

October 16, 2005

Belgrade Rocks

By SETH SHERWOOD

Correction Appended

NIGHT falls in the capital of the former Yugoslavia, and music fills the air. Everywhere.

Along the banks of the Danube and Sava Rivers, serpentine chains of music-blasting splavovi - floating raft clubs - snake into the inky Balkan night. Fortified by huge meat-kebab dinners and Turkish coffees from Belgrade's myriad cafes, crowds of night owls line up to partake variously of Gypsy bands, electronic mixes, rock 'n' roll and a distinctly Serbian hybrid known as Turbofolk.

As a parade of Puma-clad feet files down the metal gangway to a club called Exile, the night's marquee D.J., the [New York City](#)-based techno producer John Selway, prepares for his 2-to-6 a.m. set.

"The most fun places to play are here, South America and [Japan](#)!" he shouts over rapid-fire industrial beats, praising the energy of the night life in the capital of Serbia and Montenegro, the name for what is left of Yugoslavia after its unraveling in the early 90's. "They're interested in new music and in building a scene!"

Across the water, the lighted dome of St. Sava Church and illuminated stone walls of the centuries-old Kalemegdan Fortress hover over the capital's skyline. Just six years ago, during 78 days of NATO bombings intended to quell President Slobodan Milosevic's attacks on ethnic Albanians in the nation's Kosovo province, that same panorama exploded routinely in flame and debris.

This night, with Mr. Milosevic on trial in The Hague and Belgrade's doors open to the West, it's only the lights from Exile's open-air dance floor that flash in the night sky. The club's thudding sound system, not bombs, sends ripples through the river.

"I was here in the 1990's, the Dark Ages," says Dean Triantafilou, a [Baltimore](#) native, as he leads some fellow Americans to dine in Skadarska, the city's old bohemian quarter. He worked to resettle refugees after the 1991-95 civil wars that shattered Yugoslavia, and now leads tours to Belgrade. "People were selling gas in Coke bottles," he says of those years. "If you didn't spend your dinars in two hours, they were worthless," because of hyperinflation.

As he talks, girls in short skirts and high-heeled sandals wobble up the teeming cobbled street. The nostalgic minor-chord strains of Frank Sinatra's "My Way" float from the hands of an outdoor pianist, whose earnest airs collide with techno music blasting from a nearby lounge called Red Bar.

"Now look," Mr. Triantafilou says. "There's light, there's people. They're ready to party."

This November, it will be 10 years since the Dayton Accords ended the vicious ethnic war in neighboring Bosnia, and it has been five years since Serbia's "October Revolution" - when thousands of protesters flooded Belgrade's squares, burned the Parliament building and forced Mr. Milosevic to abdicate his stranglehold on a country that he had plunged into violence, economic ruin and international isolation. But Belgrade's 1.5 million residents are still waiting for the

world to show up.

Consider, for example, what the Serbia and Montenegro chapter in Fodor's latest "Eastern and Central Europe" guidebook says about Belgrade: nothing. There is no such chapter. Ditto for "Rick Steve's Best of Eastern Europe 2005," which gives no travel information on the city and offers only a cursory sketch of the nation's history. The book's maps mysteriously end at the Bosnian and Croatian borders, with only empty whiteness beyond.

Such omissions, alas, are nothing new. Recalling his misguided prejudices before his visit to Belgrade in 1937, Henry Andrews, the husband of the British journalist and consummate Balkan chronicler Rebecca West, remarked to his wife: "I had always thought of Belgrade then as the Viennese see it. As the end of the earth, as a barbarian village." It was scarcely just the Viennese.

West did more than anyone before or since to dispel such illusions and to fill in the blank maps of Balkan life and history. Her magisterial tome "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia," published in 1941 and including her husband's reaction to Belgrade, remains the definitive travelogue about the region and your best travel companion in the city. Treading streets lined with mysterious Cyrillic signs, passing the venerable Art Nouveau exterior of the Hotel Moskva, gazing at the sad-eyed Byzantine saints of the Orthodox Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel, you can still see Belgrade as West did.

Then, as now, Old World restaurants impressed with succulent peasant-style masterpieces ("they cook lamb and suckling pig as well as anywhere in the world," she wrote). Then, as now, the city was full of passionate, vigorous people "who speak and laugh and eat and drink a great deal." And then, as now, Belgrade sagged under the weight of its history. Suffused throughout it, West observed, was "the stench of empires."

It was not a poetic exaggeration. For more than a millennium, the city squirmed in the crosshairs of its hostile neighbors: Byzantines, Bulgars, Hungarians, Austrians and especially Ottoman Turks, who conquered Belgrade in 1521 and administered it ruthlessly for most of the next three centuries. Together and separately, those powers battled each other and their Serbian subjects in a round-robin of hatred and cannon fire.

In 1941, just after West's Balkan travels, the Nazi Luftwaffe swooped into the city with more than 900 planes, leveling half of its buildings on a single day in April. Mr. Milosevic's deadly campaign in Kosovo - he is charged with genocide - brought in the bombers once again, this time NATO's. Seven decades after West composed her lines, her description of Serbia as "a new country that has to make its body and soul," seems as valid as ever.

One wonders what she would say of the post-Milosevic period. Unemployment remains rife. The former Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, a reformist who was instrumental in sending Mr. Milosevic to face trial in The Hague, was assassinated in 2003. Nationalist, anti-Western parties still enjoy support, and foreign governments have accused Serbia of dragging its feet in rounding up fugitive war criminals from the conflict in Bosnia.

On the other hand, the nation has a progressive democratic president in Boris Tadic, a firm handle on the once-ravaging inflation problem and increasing foreign investments. "Airport City Belgrade!" shouts a huge sign next to a construction site on the highway just outside the city. "First Business Park in Serbia!"

Five years after the ouster of Mr. Milosevic, says Veran Matic, a journalist instrumental in the anti-Milosevic campaign and a founder of the B92 independent media group, Belgraders teeter between cynicism and "a kind of hidden hope and a belief in Serbia's wondrous resurrection."

While the streets of post-Milosevic Belgrade may not win a beauty contest anytime soon - rusty trams, drab midcentury buildings and stately but dilapidated 19th-century edifices still dominate the gray cityscape - some glimmerings of the resurrection that Mr. Matic sees are in evidence. In Republic Square, where the ocean of

demonstrators and flag-wavers made their most passionate stand against Mr. Milosevic, construction teams are busy renovating the grand National Museum. Green Wreath Square, where the main outdoor market normally operates, is getting a similar makeover.

State-run Communist-era hotels are being privatized and boutique hotels like the smart, crisp Petit Piaf have begun to appear. Style-conscious restaurants, once unheard of in a land of pork-and-potato places, proliferate.

But it's the electricity of Belgrade's street life that makes the greatest impression. "Belgrade," Mr. Matic says, "is a very exciting city for anyone who expects to feel pure human energy."

You feel it along Knez Mihailova, a boulevard of fountains and Art Nouveau details where streams of D & G-wearing women strut past showrooms of Italian furniture, and preadolescent Gypsy musicians thrill the passing throngs with virtuoso fiddling. You feel it within the narrow passages of the Kalenic outdoor market on Njegoseva Street, as neighborhood residents shout "Koliko? Koliko?" ("How much? How much?") at the phalanx of elderly women in headscarves selling all manner of sausages, produce, nuts, dates, batteries, hair dye, sweaters, rice and deodorant.

You feel it especially in crowded Kalemegdan Park, a green swath overlooking the confluence of the Sava and Danube Rivers that West called "the special glory of Belgrade and indeed one of the most beautiful parks in the world." Formerly the citadel of Belgrade, Kalemegdan was long the bull's-eye that foreign invaders variously charged, captured, built up and eventually lost. The Roman well, the Turkish mausoleum, the Austrian clock tower and other abandoned relics form an Ozymandian graveyard of vanished dynasties.

But come dark, a number of outdoor bars and nightclubs sprout in the recesses of the park, and the cemetery of empires is reborn as the booming, cocktail-soaked cradle of Belgrade decadence.

"Anywhere else in the world, you wouldn't be allowed to have something like this in a historical monument," a bearded film student says one night at Bassment, a club that operates against the Kalemegdan battlements in warm months. "Not Belgrade."

A German D.J. duo called Moonbootica has the crowd jumping up and down to electronic music on ground that may once have seen battles for the city's soul.

Like Kalemegdan, the rest of the White City - the literal translation of its Serbian name, Beograd - reaches the zenith of its energy at night. Propelled by some of [Europe's](#) cheapest cocktails and taxi rides, the after-dark adventurer discovers that the surprisingly friendly and safe terra incognita of Belgrade holds a bounty of hidden hipster speakeasies, raucous rock 'n' roll dives and nightclubs boasting global talent.

Pick up the glossy entertainment magazine Yellow Cab at the slick bilevel Tribeca bar (Belgraders like to imagine their city as the Slavic counterpart to New York) and you find page after page of listings for exhibitions, theater events, concerts and club nights. If the great Yugoslav unifier Tito staggered from his hillside tomb, he'd find himself in the Continent's last great undiscovered night-life scene.

On a late fall evening, some weekendng Britons follow a muffled electronic beat through an undistinguished door along Boulevard Novembra 29, descend a poorly lighted staircase and emerge in a basement bar stuffed with ugly oil paintings, retro-tacky lamps and other vintage touches. To judge from the décor, it's likely that there's a grandmother in some remote Balkan corner filling out a burglary report. The name of the bar, the Association of Globe-Trotters, seems fitting: Only the most motivated travelers can hope to discover it.

"This place you can only find if somebody brings you here," says the bartender, Dejan, serving up bottles of Montenegrin Niksicko Beer and explaining that the owners want to limit the establishment's clientele to loyal

cognoscenti. The country's prime minister, Vojislav Kostunica, has been known to stop in, he adds.

The secret bar phenomenon is very much a trend in Belgrade. Some, like the aptly named nightclub *Anderground*, occupy subterranean spaces in Kalemegdan Park. Others, like the cocktail lounge *Ben Akiba* - where a lively crowd of people in their 30's toasts "Ziveli" amid loud disco and funk - are concealed in private apartments.

"Where are all the people between 2 and 6 a.m.?" playfully asks the online entertainment site Belgradeinsideout.com, one of the rare English-language guides to the city. "They are probably hiding in some places where you can't find them."

Near Slavija Square on a Friday night, however, ranks of splendidly grimy music fans emerge from the woodwork to follow the buzz-saw sound of melodic punk rock reverberating from the outdoor stage of SKC, the CBGB of Belgrade. The every-punk-and-his-mother crowd arrives by the hundreds, chugging *Lav Pivo* (Lion Beer) from two-liter bottles. Two unshowered rock chicks in Converse high-tops carry a friend who has passed out and lies horizontally in their arms like a drunken log. These are the apostles of the elder statesmen of Belgrade's rock universe, the *Partibrejkers*.

For a place that has suffered as many privations and embargoes as Belgrade - where rock was a key opposition force during the lean Milosevic years - the locals exhibit musical knowledge as extensive as anywhere in the West. Scanning the rack of top-selling albums at the IPS music emporium, you find the *White Stripes*, *Audioslave* and other bands that grace top music magazines in America and [Britain](#).

"They're remarkably well-informed," says Nick Hobbs, a concert promoter who has brought *Kraftwerk*, the *MC5*, *John Spencer Blues Explosion* and other staples of American vinyl junkies to Belgrade in recent years. "We can do things in Belgrade that we can't do anywhere else."

The result is a fertile musical landscape full of acts that would probably be alt-rock icons in countries with better record companies and higher disposable incomes: the hard-driving *Lira Vega*; the indie-electronic *Darkwood Dub*; the subversive sonic experimenter *Rambo Amadeus*.

On stage, the *Partibrejkers* tear through a succession of *Stooges*-meets-*Kiss* anthems while the throng pumps its fists and yells "Oh, Yeah!" Having endured more than two decades of the vicissitudes of their homeland - the post-Tito comedown, the wars of the 1990's, the economic and political uncertainty under the new leaders - the *Partibrejkers* are perhaps one more inspiring symbol of Belgraders' endurance. "When you have a strong link to the source of life," the group's guitarist, *Nebojsa Antonijevic*, said before the show, referring to his passion for music, "the outer situation can't deter you."

As the final number ends and people start to shuffle out over hills of crushed beer cans, the lead singer, *Zoran Kostic*, leans into the mike and offers a final message: "Sacuvajte svoje duse" ("Save your souls").

Punk rock fades to club beats the next evening as a slew of international D.J.'s hits town. While Mr. Selway presides over the turntables along the Sava at *Exile*, the Israeli trance-music guru D.J. *Goblin* spins to a sea of bobbing heads at the *Baratuna* club, and the *Shapeshifters*, British house-music masters, conjure their mixes at *Bassment*.

But it's the quiet, historical neighborhood of *Zemun* that plays host to the weekend's - and the season's - splashiest night-life event. There, as black S.U.V.'s idle outside, a flashbulb-popping crowd of the nation's most famous faces - soccer heroes, music idols, captains of industry - celebrates the opening of a swanky bar-restaurant called *Eklektika*. With its gauzy white rooms and ambient music, it feels like the sort of place where the "Sex and the City" quartet might schmooze - if their names were *Jadranka*, *Desanka*, *Zoja* and *Kaja*. But in spite of the sushi rolls and Slovenian wine, at least one V.I.P. is hiding out in a private room and waxing slightly nostalgic tonight.

"It used to be a positive thing to be a Yugoslav," says Dan Tana, the Serb-American whose namesake Hollywood restaurant is a favorite film-star hangout, with a sigh. "Milosevic did more damage to Serbs than Hitler did to the Germans."

His somber remarks, at first, seem to have sprung from the same undercurrent of wistfulness that West found so many decades earlier. "Autumnal doubtfulness," she eloquently called the mood.

Then, suddenly, Mr. Tana's face lightens. Just outside the door, ringing cellphones, clinking glasses and greetings of "dobro vece!" ("good evening!") filter through the soft-glowing, milk-white rooms.

"But I've brought many Americans to Belgrade, and they all fall in love," Mr. Tana goes on, passionately. "Our future is bright, but it's going to take time."

IF YOU GO

Getting There

Visas are no longer required for American citizens traveling to Serbia and Montenegro for up to 90 days.

While there are no direct flights from the [United States](#) to Belgrade, several European carriers fly there. A recent Web search for round trips from New York in late October found a wide range of fares, starting at \$535 on Lufthansa through Frankfurt, but with most over \$800.

Getting Around

At the airport, avoid the renegades approaching you with "taxi?" come-ons since legitimate cabs must be called (and should cost about 600 dinars - about \$8.50 at 73 dinars to the dollar). But the JAT airline bus, which you can catch on the curb just outside the terminal doors and a bit to the left, costs 140 dinars and leaves the airport every hour on the hour. It stops at the central rail station and at Slavija Square, where taxis are easy to find and many hotels are within walking distance.

Central Belgrade is fairly compact, so walking to key points of interest will rarely take more than a half hour, and often less. City taxis are abundant, cheap and well-metered, and can be hailed in the street or at major hotels and squares. Rides around central Belgrade should run 150 to 200 dinars. A trip to the popular raft-clubs along the Danube and Sava Rivers costs around 250 to 350 dinars.

Taxi drivers may or may not speak English (you can ask them with a well-rehearsed "Da li govorite Engleski?"), so it's always best to take a marked map or a written address for the driver. A list of taxi companies and other useful information can be found at the Web site of the Tourist Organization of Belgrade, www.tob.co.yu.

Where to Stay

With the few noted exceptions, dial 381-11 before the numbers below from outside Serbia and Montenegro. Hotels often quote prices in euros, but not necessarily.

Le Petit Piaf, Skadarska 34, 303-5252, www.petitpiaf.com, was opened last year in the heart of Belgrade's small but lovely (and lively) old bohemian quarter. This pioneering boutique hotel offers 12 sleek, modern rooms and suites with phones and high-speed Internet access - a local rarity. A good breakfast is included in the room rates, which start at 150 euros (\$183, at \$1.22 to the euro).

Hotel Moskva, Balkanska 1, 2686-255, www.hotelmoskva.co.yu, occupies a stately Art Nouveau building that is one

of Belgrade's most recognizable landmarks. Equipped with TV's and phones, the 132 rooms themselves are unexceptional, as is the included breakfast. Doubles from 136 euros.

Garni Hotel Splendid, Dragoslava Jovanovica 5, 323-5444, www.splendid.co.yu, is a good budget option in central Belgrade, if you can handle the dated 1970's feel. The 40 simple, clean rooms have TV's and phones. There's also a restaurant and bar on the premises. Doubles from \$58.

Where to Eat

Daco, Patrisa Lumumbe 49, 278-1009, attracts a crowd with its ersatz rustic environment - raw wood-plank floors, exposed beams, farmhouse knickknacks- and huge portions of sopska salata (diced cucumbers, peppers and cheese) and hajducki cevap (pork kebabs) backed with rakija (fruit brandy). Dinner for two, without drinks, is around 2,000 dinars.

Zaplet, Kajmakcalanska 2, 240-4142, is a beautifully designed contemporary space with large windows, lots of right angles and muted fabrics. The extensive menu features appetizers like grilled goat cheese with red pepper and caper salsa, and entrees like filet mignon with gorgonzola-hazelnut butter. Dinner for two runs about 2,500 dinars, without drinks.

Tribeca, Knez Mihailova 50, 328-5656, is a strikingly modern and aggressively stylish restaurant-lounge with its own CD of club music ("Tribeca Chill-Out"). You can enjoy the grilled, bacon-wrapped chicken filled with prosciutto, mozzarella and sweet peppers, then stay for cocktails. Dinner for two runs 2,200 dinars, and cocktails 350 dinars.

Where to Drink

Ben Akiba, Nusiceva 8, 323-7775, is a lively cocktail lounge hidden in a second-floor apartment roughly across Terazije Street from the Hotel Moskva. Go to the end of Nusiceva, turn right and look for the apartment stairs to the left.

Club of World Travelers (Udruzenje Svetskih Putnika), 29 Novembra 7, 324-2303, is yet another of Belgrade's many hip, hidden bars. Enter this quiet residential building, go to the end of the lobby and descend the stairs to the right.

Idiot, Dalmatinska 13, no phone, attracts Belgrade's alternative set - musicians, artists, self-styled hipsters and a smattering of gays and lesbians. This indoor-outdoor bar fills the street in summer and packs its brick-vault basement when the weather gets cool.

Where to Dance

In summer, the banks of the Danube and the Sava are lined with splavovi - nightclubs on rafts - featuring everything from Gypsy bands to electronic music to a distinctly Serbian mixture of sentimental lyrics and disco beats called Turbofolk. Many places charge no cover, or at most 5 or 10 euros.

One of the top spots for imported D.J. talent is Exile, Savski Kej, (381-63) 205-545, which sits along the west bank of the Sava.

True to its name, Andergraund, Pariska 1a, 625-681, www.andergraund.com, is a subterranean den of decadence near the southwestern corner of Kalemegdan Park for house, funk, R & B and hip-hop devotees.

Around the corner and down the hill from Andergraund, at Karadjordjeva 9, is Bar Balthazar, (381-63) 706-3302, which opened in September. A nondescript doorway, guarded by bouncers, leads to a staircase down to the brick-roofed basement. Despite the name, Balthazar is more club than bar, with thundering house and techno beats.

Where to Rock

Akademija, Rajiceva 10, 262-7846, www.akademija.net, is a longtime favorite rock 'n' roll dive for top local talent.

SKC (Student Cultural Center) at the corner of Kralja Milana and Resavska Streets, 360-2000, www.skc.org.yu, features major bands not only from the Balkans but also from the rest of [Europe](#) and North America on indoor and outdoor stages. It also puts on art exhibitions, films and other cultural events.

Dom Omladine (Belgrade Youth Cultural Center), Makedonska 22/IV, 324-8202, www.dob.co.yu. is a top spot for touring bands and bigger names from Belgrade.

Sightseeing

Kalemegdan Park, at the confluence of the Sava and Danube Rivers, is Belgrade's most beautiful green space. It is where the Romans, Byzantines and subsequent early settlers of the area once lived. The park houses a zoo, military museum and numerous centuries-old structures left by the various powers - Serbian, Austrian, Turkish - that occupied and controlled Belgrade in later eras.

Museum of Contemporary Art, Usce Save BB, Novi Beograd, 311-5713, www.msub.org.yu, sits just across the Sava in New Belgrade. It displays Yugoslav art since 1900. The current exhibition, "On Normality: Art in Serbia 1989-2001," looking at responses to the Milosevic years, runs through Nov. 7.

SETH SHERWOOD is a freelance writer based in Paris.

Correction: Oct. 30, 2005, Sunday:

A front-page article in this section on Oct. 16 about Belgrade misstated the name of the Bohemian quarter. It is Skadarlija; Skadarska, from which it is derived, is the name of the street that borders the section.