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10 reasons why you should visit Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2016

There's plenty to fall in love with in this heart-shaped land, says Liz Connor

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- Bosnia and Herzegovina - in pictures
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Turquoise rivers, medieval castles and tumbling waterfalls. It sounds like something out of a fairytale, but the craggily beautiful lands of Bosnia and Herzegovina are real - and they're one of Europe's best kept secrets.

Just two and half hours away by plane from London, well-seasoned travellers that have tired of neighbouring Croatia are now finally rediscovering the beauty that has always lay hidden within this exciting and mountainous country, 20 years after civil unrest tore it apart.

Few places can boast being the cross-cultural centre of Eastern Europe - the place where East meets West - but in this heart-shaped country can. You'll find a mix of influences at its most spectacular, born from its blended Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian histories.

Strolling the streets of Mostar feels almost like stepping back in time, with gushing streamlets, cobbled lanes and unspoiled nature surrounding its reincarnated medieval towers and enchanting stone buildings.

But there's more to this former Yugoslav Republic than its fascinating, and often turbulent, history.

Click through our gallery above to discover 10 reasons why this underrated paradise should be top of your 2016 travel bucket list.

1. You can go bridge-jumping in Mostar

Forget skydives, dare-devils looking for an adrenaline rush throw themselves off the parapet of the Stari Most (Old Bridge), hurtling more than 20m into the waters of the River Neretva in front of gathered crowds. The bridge was destroyed in the 1990s, but has since been rebuilt, recreating the arch of the 1567 original. Each July there's a bridge-diving competition, but non-professionals can also try it for themselves, paying €25 for advice and a practice jump from a lower platform on the river bank. But be warned: travellers have died in their attempts.

2. It's cheap

Incredibly so. Sarajevo is one of Europe's cheapest capitals, and outside of the city the prices fall even lower. Unlike Croatia, which has prices rising towards Western Europe, you can expect to eat out for as little as 3-5 Bosnian Marks (less than £1.50).

3. The food

Food in Bosnia and Herzegovina is almost entirely organic, and there are plenty of options for inquisitive foodies who want a taste of Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Balkan flavours. In the capital, Sarajevo, there's Dveri - a traditional restaurant that serves up Balkan favourites like polenta, goulash and stuffed veal. The country is a meat-lover's paradise, but there are hidden vegetarian gems to be uncovered in the capital, too. Karuzo is the only meat-free and smoke-free place in the city. So popular is it, in fact, that it's nearly impossible to get a seat without booking in advance.

4. It's not touristy

Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the last undiscovered regions of the southern Alps, but tourism is a growing sector in the area. See it, and its undisturbed beauty, before everyone else does.

5. Adventure

There are few places in the world where you can enjoy hiking, beautiful countryside, rafting and swimming in wild waterfalls, and skiing all within one country - but adventure-lovers will find plenty to do in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Perućica is one of Europe's last genuinely primeval native forests with spruce, fir and beech trees sometimes exceeding 50m high, surrounding a 70m waterfall. But if getting on the slopes is your thing, you can be out of the plane on the piste in an hour in Bjelašnica.

6. The architecture

Despite much of the old cities being destroyed in the civil unrest, Bosnia's architectural heritage is a delightful interplay of Ottoman and later European styles. In Mostar and Sarajevo, the old city centres are peppered with old clock towers, fortresses and stone buildings alongside Moorish muqarnas (ornamental vaulting), courtyards and arches.

7. Dozens of castles

In the 15th century the Ottomans arrived and added their own castles, or built upon existing ones, as did the Austro-Hungarians later on. For this reason, Bosnia is a haven for castle-lovers and history buffs alike. There's Jajce castle in the fortress town of Jahce, which was once home to local kings and sits on top of a hill overlooking the city; and Tešanj Castle - another remarkably well preserved pile on the top of a hill overlooking the city. You'll feel like Cersei Lannister in no time.

8. You can explore the Balkans

The Balkan Peninsula is one of the last relatively unexplored corners of Europe, but as tourists flock to this up-and-coming land, it won't be long before the region becomes the next travel hotspot. Sarajevo provides the perfect base for road-tripping the entirety of the peninsula, with the cultural and culinary treasures of Montenegro, Croatia, Macedonia and Albania right on its doorstep.

9. Visit 'The World's Biggest Pyramid'

Is Visoko's 250m-high Visočica Hill the World's Greatest Pyramid? That's the theory of Semir Osmanagic, an American-Bosnian researcher who claims it was built approximately 12,000 years ago by a long-disappeared superculture. Scientific investigations of the site show there is, in fact, no pyramid, but it's still a fascinating to see this natural geological formation.

10. Take in the Una River's rapids and waterfalls

If getting a perfect Instagram picture is your thing, then you'll want to make a pit stop at the Una River. There are areas that are as calm and tranquil as turquoise paint, and areas that flow briskly with widely fanned rapids. Locals advise taking a trip to Kostelski Buk, a natural waterfall that can be admired with a glass of wine from one of the area's brilliant riverside restaurants.