

Western Balkans – Serbia & Kosovo June 2011

“The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was the Yugoslav state that existed from the second half of World War II until it was formally dissolved in 1992. It was a socialist state and a federation made up of six socialist republics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia”.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Federal_Republic_of_Yugoslavia

Serbia:

Religion: Orthodox Christian
People: 95% Serbian
Unemployment: 20%

Once seen as the bad boy of the Baltics, Serbia is slowly emerging with its head held high and preparing to launch itself into a future with Europe.

BELGRADE - БЕОГРАД

Belgrade certainly couldn't be called beautiful, but it has vibrancy and an interesting chaos that makes it a worthy place to 'begin the end' of my exploration of Eastern Europe and more importantly former Yugoslavia. Evidence of the NATO bombing campaign can still be seen; however, extravagant new builds are sprouting up everywhere. Pedestrianised areas with lavish restaurants and cafes provide excellent stop offs for that people watching experience. The coffee is gorgeous and the girls even more so. Kalemegdan Citadel is the historic heart of the city and a great place to visit, with panoramic views across the river Danube, which meanders peacefully below.

The train journey to Novi Sad, north of Belgrade, took a little under 2 hours. NS is a city of culture and famous for Exit, the annual summer music festival, which is held in the Petrovaradin Fortress. June sees Novi Sad host a film festival known as 'Cinema City'. More than a hundred premieres were due to be shown at 5 indoor and 4 outdoor locations. I went to see a delightful British film called Tamara Drewe – keep an eye out! NS is a beautiful town to wander around, the traffic free centre is crammed full of charming old buildings, cafes, and restaurants.



Zlatibor, a 6-hour bus ride south of NS is a region of rolling plains and ski fields. The town center of Trizren is where I made my base. It is very much geared towards families with lots of restaurants and fast food outlets, plus loads of activities for the kids.

The hike to Tornik (1496m) was an 8-hour round trip from Trizren, following ancient tracks that have been used by locals for centuries to get to the many isolated villages that are spread across this region. It was a tough slog but the views from the top were well worth the effort.

Another 6-hour bus journey, south, took me to Novi Pazar where I visited Studenica Monastery, one of Serbia's most sacred sites. It took several busses and a car journey to get there but it was an exceptionally beautiful and tranquil place to visit. Local busses run very infrequently so I had to resort to hitch hiking. Novi Pazar is an interesting town with a distinct Islamic heritage - the Turks were here until 1912. NP is a gateway and warm-up to Kosovo.

Kosovo:

Crossing the border was swift and efficient and not at all what I had expected. A quick check of my passport and I was in - not even an entry stamp!

In 1999 Serbia, backed by president Milosevic, started a campaign of ethnic cleansing in an attempt to swiftly clear Kosovo of its non-Serbian population. NATO demanded that Serbia desist - they didn't and as a result the bombing campaign of Belgrade began. Milosevic's troops eventually withdrew, the NATO air strikes ceased, the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) agreed to disarm and the NATO led KFOR (Kosovo Force) took over.

Religion: Muslims are mostly Albanians and Orthodox Christians mostly ethnic Serbs.
People: 90% Albanian. 10% Serbs. The Serbs mostly live in KFOR-protected enclaves.
Unemployment: 45%.

There was an air of tension building up long before the bus came to a halt. A group of maybe 8 or 9 people was getting extremely agitated - standing up and scanning the horizon. As soon as the doors of the bus flung open they clambered out and swiftly jumped into a waiting taxi. Somehow they all managed to squeeze into the one taxi! Two army helicopters screamed low overhead! Welcome to Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. What in God's name had I let myself in for?

After checking into my five star hotel, costing 35 euros, and a quick change of clothing it was time to explore the city. My Lonely Planet guide book described it well: "Pristina looks like a torn-apart town crudely reassembled by differences of opinion."

The conflict has clearly left its mark on Pristina. The Austro-Hungarian exterior of the Kosovo museum stands out in splendor, but sadly it was closed – like so many of the other historic buildings in Pristina. Some 1,247 pieces of the museum's collection are being 'safely looked after' in Belgrade! No one knows when they might be returned. Walking from the museum, past the the perimeter of the government building, you get a feel for the reality of what went on here. Fixed to the metal fence are hundreds of photographs showing 'the missing', locals who 'disappeared' during the conflict.

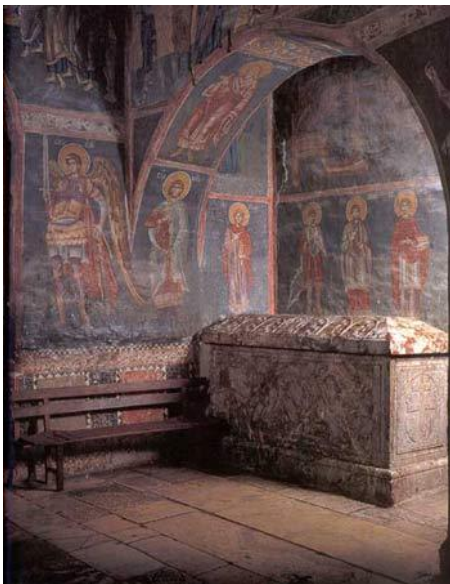


The city has a very Turkish feel to it, with Ottoman-era buildings, stone houses, churches, mosques and medieval fresco paintings. At one end of the city stands the most incredible building imaginable. To me it looked like a random selection of shoe boxes encased in a giant Mecano frame. Lonely Planet described it as "gelatinous eggs wearing armor." It is in fact the city university.

Restaurant Tiffany delivers mouth watering cuisine! There's no menu but the chefs grill up a treat right in front of your eyes. Everything is freshly cooked in an open kitchen in the corner of the dining room. My succulent steak was washed down with a delightful glass of Rioja. What better way to end my first day in Pristina. Just say thank you but please don't say havala!

Prizren was a comfortable (but slow) 2-hour bus journey south west of Pristina. It's an exceptionally picturesque town with little bridges that intermittently crisscross the small river running through the middle of town. The presence of KFOR troops is much more noticeable here. The town is overlooked by an imposing fortress - the 180 degree view from the top is stunning. Again the Ottoman influence is very noticeable with a number of mosques and a semi restored Haman. There are also a number of beautiful Orthodox churches dotted about but these were all locked and heavily guarded at the time of my visit.

Peja (Peć) 2 hours north west of Prizren.



Pressed against the lush border region shared by Montenegro and Albania, Peja is flanked by sites important to Orthodox Serbians. The most famous of these sites is the Patriarchate of Peć. The grounds of the monastery are surrounded by a tall, thick stone wall with razor sharp barbed wire mounted on top for good measure. The entrance is guarded by a heavy KFOR presence. Passports/ID are handed over at the checkpoint whereupon you are given a pass which gains you access. There are four churches within the monastery, built one against the other such that they now form a single whole. It was the centre of the Serbian church for centuries. From its origin in the 13th century the Patriarchate attracted learned divines, reputed writers and gifted artists, and all of them have left traces of their work in it. History oozes out of every nook and cranny as you wander around the half lit passages; the walls are covered from top to bottom in ancient frescoes.

Kosovo is an intriguing place, full of paradoxes and surprises for the first time visitor. You will no doubt be surprised to hear that Kosovo's official currency is the euro, without it being a member of the European Union. Kosovo is also acknowledged as having the best coffee outside Italy. It has rivers for fishing, lakes for swimming and fabulous opportunities for hiking and mountain biking. I wish I'd had more time to explore its hidden treasures.

Kosovo to Serbia via Montenegro & the ubiquitous taxi driver.

Sitting, minding my own business, reading my book, I became aware of someone trying to gain my attention. I was at the bus station waiting for a bus to get me back to Novi Pazar. The man was asking me where I was going. I did my best to dismiss his questioning but in the end I told him my

destination. The same immortal words that I had heard back in India, before the car crash, were yet again repeated: "I have a car and it is much quicker than the bus". No, no, no, absolutely not I said to myself.

Okay, so I should have learnt my lesson in India but after a long discussion I agreed to join him. As we got to his car I clocked the two occupants in the back seat, both had 'trouble' written on their faces. As I stepped into the car I had the feeling that perhaps this was not such a good a good idea after all!

The details of the journey: Car from Peja (Kosovo) to Rozage (Montenegro) then a bus back over the border, to Novi Pazar (Serbia).

We reached the Kosovo border in just under an hour, there were problems! The border police were not happy with the fact that my passport did not contain an entry stamp. The two female officers spoke limited English but somehow, with the help of my driver, I managed to resolve the problem and was eventually allowed through. My handling of the situation must have impressed my companions because for the rest of the journey they all chatted away, in pigeon English, about all manner of different subjects. By the time we arrived in Rozage I knew their favourite pop stars, football teams (Manchester United, Liverpool, and Chelsea) and a multitude of other miscellanea. The driver had also phoned ahead to see what time my connecting bus would be departing. When we arrived at the bus station in Rozage they helped carry my stuff onto the bus and after much hand shaking and back patting we bid our fare wells. I guess the moral of the story is: it pays to have an open mind!

DESPOTOVAC – ДЕСПОТОВАЦ (Via Montenegro, Novi Pazar and Belgrade)

The mini bus left Belgrade in the manner that it would continue - fast and furious. I held tightly to my seat as the competent driver delivered passengers to various destinations as fast as he possibly could!

The idyllic town of Despotovac is a welcome refuge from the madness of Belgrade (3 hours away). Manasija Monastery is 2km from the centre of town and my main reason for visiting. The first thing that strikes you when you arrive at the monastery is the imposing fortress which surrounds it. During the five centuries of Ottoman rule, the monastery was abandoned and wrecked several times. The lead roof was removed from the church, and so for over a century the frescoes inside were subject to damage by rainfall. As a result, about two-thirds of them became irreparable. In the 18th century, the western part of the church was heavily damaged in an explosion but was later rebuilt. The monastery has a tiny shop which is manned by the resident nuns. It was here that I met a charismatic nun from Ireland!



TOPOLA - TOPIOJA

Oplenac Royal Mausoleum is the resting place of the Serbian Karadorđević Royal Family. It is better known as the Church of St. George. The initial idea was to carve into the walls the names of all soldiers and officers who had perished in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913. But, since the church was not fully completed, and since First World War followed, this idea had to be abandoned. The solution was to decorate the interior of the temple with mosaics, which would be a sort of a museum of reproductions of the prettiest frescoes of the Serbian medieval arts. The entire mosaic has 725 painted compositions (513 in the temple and 212 in the crypt), on which there are 1,500 figures. The entire area of the mosaic is 3,500 square metres (38,000 sq ft); with 40 million various coloured pieces of glass which have 15 thousand different varieties of colour, making the most vivid artistic impression. It is an absolutely amazing place to visit; the vibrancy of the colours is mindblowing.

You will no doubt have gathered by now that religion features strongly in this part of the world!

The final piece of the jigsaw has been placed and I have now completed my exploration of Eastern Europe. As I depart I do so with air of sadness. It has been wonderful to travel through this fascinating region, with a plethora of absolutely amazing places to visit. War has left an obvious visual stain. It is, however, difficult to gauge the psychological damage left behind and what affect this will have on future harmony. For 500 years Muslims, Serbs and Croats lived in coexistence, then, as a result of a few power crazy individuals, with their own personal agenda, the whole region fell into a virtual Armageddon. It remains to be seen whether peace will reign over this area for another 500 years.

