

Story and photos by Cari Gray

At first, you notice the bullet markings. Everywhere. They still scar the buildings of Sarajevo, ever since the siege. Mortar shells, now safely embedded like fossils, lie in the concrete of sidewalks.

Thankfully, nowadays bullet casings are carved into decorative vases, pepper grinders and key chains that sit in the windows of brightly decorated shops. Sarajevo, the capital city of the tiny, heart-shaped Bosnia and Herzegovina, is bustling. Streets are lined with countless stylish cafes and restaurants where locals slowly sip coffee and eat. The young women all look like supermodels, especially at the popular Cafe Tito student hangout.

It's hard to believe that for over 1,200 days, from 1992 to 1995, Sarajevo was almost entirely cut off from the world – no electricity, gas, food or water. Sarajevans – Muslims, Catholics, Jews and Orthodox – all lived under constant threat of sniper fire from the surrounding hillsides. Train and cable car tracks were ruined. The only way to move essential supplies into the city was through a hidden 700-meter tunnel dug under the airport tarmac, linking a non-descript farmhouse in the suburbs to a random apartment in the city. The tunnel was just big enough to move a live goat for fresh milk or a crouched over man hauling a huge sack of potatoes. Some relief was flown into the UN-protected airport, but much of it ended up for sale on the black market. The US brokered Dayton Accords ended the conflict in 1995, but saddled the country of 4.3 million with a government divided largely along ethnic lines and one of the most inflated civil services in the world.



Shop in Sarajevo

Despite all, Sarajevo today continues to pride itself on its long legacy and spirit of tolerance, diversity and multi-ethnicity. Distinct Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian styles of architecture lie in districts next to one another. Look to the right – it's Istanbul. Look left – it's Vienna! Bridges cross the River Miljacka, full of crystal clear mountain water. Mosque minarets and cathedral towers decorate the city skyline. Colorful trams, many donated from a variety of European capitals, look like toy people movers. The 1984 Olympic nostalgia celebrates such stars as Katarina Witt and Torvald and Dean. There are no Golden Arches or restaurant chains, the locals preferring their local delicious kebabs, fresh Adriatic fish and local filo-dough pastries. You'll find authentic Turkish coffee shops at every corner – no Starbucks here thanks. The elegant five-star Hotel Europe, rebuilt in 2008, sits in the heart of the vibrant pedestrian zone. The family-run boutique Hotel Michele is a favorite of stars of the Sarajevo Film Festival, hosting film greats such as Morgan Freeman.



Bridge at Mostar

Sarajevo's surrounding areas feature the alpine ski village of Jahorina; the 21-meter high Old Bridge of Mostar; Blagaj's "dervish monastery" built into the rock face source of the Buna river; the Christian pilgrimage site of Medugorje (second largest Catholic pilgrimage site in the world); the 25m high Kravica falls; and the artisan village of Pocitlj. The dramatic Dinaric Alps, the southern extension of the Swiss Alps, make for superb guided hiking and rafting excursions.

Bosnians are used to voting – they have had more than 5 elections in 15 yrs. Voter turn out, particularly among young people, is typically low. Unemployment is high. More challenges lie ahead. But a unique spirit thrives in Sarajevo. I'll be back.

Recommended tour operator: www.exploringbh.com

Cari Gray has traveled the world— initially as her parents' excess but well-loved baggage on overseas work assignments, later as a wide-eyed explorer. For over 15 years, Cari worked for Butterfield & Robinson in the luxury active travel business, crafting and guiding custom trips annually for high net worth individuals and corporations. Her many roles at B&R included directing global marketing and public relations. She's since started Gray & Co., applying her in-depth knowledge and personal experience to create custom high-end active journeys around the world with the best global array of hotels, resorts, villas, events, guides, tour operators and industry consortia.

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