

## As Serbia recovers from Milošević-inspired chauvinism and NATO bombing in 1999, Belgrade is becoming a party capital of the Balkans - with wild music and fiery *slivovica*. Bojan Djordjević reports

**B**elgrade sits on one of the European frontiers of East and West. Strategically sited at the confluence of the Danube and the Sava rivers, it was regularly fought over by the Habsburgs and Ottomans and the impressive hilltop Kalemegdan fortress dominates the city to this day – as well as being a concert venue in today's more peaceful times. Skadarlija, the picturesque Gypsy quarter, often called the Montmartre of Belgrade, was famous during Tito's time for its inns and spontaneous music scene. These days, like Montmartre, it's a pale imitation of what it was, although there's still music to be heard in restaurants like Ima Dana or Tri Sesira.

In the 80s the capital's local music scene began to flourish, until war and economic devastation

intervened. Things began to pick up rapidly in the late 90s when a boom in world music coincided with the arrival of widespread internet access in the Balkans and a surge in private enterprise. In recent years world music has become increasingly popular with regular concerts at Belgrade's venues and festivals, alongside some great Balkan and Gypsy music. Belgrade's position on two rivers means good opportunities to party on the water. Hundreds of boats – transformed into restaurants, pubs and clubs – have become the centre of town nightlife.

Political changes in 2000 saw the devastated and ruined streets and buildings repaired and growing business transform the city into a real metropolis. Nevertheless unemployment is still clearly visible, with many people hanging about the streets and bars during working hours.

Belgrade residents are friendly, hospitable people, English is widely spoken and prices are low by European standards. Because of Serbian's party mentality, tourists throng to spend wild weekends and five-day breaks. The major festivals outside Belgrade, like EXIT in Novi Sad (July 12-15, [www.exitfest.org](http://www.exitfest.org)) and the brass band festival in Guča (August 8-12, [www.guca.co.yu](http://www.guca.co.yu)), are not too far from the capital and worth a visit for the great music, food, drink and crazy parties.

The capital too has something to offer throughout the year – sometimes it can get busy with many events happening on the same weekend (April-June, October-December) and it can be worth hiring a guide for a specific event. If interested in folk dance, it is also worth checking out the dance societies who teach anyone interested.



### GOING TRAVELLING?

Songlines has now profiled the world music scene in over 30 cities. Check the archive on [www.songlines.co.uk](http://www.songlines.co.uk)

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Be prepared to party all night with the Blek Panthers

### BOATS

Boats lining the riverbanks play everything from hip-hop and disco to rock ballads, folk and turbo folk. If you don't like the music on one boat, you can always hop onto another one.

### Blek Panthers (Black Panthers)

A must for all lovers of Balkan craziness and parties till morning. Famous actors, directors, conductors

and musicians love to come to the boat run by a Gypsy family. They play music there six times a week, from 11pm until everyone is under the table. They play lots of different styles but their Gypsy repertoire is most famous, attracting a large number of foreigners every night. The band, after all the years of playing on the boat, are just releasing their first CD. Reservation may be necessary.

[www.blekpanthers.net](http://www.blekpanthers.net)



The impressive main concert hall at Sava Centar

### CONCERT VENUES

#### Sava Centar

A major venue, with a main hall capacity of 3,400 seats, and the only place for cultural events in the new part of town rapidly becoming 'the city'. Lots of the world music big guns have made their mark here, including: Mariza; Madreus; Omara Portuondo; Femi Kuti; Boban Marković; Cesaria Evora. From time to time they do festivals, with lots of jazz and world music.

**Milentija Popovica 9, +381 (0)11 220 60 00**  
[www.savacentar.com](http://www.savacentar.com)

#### Dom Omladine Beograda

A terrific venue in the heart of the town with three music halls in one building and a capacity ranging from 200 to 1,500. In the mid-90s the Dom was the first venue in Serbia to open its doors to world music DJing evenings. They organise all kinds of concerts and festivals, but it's currently closed for renovation work for which the US embassy donated one million dollars.

**Makedonska 22, +381 (0)11 3220 133**  
[www.domomladine.org](http://www.domomladine.org)

#### Rex Cultural Centre

Run by the Radio B92 crew since 1996, the centre has established one of the most thought-provoking programmes in town. Several music and film festivals take place here, as well as workshops. A great venue for young artists, the only problem is that the centre is housed in a residential building meaning no music is permitted after midnight.

**Jevrejska 16, +381 (0)11 3284 534**  
[www.rex.b92.net](http://www.rex.b92.net)

#### SKC

The student cultural centre hit peak fame in the 80s but is now recovering from years of being run by people from Slobodan Milosevic's former regime. More rock oriented than the other venues, but still lots of possibilities in two indoor and one garden venue.

**Kralja Milana 48, +381 (0)11 3602 061**  
[www.skc.org.yu](http://www.skc.org.yu)

### SHOPS & LABELS

#### IPS

A chain of shops in the major cities of Serbia. The biggest one is in Belgrade city centre at the start of pedestrian area, called Mamut. It has a nice selection of local and world music. Locally produced CDs range from four to six euros and imports from ten to 16 euros.

#### B92

This TV and radio station is also a fine

record label. It produced an excellent compilation series called *Srbija: Sounds Global* and *Romano Suno*, as well as local bands like Kal and Aca Šišić. They have a shop next to Dom Omladine, with a good selection of CDs and books, where you can also buy tickets for various events. Lot of CDs and DVDs are on sale, for the price of less than two euros, at kiosks around town. They often don't have booklets and the selection is not the best, but maybe worth it for a few musical memories.

### FESTIVALS

Although there's no specific world music festival, several include plenty of world music events:

#### BELEF

This summer festival includes theatre, music, dance and visual arts. The music depends greatly on the music programmer who changes every two years. Over the last four years some astonishing acts have played for the first time: Armenian Navy Band; Mostar Sevdah Reunion with Ljiljana Buttler; Tinariwen; Stella Chiweshe with Svetlana Spajić; Laurie Anderson and other interesting shows. This is the best in summer refreshment – apart from the mid-August beer festival of course.

[www.belef.org](http://www.belef.org)

#### Ring Ring

For the last 12 years this May festival has been a major window into new and world music. Innovative programming has opened eyes and ears to the sounds of Taraf de Haïdouks, Anouar Brahem, Lajko Felix, Habib Koité, Kroke, Bratsch and many

others, who have been happy to play in front of an enthusiastic crowd. This is a festival adored by the artists due to the open-minded audience – the close contact continues after the concerts.

[www.rex.b92.net/ringring](http://www.rex.b92.net/ringring)



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