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Sarajevo, the city where east meets west

Its idyllic mountain setting and diverse heritage makes Sarajevo one of Europe's most intriguing cities. Yet it is its indomitable spirit that makes it truly special

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If ever a greeting has momentarily filled my head with mixed emotions, it was the one offered to me the other day by a smiling young taxi driver at an airport. "Welcome to Sarajevo," he announced, and then he sped me off to my hotel in Baščaršija, the city's cultural and historic heart.

Although Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is a name which might seem inextricably linked to war and tragedy, the passing of 20 years has done much to heal this remarkable and resilient city, and tourism is now sharply on the rise. The reason is obvious. Sarajevo is beautiful. The city is tucked inside a long, thin valley and surrounded on all sides by forested mountains, and almost every crossroads and street corner provides at least a glimpse of an idyllic picture-postcard backdrop. During the worst moments in the city's history, when its inhabitants were targeted by snipers, this dramatic geography proved to be a terrifying drawback but, thankfully, the spectacular natural beauty of Sarajevo can again be admired and enjoyed.

The best way to do this is to find the highest vantage point possible, and with the recent reopening of Sarajevo's iconic cable car, a trip up the mountainside has, once again, been made easy. A short walk from Baščaršija brings you to the shiny new cable car station in the foothills of Mount Trebević, one of the peaks which played host to events in the 1984 Winter Olympics. For a return fee of 20 Bosnian marks (approximately £10), this must-do cable car lifts you more than 1,100m in seven minutes, providing breathtaking views every second of the way. At the top, the perspective shifts and changes like a kaleidoscope. In the short space of time that I was on the mountain, I saw the cityscape swelter beneath me under a clear blue sky and then quickly become obscured by twirling strands of mist that seemed to appear from nowhere.



'At the top, the perspective changes like a kaleidoscope' ... a panoramic view of the city from the cable car. Photograph: Getty Images

It's a view which defies comparison with most other European cities. Mosques and minarets decorate the skyline along with the Romanesque towers of Catholic churches and the onion-shaped domes of Orthodox ones. And that is another thing which makes this city so fascinating: it's a place where east and west meet. On the main pedestrian thoroughfare, Ferhadija, this cultural equator is marked for posterity on the pavement and a sign encourages visitors to take a photo looking first one way up the street and then the other.

The contrast is stark. Austro-Hungarian architecture and a mosaic of western shop signs can be seen in one direction, while, with a simple turn of the head, the outlook abruptly transforms into a Turkish bazaar. On one side of this line, people sit and drink beer at tables on the street, while on the other, there isn't a drop of alcohol to be found. Instead, you'll find open-fronted cafes offering strong Bosnian coffee and also, perhaps, a puff on a hookah pipe.



Break time ... Turkish coffee, as served in a Sarajevo cafe.
Photograph: Eric Nathan/Loop Images/Getty Images

Following Ferhadija in the direction of the coffee will wind you into the heart of Baščaršija and, inevitably, to the enjoyable hubbub nicknamed "Pigeon Square". My first visit here was to the accompaniment of Bosnian folk music being blasted loudly through outdoor speakers and provided the odd spectacle of several dozen tiny parked cars which looked like vintage Fiat 500s but were, in fact, Yugoslav Zastavas. Like the views from Mount Trebević, the drama in Pigeon Square is ever-changing but one constant is the wonderful ice-cream being sold by street vendors in an alluring range of flavours. One scoop will set you back as little as £1.

For a wider choice of refreshments head for Gazi Husrev-begova, the narrow street walled on one side by the indoor marketplace known as the Old Bezistan. Cafe tables squeeze the street even tighter and a cup of coffee here lasts as long as you can linger over it. A good choice is Café Ramis, which sits on a corner and attracts locals and

foreign visitors alike. With windows that open fully on to the street, it actually makes little difference whether you choose to sit in or out but there is something rather lovely about relaxing inside, surrounded by Ottoman geometric patterns and happy people munching cake. The cakes reveal as much about Sarajevo's diverse heritage as everything else does in this city. Viennese Sachertorte is offered alongside krempita kolač (a Bosnia and Herzegovinan custard slice), as well as something that looked to me very much like a rum baba. Whatever you choose, you won't be rushed.

A short distance away and one sight not to be missed in Baščaršija is Gazi Husrev-Bey's mosque. Actually, you can't miss it; the largest Ottoman mosque in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is awe-inspiring from every aspect. This mosque is used to the curiosity of tourists, and welcomes them. Like the Sacred Heart Catholic Cathedral, which can be found on the western side of Ferhadija's cultural dividing line, it was significantly damaged during the war and its continued presence makes it an important symbol of the city.



Crossing the divide ... Seher-Cehaja bridge, over the Miljacka river. Photograph: Getty Images

Sarajevo has such a good vibe that it can be extremely difficult to grasp the terror of what happened here as recently as the mid-1990s. But the truth is that you don't need to look far for evidence. Any building which predates that time is likely to be pockmarked with bullet holes, and a memorial garden in Veliki Park, opposite one of Sarajevo's busiest shopping malls, quietly commemorates the 1,500 children who lost their lives during the 44-month long siege.

Even without factoring in its incendiary role in the first world war, the history of Sarajevo can seem impossibly sad. Despite that, it doesn't feel like a sad place to visit because when you come here, you get the sense that the city is now looking to the future. And it does that with dignity, resilience, an indomitable spirit and hope. If you want to discover somewhere remarkable, then make your way to Sarajevo.

Way to go

There are currently no direct flights from the UK to Sarajevo but Norwegian Air Shuttle offers flights from Gatwick via Stockholm from around £130 each way. Hotel Old Town is in the Baščaršija district (doubles from £70 B&B)

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