

Article by Paddy Ashdown, High Representative for BiH: "Paddy Ashdown says please come"

Lord Ashdown shares his vision about this previously war torn
region.

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Nine years ago the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina finally came to an end.

A long-time advocate of international intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina , Lord Ashdown took up the post of High Representative on May 27, 2002 .

Now Paddy Ashdown (as he is more commonly known) shares his vision.

In May 2004 I traveled with a delegation from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) to several European capitals. In each city we gave a presentation. Our object was simple: we wanted people to stop thinking of BiH as it was a decade ago – war torn and destitute – and start thinking of it is today – stable, democratic and safe. We wanted to get people all over Europe to begin looking at BiH as a potential tourism destination.

The first thing we did was dispel some myths:

– Myth 1 – BiH is a War Zone. No it isn't. The war ended nine years ago. In terms of personal security BiH is one of the safest countries in the world. (Sarajevo, for example, has

less crime than Lucerne in Switzerland).

– Myth 2 – BiH is full of landmines. No it isn't. There are mines along some parts of the wartime front line, but a lot of de-mining has already been carried out, and landmines remain a problem in only a tiny proportion of BiH's land area. You can trek for days and you will not come within 20 miles of a wartime minefield.

– Myth 3 – You need a visa to visit BiH. Not if you're an EU citizen you don't.

– Myth 4 – It's difficult to get to. No it isn't. There are direct flights from London during the summer, and during the whole year there are regular scheduled connections to Sarajevo via Zagreb , Belgrade and Vienna . BiH is easily accessible by coach from Croatia 's Adriatic resorts (from Dubrovnik to Mostar under three hours, from Split to Mostar just over three hours).

After dealing with the myths we got down to business – and tourism ought to be very big business indeed as far as BiH is concerned. The country's enormous tourism potential hasn't begun to be exploited. It's worth emphasizing that because its tourism infrastructure is still in development, many of the mistakes that have been made in fully developed markets have so far been avoided in BiH.

The country is genuinely different – that's not just a slogan; it's a fact. BiH offers visitors a unique combination of unspoiled nature and a diverse culture that has not been packaged and homogenized for mass tourism. It's a country where hospitality is still a tradition and not an industry.

If you are looking for a luxury poolside break with five-star service, then BiH probably isn't for you.

But for the adventurous of spirit looking for a destination which has distinctive and still relatively unknown traditions,

unmatched natural beauty, and a unique blend of European cultures then BiH is definitely worth a second look.

It is a place of extraordinarily beautiful mountains (and ski resorts) and rolling green meadows (intersected by rivers which boast some of the best white-water rafting in Europe).

But perhaps, you think, the same can be said for many other parts of Europe – what makes BiH different?

Well, consider this: of the 4,000 species of high-altitude flowers in BiH, more than 400 are indigenous. That's 400 flowers you won't find anywhere else.

BiH has one of only two remaining primeval forests in Europe – and its forests and mountains are still the haunt of bears.

Less than three hours from London by plane there is an authentic wilderness, where rest stations for trekkers don't feature overpriced restaurants and chalets with hot and cold running water, but rather villages where the inhabitants continue to wear the colourful traditional clothes of their great-grandparents' day – not to please tourists but because that's their working clothes.

The ski slopes are smaller than in the Alps, and less crowded, and less – far less – expensive. The pistes are challenging enough to have been the venue for the Winter Olympics in 1984, and the ease of access is unparalleled. It takes about 30 minutes to get from the Arrivals Lounge at Sarajevo Airport to the top of the ski-lift at Bijelasnica, the nearest resort. (During the Sarajevo Winter Festival you can ski in the afternoon and go to the Opera in the evening!)

Small in this case is very definitely beautiful.

And then there is the culture. Most people know that the 1992

– 95 war pitted Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox against one another. True, but it's not the whole story. Less well known is the fact that during the whole course of the war decent citizens in BiH sheltered their neighbours, whatever their religious affiliation. And though there have been sporadic bouts of religious intolerance in BiH, there have been hundreds of years in which the communities lived together in harmony – when BiH has been a role model for the rest of Europe showing the benefits of tolerance, rather than a warning of the dangers of intolerance.

What the visitor today will find is Europe's largest Catholic pilgrimage centre, at Medjugorje, its largest Muslim pilgrimage centre, at Ajatovica, and Orthodox monasteries that are rightly famous for their exquisite iconography. The recently restored National Museum in Sarajevo (itself a remarkable and arresting Habsburg "folly" that dominates the entrance to the city-centre) is home to the oldest Sephardic Haggadah in Europe, brought to the Balkans by the Jews who were exiled from Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492.

Sarajevo famously has an Orthodox and Catholic Cathedral, an architecturally exquisite 15th century Mosque and a Jewish synagogue all within a few blocks in the city centre.

But it is important to stress that this cultural mix is not just a matter of art or architecture or even of the religious devotions of the faithful. The cultural and religious monuments that abound in BiH testify to a cultural diversity that is simply a way of life. Culture in this country is not a thing of history. It is a thing of every day life; celebrated in cafes and town squares, in the songs and dances of weddings and festivals. Traditions abound – but they are living traditions.

Soon after I took up my duties as High representative, in May 2001, I decided that this was a country I wanted to visit long

after my formal duties came to an end (I'm scheduled to step down in May next year). So I bought a house. It's a villa on a lake halfway between Sarajevo and Mostar. I spent about a year fixing it up, and in the summer of 2003 we had the pleasure of inviting friends to come and stay.

Well, word has got around. This year, Hotel Ashdown is fully booked. What impressions do all our visitors have in common? Compared to neighbouring Croatia , they say, BiH is rough and ready but extraordinarily friendly. Whatever tour guides, taxi drivers and waiters may lack in finesse they more than make up for in exuberance – the people of BiH are instinctively hospitable.

On 23 July in Mostar, the capital of Herzegovina , the Old Bridge that spans the rapids of the River Neretva and connects the city's two banks was reopened. The bridge, which was destroyed by tank shells at the end of 1993, has been recreated, using much of the original stone and using exactly the same techniques that were used by the master masons who erected this breathtakingly beautiful architectural masterpiece for Sulejman the Magnificent in 1566.

The restoration of the Old Bridge at Mostar mirrors the restoration of BiH as a fully-functioning member of the European family of states. It marks Bosnia and Herzegovina 's long road back, from a place that a decade ago was a byword for war, to a place that today is a byword for much that is best in European culture and society.

It is a place that is well worth a visit.