Belgrade, Serbia: a cultural city guide

Gabriella Le Breton on Belgrade, a city fast rediscovering its sense of fun after centuries on the front line of history.

Belgrade's still-closed National Museum Photo: Alamy

By Gabriella Le Breton
9:34AM BST 07 Oct 2013

15 Comments

"Over the past 2,600 years, my city has been destroyed 40 times and changed rulers over 60 times. History is one of our products."

Standing in Kalemegdan Park, on a cliff 410ft above the confluence of the Danube and Sava rivers, where the Pannonian Plain meets the Balkans, it's easy to appreciate the strategic importance of my guide Srdjan Ristic's beloved Beograd, the White City, or Belgrade.

The fortress behind me forms the ancient core of Belgrade and was alternately ruled and conquered by Celts, Slavs, Romans, Byzantines and the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires. The citadel, now a peaceful spot for picnics and strolls, has been a boundary between the West and the Orient for millennia.

Today, Belgrade incorporates the Old Town, south of the citadel, and the New Town on the opposite bank of the Sava. The city is a mix of languages, cultures, peoples and history, the threads of which are most apparent in its architecture. Walking through Kalemegdan Park from the Fortress, I reach the pedestrianised shopping promenade Knez Mihailova. Here, beneath the city library, lie the remains of a Roman fortress.

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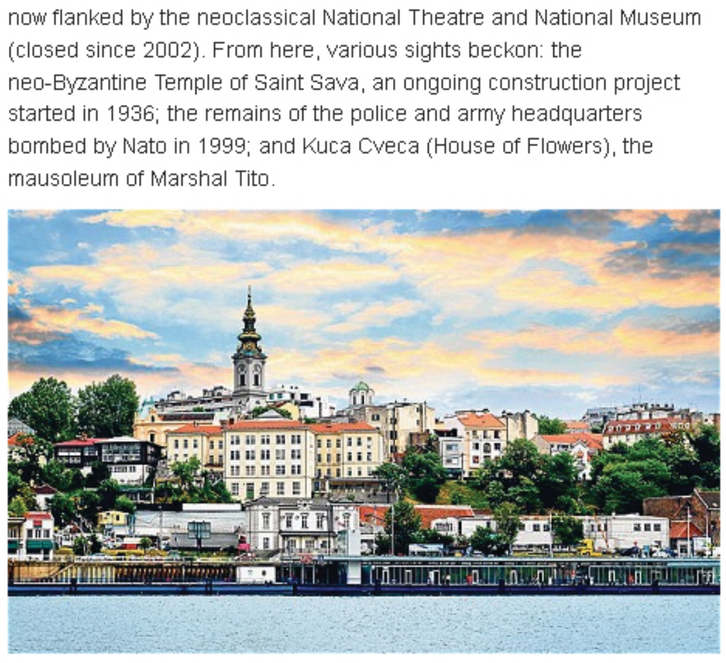
Walking along Knez Mihailova, neoclassical Austro-Hungarian mansions rub shoulders with academic-style villas, while ornate Renaissance beauties pose opposite brutal Soviet-style offices. Side streets offer glimpses of Bajrakli Mosque, the sole survivor of the 273 mosques built under the Ottomans.

Continuing through the Old Town, I reach Trg Republike (Republic Square), once the starting point of a Roman road to Constantinople and now flanked by the neoclassical National Theatre and National Museum (closed since 2002). From here, various sights beckon: the neo-Byzantine Temple of Saint Sava, an ongoing construction project started in 1936; the remains of the police and army headquarters bombed by Nato in 1999; and Kuca Cveca (House of Flowers), the mausoleum of Marshal Tito.



Belgrade from the Danube

Perhaps as a response to centuries of repression, Belgradians are inherently sociable and their city has become one of Europe's hottest party destinations. Live music, dancing and consumption of rakija (fruit brandy) are standard in the kafanas (taverns) that line the cobbled streets of Skadarlija, the haunt of the city's artists, authors and journalists, and in th bars of Strahinjica Bana in Upper Dorcol.

Come summer, Belgrade really comes alive, particularly along the shores of the Danube and Sava. Former warehouses and splavovi (barges) have been converted into slick restaurants, bars and clubs, and Ada Ciganlija, a former island in the Sava, becomes has been developed into a recreational area with beaches, sports facilities, cafés and bars. Locals and tourists alike pour on to Ada on balmy evenings and at weekends for waterskiing, picnics, concerts and festivals, with the world's largest single pylon suspension bridge, Ada Bridge, as a backdrop.

Did you know?

Belgrade lays claim to over 125 miles of river bank and 16 islands.

Getting there

Fly from Heathrow to Belgrade's Nikola Tesla airport with JAT Airways (020 7629 2007; jatlondon.com) or from Luton with Wizz Air (0906 959 0002; wizzair.com). Taxis between the airport and Belgrade city centre should cost no more than £13.]

Package

Regent Holidays (020 7666 1244; regent-holidays.co.uk) has specialised in bespoke holidays to the Balkans since the Seventies. It offers a three-night break to Belgrade from £375 per person, including return flight, transfers, b & b based on two sharing in the three-star Le Petit Piaf, and a half-day guided tour.

Where to stay

Square Nine £££

The chicest of Belgrade's handful of five-star hotels, the 45-room Square Nine is located on Student Square and has a slick yet unpretentious decor, with many rooms, right, boasting large balconies. Two former Claridge's chefs run the kitchen and there's a pool and spa (3333 500; squarenine.rs; doubles from £177, including breakfast).

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