

High Times in Bosnia & Herzegovina

Eco Tourism in the Balkans

> By Nick Redmayne

The 25th March 2007 saw the first commercial flight from London to Sarajevo since Bosnia & Herzegovina's bitter civil war ended in 1995, making it the last city in Europe to establish a direct air link with Britain.



Mosque, Mostar
مسجد / موستار

Amongst those aboard the inaugural flight the atmosphere was buoyant. Martin Bell, veteran front man for the BBC's wartime coverage, sat across the aisle, dapper in his 'lucky' white suit. From a younger generation, the British Ambassador Mathew Rycroft, sat a few rows behind. However, it was not just a celebration of notables. Amongst an attentive BA cabin crew were

those with Bosnian family links. Crewmember Andrew Gosling was particularly proud to be on this first flight, 'It's been a long time coming and I wanted to be part of it.'

Speaking on arrival at Sarajevo airport, the Ambassador Rycroft said 'Bosnia & Herzegovina offers mountain adventure, cultural and religious tourism, and the ▶



Pocitelj Mosque

مسجد بوشتيلي



Neretva river, Mostar

نهر نيريتفا / موستار



Stari Most, Mostar

ستاري موست / موستار

potential for much, much more.' Even Martin Bell was here to promote tourism - he plans on escorting a group of visitors around the country later in the year, and Sarajevo itself has high hopes that the European short break market will provide a much-needed boost to its economy. I was here to do my part with a spot of mine-safe hiking. How times change. Heading to town, I planned to meet Tim Clancy of Green Visions, a local campaigning environmental group and eco tour operation. A long time anti-war activist and a young American who has lived in Sarajevo since 1992. All through the war he worked on humanitarian projects across the region, including coordinating a medical project in Mostar during the worst of the fighting. I'd first met Tim in 2004, whilst attending the Lancaster House date on Paddy Ashdown's European roadshow. Lord Ashdown as UN High Representative was on a mission to showcase the wealth of Bosnia & Herzegovina's undiscovered landscapes and culture to an incredulous journalistic audience. 'Hey Nick, Come and do some hiking with us sometime.' OK Tim, here I am and I've brought my boots!

After a couple of days enjoying the pleasures of a decidedly resurgent Sarajevo it was time to head for the ozone-rich air of BiH's hills. Reassuringly Tim declared, 'It's true there are a lot of mines, but also a lot of areas that are completely safe and free of landmines... some illicit forestry camps put up their own mine signs! Where there's any doubt we don't go there.' ▶



Neretva river, Mostar

نهر نيريتفا / موستار

BiH is dominated by the Dinaric Alps, ranging across much of the country's 51,000 km² and creating the world's largest limestone karst field. Through these rugged peaks and valleys flows the ever-present torrential theme of water – it's everywhere and in vast quantities. Rivers tumble over cliffs in hazy cascades or are magically swallowed up by sinkholes only to emerge, miles further in alarming surges of powerful white water.

In amongst all this there's a surprisingly rich biodiversity, including Brown Bears, Wolves and Wild Boar together with more than 240 bird species and over 3,700 plants, hundreds found nowhere else. A bizarre twist has caused many of the ill-defined minefields to become de facto safe havens for wildlife, animals paying no heed to the warning skull and cross-bones signs but hunters valuing their own limbs highly enough to keep out. Elsewhere, despite a voracious logging industry, significant stands of old growth Primary Forest exist, one of only two places in Europe where this ancient woodland is still to be found.

Travelling out from Sarajevo, a recent dump of snow has awakened the slopes of Bjelasnica Ski Resort. However, the surprise blizzard has also cut off some mountain villages including our planned trailhead. Plan B involves snowshoes and a circular trek from the Muslim village of Umoljani where local inhabitants nurture a nascent community-based tourism initiative.

Our truck follows a newly-laid road to a point where the three mountains of Bjelasnica, Treskavica and Visocica meet. Here, we halt for a while and scramble through deep snow onto a nearby ridge. Looking out across the valleys with their cascades of stream-fed water mills it is difficult to conceive this area as a war zone. During the conflict Serb forces drove out Muslim families, razed their villages and worse. Tim leads the way to a line of intriguing stones set along the ridge. It's then that I realise I'm standing in a graveyard. However, these souls perished centuries ago and their carved memorials, stecci, are a unique characteristic of BiH, with tens of thousands found across the country. Continuing towards Umoljani (meaning Of the Prayers), we pass a single village minaret, testament to vestigial humanity in an inhumane time. The story goes that



Folk Singers, Umoljani / مغنيات شعبيات / أمولجاني



Mirsada Sehic, Umoljani / مرشدة سياحية / أمولجاني



Walker's hut, Umoljani

كوخ لإستراحة المشاة في أمولجاني

the mosque was spared by a Serb commander whose son had been miraculously healed by the village's Hodza (Imam) some years earlier. Whatever the history, the fact is that this is the only mosque left standing in the entire area. At the village it's time to don snowshoes and grab some ski poles. An unfamiliar feeling but I'm soon in my stride, heading steadily up

the hillside, though wishing perhaps I'd brought more chocolate. Continually sighting the footprints of those ahead, younger and fitter than I, the snow is blinding white and sunnies are a must. At about 1,600 metres my chocolate supply is exhausted and so am I. We reach the deserted summer village of Gradina and I take the opportunity for a breather. Here, ▶

simple wooden buildings sit hard pressed against the hillside, looking rather too well ventilated for today's snowy winds. A little further, atop the ridgeline, views open into Studeni Polje, literally 'cold field', below with the dark course of Studeni Potok, 'cold stream', describing a serpentine meander along the valley floor. It's an arresting burst of sight even in the snow, though I can't help a mental fast-forward to early summer evenings when Gradina's inhabitants are in residence and the pastures below are wild flower-filled. After lingering for while, to rest and take photos we search out a different and steeper route in descent, crossing streams of melt water burbling beneath the snow, finally knocking the ice off our boots back at the truck.

Local man Emin Fatic is the prime mover in a small scale tourism revolution to hit Umoljani, he beckons us towards his wooden hut. Inside there are a couple of rooms, one with a wood-burning range tended by three or four women. We sit down and are soon served sugary mountain tea. Via Tim's translation, Emin clearly states his manifesto, 'Ask any villagers in this area what the future is, and they will say tourism. Every weekend I'm here, Europe is coming to Bosnia, as Bosnia can't get into Europe - but we are waiting for that day.' On cue village ladies start filling the tables with pans of magnificent filo pastry burek and zeljanica dishes, cuscus, vegetables and chilled yoghurt drinks. This is rustic food par excellence, as Emin says, 'Almost everything we are eating

here today was produced here too.'

Emin reports 'Villagers used to be a little shy, but they soon joined in. The results we expected in three years were apparent in three months!' At this point, in an apparent bid to aid digestion, five ladies in white and red traditional costume, who have been helping with the feast, take on the roll of folk harmony group. Their songs are ancient ones, and though I can't understand the words I'm sure these are cautionary ballads of tragedy and of loves once lost. Soon it will be time to return to Sarajevo but the day's warm glow stoked by exercise, uplifting landscapes and fine food has without resistance permeated my entire body.

Though the multitude of rivers and waterfalls running through BiH are often



Café in Bascarsija (Old Town)

مقهى في باشارشيجا



Tim Clancy

تيم كلانسي



Stecci, Umljani highlands

ستيتشي / جبال أمولجاني

cited as the country's most memorable characteristic, coffee must be up there too. In Emin Fatiā's hut it arrives, thick and sweet, taking its rightful place as the country's ubiquitous social glue. 'Hajmo na kafu' ('Let's have coffee') was a slogan for post war reconciliation - it seems also fitting as an invitation to the rest of the world. So it's time to wake up and smell the coffee of Bosnia & Herzegovina, walk in the mountains, take in vistas unseen by visitors for a generation and enjoy a genuine hospitality that's been missing from our sophisticated lives for even longer. ■



Woman selling woollen clothing, Umljani

امرأة تبيع ملابس صوفية / أمولجاني

If you go

When to go: May through to October unless you want to ski or snowshoe.

Getting there: British Airways flies direct to Sarajevo from Gatwick three times a week www.ba.com

Visas: No visas are required by EU citizens, Americans or Canadians

Money: KM or Convertible Mark, Euros are commonly used too. 1-2KM or £1-3KM

Language: Three official languages, Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian though very similar.

Reading: Bosnia & Herzegovina (www.bradtguides.com), or Sarajevo Thomas Cook both by Tim Clancy.

Accommodation in Sarajevo: Hotel Hecco 033 273 730 www.hotel-hecco.net 100KM per double with breakfast – bright clean rooms, internet, and only a short walk to the centre of

town. Also Hotel Astra, very central 280KM double www.hotel-astra.com.ba Alternatively you could play at foreign correspondents and book into the Holiday Inn 300km double room www.holiday-inn.com/sarajevo

Tour Operator: Green Visions www.greenvisions.ba +387 33 717 290 offer eco-tours of BiH including hiking in Umljani and elsewhere, biking, rafting and wildlife combined with village-based community projects.