



Bosnia: a model for the planet

In many ways, the country has what the rest of Europe has lost

By Richard Bangs

updated 9:52 a.m. PT, Wed., Sept. 16, 2009

"One of those places where you come as a guest, leave as an acquaintance, and return as a friend" — Nenad Velickovic

The Bosnia we know from images of the war — the bombed and bullet-ridden buildings, the scars from the 1,200-day siege of Sarajevo — has kept from view a Bosnia we don't know, a place where Nature has been big-hearted with its gifts. The country described sometimes as the heart between the mouths of two lions, hosts one of the two greatest tracks of primeval forests in Europe, unmatched biodiversity, daunting mountain faces yet to be climbed, deep gorges yet to be traversed, wild rivers with water so pure you can cup your hand to drink, some of the highest concentrations of wildlife, and perhaps the last highland tribes of semi-nomadic peoples on the continent. In many ways, Bosnia today has what the rest of Europe has lost.

With Laura Hubber of the BBC, who in the 90s served as a teacher in Sarajevo, I head to Bosnia with a skeptic's shrug to do some hiking, rafting and climbing throughout the country. We began with a bear quest in Sutjeska National Park, about two twisting hours by car from Sarajevo. The park is 17,500 hectares, larger than some small countries, with no trail maps or guides. When we step into this cathedral of old-growth beech and black pine, there is recognition that we are probably the only ones here.

Tourism is still a secret here. We make our way to an overview at the base of Bosnia's highest peak, the 7,828-foot-high Maglic Mountain on the Montenegrin border, the last great sigh of the Alps extending south from Switzerland. From here we set out to hike to an Alpine aerie to look for bears, wolves, and wild goats, chamois. Before the war, Bosnia had the second highest concentration of brown bears in the world, after Canada, and perhaps the greatest number of wolves in Europe, and chamois were so ubiquitous they would sometimes leap over hikers' heads. Now, nobody knows how many remain, but some in the area guess perhaps as many as 1,000 bears, which would still rank highest in the region.

But we find no bears on our quest. Nor wild goats, nor wolves. Just waving fields of wildflowers, and the perfumed Alpine wind. But that is fine, as the beauty is exquisite, almost intoxicating, and I sit for an hour or so in some sort of state of bliss.

As the sun burns out the remnants of the day, we make our way to one of the first eco-lodges in the country, Motel Sunce, up a long dirt road atop the windswept Podvezlje Plateau, roosting beneath a stunning mountain ridge called Velez. The lodge is modest and fashioned from concrete — not the western vision of an eco-lodge, but the food is organically grown, and certainly the staff is local. No monies being drained away to multinationals here. After we sup on organically grown peppers stuffed with beef and rice, traditional salad and soup with hyper-crisp fresh vegetables, farmers' cheese, and share a glass of homemade Herzegovinian rakija, there is a feeling of having found a little peace of mind on a wilderness table in the back of Bosnia.

The Neretva River is the Nile of Bosnia. For centuries it was the passageway from the sea to the riches of the interior, the river road up which sailed explorers, settlers, traders, and conquerors, from the Illyrians to the Romans to the Ottomans to the Austro-Hungarians to the Serbs and Croats in attempts to plunder or possess this land. And just as the Nile has the pyramids, the Thames its London Bridge, the Seine its Eiffel Tower, San Francisco its Golden Gate, all emblems that transcend the tyranny of geography and politics, Bosnia for 500 years had Stari Most, the gracious single-span link across the Neretva. Commissioned by Suleiman the Magnificent in 1559, completed seven years later, the elegant bow withstood earthquakes, floods, battles, and two world wars. But on November 9, 1993, Croat forces pummeled the little footbridge with tank shells, and after long resistance, it fell like a proud warrior into the crying, hissing currents. For a moment, denominations on all sides were united in grief over a cherished monument destroyed. The hearts of thousands sank with the stone.

But on July 22, 2004, nine years after the war ended, the bridge reopened, and the sky was lit not with the lights of conflict, but with fireworks, the pyrotechnics of peace. The symbolism happily cried with cliché, the

bridge over the ethnic gap, connecting East and West, church to mosque, the past to the future. And it brought back a proud tradition that dated back to the Ottomans: the Mostari Bridge Divers.

The Mostaris were the original bridge keepers, who maintained the 100-foot span and took tolls from those who passed. In the 17th century, however, a Turkish travel writer described how young men would jump from the 80-foot-high bridge as a rite of passage. The Mostari today jump for tourists, and their touro-euros.

On the bridge's western abutment at the entrance to the Mostari Divers Club, we meet Ermin Saric, one of the eight official bridge divers, meaning he dives professionally, it's his job. He's been diving since age 14, and is 24 now, and says he will dive as long as he can. He thinks the body can handle the punishment until around 50, at which point the shock of the cold water might trigger a heart attack. Ermin says about one or two people die each year diving, and there are many injuries, but all these casualties are from nonprofessionals—swaggering tourists, locals on a dare, Saturday night drunks. As long as Ermin can remember there have been no fatalities among club members, as they know how to dive it right.

Ermin offers to demonstrate. He skips the part where he passes a floppy hat to tourists lining the parapets — ever since the bridge was listed as a World Heritage Site, the number of visitors has steadily increased, as have the fortunes of the divers. As he stands at the apex, he drenches his head and limbs in cold, cold water from a big bottle to acclimatize his body for the freezing Neretva. He climbs over the matrix of metal bars that protect innocents from the precipice, and then he “enters into the world of diving.” There are butterflies in his stomach; they have yet to go away after all these years and countless jumps. Then he spreads his arms as though flying in the wind and leaps into the void.

About two-thirds of the way down, he draws his arms tight against his sides, and firms his legs straight and fast against one another. He tucks his chin against his chest, and points his toes to the fast-approaching water. Then he hits the river “like a bullet,” and with a sound like glass shattering he disappears. There is an awful silence as all who watch hold a collective breath ... and then, *whoosh*, Ermin's head pops to the surface, and he swims to shore. If the demand is there, Ermin will jump six or seven times today.

There's no health care or insurance with this job, certainly no job security. But Ermin is thankful to be a Mostari, and he admits there are perks: no local women are divers, but they admire the men who are, and Ermin is never without girlfriends, he grins.

Although Mostar is far and away the most famed feature of the Neretva, there is more delight downstream. A short drive takes us to the delta, where the Neretva begins its fan into the Adriatic, right on the Croatian-Bosnian border. Not only have waves of armies flowed up this waterway, but also thousands of birds, who biannually migrate from Africa, across the Mediterranean, up this corridor into Europe for the summer, then back again. The biggest bird resort in Europe sits along these banks.

A bit farther up the river is Pocitelj, an art colony among the fig trees, shaded by the labyrinthine walls of Sahat-kula, the Ottoman fort strategically situated above the Neretva so that watchmen could see approaching invaders for miles. The mosque in the fort has been superbly rebuilt after being razed during the war, and the grand watchtower allows unobstructed views of the limestone-encased river with water clear as local brandy.

Up the Buna River, a Neretva tributary near Mostar, there is a karst cave that seems to deliver cherished secrets as clearly as if uttered with a voice. At its side shines the 17th-century Velagic House, a dervish monastery. The water, filtered by the porous rock, spills like the translucent eyes of an eagle. Swallows sing and flit. This is a back eddy of Bosnia, spared the wounds of war. Glades of trees stand tall, the stream runs pure, the monastery lusters as it has for 400 years. This the way Bosnia used to be, and what it aspires to be again in the future.

Down the road is Medugorje, famous for its apparitions of the Virgin Mary, which first appeared to six children in 1981, and in wake has prompted countless pilgrims to visit, spawning a considerable religious tourism industry. Less known are the wineries of the region, including some of the oldest in Europe, such as the Vinarija Stankela Stanko winery. Climbing down into a 400 year-old wine cellar where the walls are lined with bottles stacked in terracotta earthenware tubes, the owner, Vasilj Stanko, produces the largest tasting glasses in the world, and fills them to the brim with a 90-year-old vintage.

He offers up cheese, bread, and a dry cured dried ham on a cutting stand, and we slowly try to sip the hospitality. But before we make much of a dent, he serves up another specialty, Extra Loza, the local grape brandy, and we capitulate and offer to buy a trunk-load of his wines, and head to the sunlight.

We are in the mountain valley of Diva Grabovica, just off the Neretva River, in the stony heart of the Dinaric Alps. Behind us is Velki Kuk, the largest rock face in the Balkan Peninsula, over 3,400 feet sheer, taller than Yosemite's El Capitan. Framing it are ragged beech and pine-covered peaks, which some locals have tagged the "Herzegovinian Himalaya." This is a the mnemonically inhospitable Prenj-Cvrnsnica-Cabulja National Park, after the three mountain chains that connect here, along with the interface of the Mediterranean and Alpine ecosystems. This was once the hunting grounds for Tito and his Communist elites—packed with European mouflon, chamois, boar, and bear.

We continue our trek up the Neretva River, filtered to a glassy sheen from its limestone frame; it almost seems lit from beneath as we glance down from the precipitous road. At the little way-station of Konjic, where some of the finest wood furniture in Europe is crafted, we stop at a riverside restaurant and meet Samir Krivic, owner of Rafting Europe.

Over a glass of Rafterica (a plum brandy brewed by a former Olympic whitewater coach now a raft guide on the Una River in north), Samir offers to take us on a 14-mile bolt down the Neretva, the river he calls the best rafting run in the world. He's prejudiced; he admits. He's been running the Neretva for 30 years, since he was 8. Now he is a physical education teacher at the nearby elementary school in the winters, and runs his rafting operation in the summers, mixing the two as often as he can, teaching students environmental education during school, then taking them down the river on clean-up expeditions during vacation.

At the put-in, Samir brags the run is ranked class III-IV, with one Class V "jump," which would place the course in same league as the Rogue, Selway, Tuolumne, and many of the great white-water rivers of the American West, but the wimpy Slovenian life jackets, and the 1,000-cubic-foot-per-second river volume seem to belie the boast.

Minutes later, we're riding through a glacially carved canyon, where once a river of frozen water spilled, then thawed, cracking the gorge like an egg. The sail is dreamlike, down a delirium of blue-gray limestone, with trout-filled vitreous pools and sudden springs spewing from the walls. At one spout Samir pulls us over and tugs a bouquet of wild mint from the ground, grinds it in his palms, and then mixes it with the cold, clear water, creating instant iced tea, or a mojito without the rum. There remains virtually no rafting river in the U.S. where drinking its water doesn't risk catching *Giardia lamblia* or some other nasty flagellated protozoan parasite, but here the luminous water is eminently potable, and we all drink with wild abandon.

At last we ride the vectors into the rapids, and thankfully they are not the uncorked tempests Samir seemed to describe. Instead they are delightful drops of interference waves, little sacraments of crests and troughs. But what the Neretva lacks in muscle it more than makes up in the spectacle it has scrawled from the rock, towering walls, temples, buttes and monuments: feathery waterfalls, and gardens of wildflowers and stately trees inhaling the warm coastal breezes.

In the slanted light of evening, a mist begins to gyre, and as we drift closer we see it doodling lazy curlicues up the abutments of a bridge. If, as some have postured, water is the next oil, the precious global resource in limited supply, then Bosnia might be a one-country OPEC with its luxury of freshwater fonts.

As we make the last paddle strokes, we glide over the rusted magazine to an AK-47 among the colored pebbles, and I ask Samir if he fought in the war. Everyone we've met in Bosnia over 30 harbors memories of the horror and typically wants to tell the stories, to relive the searing moments. But Samir says he doesn't want to talk about the war. "We're all in the same raft now. We all breathe the same air, drink the same water. Let's just enjoy our river. It is the best river in the world."

We grind up a dirt road high above the Neretva River canyon and stop at various overlooks, where we gaze down at screaming rafters on the limpid ribbon, and then upward across a green countenance of 100-year-old pines and beeches. We wind higher and higher, rising fluently into an immense horizon, until at last we spill across a rocky plateau above the tree line, into the village of Umljani. The tiny Muslim community near where several events were staged in the 1984 Winter Olympics was burned down during the war.

But it has rebuilt itself and discovered new economies for a traditional way of life. Spread across the tableland are gardens of organically grown potatoes, carrots, onions, lettuce, cabbage, and wheat, fertilized with manure, grown without pesticides or herbicides or chemicals of any kind. It is the method of growing they've practiced for centuries, yet today they are exporting these crops to groceries and restaurants in Sarajevo and beyond for a market increasingly willing to pay premiums for organically grown food.

Looking about the village we see several buildings in various stages of construction. Of late adventure travelers on treks have come to this scenic outpost in increasing numbers, and now village entrepreneurs are building eco-lodges in childlike bright colors to accommodate the visitors. The people of Umoljani see ecotourism and organic farming as their future; the alternative sustainable economies to felling forests, damming rivers, or abusing this singular land for short-term profits. This is the living hope and opportunity for Bosnia.

One of the nice little sleights of logic in the wake of the Bosnian war is that land mines may have saved the country's greatest asset, its large swaths of old-growth forest. As we wend our way up the edge of the Rakitnica Canyon, a tributary gorge to the Neretva that may be the most unexplored in southern Europe, we pass a seductively alluring leafy copse marked with a red sign sporting skull and crossbones: "Pazi": "Mine," where loggers fear to tread.

We're in the boundaries of the proposed Bjelašnica National Park. In the middle of what seems the end of the world, we pull to a wide spot, jump out, and start walking into something that seems from a fairy tale: the highest and most remote community in Bosnia, perhaps the Balkans, the little feudal village of Lukomir.

The village itself seems hung with rusty nails to the rim of the Rakitnica, with collapsed roofs, pieces of tin patched over broken tiles, rotting timbers, abandoned wood carts, even an ancient red Yugo that looks like it took a wrong turn in the quondam Yugoslavia and ran out of gas.

One of the matriarchs of Lukomir, Rahima Comor, offers to show us around her community, which looks more relic than real. She points out roofs crafted of cherry wood shingles, a technique dating back hundreds of years; the men cutting grass as the women gather it into mounds, preparing for the harsh six-month winter when the snowbound village is cut off from the outside; the *stecci*, medieval tombstones, that have washed down from the hill, and are now adjacent to a newer cemetery where I can't help but notice that most of the occupants lived to ripe old ages. "There is very little stress here; and the food is as healthy as you can get. No added hormones, the air is pure, the water clean. Everything is authentic and simple," she tells us.

As if to prove this ecumenicalism, we're invited into her home, which is a portal to Europe 1,000 years ago. It has just three low-ceilinged rooms and an attic. The first is an all purpose mudroom for footwear and clothes, and where raw food is prepared.

The second has a wood-burning stove, a worn Persian rug, and a low round table where the family dines cross-legged. On the wall hangs a sheepskin prayer rug, as this room is also for worship. The third is the bedroom, where Rahima raised her six children. We peek into the dark, smoky attic and see hanging cheese and shanks of meat. There are no chimneys in the Lukomir homes; the wood smoke circulates in the attic as a sealant, and to cure food. There is a clock ticking through the quiet somewhere in the house, but it has no need — time has stopped here.

Rahima turns a coffee grinder as a potato pie cooks in the stove. She wears clothes suitable for a Renaissance Faire, though this is her daily ensemble: a head scarf, wool pantaloons, cotton nightgown shirt, wool vest, and socks, all handmade. Rahima and other villagers have found a modest market in selling hand-knitted socks, sharing their homes for overnights, and serving traditional shepherds' meals; economics that help them live and stay in a place they love.

Back outside we sit on a log, sip thick coffee and share a view across a chasm that seems to transcend time. In the heart of this uncommon culture, in this unequaled environment, it does seem that while the rest of the world has made irrevocable mistakes, Bosnia is at a magical inflection point, a crossroads, where it has the opportunity to be a model for the planet ... and visiting now is not only personally rewarding in ways distinctive to this place and time, but it can only help to bolster and point the way for the good path.

For information and booking options to Bosnia, go to www.exploringbosnia.com

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/32789005/ns/travel-destinations/>

[MSN Privacy](#) . [Legal](#)
© 2009 MSNBC.com