

Features

GOOD MORNING NOVI SAD!

Say hello to a year's placement in Serbia!

Get ready as Anne Sheridan finds it is not as far as it seems, geographically or mentally.

A ginger haired Mancunian paces nervously up and down, sweat dripping from his forehead. Clearly vexed, something to do with a missing friend or luggage or not having enough time to go back and check-in, because in Heathrow check-in might as well be as far away as Belgrade. Indeed, worthy of it's own Palin escapade account. Surprising he hasn't thought of it already - what else remains to be done - Around Heathrow In Eighty Minutes?

There is something quite thrilling about watching dramas unfold in airports. It is not a case of taking sadistic pleasure in other people's anguish; it's simply a situation (and often a nightmare), which most people can identify with. The frustration, the anger, the exhilaration of being personally escorted through customs. During our four-hour stopover in Heathrow I read an article about long distance relationships - one of the most notable points of the piece was a claim that when you're on the move, it always feels like you're in a movie. This certainly did.

"Any unattended baggage will be taken away and DESTROYED!" Not confiscated or inspected but destroyed! Visions of your luggage being blown to bits is an unsettling thought. It doesn't exactly reassure your faith in the State of world security, especially when you are about to embark to a once war-torn, ethnically cleansed, systematically raped country - Serbia, part of the former Yugoslavia, last bombed by NATO in 1999. Nor did our bumpy ride on JAT Airways, as we missed down into Belgrade. Nevertheless we arrived and left unscathed individuals. Uninjured, unharmed, and enchanted yet again of the beauty of the East. The greatest love affairs always end in haste.

It came as a pleasant surprise to discover that Novi Sad, the cultural capital of Vojvodina, being the most bombed city in Serbia (apparently for no strategic reasons) is far more aesthetically appetising than Limerick. Maybe surprising is the wrong word? But pretty it is; a self-contained, contented kind of pretty.

Novi Sad naturally comes complete with all the consumer fetishes of Western living - Mango, Diesel, and of course (big sigh please) McDonald's; who thoughtfully provide the 'Welcome to Belgrade' sign at the airport, just in case, for one happy blissful second you forgot they ever existed. Here, Ronald McDonald can be seen standing proudly beside the Serbian national flag, his arms extended, inviting you in. Repelling. 'The Red Cow', Novi Sad's answer to Irish pub, is testament to how far this country has progressed. They have taste; 'The Smiths' was played, while Guinness was poured into the kind of vessels that would put the Munich Beer Festival to shame. Not your average Sunday drinkers, much less Sunday drivers.



MTV Europe Foundation joined forces with the Exit team to raise awareness of human trafficking. Over 150,000 came to see Iggy Pop, Cypress Hill, Massive Attack, Goldfrapp. Roger Snachez and a host of international DJs. Where will you be June '05?



The Orthodox Celts, an Irish folk-rock band based in Belgrade.

What hits you about a place like Serbia is that it doesn't feel like Serbia ought to feel. Gone is the media transplanted spectre of the '90's. It was not Belgrade that amazed, nor was it Novi Sad. It was the one and a half hour bus journey between the two cities that left you reeling.

The barrenness of the countryside is painstakingly bleak; here there is no 'green'. The expanse of flat land is so vast there is no knowing where all the surrounding countries (Hungary, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro) begin and Serbia ends. It is if whatever existed before has been steamrolled and is now just a flat piece of dough waiting to be moulded. No flowers, no shrubs, no trees, huts and red roofed-topped houses sprang up where vegetation should have been. The theatre of war flickers before you.

Fear not, there is beauty to be found elsewhere. Serbian women are after and succeed in getting the real deal, high powered yet un-'80's style fashion; they are simply too intelligent to be impressed by bohemian chic. Strange how poor women always want to look rich, and rich women pretend to be poor. To say that such impeccable grooming is a spin-off of coming from a poor Eastern European country, might contain an ounce of truth, but it is mainly comprised of envy. Wealth and poverty sit as easily with each other here as they do in any country, but the difference here is greater than most; For the thousands of VW's, Lada's and Yugo's (DieHard 3), there are a handful of BMW's and Chrysler's. Especially to be aware of, I was told, were grey Audi A8's - the preferred vehicle of

choice for drive-by shootings.

As we crossed the Danube, with the sun rising over Beograd, we knew that we might never see anything like this again. Electric, alive, back from the brink, moving on - words are an inefficient tool to capture what's really going on here: You can only see it for yourself.

All those involved in making Campus Europae(CE) a success, hope that we won't be the last two UL students ever to cross that bridge. You could choose Prague or Seville, or go to North America for your Erasmus experience. The question you really need to ask yourself is why would you choose the ordinary over the extraordinary. As Professor Ehmann said, "learning French or Spanish is not the advantage any more, it is the norm. If you know Serbian, you will know the languages of all the surrounding countries as well".

On our final night we left the restaurant in the Novi Sad Theatre for our night sightseeing tour. People barely managed to take their eyes off the screen to identify this group of twenty odd students, the majority of whom were clearly not Serbian. We didn't hold their attention for long. Back on the screen, wearing a Russian hat and singing in a mock-opera, was Michael Palin. Distance is only an illusion, whichever way you care to look at it.

WATCH OUT FOR CE INTERNATIONAL DAY -COMING SOON!

For further information on Novi Sad visit: www.campus-europae.org; www.novisad-tourism.com; www.mtvexit.org. Or email UL Co-ordinator for CE - patricia.oflahery@ul.ie



Map of Serbia