

## DESTINATION

So much more than a former war zone with centuries of conflict around it, **Bosnia and Herzegovina's** rich history, incredible nature, and uniquely multicultural heritage are transforming it into an increasingly valued tourism destination

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# The land where West meets East

**O**n a Sunday in June in 1914, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg, were shot while visiting Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina – and the event changed world history forever. The assassination took place from the city's Latin Bridge – an Ottoman-era structure over the Miljacka river – and is widely recognised as the moment that set off the catastrophic events of the First World War.

Yet 110 years later, this spot where this catalyst occurred is only marked by a plain commemorative plaque, with a single line stating what happened. On top of the bridge, tourists snap selfies, while in the Muzej Sarajeva in front of it, history buffs can immerse themselves in mementos like life-sized sculptures of the late couple, the dinnerware set from their hotel, a replica of the gun they were shot with, and the car they were in when it happened – a Gräf & Stift Double Phaeton limo preserved with the bullet marks still on its rear. If you're lucky, a working replica of the vehicle – built ten years ago by local car enthusiast Edo Kapetanovic – will be outside. You can take a picture inside it for 1KM (€2) or be driven around town in it for 100KM (€50).

This feeling of travelling back in time is extended the moment you set foot in Baščaršija, the city's Old Town just steps away. It's separated from the more modern side of

**ABOVE:** A view of Stari-Most bridge, a reconstructed 16th century Ottoman bridge that is a main attraction of the Old Town, in Mostar, in the south of Bosnia and Herzegovina

the city with a literal marker titled the “Sarajevo Meeting of Cultures” – an ode to the blending of its Ottoman and Islamic past, its Austro-Hungarian and Christian era, and the West-meets-East culture found across the country, which is informally referred to as Bosnia, or sometimes BiH.

Baščaršija is a postcard-perfect setting of cobblestoned streets, charming cafés, and small, colourful shops selling everything from handmade clothing to local crafts and sweets. The latter is tempting enough to make anyone develop a taste for sugar, with organic mountain honey, freshly-baked golden baklava drenched in syrup and sprinkled with pistachio, and pyramids of rainbow, powder-dusted lokum on offer. These are best enjoyed with a serving of Bosnian coffee – a dark and robust concoction typically served in a džezva, a traditional stainless steel or copper coffee pot – and perhaps after some savoury local delicacies like ćevapi (kebab-like grilled minced meat), burek (flakey meat pies), sirnica (moreish cheese pastries), dolma (stuffed vegetables), or Bosanski lonaca – a meaty stew that dates back to the Middle Ages. Surrounded by the minarets of the Havadža Durak mosque and other remnants of the country's time under Ottoman rule, it would be easy to imagine that you're in Türkiye – a more quaint version of Istanbul's Grand Bazaar, for instance. Yet if you look closely, you'll see clear signs of Bosnia's diverse past: the Old Orthodox Church, the Old Synagogue, →





rate in the world, and the industry contributed more than US\$456 million to the economy that year. Although the COVID-19 pandemic stemmed this flow by more than 85 per cent, these figures are now steadily back on the rise. In fact, although tourist arrival figures hit a record low in March 2020, in August 2023, these numbers reached an all-time high. Travellers from Croatia make up the largest percentage of the country's visitors, along with those from China and Serbia. Interest from travellers from the UAE, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia is also high – although it is a secular country, Bosnia's abundance of mosques, halal food options, and historical attractions with Islamic heritage make it particularly popular with tourists from the Middle East. As a result, airlines from the region have been steadily boosting flight options to this destination over the past decade. In spring 2014, Turkish Airlines launched direct flights to Sarajevo from Istanbul. It now flies there sixteen times a week. Also in 2014, flydubai launched a twice-a-week route from Dubai to Sarajevo – and in 2024, the UAE carrier now flies there daily, or twice-daily during the peak season, making it one of the most popular ways to get there from the GCC. Qatar Airways first touched down there in 2017 with three flights a week, which has now increased to five.

With an immense amount of natural beauty bolstering its cultural and historical appeal, it's not hard to see why tourists are flocking to this enchanting country. Bordered by Serbia to the east, Croatia to the north and southwest, and Montenegro to the southeast, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a true hidden gem that remains somewhat undiscovered, not yet overcrowded by mass tourism. Beyond its relative affordability, the country is also home to some of the most beautiful natural landscapes in the region. Picture rolling green hills, lush valleys, sparkling waterfalls, fortresses and castles near small villages that are rife with treasured historical structures and mystical places of ancient worship: this country has it all, and more. It may even have pyramids – in Visoko, about 40 minutes drive northwest of Sarajevo, a cluster of natural hills is currently under study after a new theory was put forth that these are really the largest human-made ancient pyramids on Earth. Known as the Pyramid of the Sun complex, archaeological societies have condemned it as a hoax, while others insist that the site does possess a mystical energy that can be absorbed through its healing



Although Mostar itself can easily be seen in a day, the atmosphere is so dreamy you'll likely want to stay for longer – especially since there are many incredible sights within a one- to two-hour drive from town. Typical day trips in the area include a visit to the Kravice Waterfalls – cascading dramatically off limestone mountains into a natural pool that you can swim in or picnic next to; Počitelj – a historic medieval village that is now an open-air museum; and Blagaj – another historic village that houses a Tekija, or Dervish monastery, built in around 1520. The latter looks over the Buna river, where the water remains a cool 8°C no matter

how hot it gets outside. At this ancient and mystical spot, the sight of the beautifully-preserved cliffside structure, overlooking crystal-clear turquoise waters that sparkle in the sunshine, will make your heart sing.

There's also the town-fortress of Stejpan-Grad; the spiritually-revered village of Medjugorje; the strikingly-preserved Roman villa rustica of Mogorjelo; the lakeside town of Jablanica, famous for its spit-roast lamb; peaceful local vineyards; and so much more to see. I stayed there for two days, and wished I'd had a week more.

To maximise my time, I'd hired a local guide, and doing so offered me a treasure trove of more value than I'd initially hoped for. My host Camil had founded his company, Herzeg Day Tours, out of a desire to share his love for the incomparable beauty of his country. Extremely well-versed in every part of Bosnia's past, he taught me about its recent history, its time under Ottoman rule, and even its Illyrian period, and everything in between. He shared personal stories of his youth, some of which was spent actively in the war. Although Camil's ability to distill the country's sometimes-confusing history into clear, richly-detailed accounts was fascinating, it was his disposition that I will long associate with my trip to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Like the country itself, the people, places, and memories here are multi-layered, wherein the pain of past wars has led to profound new perspectives, developed with compassion, strength, and patience, and a desire to never give up on letting the rest of the world know how special this land really is. [📖](#)

The charming medieval town of Mostar is one of the most lovely and unique in Europe

“pyramid water”, sourced from a natural spring deep within the tunnels beneath it. Like many other things in Bosnia, it's a hotly-contested issue – the project has received official backing and thousands of dollars worth of donations, while skeptics call it pseudo-archaeology. Some insist it's a New Age wellness scam, while world-renowned tennis player Novak Djokovic has visited several times, having reportedly described it as a paradise on Earth. The verdict is still out, but in the meantime, you can visit to decide for yourself.

If you'd rather spend your time somewhere with uncontested appeal, Mostar, in the south of the country, is a roughly two-hour train ride from Sarajevo. Although it can make for a great day trip from the capital, for those with the time, it's well worth staying overnight in this charming medieval town that is quite possibly one of the most lovely places in Europe. Mostar's warm Mediterranean climate feels noticeably different from Sarajevo, reaching scorching highs in the summer. No matter how hot it gets, the Neretva River – the beating heart of the area, giving life to all of its surrounding settlements – remains cool and fresh.

The city's most famous attraction, the Stari-Most bridge, rises above the river. The 16th century structure was named after the bridge-keepers that guarded it during the Ottoman era. A UNESCO World Heritage Site that was reconstructed by 2004 after a 1993 attack brought it down, it's the mouth to Mostar's old town, where a tour of the picturesque bazaar and a meal at one of the riverside restaurants will make you feel like you've stepped onto the set of a fantasy novel's film adaptation.

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** Baščaršija square, with a Sebilj wooden fountain in Old Town Sarajevo; Bosnian coffee being poured from a copper džezva into a cup; Visoko's "Pyramid of the Sun"; Sirnica, a phyllo pie with feta; A market area in the Old Town of Sarajevo; Kravica waterfalls on the Trebizat River

and the caravanserais that housed traders travelling the ancient Silk Road.

The resulting melting pot of cultures is a beautiful collage of the diversity among the country's citizens. In some parts of Bosnia, the quiet tensions simmering between its ethnic groups and internal political divisions do still whisper under the surface. Yet to the average traveller, the country's conflict-ridden past seems to hold an aloof relationship with its burgeoning tourism industry. Considering the sheer amount of conflict that has taken place on Bosnian territory – and the fact that for the many who can remember the devastating news headlines between 1992-1995, the Bosnian War took place in living memory – it would be impossible to detach completely from these tragic chapters of the country's past. And Bosnia's growing tourism industry doesn't hide from them, either. Among its many sights and key attractions are cultural institutions that not only educate on history while boosting the economy, but also remind us all of the consequences of such destructive division, lest anyone ever forget how – or why – it is so important to try and maintain peace. From museums showcasing the crimes against humanity and the heartbreaking impact of the Bosnian War, to those displaying the memorabilia and stories of those who were children at the time of the siege of Sarajevo; the Sarajevo War Tunnel aka the Tunnel of Hope; the Yellow Fortress; and the Armijska Ratna Komanda D-0 (more commonly known as Tito's Bunker); Bosnia's post-war attractions are an essential part of exploring and understanding the country and its people. Even if you're not someone who would actively seek out this form of dark tourism, to visit Bosnia and Herzegovina without acknowledging its turbulent history would be to disrespect the past that shaped the people within it.

Yet Bosnia is so much more than a former war zone – or a former host of the Winter Olympics, which it hosted in 1984. In 2019, it boasted the third-highest tourism growth