

ARE YOU BEING SERBED?

SERBIA is not a country I had thought about visiting before. It's not a typical holiday destination and, to be honest, I didn't really know anything about the place.

It was certainly not a destination I associated with skiing (little did I know).

First stop for us was Belgrade, capital of Serbia and one of the oldest cities in Europe, with a history dating back thousands of years.

Looking out the window of the minibus on the short drive between the airport and the capital, I felt I could have easily been driving through South London.

Belgrade bears a stark resemblance to our own capital with its historic buildings crammed together, and it's commuters too, jam-packed on to buses looking as miserable as sin.

There is a huge diversity of cultures, with the architecture, a mix of young and old (look out for those still in ruins following the Nato bombings of 1999).

We checked into the Hotel Moscow, in Old Belgrade, a great little hotel right in the heart of everything.

Dinner was at Zlatni Bokal Restaurant, a Serbian restaurant situated in the Skadarlija district, well known for its cobbled streets, nice bars, art galleries and just a short walk from our hotel.

The first two things I realised about Serbs were:

- They like eating meat
- They like eating a lot of meat.

But who's complaining? The food was fantastic, with typical dishes including mesano meso (mixed grill) and cevapcici (ground meat sticks).

Interestingly, we were serenaded by a three-piece band, who sang Serbian songs to us all night – admittedly we didn't have a clue what they were singing, but we had a great time regardless.

The bars and clubs in Belgrade are fabulous, situated in an area known, oddly, as Silicon Valley (its

real name is Strahinjica Bana Street, which, as I'm sure you'll agree, sounds far less interesting).

Full of the hippest bars, there is a great hustle and bustle about this place and a real party buzz.

Meanwhile, those less inclined to paint the town will find plenty of theatres, restaurants and museums to keep them amused.

But do check out The Federal Association of Globe Trotters (log on to usp-aur.rs), a rented apartment in the basement of a house adapted into a bar more than 10 years ago.

Initially created as a place for friends to catch up, members began to bring in pieces of furniture and art to decorate the rooms. No great surprise then that the bar today is a real mish-mash of tastes and, as such, has become appropriately nicknamed 'Granny's House'.

Still, it boasts thousands of members from all over the globe and they do make a pretty good mojito.

Naturally, our efforts to visit as many bars as possible were rewarded next morning with the hangover from hell, but there was no time for tea or sympathy as 6am saw us on our way to Kopaonik, a mountain range in the heart of Serbia.

Be warned, it's a four hour drive although you can fly into Nis, which is the closest airport and about an hour-and-a-half's drive away.

Kopaonik is the largest mountain range in Serbia. Its highest peak Pancicev sits 2,017 metres above sea level.

The resort can lay claim to 45 miles of ski slopes with 15 blue runs, nine red runs, seven black runs and three FIS standard runs for slalom.

We were staying at the Grand Hotel, a stunning four-star hotel which was now reaping the benefits of a six-million euro refurbishment last year.

As a result, the hotel is state of the art and probably my favourite hotel of all time.

Located just a few steps from the main ski-lifts, and overlooking the stunning mountains, it is the ultimate in alpine luxury.

Kopaonik boasts close to 160 days of snow and more than 200 sunny days a year. Indeed, it is often known as "the mountain of

the sun." Now, this was only my second time skiing, but after a rather unpleasant experience with some hired boots on my first skiing holiday, I managed to



persuade my dubious boyfriend that it was in fact essential I had my own ski boots (to match my Roxy salopettes and ski jacket).

As a result, when I turned up at the bottom of the ski-lift, fully kitted out, the ski instructors mistook my swish togs as an indication of my skiing prowess, when in fact I'm what is known in the trade as "all gear and no idea".

Still, after an excellent demonstration of my downhill horizontal skiing abilities, it was decided that I should be in the beginners' group.

My disappointment however was short lived; in fact, forgotten as soon as I was introduced to our ski instructors. Not only did their names sound like tasty Serbian dishes, they looked like that too!

Having only previously skied in France's Les Contamines region, and therefore no expert, I can say I found Kopaonik very enjoyable.

There are a total of 23 lifts on the mountain.

The slopes that we used were both beautiful and challenging, and although I didn't do anything more exciting than a red run, I understand the slopes can

cater to all levels of skier. For example, the resort offers a ski safari, a night skiing run, 20 kms of cross country tracks and a purpose built snowboarding park as well as some particularly scary looking off-piste runs for the more experienced

In all, I spent three glorious days in Kopaonik, trying to improve my skiing.

But in truth, my favourite part of the holiday was jumping on one of the skidoo's you can hire from the ski school, and blasting all over the mountain.

The food on the mountain is pretty exceptional – my favourite restaurant being Honey Bunny, where I ate mushrooms hand-picked from the mountain that morning.

And the après-ski was pretty good too, although I can't be sure (as with all skiing holidays, we rarely got back to our hotel before daylight and always feeling a little

worse for wear).

Kopaonik is certainly worth visiting and because it's still relatively unknown, it offers excellent value for money when you compare it to other European resorts.





■ **ALL WHITE:** Above, skiers in Kopaonik; below from left, thick snow; Katrina Thornton on piste; the Grand Hotel

