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# THE SATURDAY PAPER

TRAVEL

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## Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina



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Sarajevo's streets bear the scars of the Bosnian War siege, but people are pursuing a relaxed approach to life.



The muezzin's call to prayer drifts up the hill to the teahouse, as ethereal as the wispy clouds that float in the luminous summer sky. As the call dies away, Hussein, a man with a great mane of white hair and a charismatic, California-grade smile, puts on music threaded with the unearthly vibrations of a theremin. Down the cobblestone street, the Ottoman Old Town appears a jumble of burnt-orange roofs clustering around a small turquoise dome in the middle of a modest square. Within Hussein's teahouse, Čajdžinica Džirlo, there are hints of Turkey in the woven pillows and rugs and of Europe in the lacy table doilies. Arrayed at the front of the shop next door is a collection of objects crafted from pale, unvarnished wood: clogs, broom handles, crutches, a butter churn. The delicate almond and rose petal aroma of my chai mingles with the sharper smells of rich Bosnian coffee and acrid cigarettes from adjoining tables.

Public smoking is still a thing in Sarajevo. It may not be a great idea for public health, but it certainly lends the place an appealingly raffish air, and adds to the sense of it belonging to an older world, one that is at once rustic, small town and cosmopolitan, that moves to its own languid pace.

Later, I will meet a young Bosnian who writes two words in big letters in my notebook: *merak* and *ćejf*. They are, she explains, all about relaxing over coffees or drinks and watching the world go by, enjoying life, taking pleasure in little habits. *Merak* and *ćejf*, she tells me, embody the "spirit" of Sarajevo.

Before coming here, I knew three things about Sarajevo, and none of them had the faintest whiff of *merak* or *ćejf*. One, it's where a Bosnian Serb assassin shot and killed Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, sparking World War I. Two, it hosted the 1984 Winter Olympics. Three, it was the site of a brutal four-year siege during the Bosnian War, from 1992 to 1996, when the former Yugoslavia fractured along its ethnic fault lines. I am old enough to remember television journalists reporting from "Sniper Alley"; the English-language banner reading "Don't let them kill us" held up by the contestants of a Miss Sarajevo contest; Susan Sontag travelling there to direct *Waiting for Godot*; Joan Baez in a bulletproof vest singing "Amazing Grace" on the shell-shattered streets.

When I told my friend Emma (Em Jaay), a young Australian filmmaker who is living in Sarajevo, that in preparation for my trip I had read Bosnian poet Semezdin Mehmedinović's wartime collection *Sarajevo Blues* and some other literature on the siege, I could hear the wariness in her reply, "You know that was 20 years ago..." Emma is studying at the Sarajevo Film Factory under the Hungarian auteur Béla Tarr, and learning Bosnian. Her Sarajevo is vibrant, international, buzzing with artistic ferment. The city, in her words, is "a broken place", but full of life and potential.

When I lived in China in the 1980s, I hated it when visitors expressed disappointment that young Chinese were no longer wearing "Mao suits". Why shouldn't they be free to move into the present? I still cringe at how I sometimes imposed my own obsession with the ultra-violent Cultural Revolution on people who only wanted to move on from it. So I assured Emma that I had no intention of being a "war tourist".

Yet strolling through the city on my first morning, my eyes were inescapably drawn to the bullet holes and shrapnel scars that pocked nearly every building in sight. Some of the buildings hark back to the Ottoman era (the Turks founded Sarajevo in the 15th century). Others recall the 40-year period of Austro-Hungarian rule that began in the late 19th century. Concrete piles give witness to the communist era, when Bosnia was part of a united Yugoslavia under Tito. But the holes punched into all of them by Serbian shells date stamp every one to the era of the siege. In front of the cathedral, a block from my hotel, I stood for a long while before my first "Sarajevo Rose" – the eerily flower-like crater left in the pavement by the explosion of a mortar shell, later filled in with red resin to memorialise the people who died there. Finally, I hauled myself back into the present. As part of the world that wrung its hands but did nothing while the missiles fell, I am on guard against my own sentimentality.

A few hours later I am ensconced with Emma in an open-air cafe in a park not far from the Film Factory over rich and frothy Bosnian coffees served in long-handled copper brewing pots with a side of Turkish delight. "The relationship of Sarajevo people with the war is complicated," she says. "They don't want the name of Sarajevo associated with war. But even when things are not about the war, it's about the war."

Sarajevo is an urban trickle through a narrow valley in the Dinaric Alps. It is bisected by the Miljacka River and stitched back together again by a dozen bridges. When Emma goes to a meeting at her school, I choose one of the many sharply sloping streets by which the city climbs the mountains that enfold it. An old man is walking down with an enormous tray of potted plants. He catches me staring. “*Salaam aleikum!*” he says with a cheerful friendliness that catches me by surprise. By the time I think to reply “*waleikum salaam*” he has already passed but he turns his head with a warm smile. I’m buzzy on the coffee, sunshine and conviviality, when I turn a corner and come upon a cemetery thickly planted with wine-red roses and tall white tombstones, on which every death is recorded as having occurred between 1992 and 1996.

Almost 14,000 people died and 70,000 were wounded in the siege out of a population of 350,000 (there are almost 500,000 living here today). There are a lot of cemeteries. But there are few formal memorials. We visit Galerija 11/07/95, a small museum in the city centre documenting the “ethnic cleansing” and massacre of more than 8000 Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica, a town about as far from Sarajevo as Bendigo is from Melbourne. The temporary exhibition *Postcards from Sarajevo 1993*, displaying the famous posters created by local artists during the siege that ironically repurposed famous images – a shot-up Andy Warhol soup can (Warhol “redesigned by Sarajevo”), for example, or an Uncle Sam poster saying “I want YOU to save Sarajevo” – almost makes for light relief. Asked earlier this year by *The Guardian* what his city did best, the Sarajevo journalist Dražen Huterer replied, “Jokes.” The tiny gift shop – essentially a counter at reception – sells T-shirts printed with “UN – United Nothing”.

Back out in the sunshine, in the world of *merak* and *ćejf*, we go on long meandering walks and linger over countless cups of coffee and tea. In my three days there, I see only one person walking as though in a hurry, and he turns out to be an American classmate of Emma’s, on a mission to buy pantyhose to stretch over his lens for a special effect.

I fall in love with *ušticipci*, light freshly cooked doughnuts served with soft white cheese; *ćevapi*, skinless beef sausages with flatbread; hot flaky pita and chocolate baklava. Although it’s Ramadan, and about 80 per cent of Sarajevo’s population is Muslim, the cafes and bars are open all day and

some even thronged. The sight of a woman in a hijab having an ice-cream at a cafe in the middle of the fasting day surprises me, but Emma shrugs. It seems everything really is pretty relaxed around here. We stroll through the bazaars of the Old Town, with their coppersmiths, rug merchants and cobblers. In short order, we visit a grand and beautiful, centuries-old synagogue, a Serbian Orthodox church and a historical madrassah, all of which are cosied up by the ancient Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque in the heart of the Old Town. In Ottoman times, Sarajevo was known as the “European Jerusalem”.

When, at sunset, the cannon is fired from the old Turkish fortress on the hill to proclaim the end of the day’s fasting, the streets grow especially festive, and the restaurants fill up. One day, we pass a merry group of young women enjoying their iftar (break-fast) feast; a stone’s throw away is a huge screen set up in a beer tent where hundreds of other Sarajevans are worshipping the gods of UEFA’s European Championship. *Ćejf* city.

Late on my last night in Sarajevo, weaving my way home amid the roisterous crowds, the groups of teenagers smoking and flirting, the clubbers in their shiny outfits and heels, I gaze for the last time at the bullet holes. I’m the only one looking.