

# WELCOME TO SERBIA



## Stereotypes about Serbia

No, Serbia is not dry and hot country in Asia, that's Syria.

We do speak English.

It's not extremely cold either, that would be Siberia.

Serbia is not in the Middle East, it's in Europe.

We were never a part of USSR

We have not been a Communist country for decades now.

We are not cannibals :)

Serbs are not terrorists, war criminals, or thugs, in fact, we are extremely friendly and hospitable

Wars, bombings, embargo etc. are all in the past.

We don't drink only Turkish coffee and plum brandy (although we do think everyone should try them).

We also have electricity and running water in our houses. And yes, it is hot.

We are not a monarchy, even though we do have a Royal Family.

Of course we have the Internet, mobile phones, colour TVs, cars...

We do have Mc Donald's, KFC, Coca Cola, you name it.

We do have street lights.

We do not have a seaside, but we do have the world's greatest water polo team

# GENERAL INFORMATION

Serbia is a land-locked country located on the Balkan Peninsula in Europe. The north of the country is flat, while the central and southern parts are hilly or mountainous. The majority of the people are Serbs and the official language is Serbian. The country's capital is Belgrade.



## POPULATION

Serbia has a population of approximately 8 million, 1.2 million of whom live in Belgrade. The eastern part of the country is the least densely populated region. Serbia is a multinational country, the majority of its population being of Serbian nationality, but there are also Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian, Bulgarian and other ethnic minorities.

## LANGUAGE

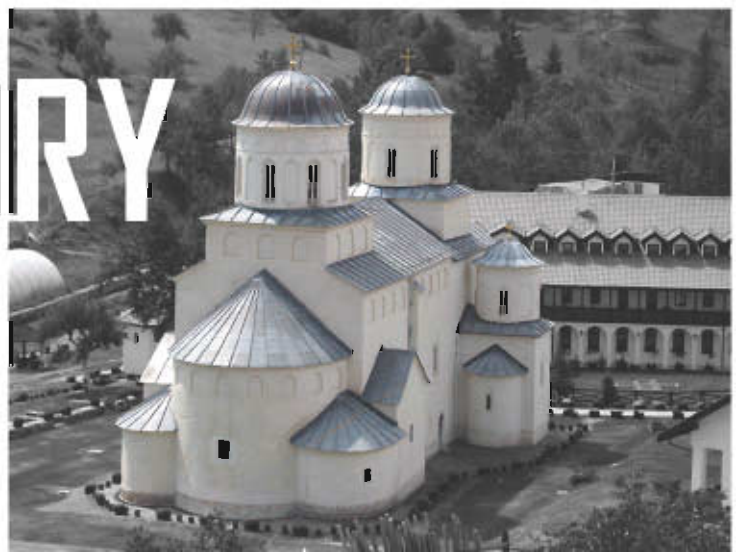
The official language is Serbian, which is a Slavic language. Though the traditional Serbian alphabet is the Cyrillic, the Latin is also in use. The alphabet has 30 letters and is phonetic, which means that each letter represents one sound. A dictionary will be essential for you during the year. Excellent English-Serbian, French-Serbian, German-Serbian, or Russian-Serbian dictionaries can be bought at reasonable prices, as well as a number of others.

## GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

Serbia takes up the northern part of the Balkan Peninsula and the southern part of the Pannonian Plain. It is bordered by Hungary to the north, Romania and Bulgaria to the east, Macedonia to the south, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro to the West and Albania to the southwest. Serbia's capital is Belgrade, which is also the largest city, and other major cities and towns are Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, and Subotica. The north of Serbia is very flat, the central part of the country called Šumadija is hilly, while there are some high mountains in the south, the most popular being Kopaonik known for its ski resorts. The country abounds in rivers, and the longest European river Danube flows through Serbia, linking it to both Central Europe and the Black Sea. Over a quarter of the territory is covered by forests, while national parks take up 10%.

The climate is continental with cold winters and hot humid summers, though it has been affected by the global climate change. Average summer temperatures in July and August are around 32°C, though they may exceed 40°C, while the usual winter temperatures range between 5°C and -5°C, or colder in the mountains. It rains in spring and autumn and summer showers are quite common.

# HISTORY



The first human settlements on the territory of the present-day Serbia date back from Neolithic times, around 6th millennium BC. Celts inhabited Serbia prior to the Roman conquest in the 1st century BC. Today's Serbs are the descendants of the South Slavs who settled the Western Balkans between the 6th and 8th centuries AD.

The Medieval Serbian state of Raška, founded in the 7th century, evolved into the Serbian Kingdom and later the Serbian Empire under the House of Nemanjić, reaching its peak in the 14th century. Serbia was defeated by the Ottoman Empire in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 and did not regain its full independence until 1878. From 1815 to 1903 the country was ruled by the House of Obrenović and from 1903 until the end of World War II by the House of Karađorđević.



After the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo (Bosnia-Herzegovina) in 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, leading to the outbreak of World War I. Serbia was a major Balkan Entente Power which contributed significantly to the Allied victory in the Balkans in 1918. After the liberation, Serbia was united with lands that used to be part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later to be re-named the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was occupied by Nazi Germany after devastating bombing of Belgrade and other cities in April 1941. During and after World War II, communists supported by the Soviet Union and headed by Josip Broz Tito, took over the power and ruled until 1991, when a war broke out starting the disintegration of Yugoslavia, which ended with the NATO bombing in 1999. The regime of Slobodan Milošević was overthrown in 2000 and Serbia got its democratic government.

In February 2008, the Parliament of Kosovo, Serbia's southern province with an ethnic Albanian majority, declared independence. The response from the international community has been mixed. Serbia regards Kosovo as its autonomous province governed by the United Nations.

# CULTURE RELIGION



Thanks to its eventful history, Serbia has a variety of cultural and architectural monuments – medieval monasteries with their fresco paintings and icons, beautiful mosques, medieval and Austro-Hungarian fortresses, baroque churches. Serbia has a very rich folklore which consists of national traditions and customs, traditional costumes which differ from one region to another, folk dances and songs. The traditional folk dance is called kolo.

Serbia also has a thriving modern art scene. In addition to internationally renowned theatre festival BITEF music festival BEMUS and film festival FEST, Serbia now hosts EXIT, voted best music festival in the world in 2006. Many foreigners agree that Europe's best night life can be found in buzzing Belgrade. Literature has played an important role in Serbian culture and Serbian writer Ivo Andrić won the Nobel Prize in literature.

Though an average Serb is not very athletic and would rather watch sports on TV than take part in them, Serbian athletes are among the best in the world. Group sports such as basketball, football, volleyball, handball and water polo play an important part in sporting life and tennis has become increasingly popular over the past few years.

Serbia is a democracy with three branches of government: the executive - the president and the cabinet of ministers headed by the prime minister, usually referred to as the Government, the legislative – the unicameral parliament called the National Assembly and the judiciary – the Supreme Court.

Serbia's economy is based on agriculture, metal processing and mining. A developing branch of economy is tourism, especially eco tourism.

Most Serbs are Orthodox Christians and the religion has always played an important role in maintaining the Serbian identity, especially during the five centuries of Ottoman occupation. There is also a significant Muslim community, mainly in the southwestern part of Serbia called Sandžak, as well as small Catholic, Protestant and Jewish communities.

Most Serbs are Orthodox Christians but do not go to church regularly. Most families celebrate Christmas, New Year, Easter and Slava – the family's patron saint's day. The Serbian Orthodox Church uses the traditional Julian calendar, instead of the Gregorian calendar used by the state (and the rest of the world). Christmas is on 25th December, but 25th December in Julian calendar is 7th January in Gregorian calendar. As they have two calendars, the official state calendar and the church calendar, Serbs celebrate two New Years – one on 1st January and the other on 14th January!

GOVERNMENT

ECONOMY

# EVERYDAY LIFE IN SERBIA

Family is very important, and by 'family' Serbs often mean also the grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. An average family usually consists of the parents and two children, though there are many single-parent families, but the patriarchal tradition has left its traces so it is also common to see three generations living under one roof in perfect harmony. Many children remain living with their parents until marriage, but it is also the custom to take care of the parents when they get old. For many people it is unthinkable to put parents in the old people's home.

Usually both parents work and their working hours may be from 8a.m.-4p.m., or 9a.m.-5p.m. or even longer. Even though men and women are equal, most housework is done by women, while men are in charge of house repairs, car maintenance and other 'rough' tasks. Children are expected to keep their room tidy and help with the house chores. They may be expected to vacuum the home or part of it, take out the rubbish, lay the table or do grocery shopping.

## Be part of your family

AFS students to Serbia must be prepared to live under conditions different from those at home. Some host families may not have all modern facilities such as air-conditioning or microwave ovens and the level of material comfort may be lower than in the more developed countries. Your Serbian family will be like any other family. They will have times of joy, times of conflict and times of just being together. Use your eyes and ears to see how things are done in your Serbian family. Be open and honest and ask your family to be honest with you. They may hesitate because they are afraid to hurt your feelings, but it is important that you cross the barrier and talk honestly together.

## Brothers and sisters

Most Serbian teenagers are extremely friendly and outgoing. They may have one or two very good friends, but generally hang out in large groups and new people are welcome to join, so it should not be difficult for you to meet people and make friends. Your host brothers and sisters will probably be very proud of having you and introducing you to all their friends, but they may also be a bit jealous because you are taking away a bit of the attention they have been used to. The best way to overcome this is to show interest in what they do and to include them in your activities. Many students expect their host brother or sister to be their best friend, but this does not always happen. After all, many natural brothers and sisters do not share the same interests or friends, so be prepared to make your friends and pursue your interests without depending on your host brother or sister.

## Clothes

Teenagers dress casually and most people wear jeans, T-shirts, sweat shirts and trainers. There are no school uniforms, so you can wear the same things to school, as long as they are decent - no strap/strapless tops or bare stomachs. It is enough to bring one or two nice outfits for special occasions. Cotton clothing is suggested for the summer, but you will also need jumpers, warm socks water-proof boots, gloves, hats and a warm coat or jacket for the winter.

## Hygiene

Hot water is expensive and Serbs usually shower once a day, so ask what is an appropriate time to take a bath or a shower. After bathing, you are expected to clean the bath and mop the water on the floor. In most homes mother takes care of the laundry and other family members may be expected to do their own ironing. Don't forget to ask what is expected of you.

Typical diet includes meat (chicken, pork, beef, veal or lamb), all kinds of vegetables (which Serbian teenagers often do not appreciate) and fruit. Dairy products are also important, especially natural yoghurt, farm cheese and kajmak – the cream skimmed from boiled milk. Serbs eat a lot of bread.

Breakfast includes bread, butter, jam or honey, cheese, kajmak and ham, but at week-ends it may also include cheese pies, corn cakes or goodies from the bakery. Grown-ups drink strong black Turkish coffee, while teenagers usually have milk, cocoa or coffee with milk.

Lunch has traditionally been the main hot meal. This is changing however, due to the fact that both parents work and the family gets to eat together at midday only on week-ends. Many traditional dishes combine meat and vegetables cooked together, while a typical Sunday lunch, often taken with grandparents or other relatives, will consist of a soup, meat, vegetables, salads and a dessert. Serbs don't eat much fish and if they do it is more likely to be fresh-water fish than sea fish.

Supper is often eaten rather late, 8 p.m. or later. It may be a cold meal – sandwiches, salads, cold cuts, or a simple hot meal such as a pie, pizza or pasta.

Eating Serbian food is part of your experience, so make an effort to taste everything. Don't put more food on your plate than you can eat – Serbs don't like to throw food away. It is better to take less the first time and ask for a second helping. Most mothers and grandmothers feel it is their duty to make sure everyone eats enough, so don't be surprised if they keep offering and stacking food on your plate even after you have had enough. They don't take 'no' for an answer so easily!

# FOOD



Most Serbian schools are state schools. Primary education lasts 8 years and is divided into two stages. High schools may last three or four years. There are three types of high school: vocational – where students learn how to do simple jobs, professional – the students who complete it can either get a job in their respective fields (nursing, accounting, technical etc.) or go on to university or college, and academic – which prepare students for university and offer general subjects such as languages, mathematics, sciences, social studies.

Average class size in high schools is 28–32 students. There are no compulsory and elective subjects, so all the students in one class have all their lessons together. The only choice they can make is between religion and civic education. Each class has their 'class teacher' who is in charge of the class. Many schools work in two shifts – from 8a.m–2p.m. and 2p.m.–8p.m. and students change shifts weekly. Serbian schools are a bit old fashioned – the teacher lectures, the students listen and take notes. In many classes there is very little interaction between the teacher and the students. Students are tested both orally and by written tests.

There are not many foreigners in Serbian schools, so your class mates will want to get to know you and to help you. You may find the first days confusing but with the help of your class mates you will soon find your way around.

# SCHOOLS

# ACTIVITIES AND SOCIAL LIFE

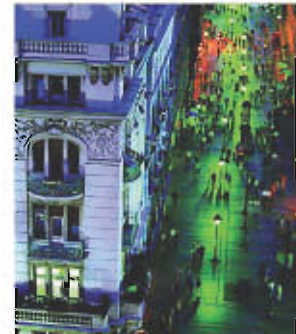
Most schools have a number of activities that students can engage in – drama club, debate club, choir, foreign language club. Although some sports competitions may be organized in the school, or between two schools, there are no school sports teams or regular practices. In all towns there are local sports clubs and gyms or swimming pools, where students can practice (for a reasonable membership fee). Exchange students who like dancing and music could join a Serbian folk dance group and or a choir.

Serbian teens socialize a lot. It is quite common to visit other people's home even without prior arrangements, or to hang out with a group of friends in the local park on a summer evening. Teens like going out late on Friday and Saturday night – the nightmare of every parent. Always tell your family in advance of your plans and don't say 'yes' to a friend before checking with the parents. Your host family will want to know what you are doing and where you are. This will make them feel you are part of their life and they are part of yours. Whenever you make plans, it is advisable to tell your family what you will do if the plan falls through. This means you need to make alternative plans before you leave the house.

## Punctuality

Serbs are rather laid back and punctuality does not mean a whole lot to them. You must be punctual for school and other formal occasions and events that start at a certain time, such as theatre or cinema, but when meeting or visiting friends it is okay to be reasonably late. Likewise, don't be surprised if your friends are fifteen minutes late.

## Phone, mobile phone and internet



Keep phone calls to a minimum, they are expensive. It is recommended not to talk to your family at home more frequently than once a month. Ask them to call you, rather than calling them. All Serbian teenagers have mobile phones and they communicate a lot with text messages. It is a good idea to get a Serbian SIM card. Ask your family to help you buy it. Be aware of the costs of calling from your mobile phone or receiving calls on it from abroad. One of the key problems with chatting on the internet is the false feeling of company, when in fact you are sitting alone in front of the computer. Our advice is to limit your use of MSN, Skype and the like and to interact with people around you instead.

# ATTITUDES

## Appreciation

AFS host families in Serbia, like host families worldwide, are not paid. They open their homes to AFSers to share their culture and to enrich their family life. It will mean a lot to them if you show your appreciation. Show them that you are grateful – not by buying them expensive gifts – smile, say a lot of thank you's, lend a helping hand, show enthusiasm and interest. Appreciation is necessary to build lasting bonds.

## Openness

You are in Serbia to learn. Open your eyes and your ears and keep asking questions. Do not hesitate to ask advice from your host family and friends and don't be afraid of being corrected. Encourage them to correct you when you make mistakes. If you feel uneasy about something, talk to your host family and friends. They won't realise it unless you tell them.

## Accepting differences

Many things are different without being better or worse. You need to see things from another viewpoint if you want to understand a different culture. Your exchange year is all about differences.

## Humour

Laughter is international means of communication. This includes laughing at yourself. Being able to laugh at your own shortcomings or mistakes is a characteristic of a balanced person. A good laugh will give you the strength to overcome a difficulty, to correct a mistake and it is a lot more fun than getting upset.

**Of course, these attitudes do not apply only to Serbia or only to AFSers, they are important everywhere. They will help you connect to other people, no matter what country you are in.**