

In Serbia it's obligatory to raise a glass or six to your hosts, and there's fun and fascination aplenty despite the uglier aspects of the past

WORDS RUTH WALKER

FROM Austro-Hungarian rule to bloody revolutions and the much more recent Yugoslav conflict, the Serbians have had a messy old time of it.

But, being a stoic lot, they don't let it get them down. In fact, the Serbian people have a fail-safe coping mechanism when it comes to trouble: they crack open a bottle and throw a party.

During the Nato bombing of Belgrade in 1999 – the effects of which can still be seen in the crumbling facades of one or two buildings on Kneza Milosa – they took to the miles of underground caves and tunnels beneath the city for protection. And to let their hair down a bit.

"We are party people," says our beaming guide. And, during five days and nights in the country, they prove it – over long lunches at Aqua Doria, on the banks of the Danube in Novi Sad (kick-off 2pm; stumble-out 9.30pm), and over nights-before that seem to merge, sleeplessly, into post-party morning-after breakfasts.

It's exhausting but, man, is it fun.

There is no trace of anger or animosity here, only smiles and a warm welcome. Serbia is a country determined to move on from its, at times, ugly past with a laugh on its lips and a rakja in its hand. That's the local fruit brandy, in case you were wondering, and it will be thrust on you at every opportunity. It is considered rude to refuse.

Theirs is a dark, sarcastic humour that fits well with the Scottish psyche – perhaps that is why Scotsman Francis Mackenzie settled here in the late 1880s, buying up land and establishing Belgrade's Slavija Square on the eastern outskirts of the city. There is little crime, and a festival, large or small, crops up for any and every occasion – film, dance, beer, wine, street theatre, trumpets. Yes, trumpets. We only hear of the reputation of Guca, a week-long brass band blast of a fest that combines drinking with gypsy dancing with an undertone, if you care to notice it, of fervent nationalism. And did I mention the drinking? You have never been to a music festival, we are told, until you have been to Guca.

It makes our exploits at Exit seem tame in comparison. An event that began in 2000 as a student stand against the Milosevic regime ("Exit out of ten years of madness"), it has since grown in size and reputation and is now considered one of the top summer festivals in Europe. This year it attracted Nile Rogers, Snoop Dogg, Prodigy, Fatboy Slim, Atoms For Peace, Nick Cave and David Guetta to its 20-plus stages over four nights. There can be no more majestic setting for any festival, in the moats, amphitheatres



and sprawling grounds of the medieval Petrovaradin Fortress.

But before all that we visit Belgrade, whose position at the junction of the Danube and the Sava rivers is what has made it so vulnerable to attack over the centuries. That weakness also contributes to its staggering beauty, however. Restaurants and lively bars now line the streets and riverbank, and the district of Zemun, in particular – which predates Belgrade but is now considered part of the city – is very pretty.

Visit Kalemegdan fortress, some of which dates as far back as the first century, for spectacular views of the city and the rivers far below, then meander through Kalemegdan park, with its stalls selling sweets, crafts and pre-revolution military souvenirs.

We have a late lunch at Saran, a beautiful spot on the waterside, where local fish – perch, salmon, catfish – is accompanied by a garlicky potato salad and washed down by surprisingly good local wine. Then we wind things up at Sveti Sava – St Sava Cathedral – a

dramatic domed place of worship that can be seen for miles. Construction was started in 1936, but various wars and a lack of money means it is still many years from completion. None the less, it is a breathtaking place of quiet contemplation.

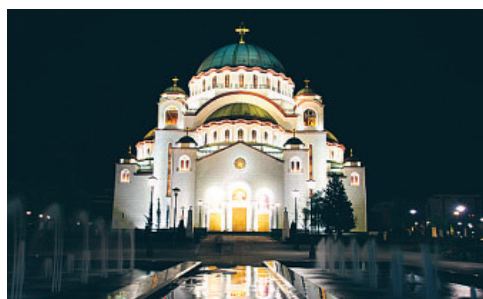
Just over an hour to the north of Belgrade is the city of Novi Sad, a cosmopolitan destination known as the Serbian Athens, since this is where the country's cultural heart beats. Steeples from Roman Catholic churches pierce the skyline along with orthodox onion domes and an art nouveau synagogue, indicating the city's vast religious and cultural diversity.

A bustling university town, at its centre is a pedestrianised criss-crossing of lanes and boulevards which house coffee shops, bars and restaurants. A walking tour can give a taste of the area's colourful history, while a pint of beer, the gentlemen in our party are excited to note, can cost as little as 60p. Bars are open late (or early, depending on which direction you're coming from) and any night can turn into a party.

As an antidote to city life, head for the open countryside. Fruska Gora, once an island, is now an oasis of fields and farms on the southern rim of the Pannonian basin, about half an hour's drive from Novi Sad. Sometimes called the Holy Mountain because of its 17 monasteries and numerous churches, it provides a refreshing change of pace after the madness of a night at Exit.

We have Sunday lunch here, along with many Serbian families, in a rural household, eating traditional food grown on nearby fields – first, rakja, followed by a simple broth, then stuffed peppers and a sweet layered cake made from cream and pastry – lying back on haystacks amid the sunflowers as children chase around after the farm's long-suffering kittens.

In the late afternoon, a visit to Sremski Karlovci, once the religious and cultural centre of Serbia during the 18th and 19th centuries, takes us not just to the country's oldest high school (founded in 1791) but also, of more interest to our party, the Kis winery. For this is the heart of Serbia's wine



NIGHT AND DAY above left, the majestic, though unfinished, St Sava Cathedral; above right, high jinks at the Exit festival; top, a panoramic view of Belgrade



Photographs: Getty Images

DO NOT DISTURB GRANARY COURT, MAINS OF TAYMOUTH, KENMORE

EVERYONE always says you can't beat Scotland if you get the weather and that's true, but even when it rained for an entire day on our short break at Mains of Taymouth, we were as happy as Simon Cowell in a hot tub. Much of that was down to the five-star standard of Granary Court – it's the sort of place you never want to leave. But once outdoors there is a wealth of activities such as hiking, kayaking and walking, plus the golf course and pony trekking on site. The winning location is also part of the attraction as the shortbread tin scenery invites you to sit back and admire, glass in hand, as swallows dart overhead, salmon leap in the river and sausages turn on the barbecue.

WINING AND DINING

It's self-catering with everything and more required to cater for our large party. The kitchen looks on to the garden and terrace (as well as being open plan to the huge lounge above), so the cooks can watch everyone else bobbing about in the hot tub like so many champagne corks. The range and various white goods all did their thing and there's a gas-fired barbecue and dining table outside for enjoying a garden big enough to kick a football around. When you can't cook, won't cook, there's the Courtyard restaurant where the cheery staff ensured everyone left stuffed to the gills with fresh local produce.

ROOM SERVICE

Two double and two twin-bedded rooms, three of them ensuite, meant loads of room for all and no queues for the bathrooms. The master bedroom has acres of space, while the



downstairs double with ensuite has french door access to a terrace and garden. The flatscreen TVs in rooms were popular, as was sprawling on sofas in front of the lounge TV/DVD.

WORTH GETTING OUT OF BED FOR

Mains of Taymouth arrange a huge range of activities. There is Taymouth stables and trekking centre on site, the excellent nine-hole golf course, and various adventure sports bookable at reception, including bespoke sea kayaking trips, ice climbing and biking, with fantastic food too. Then there's panning for gold along at Highlands Safaris' HQ (www.highlandsafaris.net), tame deer to feed while you graze at the excellent cafe, and fascinating 4x4 trips in the hills above.

LITTLE EXTRAS

The hot tub had everyone in a froth, and there's a sauna too. The TVs and free wifi kept bickering at bay, while

the utility room meant returning soaked wasn't a problem. A shop, restaurant and cafe mean you'll never go hungry and Mains of Taymouth even provided a vole who patrols the garden for that Wind in the Willows touch. Dogs are welcome too.

BUDGET OR BOUTIQUE?

It's boutique self-catering with all the five-star touches you'd expect.

GUESTBOOK COMMENTS

You can't fail to have a good time at Mains of Taymouth. If you want to do nothing, you can, if you want to be out and about from dawn to after dark, that's easy too. Granary Court provides the perfect base for every family's mixed bunch of lounge lizards and adrenalin junkies. □

Janet Christie

Twitter: @JanetChristie2

Granary Court (sleeps eight) from £1,600pw, also one-bedroom villas £200 a night, two nights £300 and two-bedroom villas/apartments £250 a night, £350 for two; Mains of Taymouth Golf Course: nine holes from £15-£17; 18 holes £20-£25 and day ticket from £30; winter green fees £11 per day; Mains of Taymouth Stables and Trekking Centre: Own a Pony Day for six to 16 year-olds, £40, 30 min pony ride, £18, 30 min Family Time £18, one hour trek £30, two-hour trek £50 (not for under 12s), (0712321903 or via reception); Sea Kayaking (min two persons, 14+) is £165pp incl lunch. Family, individual and group activities include white water rafting, mountain biking, abseiling, canyoneering, off-piste skiing and snow-showing. Bespoke activity bundles via the Mains of Taymouth website or 01887 830226. Book trekking on 0712 321903 or via reception at Mains of Taymouth; Granary Court, Mains of Taymouth Country Estate, Kenmore, Perthshire (01887 830226, www.taymouth.co.uk)

country, and we spend a lazy afternoon tasting the best of the country's reds, whites and rosés under the shade of overhanging trees in the garden.

The area is particularly known for bermet wine, which contains about 20 spices and was originally intended as a herbal digestif. Which, unless I am very much mistaken, makes this tipple purely medicinal. And provides yet another opportunity to raise a glass, look our neighbour in the eye and toast "ziveli". Don't make eye contact and, the story goes, we will be condemned to ten years of bad sex. You've never seen so much eye-locking. □

Twitter: @Ruth_Lesley

FACT FILE

Ruth Walker flew with Lufthansa from Edinburgh, stopping briefly in Frankfurt – a speedy, trouble-free alternative. Prices from around £250 return (www.lufthansa.com).

National Tourism Organisation of Serbia (www.serbia.travel)

Tour operators offering tailor-made packages to Serbia including Exit include: Regent Holidays (0207 666 1244, www.regentholidays.co.uk); and Travel The Unknown (www.traveltheunknown.com).

Currency: few places will sell you Serbian dinar in Scotland, but cash machines are plentiful in Belgrade and Novi Sad. Just beware taking out more than you need, as you may struggle to sell them when you get back home. £1 = 132RSD

Exit takes place in July 2014. Check the website for dates, acts and prices. Five days of music, eight days of accommodation, airport transfers and a Novi Sad city pass cost £115 in 2013 (www.exitfest.org).

WALK OF THE WEEK UNION CANAL, LINLITHGOW

A STROLL by the canal and along quiet country lanes makes for the perfect weekend dose of peace and quiet. The canal towpath, rich in birdsong and flowers as well as the tranquillity of the water beside it, could not be described as off the beaten track. However, it can be a place of retreat and relative silence, providing a corridor away from urban life.

As with many good things, I happened on this route by chance. A canal walk with my daughter was altered when she raised the typical child's question of "What's that over there?" A little exploration followed and an enjoyable, if longer than planned, walk ensued.

DISTANCE 4½ miles.

HEIGHT CLIMBED 280ft.

TIME 2 to 2½ hours.

MAP OS Landranger 65.

PARK

If entering Linlithgow from junction 3 of the M9, go left at the roundabout in front of the Star and

Garter Hotel then turn right once under a railway bridge to drive past the back of the town's station. Just before a bridge over the canal go right to find roadside parking near the canal basin. There is also parking in the centre of Linlithgow.

IN SUMMARY

Head west on the towpath from the canal basin, following a blue sign for the Avon Aqueduct – although you are not going that far. After about a mile a pipe crosses the canal near Linlithgow Golf Club – there is a blue sign for the club below the pipe on the other side of the water. About 20 yards before the pipe, go right, down steps, to reach a minor road. Go left to walk below the canal – taking care because of traffic – then follow the road up past the golf club.

Continue up the road past the golf course and over a cattle grid. Farmland is now passed as the road turns into more of a track and a view opens up of a hill – Cockleroy – ahead. The track becomes a concreted lane after bearing right and passing cottages. As

it descends look for views across the Firth of Forth to the Ochil Hills and back to Linlithgow with the distinctive spire of St Michael's Church and the outline of the town's palace.

When the road has crossed a bridge over the canal join the towpath and go back under the bridge to head back to the start – the canal basin is about two miles from this point.

REFRESH

There is a wide choice of cafes, pubs and restaurants in Linlithgow.

WHILE YOU ARE IN THE AREA

Linlithgow's Palace (www.historic-scotland.gov.uk) is the birthplace of Mary, Queen of Scots, and is well worth exploring. For more history head to Annet House Museum (www.annethousemuseum.org.uk). Its restored garden in particular is worth seeing.

Linlithgow Canal Centre (www.lucs.org.uk) at the start of the walk is open, with a small museum and boat trips, until 29 September. □

Nick Drainey

Twitter: @ScotlandWalk