

Gorging on new hope for Serbia

With the charms of Serbia on offer, **John Sutton** defected to the Eastern Bloc

SERBIA is one of those places I've always been vaguely aware existed, mostly because it featured, every now and then, in news bulletins during my childhood.

Belgrade, Serbs, Bosnians. Former Yugoslavia, Croats, Kosovo. They were beamed into the living room during the early 1990s with accompanying pictures of wailing widows, bombed out buildings and booming artillery.

Belgrade's a bit different now. Sitting on an outside terrace, enjoying a meal at gone ten at night while it's still T-shirt warm in September, you get the impression this capital has come a long way, and wants to go further still.

The city itself is the natural entry point from which to explore Serbia. That's where most of the flights go, the hotel and restaurant staff are friendly, speak English and will offer advice on what to see and where to go.

This can be a stroll round the city in the early evening, much like people do in Spain or Italy. Belgrade has the same relaxed, continental vibe. People amble along the wide eighteenth and nineteenth century boulevards

just taking in the evening.

Then they pop down narrow little side streets, full of artisan coffee shops where grandparents feed their toddler grandchildren cakes and ice creams, teenagers swig bottled beer in designer sunglasses and couples sit outside at tables eating for as long as they like.

A great way to see the city is by bike. The Danube, the river that flows through Belgrade, is

flanked by a network of cycle paths that will one day extend along its whole 1,777 mile course from the Black Forest in Germany to the Black Sea through the Ukraine.

The cycle tracks in Belgrade are away from the traffic, not crowded and packed with little cafes and restaurants to stop for a break.

The food is good, and varied. Traditional Serbian dishes typically include tomato salads, stews, grilled or barbecued meats and river fish from the Danube.

This is often served in an informal, almost tapas-like way, with the dishes being put on the table and everyone helping themselves. Of course, if you want a more formal setting, fine dining and foreign restaurants

are opening up all the time.

Belgrade feels a safe city, quietly sure of itself and confident for the future. But the recent past is always there – you see the rubble remains of buildings hit by bombs, and the parliament where, during his last stand just 10 years ago, Slobodan Milosevic ordered his generals to fire on the tens of thousands massed in protest at his regime.

To go now, while that future is still being forged, provides a snapshot of a city and a country on the up, embracing the challenges and opportunities of freedom and democracy.

But this optimism isn't just confined to the metropolitan types.

The countryside is a hiker's paradise, with miles and miles of unspoilt land punctuated by towns and villages and small campsites. You can walk through the Djerdap National Park along the Danube, where it forms the border with Romania, but the best way to see the river is to get on a boat.

We took a trip to see part of the magnificent Iron Gate Gorge, hewn out of the solid rock when this river carved its way through Europe. The Romans even



followed it on their travels, and modern-day Serbia was one of their most populous settlements.

The Viminacium archaeological site is slowly being uncovered, bit by bit, and provides a fascinating insight into Roman life on the road.

With beautifully preserved tomb paintings, a Roman public baths and countless other buildings still being discovered, this has the potential to be one of the most complete archaeological sites in the world.

The countryside offers great value for money too. £10 worth of Dinars should be enough for a night's drinks.

Nine of us had a meal, including beers, and the bill was less than 50 euros, and hotels and hostels are much less than the already bargain Belgrade rates.

The food in the country is rustic, simple but delightfully tasty. The charcuterie will rival anything else you've tasted, the soups and stews burst with flavour and the local wine washes it all down very nicely.

So from wine to beer, and the Belgrade Beer Fest, in its seventh year and getting bigger and bigger – this is more like a rock festival, but unlike ones back in Blighty, the ale won't cost you a fortune.

I had several pints of a strong local lager, and when I turned in at gone 4am, another band were about to come on stage, and a good seven or eight thousand people were still there ready to cheer them on.

Winding my way back through the streets of Belgrade as dawn rose, birds chirruped and the city whirred into life again I stopped for a coffee and got chatting to the waitress.

She asked me if I had a nice time, where I'd been, what I'd seen, and then reeled off half a dozen sights I hadn't even got near:

"Well then," she said, "you'll just have to come back."

She's right. I will.

TRAVEL FACTS

John Sutton stayed at hotels in Belgrade and throughout the east of the country.

Go to www.serbia.travel for more information.

For more information on Belgrade city breaks, go to www.travellerscities.com or www.regent-holidays.co.uk

To learn more about travel in rural Serbia, click on www.exploreworldwide.co.uk

Wizz Air fly from London Luton and JAT Air fly from London Heathrow to Belgrade. Prices with JAT beginning from 244 euros.





IRON WILL: The spectacular Iron Gate Gorge in Serbia, a country fighting back from its war-torn past and building a new future

