

# ON SUNDAY Travel Mail



**CHILDREN BELOW 12 CAN STAY FREE OF COST AT THIS MALDIVES RESORT**

Amaya Kuda Rah Maldives is running a kids-free offer on its Beach Suite Villa and Family Duplex Beach Villa (both room categories have a private pool) till October 31. Children aged 12 or below can stay free of cost up to 2 children per room. Terms and conditions apply.

# IN DJOKOVIC COUNTRY

Serbian director Emir Kusturica built the "Drvengrad" (Wooden town) Village between two mountains (below); the writer with Novak Djokovic's father Srđan Djokovic



by Archana Singh

**■** WAS NURSING the wounds of being pickpocketed in a train from Zagreb to Belgrade, and had arrived penniless in a country where I knew no one. I was pleading with my hotel receptionist to allow me an early check-in but she was adamant on following the rule-book.

Enter, 5.2 feet tall, fair-skinned, straight haired and almond hazel eyed Bojna Sestovic dressed in black. Perhaps, Bojna had watched me for a while before volunteering to help. She patiently heard my ordeal and said something to the receptionist in the Serbian language. Voila! The receptionist had a change of heart. As I thanked Bojna for her help, she extended a friendly invitation to explore Serbia with her.

Bojna asked why I was visiting Serbia. Being a die-hard tennis fan, my face lit up like a bulb when I said, "Because it's the birthplace of Novak Djokovic." She laughed and said, "Well, this is a valid reason. But if you want to see the real Serbia, you must explore it like a local."

Hesitantly, I tried to find a face-saving excuse, "But I have no cash left to explore the country. The only thing I have right now is this." I said, gesturing to my Eurail Global Pass. She smiled and said, "Oh, don't worry about the expenses! You are my guest!"

Thereafter one surprise followed another as I explored Belgrade and Western Serbia.

## AT NOVAK'S RESTAURANT

The first surprise arrived in the form of a lunch at Novak 1 Cafe & Restaurant. Like an excited kid, I explored all the sections of the building, the cabinets full of silverware won by the Wimbledon champion and the merchandise for sale. The restaurant served everything from lamb chops to spring rolls, and there was an extensive vegan and gluten-free menu. However, the real deal wasn't what I ate, but who I met. I was a lucky patron to meet Novak's dad, who happened to be there.

My day was made! But the surprise train has just left the first

## High point of a fan's trip to Serbia? Dining at a restaurant owned by the ever-popular Wimbledon champion

station. Sadly, Bojna couldn't join me on my next adventures but her good friend-cum-travel-organiser, Nedeljko Stamenic Nadjo, ensured I experience the best of Serbia.

## RENDEZVOUS AT ZLAKUSA

As we drove for 240-km from Belgrade towards alpine like Zlatibor in western Serbia, the scenery changed dramatically. Braids of lush green carpeted vistas hemmed with forested peaks, plunging waterfalls and pretty

villages replaced the brutal communist era skyscrapers. After a ride of about two hours, we reached Zlakusa village, where the traditional fare of interesting dishes was awaiting us.

"Nothing is more important in Serbia than food," my host-lady dressed in folk costume told me with laughter in her eyes as I accepted a third helping—sans protest—of her delicious Sarma (mince-meat wrapped and cooked in cabbage leaves). "It doesn't matter where you are and

what is happening, food is always at the centre!"

With Serbia being at the crossroads of East and West, its cuisine has collected elements from different cooking styles across the Middle East and Europe to develop its own hearty gastronomy with an intricate balance of rich meats, vegetables, cheese, fresh pastries and desserts.

The Serbian hospitality piqued my interest into knowing more about the ethnic Serbian rural life and my wish was granted in the

form of "Terzica Avlija". Artisans were working to keep a four century old pottery making technique alive, by making earthenware from a mix of stone and clay, using a slow wheel and open firing.

The star attraction of the day was reserved for the last. Befittingly in the twilight, we saw a glimpse of Serbia's past through the open-air museum of Sirogojno. A 19th century village reconstructed to showcase what rural life was like at that time.

Next day our journey took us to Drvengrad (Timber Town), originally built by world famous Serbian director Emir Kusturica for his 2004 movie *Life Is a Miracle*. It's now an eccentric ethno village of 19th century-style farm buildings with shops, restaurants, galleries and apartments to rent.

Nearly two kilometres away was an equally quirky sight, the Sargan Eight, where a 2.5hr long romantic steam train ride and an incredible feat of engineering

