

Sojourn in Bosnia-Herzegovina



by Ir. Sharifah Azlina Raja Kamal Pasmah

THE winter of 2011 saw my family and I trekking through Eastern Europe with Bosnia-Herzegovina on our itinerary. The flight from Vienna took an hour and upon setting feet on Sarajevo, I was overwhelmed to know I had made it to a land that I had read so much about its war. It snowed the night before and the vastness of the snowcapped-hills was a welcome sight.

Bosnia-Herzegovina was where World War 1 “started” following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary and his wife, in 1914, on a bridge named Latin Bridge. This bridge still stands in the city of Sarajevo. Eight decades later, Bosnia-Herzegovina became infamous for the Bosnian War (1992-1995). Of its population of 4 million, half became refugees, 112,000 killed and Sarajevo suffered the longest siege of any city in modern times.

Today, Sarajevo is a kaleidoscope of timeless Asia and vibrant Europe. We visited Muslim mosques, Jewish synagogues, Orthodox and Catholic churches – all within close proximity of each other. With the *Miljacka River* meandering through the city, there are many beautiful bridges in Sarajevo, some dating back to the 14th Century. In the heart of the city is the cobblestoned *Baščaršija* or Pigeon Square, bustling with souvenir shops, brassware shops, carpet-makers and Turkish coffee-stalls. Former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir is well-known here and every shopkeeper takes pride in telling us they had met and welcomed him into their premises.

A prominent but disheartening feature of Sarajevo is the bullet-riddled buildings – a grim reminder of the war. We traversed the main boulevard, dubbed Sniper Alley, which was a constant target of snipers during the siege. It connects the city’s industrial part to the cultural and historical sites in the Old Town. During the siege, the locals continued to carry out their daily routines, often at great risk to their lives. They had to either dash quickly across the 6-lane thoroughfare or wait for United Nations’ armoured-vehicles to shield them from bullets.

Our tour-guide, Ahmed, was 5 at the time, and his family lived in the basement for the first few months. But eventually all families emerged from their refuges when they realised the war was not about to end quickly. School was held in homes and when a building was shelled, the classrooms were moved to the next building.

An engineering feat we visited was the *Tunnel Of Hope*, sited below the runway of Sarajevo Airport. Used during the Bosnian War to transport food, medical and army supplies as well as fuel and humanitarian aid, the 1.6m-tall by 1m-wide tunnel was dug out with the people’s bare hands. Passable only in a single file, the direction of movement alternates throughout the day. The tunnel entrance was camouflaged under a nondescript house and led to “free territory” some 840m away.



We travelled 73km southwest to Mostar, to the renowned *Old Bridge Of Mostar*. Built in 1557, this is a masterpiece of Ottoman-Turkish architecture. Elegant in its simplicity, the 30m-wide by 24m-tall arched bridge spans the Neretva River, with two towers flanking each end. An iconic landmark, it was not spared during the war and was destroyed in November 1993. Re-construction work started in 2001 to preserve its 16th Century features. Substantial original stones were salvaged from the riverbed while the rest were replaced with new blocks quarried from similar sources as used in its original construction, with some brought in from as far as Turkey.

Leaving Mostar, we stopped by an underground karst river, Buna River, which flowed from a cave below a 200m vertical cliff, creating one of Europe’s largest and most amazing underground water courses. This is water as pure and pristine as it gets. A 16th Century Dervish cult monastery, *Blagaj Tekke* and its beautiful garden are sited on the riverbank.

Sarajevo hosted the Winter Olympics in 1984 and many facilities still stand today, albeit in desolation. The slopes of Mt. Bjelašnica, Mt. Jahorina and Mt. Igman – renowned for their challenging ski slopes – are winter sanctuaries that are easily accessible and within an hour’s drive from the city.

While many citizens still recall surviving on United Nation’s food rations, Sarajevo has made remarkable recovery. It now boasts of shopping malls, hotels and restaurants. The cobblestoned Old Turkish district lends a charming, quaint ambiance. It is well regaining its multi-cultural and multi-ethnic identity. At the end of our stay, I began to notice spots (only locals knew the significance of these) where life ended whilst queuing for basic necessities or even while playing innocently.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is a symbol of its people’s resistance and its resurgence is the epitome of a resilient society. The land is vast and beautiful and the people’s courage and determination, inspiring. ■

Ir. Sharifah Azlina Raja Kamal Pasmah enjoys travelling with her family to places they read immensely about – places showcasing evolution of religions, wars and civilisation, as well as to abodes of Dracula, vampires, fairies and Hobbits.