

Won over by Serbia's modern-day charms



BEAUTIFUL SCENERY A view across the Djerdap National Park and River Danube.

FOR those of us of a certain vintage the name Belgrade meant just one thing — Red Star Belgrade, and the glamour of European football.

Growing up in the 1970s and '80s Belgrade was an exotic and unknown place behind the Iron Curtain — going there for the first time I found a jumbled, bustling, interesting city which reflects its historic position on the crossroads between culture and empires.

Walking or riding around the city on trolley buses in sweltering September heat, the place feels unmistakably like a southern European city, but one combined with boulevards and some fine late 19th century architecture that wouldn't be out of place in France, together with a lot of stark communist-era concrete buildings (an architectural style a love — but a strange passion which I know might put me in the minority!)

Throw into the mix is the Serbian Orthodox church — with its wonderful marble confection of St Sava Cathedral in the city centre — an outdoor cafe culture, and road signs in the alien-looking Cyrillic alphabet, and you have a beguiling mix.

Even Belgrade's biggest fans wouldn't claim it is the most handsome city in the world — which may be something to do with it having been sacked and rebuilt 40 times in its turbulent history — but it is fun to explore.

Friendly people, a fascinating culture and an aphrodisiac cheese. Little wonder then that JASON EVANS fell for the charms of Serbia.

The one outstanding historical building is the Kalemegdan fortress — once a castle at the heart of the powerful Medieval Serbian empire, the Austro-Hungarian empire that later ruled the country drew up plans for massive new defences

but by the time work started on the walls it was the Muslim Ottoman empire that was in charge.

Today, the moat around the walls houses a basketball club.

Belgrade also boasts a great city beach built along two sides of lake — actually a damned branch of the Sava River.

There are long, and very popular, gravelly beaches and acres of parkland, with cafes, restaurants, and loads of sporting opportunities from golf to football, and even outdoor darts.

When the sun goes down Belgrade becomes a party town —

the nightlife is great, and at around £2 for a glass the cost of beer it won't break the bank.

The long pedestrian street of Kneza Mihaila is a good place to start, and is an ideal spot for some promenading or people watching, while in summer much of the

action moves down to the banks of the Danube and Sava rivers, where you will find more than 200 boats and barges housing a myriad of cool cafes, bars and nightclubs.

While the city makes a great place for a weekend break, you don't have to go far to find a very different — but equally fascinating — country.

Just a few hours drive east and the prosperity of Belgrade seems very distant — this is a landscape of farms and small holdings, of villages and towns where it feels like not much has happened for decades.

As you head further east towards the Romanian border the countryside becomes more wooded and hilly — and there is plenty to see, including some great Roman ruins to explore.

The Djerdap National Park, with its beautiful forested mountains and sense of peace, is a real gem and is a great place to go walking, while a special mention must go to the wine village of Rajac, which is one of the most magical places I have visited.

Families from the village in the valley below have built hundreds of little stone cottages-come-wine cellars in the settlement, and for generations they have come up the hill every summer and autumn to make wine, cook meals and eat together.

But wherever you go in Serbia you will be well fed and watered at reasonable prices — a good meal with wine in Belgrade will cost you about £12, while out in the countryside it will be half that much.

The Serbs are generous hosts and serve up great meats, wonderful breads, and lovely fresh veg including some of the best tomatoes I have tried in a long time.

And don't miss the warm, soft, creamy belmuzh cheese, which I was assured was an aphrodisiac.

After eating a bowl of the stuff with fresh bread, and drinking a few little glasses of the local sljivovica plum brandy, I had set my mind to jacking in the day job and never leaving!

The facts

Best for: A great value break.

Don't miss: The spectacular scenery of Djerdap National Park.

When to go: Early summer or Autumn — in August it gets very, very hot.

Getting there: JAT Airways fly daily from Heathrow.

Find out more: Serbian national tourism www.serbia.travel.com