

## Bridge of dreams

In Bosnia, it is hoped the reconstruction of a 16th-century bridge help span a long-standing ethnic divide

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Special to The Globe and Mail

UPDATED AT 3:32 AM EDT

Wednesday, Jul 1

MOSTAR, BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA -- If there's any sight in Bosnia that is widely recognizable beyond the country's borders, it's the Stari Most, or Old Bridge.

The ivory-coloured stone bridge -- its single arch spanning the 29-metre gap above the green Neretva River that bisects Mostar -- was considered the greatest Ottoman-era architectural masterpiece in Eastern Europe, and remained the most famed sight in Bosnia even after its destruction by Bosnian Croat tank shells during the 1992-95 war.

The bridge -- the \$20-million (U.S.) reconstruction of which is scheduled to be officially inaugurated next Friday -- is so much a part of the town that it never lost its role as the star in all of Mostar's tourist brochures, even when it was just piles of three-tonne stones being salvaged from the bottom of the river.

It is hoped that the reconstruction of the 16th-century bridge, a World Heritage site, will not just physically reconnect the two banks of the river, but begin the process of reuniting the town's Croat and Muslim communities. Mostar, which is the most important city after Sarajevo, is in the southwestern part of the country, surrounded by mountains. The brilliantly coloured Neretva cuts a sort of canyon through the centre of town and physically divides it into two. The town's ethnic communities have used the river gap to separate themselves: Croats on the west bank, Muslims on the east.

Mostar was one of the most heavily damaged cities in the war, and the destruction of the bridge was one of the most tragic acts of destruction in a conflict that was full of them. The extraordinary amount of devastation that Mostar experienced during the war is still evident, particularly along what is still called "the front line," a road along the western side of the river, with block after block of bombed-out, uninhabitable apartment buildings.

But the city is slowly rebuilding itself and is now attracting the kind of tourists who don't mind warnings about mines in guidebooks. Although you won't find throngs of visitors in Mostar, or many facilities that would cater to them, you



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will find locals who look at the slowly increasing number of tourists with curiosity and optimism.

In Mostar, like the rest of Bosnia, many locals -- such as my waiter, Mirnes, at my first meal in town at one of the many restaurants lining the riverbank -- will happily go out of their way to guide you not only through the town, but through their difficult history and their hopes for the future.

They are frank when they talk of the ethnic divisions that still exist here. As we walked to Mirnes' Turkish style house for tea in one of the Muslim parts of town, he pointed out the enormous illuminated cross erected by the Croats a few years ago on a mountain overlooking the city, although it was hard to miss since it dwarfs Mostar's skyline.

Mostar's Turkish influence -- there are several mosques and minarets, Oriental-style buildings, and preserved Turkish houses, some of which are now museums to Turkish life -- is the town's most defining feature. At the Turkish bazaar in the Old Town on the east bank of the Neretva, artisans have been peddling their rugs, copper, leather, and handicrafts for centuries. Since the war, they've been hawking a new type of product: souvenirs made from old bullet casings with engraved flowers on them. Turkish-style coffee, often served in the traditional copper kettles, is still practically the only way to drink coffee here, and teeth-achingly sweet baklava-style desserts are the norm.

But Mostar also has Catholic Churches, Orthodox churches, a Franciscan monastery, a synagogue, and a Jewish cemetery. Many of these buildings were also heavily damaged or destroyed during the war and, like the bridge, are being rebuilt.

Mostar has just three mediocre hotels, but in the place of youth hostels or fancy accommodation are the pensioners who await buses pulling into town, offering their spare bedrooms to supplement their meagre incomes. As I stepped off the bus, Omer Lakise, a retired professor of languages, greeted me, proudly pointing out his name in my *Lonely Planet* guidebook. With eight spare beds, shelves full of German books, breakfast in the morning, and a host who loves to talk about the town where his "family has lived forever," staying with Omer was probably the best possible introduction to Mostar.

I happened to be here last August on the day when the keystone was placed in the centre of the reconstructed bridge's arch by Turkish engineers, Mostar's Muslim mayor, and his Croat deputy. It was also the day of the city's annual diving contest, during which dozens of divers jump from the 20-metre-high span into the Neretva.

The contest is an institution in Bosnia -- interrupted during the war when there was no bridge to dive from -- and divers now come from many other European countries. The contest, which is aired on national television, brings the locals down to the riverbank in droves to watch the divers plunge into the river.

When they're jumping from the bridge, it doesn't matter whether they're Muslim, Catholic, or Orthodox. The Old Bridge has for centuries given Mostar this tradition in which ethnicity doesn't matter -- all that's needed is fearlessness.

### **Pack your bags**

### **WHERE TO STAY**

Omer Lakise lives a few minutes walk from the bus station (Mladena Balorde 21A, Mostar, Bosnia, 387 (36) 551-627). He has a few bedrooms with a total of eight beds.

### **THINGS TO DO**

The Turkish House, Turkish bazaar and most other sights of interest are along the eastern side of the river.

### **MORE INFORMATION**

The Bosnia-Herzegovina tourism website is <http://www.bhtourism.ba>.

### **RECOMMENDED READING**

Lonely Planet's *Eastern Europe*.



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