

Serbia and Montenegro

Serbia: Greetings from Belgrade as low-cost flight route opens

Serbia's capital is now on the low-cost flight route - and its people are trying to present a friendlier face to visitors. Adrian Bridge reports.



People walk in the park below the city's citadel

By **Adrian Bridge** 8:00AM BST 17 Jul 2010

Comments

Within the space of a few minutes wandering around the side streets of Belgrade I am shown a mural depicting a beautiful woman; the tomb of an ancient Ottoman warrior; a "concept store" selling quirky designer goods that wouldn't be out of place in Soho in London; and a cool place to stop and have a late-night coffee – the *Insomnia* café in the "Silicon Valley" district.

My guide to these and many more of the less obvious pleasures of Belgrade is Marko, an engaging university student. He is one of a volunteer team of "Belgrade greeters" – people who introduce visitors to some of their favourite spots and experiences in the city.

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The greeter scheme – new this summer – coincides with the commencement of a new low-cost route operated by Wizz Air linking Luton and Belgrade. It also forms part of a campaign to alter the primarily negative images most foreigners have of a city whose population is so heavily identified with (and blamed for) the wars that followed the break-up of the old Yugoslavia.

Marko – just 23 – was not involved in the wars, and we skirt around the subject. There are references to "the difficult years", "the 1990s" and "the period of isolation". Like many Serbs of his age, he accepts that it was not the most glorious period in his country's history. But he wants to move on – and to be part of a project that aims to present a friendlier, funkier – and more rounded image of its capital and its people.

He makes for a passionate guide. "Look at this fabulous example of secessionist [Art Nouveau] architecture," he says, as we pass a series of grand-looking buildings on a tram ride that circles the city. "There's another of my favourites – St Mark's Church; and another – the wonderful faculty of engineering and architecture."

Belgrade can hardly be termed a beautiful city – its skyline is still scarred by communist-era eyesores – not to mention the ruins of buildings bombed by Nato in 1999. But in and around its lovely pedestrianised Knez Mihailova zone and the cobbled Skadarlija Bohemian quarter, there is much on which to feast the eyes. The Kalemegdan fortress and park (overlooking the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers) also has a pleasing vibe.

For centuries the land around here was where the Ottoman and Hapsburg empires battled it out for supremacy. These days tourists from the cruise ships plying the Danube jostle for the best vantage points.

In recent years the city's youth have made a name for themselves for partying. Much is made here of the declaration in Lonely Planet's guide to "1000 Ultimate Experiences" that "Belgrade rocks" and is now one of the best places to party on the planet – and the throngs of beautiful young people and the all-night hum from barges on the Sava and the Danube testify to it.

In addition to Serbs themselves, the clubbing scene attracts a younger set of foreigners who like their travel to be stag and hen party-free and to have something of an edge.

Marko's personal favourite is the Underground Club. "Mention that to any clubber here and the heart still beats to the memories."

We stop on the terrace of one of the city's grand old cafes for coffee with another student greeter, Katerina, and Sladjana (meaning sweetie), an official guide. They say Belgrade could again become the most important city between Athens and Vienna. Marko even describes it as "the New York of the Balkans".

I wouldn't go that far. But I have been pleasantly surprised; Belgrade has been quite an eye-opener.

Belgrade basics

Getting there

JAT (www.jat.com) flies from London Heathrow to Belgrade. Low-cost carrier Wizz Air (www.wizzair.com) flies from Luton.

Regent Holidays (0845 277 3317; www.regent-holidays.co.uk) offers 3-night breaks to Belgrade staying at 3- and 4-star hotels from £290 per person (including flights from Heathrow with JAT).

Greetings

To book a free introduction to the city (2-4 hours), go to www.belgradegreeters.rs

Further information

Serbia (Bradt Travel Guides, £15.99) by Laurence Mitchell; www.serbia.travel; www.tob.co.rs/eng

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