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TRAVEL

Coffee in Belgrade?

By Melissa Goldstein



Drop into conversation the fact that you're planning a trip to Belgrade and you could find yourself on the receiving end of the five Ws. The first, of course, being, "Why?"

Add yours

Unlike Croatia, Serbia has yet to make the leap from war-torn news story to popular tourist destination in the public's consciousness. *This is exactly why you are going*, you tell your not-exactly-cosmopolitan-but-well-meaning-drinking buddy. You, Belgrade traveler, like your city-break diamonds in the rough. You appreciate a bit of historical baggage and all that comes with it: bombed shells of buildings yet-to-be renovated, authentic restaurants serving affordable organic food (because

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pesticides are too pricey anyway) and a 24-hour party staged nightly on boats teaming with Balkan Beat enthusiasts.

We're also talking about getting a bit of dinar bang for your pound rather than being fleeced by the Euro - and spending every last dinar because it will not be accepted upon your return to Heathrow.

Still with us? Thought so. Now say goodbye to that EasyJet ticket to a soon-to-be-passé locale and allow us to whet your urban adventurer's appetite. Below, GQ.com's rundown on the unmissable in Belgrade and its environs.

Where to eat

Meat, mostly. For a taste of traditional Serbian cuisine, head for Belgrade's cobblestoned bohemian quarter Skadarlija. Options abound but you really can't go wrong: Grilled meats and sausages, local cheeses, Balkan wines and live gypsy bands can be found at **Zlatni bokal** (Golden Jug) [Skadarska 26; +381 11 323 4834] and **Tri Sesira** (Three Hats) [Skadarska 29; +381 11 324 7501]. Meanwhile, **Zaplet** [Kajmakcalanska 2; +381 11 240 4142] in Belgrade's Vračar neighborhood, is an upmarket local favourite and **Jevrem** [Gospodar Jevremova 36; +381 11 328 47 46] is also worth seeking out, both for its glowy dinner party vibe and the saucy vintage erotica in the toilets.

Where to drink

Brandy. Quince and plum tend to be specialties of the house-order one as an aperitif and toast to your dinner partners like a local ("Zivili!"). At happy hour, sample the underground café culture: **Klub Svetskih Putnika** (Club of World Travelers); [Bul. Despota Stefana 7; +381 11 324 2303] isn't the easiest to find but the atmosphere is worth the hunt: prohibition-era speakeasy meets indoor greenhouse meets *Three's Company* retro. For a well-made cocktail, head to **Strahinjica Bana** or "Silicone Valley"; thus named for the cosmetic enhancements on display. Bars team with the young and beautiful (some of them, true to the name, less-than-naturally endowed). Stake out a table at hotspot **Bistro Pastis** [Strahinjica Bana 52b; +381 11 328 8188] or upstairs at low-lit **Insomnia** [Strahinjica Bana 66a; +381 11 328 3715] and take notes on how the locals kick off their nights.

Where to dance

To turbo-folk, if you dare. After your after-dinner drinks wrap, adjourn to the waterways to experience Belgrade's famed *splavovi*, moored boats-cum-nightclubs that truly shine in the summer and dot the Zemun quay on the Danube and the New Belgrade promenade of the Sava river (your taxi driver will know where to drop you). The music on offer ranges from standard club fare to Serbian turbo-folk (a heady sonic concoction of Serbian folk music, Europop and Turkish Arabesque music). Try **H2O**, **Exile** or **Plastic** for the former and **Amsterdam** or **Acapulco** for the latter - and if it's still not to your liking, no matter: "splav-hopping" is encouraged. For the morning after, a piping cup of chocolaty-rich Turkish coffee (also called Serbian coffee, depending on the level of patriotism of the person you're talking to) will be your salvation. If you're not sure which to ask for, "the



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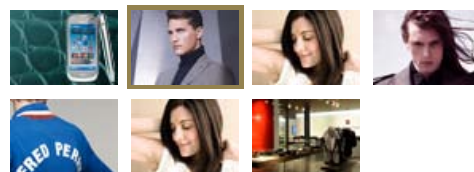
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good coffee" should achieve the desired result.

What to see

A city in the midst of regeneration - which makes it a fascinating, if not always conventionally beautiful, site to behold. Ghosts of buildings decimated by the NATO bombing campaign in the '90s abound. Indeed, Belgrade's political history is on display everywhere:

A trip to the **House of Flowers** [Botićeva 6; +381 11 367 1485] which contains the tomb of the famed former President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito-or "Tito" as he's universally known - is worth it, if only to admire the oversized vintage photographs of Che Guevara, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton hobnobbing with the chief architect of the "second Yugoslavia."

Book ahead at **the Royal Compound** [royal.rs] and you just might luck into a photo-op with Crown Prince Alexander II and his wife Princess Katherine. You're guaranteed to have things in common: He was born in London-Claridge's Hotel, suite 212, which Churchill declared the property of Yugoslavia at the time, in order to ensure that the heir to the throne would be born on Yugoslav soil. He's also relatively new to town-he was only invited back to the country to take up residence in 2001. Tour the **Royal Palace** - it all starts to feel like a Tsarist version of MTV's *Cribs* once you reach the basement, which is decorated in the style of the Kremlin's Terem Palace and comes equipped with a billiards table, stereo system and film screening room. Meanwhile, the neighboring **White Palace** is also worth a peek on the merits of its art collection (between the two palaces artists such as Poussin, Breughel Canaletto, Veronese and Rembrandt are represented).

Stroll the pedestrianised main promenade **Knez Mihailova**, which is stocked with shops and cafes, en route to Kaledmedgan Park at the foot of **Belgrade Fortress**-centerpiece of the city. The sprawling citadel boasts a zoo, planetarium, tennis and basketball courts and several museums (among them, the Military Museum, whose extensive display of decommissioned tanks and artillery pieces line the walk leading to its entrance). The real reason you're here though, is the view: make your way toward the "wall of the in-loves," as it's called by the locals, for a public-display-inducing panorama of the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers.

Where to stay

For the finest in town, head to the sumptuous, antiques-laden **Aleksandar Palas** (www.aleksandarpalas.com), one of the few five-star hotels in Belgrade. For something more boutique, **Townhouse 27** is a modern four-star option, while **Le Petit Pif** nails the quaint and cozy factor.

Where to visit

Consider extending your travels outside of Belgrade. **Novi Sad**, Serbia's second largest city behind Belgrade, is a one-hour drive (and also accessible via boat along the Danube or by train). Its Petrovaradin Fortress offers a breathtaking Peter Pan-type view of the city, and is also the setting for the Exit Festival - which, for music lovers is worth a trip to Serbia in its own right. While in town, remember to sample Bermet, an aperitif wine produced locally from secret family recipes, and composed of 20-odd ingredients whose combined effect is rumoured to function as a "blood cleanser."

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