

A short intro or kicker of the article will go here. This part acts as a bridge between the headline and the article itself.



A GEM HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT— BELGRADE, SERBIA

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHS

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As someone who cannot have enough of Europe, I am always on the lookout for beautiful cities and towns which can satisfy my craving for the European charm but is also easy to get to for a quick holiday. In one such quest, I stumbled upon Belgrade, Serbia. A stone throw's away from Budapest and Vienna, you can easily add Serbia to any East European holiday itinerary. But I am here to argue that it deserves a trip of its own. Having spent numerous vacations exploring different part of this continent, I was truly amazed by this city which blended the quintessential European streets and architecture with the most easygoing vibe of any capital city I have been to. With numerous flight options from all major cities in India, you need not go through the hassle of getting a Schengen visa for this trip. You can enter Serbia visa-free using a valid USA or UK visa.

To soak in the history and geography of the city to help contextualize your entire trip, start with a walking tour around the Republic Square and its neighbouring area. Located slightly off the city centre, the Republic Square is a smaller version of a typical European city square, only less crowded, more relatable and a lot less pretentious. Having said that, don't mistake it for being any less impressive. The square is surrounded by beautiful historic buildings and monuments - like National Museum of Serbia, being the oldest and largest museum in Serbia and National Theatre inspired by the renowned La Scala in Milan, with the monument of Prince Mihailo Obrenović built in the nineteenth century at its centre. I would highly recommend checking the schedule of shows at the National Theatre in advance and possibly catch a play, opera or a ballet while you are visiting. This area is also a cultural and shopping hub brimming with hotels, bars and restaurants with both local and world cuisines in the bylanes near the square.



The National Museum is currently hosting an inspiring exhibit called 'World Unseen' which is making photography accessible for the visually impaired. It is an incredible initiative and the photography exhibit is organised by Canon with Association of the Blind of Serbia and the National Museum of Serbia as partners. The exhibit has also been hosted in renowned locations in the United Kingdom, Kazakhstan, the Czech Republic, Kenya, the United Arab Emirates, Croatia and Slovenia.

You can also experience the art and history of numerous Serbian artists at the National Museum followed by further exploring the art scene in Savamala, the design district of Belgrade. Given the diverse options available, it is recommended you take an art tour to get a better perspective and direction in your exploration as one can spend days soaking in the Serbian art and its evolution. You can also experience the art and history of numerous Serbian artists at the National Museum followed by further exploring the art scene in Savamala, the design district of Belgrade. Given the diverse options available, it is recommended you take an art tour to get a better perspective and direction in your exploration as one can spend days soaking in the Serbian art and its evolution.



Belgrade Fortress is another imposing piece of architecture which is sure to take you back in time. Located at the confluence of Sava and Danube rivers, this fortress complex comprises of parks, stunning views, a museum and numerous statues and monuments which will give you a glimpse into the history of the region.

Since Belgrade has two major rivers, Sava and Danube, a walk by the promenade followed by a river cruise is a must. Various river cruises are available on Airbnb, viator and getyourguide and each tends to include unlimited drinks – I would recommend you pick a small cruise for a more personalised experience. Depending on your guide, you would get to immerse in not just the history of the region but also some interesting stories of recent Arab investments and hilarious urban anecdotes.

Another unmissable experience in Belgrade is to explore the orthodox churches in the city especially the Church of Saint Sava. It is one of the largest orthodox churches in the world. Despite being recently opened, the church has a rather intriguing past – during the occupation of Yugoslavia, its construction was halted in 1941 and it also came to be used by the German troops during the World War II. As serene as the white façade of this church is, the interiors are opulent with stunning use of gold mosaics. Modeled on the renowned Constantinople's Hagia Sophia in Istanbul which has recently

been reconverted into a mosque, this church is often referred to as the New Hagia Sophia.

Apart from its remarkable architecture, rich history and more chequered recent past of being bombed and occupied in the 1900s, Belgrade has a vibrant and rich cuisine. To experience it, you can head to the cobbled-stone street of Skadarlija where traditional and modern local restaurants and bars await to welcome you and take you on a culinary journey with an unforgettable background score of live music. The Serbian cuisine is a beautiful culmination of Balkan, middle eastern and Austro-Hungarian influences. Be sure to try cevapi (local grilled sausages), sarma (flavourful minced meat wrapped in steamed cabbage or grape leaves), ajvar (red pepper paste), pljeskavica (a Serbian burger), burek (pastry or pie baked with traditional fillings) and rakia (a traditional fruit brandy).

Despite its endless offerings for a traveler, Belgrade is often overlooked in recent times due to misconceptions of unrest in the country. The ongoing civilian protests against the government are well organised and peaceful. So one can easily enjoy this stunning city which has more character than most other European capital cities. Explore the kind beating heart of Balkan in the city of Belgrade for a truly unique European experience.