

Historic country looks forward to bright future

For many the mention of Serbia conjures up visions of conflict and infighting, but Guy Martin discovered, the Balkan state is establishing a modern and tourist-friendly image

DOBRODOŠLI!

That means welcome in Serbian, and it is a phrase the people of this exciting and surprising country hope to say more often to overseas tourists in the coming years.

The Balkan state has shaken off its past and is now looking to

show off its present and future by embracing tourists to its vibrant capital and beautiful countryside.

That is not to say Serbia has forgotten about its history, as visitors may be impressed at the number and preeminence of sites showing off the country's varied past.

To the first-time visitor Serbia's biggest draw is likely to be provided by Belgrade and the stunning views of the River Danube as it widens and narrows at the so-called Iron Gates.

These attractions do not disappoint, but those who venture elsewhere may find they are re-



The Iron Gates where the famous River Danube widens and narrows.

warded with beautiful walking country, superb scenery wine-growing regions and accommodation and food which offer exceptional value for money.

Whatever their ultimate destination, most travellers will fly in and out of Belgrade, and it is worth taking a couple of days and nights to see and experience what the city has to offer.

One of its most impressive parts is the meeting of the Danube and Sava. A walk or cycle ride along the riverside paths are a good way to see Kalemegdan or Belgrade Fortress, dating back to the third century, and the much more modern Ada Bridge, now nearing completion.

Away from the ancient Kalemegdan Citadel, the oldest buildings date back only to the 18th century, but are a real mix.

There are grandiose Neo-Byzantine churches such as the Cathedral of Saint Sava, which is undergoing work inside but is still a magnificent sight dominating the skyline of part of the city.

A Turkish influence, bohemian quarter and the social realism of the Soviet style concrete blocks are further reminders of the varied history.

Belgrade is famed for its lively atmosphere and this is perhaps best experienced in the pedestrianised Prince Michael Street. But almost everywhere cafés appear busy, and by night underground venues, bars and house boats converted to nightspots provide plenty for party-going types.

A chance to escape from the bustle may lie at the Ada Ciganlija river island and adjoining artificial lake, where there are man-made beaches, trees, sports facilities and restaurants.

This area can become very crowded itself, however, attracting as many as 300,000 visitors over summer weekends. Anyone looking for peace and tranquillity may be better advised to leave the city altogether, and heading east along the Danube provides plenty of spectacular scenery.

Some 90 miles south east are

the Roman ruins of Viminacium, a city and military camp dating back to the 1st century AD.

It is being restored to show off baths, tombs, an amphitheatre, reconstruction of the military camp and more features.

Experts see it as one of the most important Roman sites in Europe, and with refurbishment ongoing to make it more visitor-friendly, it is sure to attract more people from cruise boats to make the short trip inland.

For those in search of further history and culture the nearby city of Požarevac is worth stopping in.

Exhibits from Viminacium can be seen in the National Museum, while another half-an-hour can enjoyably be spent in the gallery of Milena Pavlovic-Barili, housed in the artist's former home.

The country's future plans for investing in and attracting tourism can perhaps best be seen further east, in Srebrno Jezero or Silver Lake resort.

An oxbow lake alongside the Danube and not far from the border with Romania, its beaches and opportunities for watersports and fishing are likely to make it more popular in the coming years.

In the meantime it is worth taking advantage of the prices. A good meal, even one featuring the Serbian favourites of plenty of meat, beans, excellent bread and local wine available for around £10.

Accommodation will not cost much more and refreshed history-seekers will want to head to Lepenski Vir, a Mesolithic archaeological site which sits aside the Danube within the Iron Gates gorge.

The findings are preserved within a giant conservatory-style building, where virtual tours of the Middle Age settlement can also be experienced.

Outdoor types might find real-life walks around the Derdap National Park and if a visitor was choosing places to go outside Belgrade, this would surely come top

of the list. As well as the countryside in the park being beautiful and rich with plant and wildlife, the views down to the Iron Gates gorge are genuinely breathtaking.

Cruise boats are catching on to the beauty of this stretch of the river, dotted with historic fortresses, but the park from which it can be best-viewed remains free from crowds.

Further south lies the 14th century Vratna monastery, sitting below an imposing canyon and well worth a visit for those passing by.

Further south still, in the village of Rajac, one could be forgiven for mistaking the landscape for the south-west of France, with its historic wine cellars, stone houses connected by narrow streets and squares, and glorious countryside.

It is worth setting aside a few hours to enjoy the food and wine on offer but that should still leave time for a trip to Unesco World Heritage site Felix Romuliana.

Situated near Zajecar, where some of its artefacts are stored in a museum, the ancient Roman complex consists of fortifications, a palace, basilicas, temples and other features which are fascinating international archaeologists, who believe they still have much to unearth about its history.

It should satisfy any final cravings for culture in a country packed with it, but not yet affected by the crowds and prices one expects from a place with so much to offer.

As a Serbian might say, Srećan put! In other words, have a nice trip.

■ For more information on tourism in Serbia visit www.serbia.travel.

For more information on Belgrade and what it has to offer visitors visit www.tob.co.rs. JAT Airways (www.jat.com) fly daily from London Heathrow and Wizz Air (www.wizz.com) fly four times per week from Luton. Explore Worldwide (www.explore.co.uk) will be offering activity holidays and tours to rural Serbia in 2012.

a night under the stars

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