

The European city you haven't thought of visiting

BERT ARCHER

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Belgrade at night. (Tourist Organization of Belgrade)

Nikola Tesla has always been a backroom genius, a scientist's scientist, a nerd's nerd. But things are looking up for the Serbian inventor, who died in 1943. It started in 2006, when then up-and-coming filmmaker Christopher Nolan wrote Tesla into *The Prestige*, and cast David Bowie to play the perceptor of radio waves, alternating current, remote control and radar. In 2012, cartoonist Matthew Inman explained "why Nikola Tesla was the greatest geek who ever lived" in one of his popular *The Oatmeal* online comics. By July, 2014, when the entrepreneur behind the

Tesla electric car, Elon Musk, announced he would donate a million dollars to help save Tesla's old lab in New Jersey, the little-known inventor was almost a household name, despite most people still not being clear on who the

guy was.

Musk's money will help turn the building in Wardenclyffe, N.J., into a Nikola Tesla museum. But the Nikola Tesla Museum already exists, in Belgrade. It contains nearly everything he wrote or owned and, its curator told me, it has no intention of giving the new museum anything, even on extended loan. So if you want to know more about the man who inspired the next wave of automobiles, you'll have to visit the Serbian capital. What I discovered on my visit, however, is that Belgrade itself is the real revelation.



Knez Mihajlova Street in Belgrade. (D.Bosnic/Tourist Organization of Belgrade)

Tesla did not spend much time in

Belgrade – one account says the small-town boy was there for a single afternoon – but according to his nephew, it was the scientist's last wish that his work and archives be returned there. Tesla lived most of his life in the United States, but he was always a proud Serbian.

The museum is small and cool, in a way only museums in proud but underfunded nations can be, and housed in a large 1930s neoclassical house originally built for a government minister. It holds 160,000 documents, including a number of translations into English by Tesla of Serbian authors. I saw one translation, a handwritten page of poetry by Jovan Jovanovic Zmaj, Tesla's favourite Serbian writer, and realized that I knew practically nothing about this place.



Nicola Tesla Museum in Belgrade. (Ivan Milutinovic/Reuters)

As on previous trips to other former Eastern Bloc countries, the lasting effects of the Cold War became apparent. It's as if, for decades, a blanket had been thrown over the whole area. As a result (along with some American culture-jamming) these places, rich with distinctive foods and wines, literature, art and music, continue to be a blank page to most people from the West.

I had never, for instance, heard of writer Ivo Andric, either. Just a couple of blocks from the Tesla museum, his apartment is now the Ivo Andric Museum. Also small, somewhat hidden, but perfect in a

way that a curator with means would never have been able to achieve: It's practically untouched since his death in 1975, with only glass cases added to display things such as the Nobel Prize for literature he won in 1961.

The story of the gruesome May Coup was also new to me. Minutes from the Andric museum is the Old Palace; it was here in 1903, from a second-floor balcony, that the shot, stabbed and disemboweled bodies of the Serbian king and queen were thrown onto a pile of manure, part of a military coup carried out by men who would later plan the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. These are the guys who also recruited the archduke's assassin, Gavrilo Princip, in the Golden Sturgeon Café, a 10-minute walk away. The palace is now the City Hall, with grand gardens on the lawn where the royal couple landed.



The Temple of St. Sava. (Tourist Organization of Belgrade)

If Canada suffers from a surfeit of geography, Serbia has too much history, a great deal of it happening here before spreading out to the rest of the world. In addition to Tesla's innovations, a month after Princip killed the archduke, the first shots of the First World War were fired here, and in 1961, it was here that the Non-Aligned States movement was born, already seeing past the Cold War to a time when the world would not be divided into U.S. and Soviet sectors.

But it's present-day Belgrade that I find most fascinating: The restaurants of the old-town neighbourhood of Skadarlija; St. Sava, the world's largest – and still incomplete – Orthodox

church; Marshal Tito's tomb and the grand hilltop war memorial, its never-again message competing with its NATO bomb scars.

Novi Beograd, or New Belgrade, is where the city really shines. The Palace of Serbia, the former seat of the Yugoslav government, a mid-century-modernist's dream in concrete and chrome, presides over the neighbourhood. A few blocks from there is the equally fantastic Hotel Jugoslavija, a seven-storey beauty where Winston Churchill stayed while visiting Yugoslav leader Tito. Elizabeth Taylor slept here, too, while visiting Richard Burton, who was filming a movie in which he played Tito.



Belgrade's Kalemegdan Park. (B. Jovanovic/Tourist Organization of Belgrade)

Closed since the NATO bombings of 1999, the Jugoslavija reopened this summer. For \$50 a night, you can stay in one of its unrenovated rooms, complete with defunct socialist radios and balconies overlooking the splendid bend where the Sava meets the Danube, and the Serbian pop from the 1990s known as turbo-folk wafts up from the shipboard dance clubs below.

Tesla died before the Second World War ended, but I like to think the Belgrade of today, with a dozen great futures in its past and scars of a clutch of wars on its

façades, is just the sort of place he would have dreamed up: brilliant, broken, misunderstood, managing to be both ahead of its time, and behind it.



One of the many gates of Belgrade. (Tourist Organization of Belgrade)

IF YOU GO

There are no direct flights from Canada to Belgrade. **Lufthansa** flies from Toronto and Montreal to Munich, where you can catch an **Air Serbia** flight. lufthansa.com; airserbia.com/en

Belgrade is cheap: Taxi fares start at \$2. I never had a ride cost more than \$5. Pizza slices cost less than a dollar, and multicourse meals in fashionable restaurants can be had for around \$15. A pint of domestic beer is about \$1.75, and a half-litre can in a shop is about 55 cents.

Where to stay

The **Hotel Jugoslavija** is a true slice

of history, with basic rooms overlooking the Sava and Danube rivers. From \$50 a night.

The **Argo** is a lovely little boutique hotel right in the centre of things on Kralja Milana. \$64 a night, including breakfast. argohotelbelgrade.com

What to see

The **Nikola Tesla Museum** is at 51 Krunska, a five-minute walk up the street from the Argo. tesla-museum.org

The **Ivo Andric Museum**, also five minutes from the Argo, is a little difficult to find, but the people in the neighbourhood seem happy to point it out. It's at 8 Andricev Venac. mgb.org.rs/en

I discovered the site of the Staro Sajmiste concentration camp, along with the Palace of Serbia and the Hotel Jugoslavia, on a three-hour tour with **I Bike Belgrade**. Tours from \$24. ibikebelgrade.com

Part of the writer's trip was subsidized by the National Tourism Organization of Serbia. It did not review or approve the story.

**Editor's Note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified when Yugoslavia was born. The country was created in 1918, after the end of the First World War.*