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6 REASONS WHY SARAJEVO IS THE COOLEST CITY IN THE BALKANS



By [Norm Longley](#) July 27th, 2016

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For many visitors, [Sarajevo](#) means two things: the setting for the outbreak of WWI, and, from 1992–95, being subjected to the longest siege in the history of modern warfare.

The city's recent, traumatic history is of course well documented, but what is perhaps less well known is what a warm, welcoming and fabulously cool destination it is.

Cupped on three sides by mountains, Sarajevo is where the twin strains of Hapsburg and Ottoman architecture meet head on. Buses and trams rumble past mosques and bazaars, and minarets share the skyline with Orthodox domes and Catholic spires.

This cultured and charismatic city may not be easy to reach, but it is easy to love. Here are 6 reasons to make time for Sarajevo on your European adventure:

1. BECAUSE THE OLD BAZAAR IS UTTERLY ENCHANTING

Perched on the steep slopes of the Miljacka Valley, [Baščaršija](#), Sarajevo's old bazaar, is a noisy, hectic and smoky neighbourhood that's quite unlike anywhere else in the Balkans.

Pick your way through the maze of narrow alleys, bursting with ancient Ottoman monuments, sweet-smelling *ćevabdžinica* and street corner cafés, and a motley assortment of stalls selling all manner of goods, from slippers and sandals to coffee sets and copperware.



2. BECAUSE THIS IS WHERE YOU'LL FIND THE BEST *CEVAPCICI* IN THE BALKANS

...and that's quite a feat given the status this legendary staple has in the region.

These calorific rissoles of spiced minced meat are typically served with *kajmak* (a thick, slightly sour cheese) or *ajvar* (roasted red pepper spread), and *somun*, a deliciously doughy flatbread.

Take your pick from any number of outlets in Bašaršija serving these delicious morsels, but ask any local, and there's a fair chance that they'll point you in the direction of Čevabdžinica Petica.

3. ...AND COFFEE TOO

Whisper it quietly though; they don't like to call it Turkish coffee round these parts. *Bosanska kafa* is the name of the game, yet to all intents and purposes, the process is the same. Presentation, however, is all-important: served on a thin metal tray, the bubbling coffee is poured from a cute copper vessel (*džezva*) into small tumblers (*fildžan*).

Sugar lumps can be added if so desired – the common practice is to dip aforementioned lump into coffee before a wee nibble to customize yourself with the taste. Just park yourself down at any street café and give it a go; it's a fair bet that you'll be hooked.



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4. BECAUSE IT BOASTS TWO WORLD CLASS SUMMER FESTIVALS

Festival-wise, Sarajevo is fortunate to rate [two absolute belters](#): throughout July, the streets of the old town rock big time during [Bašćaršija Nights](#), a month-long gathering of music – classical, rock and folk – comedy, theatre, opera and ballet – and most of it is free.

Bigger, and more prestigious still, is August's [Sarajevo Film Festival](#), which has grown since its inception during the siege of 1995 to become the pre-eminent movie gathering in eastern Europe.

Although very much an international film festival, its premier focus is on showcasing the best film (features and shorts) and documentary from south-eastern Europe and the Caucasus, with the biggest names in the industry in attendance.

5. BECAUSE ITS ARCHITECTURE IS THE MOST FASCINATING IN THE BALKANS

Four centuries of eastern domination are manifest in numerous graceful monuments throughout Sarajevo. Most notably the Gazi Husref Beg Mosque, possibly the most exquisite in the Balkans, above which looms the Sahat-kula, a handsome seventeenth-century clock tower with the hours of prayer are marked in Arabic numerals. Look out, too, for the lovely Sebilj fountain.

By way of contrast, the buildings along [Ferhadija Street](#) are firmly Austro-Hungarian in orientation – as are many of those lining Obala Kulina bana, an elegant riverside thoroughfare further south; the University of Sarajevo is a splendid example.

But for all of the above, Sarajevo's most symbolic building is the National Library; all but obliterated in 1992, this stately neo-Moorish edifice finally reopened in 2014, its reconstruction the most palpable proof yet of Sarajevo's renaissance.



6. BECAUSE IT HAS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT EXHIBITIONS ON THE BOSNIAN WAR

Inevitably, the city is replete with sights pertaining to the siege, and to be fair, most have been sensitively conceived. But the singularly most important exhibition is Galerija 11/7/95, which stands as a fitting memorial to the harrowing events that unfolded at Srebrenica on that eponymous day.

The exhibition is presented in a powerfully understated way, courtesy of black and white images, interviews and audio-visual documents. It's by no means an easy visit, but it is deserving of your time.