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Eurofile | Weekend in Belgrade

By [ALEXANDER LOBRANO](#)

Matthieu SalvaingThe [Square Nine Hotel](#) in Belgrade, Serbia.

Sometimes there's a pleasure in arriving in a place unburdened by too much knowledge of your destination: with none of the usual guidebook prepping, everything comes as a revelation. Aside from the fact that it's the capital of Serbia, is located at the confluence of the Danube and Sava rivers, and was a pawn between the Turks and Austrians for several centuries, I knew almost nothing about Belgrade, the former capital of Yugoslavia. With blissful ignorance whetting my curiosity, I and a friend recently arrived at the Nikola Tesla airport and hopped a diesel-fume-spewing bus into the city.

Like many former Eastern Bloc cities, Belgrade is surrounded by vast tracts of drab, concrete-slab housing, but Art Nouveau buildings give its small historic heart an Austro-Hungarian charm. The presence of a Serbian Orthodox cathedral, a mosque and a Jewish history museum, all within a few blocks of the lush Studentski Trg park, puts a spin on things, as does the fact that most of the street signage uses the Cyrillic alphabet; Belgrade is a Balkan city before it's a European one. It is also much livelier, friendlier and more prosperous than I had expected it to be.

A sign of the city's fledgling cool is the 45-room Bauhaus [Square Nine Hotel](#), which opened this year and was designed by the Brazilian architect Isay Weinfeld. The vast lobby lounge — furnished with Oriental carpets, antique globes and a casual but studied mix of Danish modern style furniture and local antiques — came off as an engaging postmodern riff on an old-world men's club, the kind of place where Bruce Chatwin might have hung out. Framed black-and-white photos added a carefully measured dose of nostalgia. My white room was sleek and chic, with Hermès toiletries and a large, well-lit limestone bath; oak parquet floors with Serbian-made accent rugs; oatmeal drapes and blinds on push-button controls; and a pair of Scandinavian-modern brown leather armchairs. The hotel also has a terrific lap pool in its basement health club and offers seriously good massages.

While my moviemaking French pal went off to scout locations — to the European film industry, Belgrade might be the new Budapest — I visited the austere but interesting [Museum of Yugoslav History](#) complex, followed by Princess Ljubica's Residence, a beautiful time capsule built in 1831 that displays the Serbian-Turkish taste of local nobles. After an excellent lunch at [Jevrem](#) — a chopped salad of cucumbers, tomatoes, onion, pepper and cheese, called shopska, and an epic mixed grill — I spent several quiet hours wandering the [Ethnographic Museum](#), where I began to draw a bead on Serbia's

chimerical identity. The rich ethnic patchwork of Serbia is revealed in displays of elaborate local costumes, tools, ceramics and domestic interiors.

The lobby of the Square Nine Hotel.

Though I'd been in a brooding "[Black Lamb and Grey Falcon](#)" frame of mind all afternoon — Rebecca West's 1941 masterpiece is essential reading for all travelers to the Balkans — Belgrade lightened my moodiness after dark with its startling *joie de vivre*. The dinner crowd at [Klub Knjizevnika](#) was cosmopolitan and appealingly louche, and the food was good, too. Though European trend peddlers have been flogging the flotilla of floating nightclubs anchored in the Sava river, it was at Magacin, a club in a vast warehouse space, that we became Slavs to the rhythm.

All of which is to say: go now. By the time you start reading that Belgrade is "the New Berlin" or "the next Prague," this Balkan charmer will surely have lost its slightly gruff but wonderfully un-self-conscious charm.

Square Nine Hotel, Studentski Trg 9; 011-381-11-3333-515; [squarenine.rs](#).

Museum of Yugoslav History, Trg Nikole Pasica 11; 011-381-11-3398-532; [mij.rs](#).

Princess Ljubica's Residence, Kneza Sime Markovica 8; 011-381-11-2682-803.

Jevrem, Gospodar Jevremova 36; 011-381-11-328-4746; [restoran-jevrem.com](#).

Ethnographic Museum, Studentski Trg 13; 011-381-11-3281-888;
[etnografskimuzej.rs](#).

Klub Knjizevnika, Francuska 7; 011-381-11-2627-931; [facebook.com/pages/klub-knjizevnika/213841918640399](#).

Magacin, Karadjordjeva 2-4; 011-381-11-328-8824.

This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: November 14, 2011

In an earlier version of the post, a reference to a particular cathedral was incorrect. It is a Serbian Orthodox cathedral, not a Greek Orthodox one.