

"Is Bosnia dangerous? Isn't there like a war going on there?" Our Bosnian guide frustratingly recounts the questions he is frequently asked when travelling overseas.

"Sarajevo is only known for three things abroad: triggering the First World War, 1984 Olympics, and the war (Bosnian War, 1992-1995)," he tells us.

"We need another Olympic games to balance things out," he jokes.

Sarajevo is an increasingly vibrant place again with a growing number of tourists each year. Rich in history and natural beauty, the country is relatively cheap to travel across by European standards.

Sarajevo, Bosnia's capital, bears all the marks of the country's turbulent history and blends together white Ottoman-style mosques, Serbian Orthodox and Catholic Croat churches, Austro-Hungarian 19th century architecture, Communist-era apartment blocks and modern shopping malls. A bit of Vienna, a bit of Istanbul, a bit of central Europe – and totally Sarajevo.

Sarajevo is made up of two words, 'saray' and 'evo': 'saray' comes from the Turkish word for palace and 'evo' is believed to be a Slavic derivative of the Turkish word 'ova' or 'ovasi' meaning field or valley.

The city is built inside a valley and is surrounded by the Dinaric Alps mountain range with green hills and beautiful houses with red roofs and white walls, minarets, church towers, forts, mansions and graveyards donned across it.

Walking through the streets of Sarajevo's old town with its wooden-built Ottoman-style bazaar and smell of kebab and grilled meat being cooked, I can see that Sarajevans, despite the rise of huge shopping complexes, still retain a love for the traditional markets. Families, couples, friends and colleagues alongside tourists relax in tea houses, smoking nargila (water pipe).

Bars, pubs and nightclubs are blended in throughout the city; a tall woman wearing a hijab walks alongside her uncovered blonde-haired sister who is



PHOTO COURTESY: USMAN BUTT

Stari Most bridge in Mostar is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

WHY HEAVENLY BOSNIA DESERVES TO BE YOUR NEXT TRAVEL DESTINATION

USMAN BUTT

wearing a dress. The city still embraces its multicultural heritage, although as our guide, who has a Serbian father and a Bosniak mother, tells us – it's not like it used to be. "Mixed marriages used to be very common in this city," he recalls.

Bosnia was a part of Yugoslavia, which encompassed present day Macedonia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Serbia, and Montenegro.

In 1991, 49.2 percent of the population

identified as Bosniak (Muslim), 29.8 percent as Serbs (Orthodox Christians), 10.7 percent as Yugoslavs, 6.6 percent Croats (Catholics) and 3.6 percent as others (including Jews and Roma).

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