

Discovering the Balkans: Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

by Diego Millan Berdasco

Being interested in history since my teenager years in the high school and having travelling as a passion, it had been long I was looking forward to visit the area which suffered the bloodiest episode and one of the few wars in the European continent since World War II: the republics which emerged from Yugoslavia.

I enjoy very much talking and engaging with locals and visiting as many historical or currently relevant places as possible in every place I go, and in the case of the Balkans I also read abundant texts and books on the formation of Yugoslavia and the 90's wars. Thus, I had an idea of sensibilities and historical development before my visit. Since time and funds were limited I decided to focus my visit on two of the six republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia with the addition of the emerging Kosovo) which now form what used to be the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia: Serbia, because of its leading role in the whole Balkans area historically and the Serbian nationalism being one of the main causes of the breakup of Yugoslavia; and Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to the bloody clash between Ethnic/religious groups (Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Croats/Catholics and Bosnian Serbs/Orthodox) in the most culturally mixed territory of the region which drove most of the 90's war.

While in Serbia, I participated in a cultural programme organised by young Serbian volunteers to show key parts of Serbian history, traditions, food and culture to young Europeans. In Bosnia and Herzegovina I travelled mostly solo, but met friendly and helpful locals in every place I stopped which explained and shared with me interesting stories and beautiful moments.

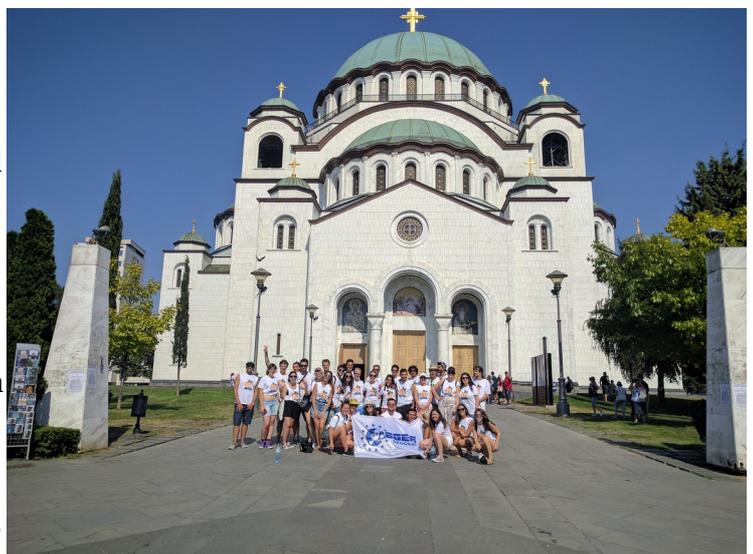
The itinerary of my trip around those two countries was as follows:

Serbia: Belgrade, Novi Sad and Sremski Karlovci.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Sarajevo, Mostar, Jablanica, Konjic and Banja Luka.

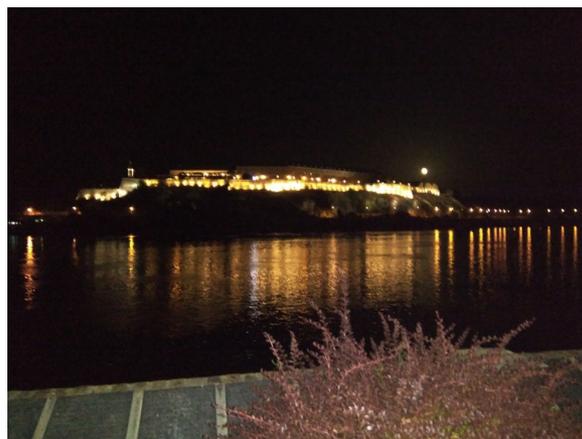
Serbia (1st -12th August)

Belgrade: the capital of Serbia and former capital of Yugoslavia is a vibrant city, full of life and activity, but which still offers traces of the war (NATO bombed the city as late as in May 1999) such as crumbling buildings in the city centre and decadency following economical crisis after breakup of Yugoslavia. The city centre offers beautiful walks which remind sometimes to Vienna or Budapest, with a former castle transformed into a park dominating the western part of the city and overseen the junction between the rivers Sava and Danube. It holds major museums in the country, such as the Yugoslavia museum, a complex which includes an exhibition centre and the mausoleum of Josip Boris Tito, the leader of partisans during the World War II and president of Yugoslavia until his death in 1980. Even today, Tito remains a respected and for some



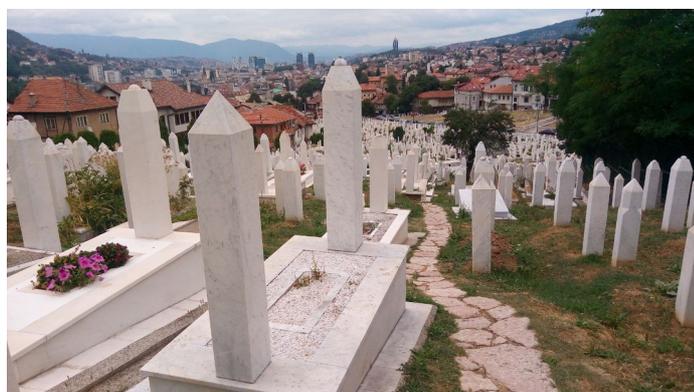
also venerated leader in all ex-yugoslavian republics and among all generations due to his deep understanding of the heterogeneous nature of the country he ruled over and securing high living standards for the population.

Novi Sad and Sremski Karlovci: the capital of the northern Serbian autonomous region of Vojvodina have a different flavour than the rest of Serbia. It resembles Austrohungarian architecture due to its longer permanence under their rule as the rest of the country remained in Ottoman hands and it is more developed than central and southern Serbia. Sremski Karlovci, a town nearby Novi Sad, has played a significant role in Serbian history. In that town was declared the armistice between Ottoman and Austrohungarian empires in 1699 and the declaration of independence of Serbian Vojvodina was held at this town in 1848.

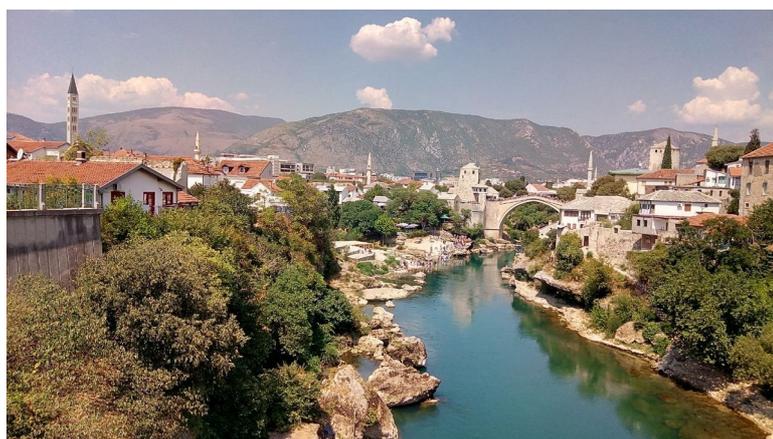


Bosnia and Herzegovina (12th-19th August)

Sarajevo: The capital of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (the majority Muslim of the two confederate entities which form the country) was without any doubt the most enriching part of the trip. Despite the marks of the war being visible all around the city, the mixture of cultures and architecture styles which the city has is stunning. Walking from the train station to the old town hall you pass through Yugoslav, Austrohungarian and Ottoman architecture, with the last part reminding to the area of the Old Bazaar in Istanbul.



Mostar, Jablanica and Konjic: Mostar is the biggest city in the Herzegovina region, and the most touristy place in the country, due to its beautiful and reconstructed medieval city centre and its proximity to Dubrovnik (Croatia). In Jablanica is located a museum to the episode which made Tito famous when he was an officer of the partisan army and Konjic is located the bunker where Tito and his government was to be hidden in case of an atomic attack of the country. A shield which could host almost 400 people for 6 months and which remains the second most expensive infrastructure in the Balkans ever built to date.



Banja Luka: the capital of the Srpska Republic (the majority Serb/orthodox entity which forms Bosnia and Herzegovina) has a very different taste from the rest of the cities and towns I visited in the country, and indeed everything reminds more to a Serbian city.

Pictures (top to bottom): Temple of St Sava in Belgrade (still under construction), Castle of Novi Sad by Danube river at night, Graveyard in central Sarajevo, and a sight of central Mostar with its famous medieval bridge.