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Europe Trip, Visiting the Balkans (E19A-3)

Niš, Serbia Day Trip

In 2019, I took a trip to Europe. My focus was on some of the countries in the Balkans, particularly Romania and Bulgaria. While staying in Sofia, Bulgaria, I took a day trip to Niš, Serbia.

I had never heard of Niš until I was looking for potential day trips out of Sofia. Although Niš doesn't have the significance of being a capital city, and nothing I found suggested that Niš was one of those quaint European cities that make for colorful photos, it has historical significance. My private day trip would visit a handful of such sites and included a traditional Serbian meal for lunch.

Niš is about a three-hour drive from Sofia, and there can be long backups at the Serbian-Bulgarian border as the highway is popular with Turks residing in Western Europe heading back and forth to Turkey to visit family during summer vacations. My driver told me that she had one border crossing that took four hours, but we lucked out, making both crossings in under an hour. But with the drive time and border crossings, that left only about four hours for exploring Niš.

Neolithic settlements in the area date back as far as 5000 BC, but Niš itself was founded by a Celtic tribe in 279 BC. The Romans occupied it 200 years later, and it became part of the Byzantine Empire after the Roman Empire was divided in two in 364 AD at a meeting that took place in Niš. After the Byzantine Empire faded and eventually fell, it was at various times fought over or occupied by the Slavs, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Serbians and German Crusaders before the Ottomans took over in 1448. Ottoman rule continued (except for two brief Austrian occupations) until 1878 when Niš fell to Serbia.

It was occupied by Bulgaria in WWI, but was incorporated with the rest of Serbia into Yugoslavia after the war. Germany occupied it in WWII and established a concentration camp in Niš. Yugoslavia broke up in 1992. On-going ethnic tensions led to NATO bombing Serbian sites in the former Yugoslavia in 1999 – Niš was hit by airstrikes 40 times.

Probably the city's most famous resident was Constantine the Great, the Roman emperor who legalized Christianity (and all religions) in the Roman Empire through the Edict of Milan, which he wrote in 313 AD (he didn't convert to Christianity himself until he was on his deathbed). Two other Roman emperors were also born in Niš.



It's hard to get much appreciation for the currently-not-open-to-the-public Mediana Archaeological Complex from the side of the road. Roman Emperor Constantine the Great was born and raised in Niš, and built this royal residence on the then-outskirts of town. After Constantine died in 337 AD, the residence was used by other Roman emperors. It was here in 364 where Emperors Valentinian and Valens met to divide the Roman Empire into eastern and western halves. Mediana was abandoned in 442 when Attila and his fellow Huns devastated the area.

Mediana has the best-preserved Roman ruins in Niš. Online pictures suggest that this will be a very interesting place to visit once it re-opens to the public.



Niš Fortress was built by the Ottomans in the early 1700s on the site of earlier Roman, Byzantine and medieval forts. The occupying Bulgarians used it as a prison in WWI. Today it is home to a jazz museum and the Niš Film Festival.



Ancient bath ruins inside the fortress date back to the Roman/Byzantine era



The ruins along a Byzantine era street inside Niš Fortress



The Bali Beg Mosque inside Niš Fortress was built during the Ottoman occupation in 1521. Today it serves as a small art gallery.



During the First Serbian Uprising against Ottoman rule in 1809, a band of Serbian rebels was attacked by Ottomans on Čegar Hill. Rather than be captured and impaled by the Ottomans, the Serbians blew themselves up along with several approaching Ottoman soldiers. The Ottoman General, Hurshid Pasha, ordered that a tower – Skull Tower – be built using the skulls of the fallen rebels in order to terrorize the opposing Serbs. The 15-foot-tall square tower was embedded with 952 skulls of Serbian rebels.

Rather than terrorize the Serbs, it motivated them in their efforts against the Ottomans, who withdrew from Niš in 1878. Over the years, some skulls fell off, some were retrieved by family members and some collected by souvenir hunters. Today, 58 skulls remain on the tower, preserved inside a chapel.



The entrance to the Niš Concentration Camp. The Nazis occupied Niš during World War II and established the Crveni Krst (Niš) Concentration Camp. It was used to detain upwards of 35,000 people, mostly Serbs, Jews and Romanis (a.k.a. Gypsies), until the camp was liberated in 1944.

Some prisoners were held as hostages – German policy for Serbia called for 100 hostages to be killed for every occupying soldier killed. By October 1941, this policy resulted in the deaths of 25,000 Serbs from in this camp and across Serbia.

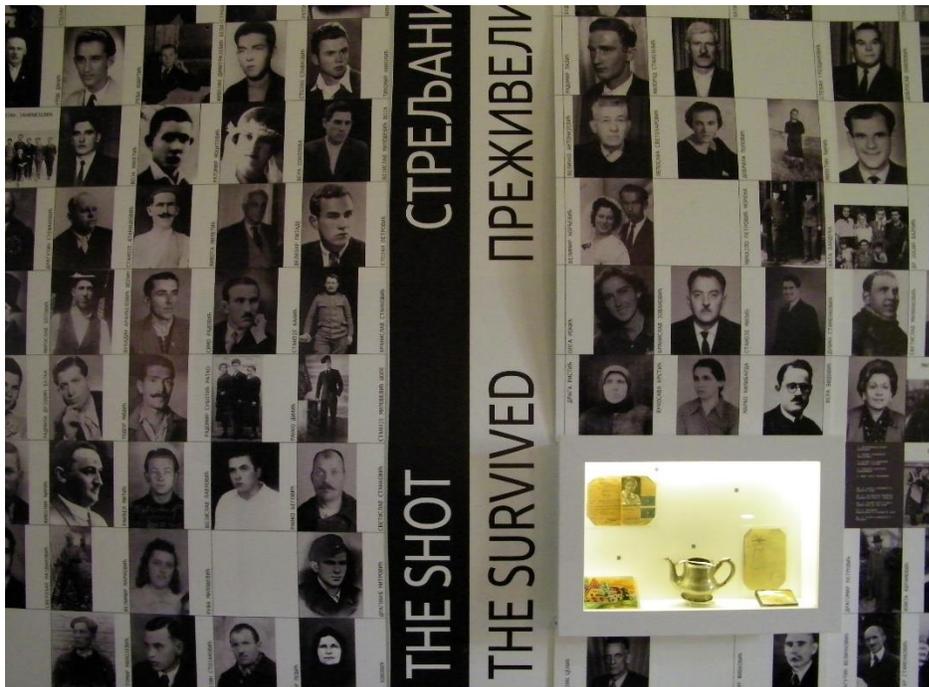
About 10,000 of the camp's prisoners were killed, some shot along the back wall of the camp, but most in mass executions at nearby Mount Bubanj.

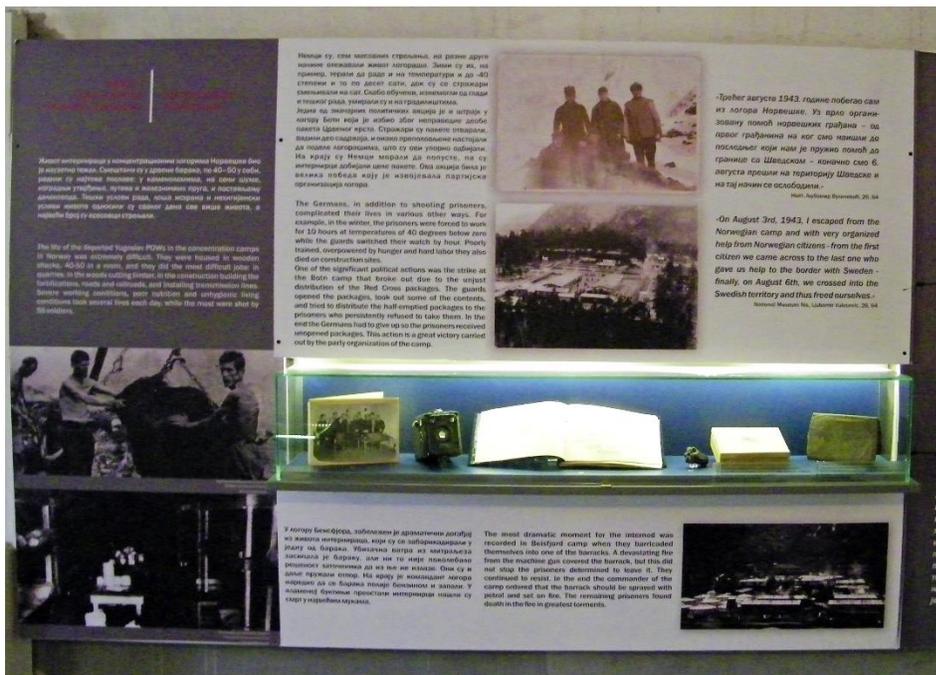


The back wall, damaged from bullets used in executions at the concentration camp



Prisoners were stripped of their possessions and their clothes before execution. The Nazis murdered these people, but thought their bowties were worth keeping.





From a display on Niš Concentration Camp prisoners who were sent to concentration camps in northern Norway. 4200 prisoners were sent to Norway camps from Serbia. These included 750 from Niš Concentration Camp, 291 of whom died in the Norway camps.



Isolation chambers



Inside an isolation chamber. Note the barbed wire that lines the floor. This is one of various approaches I've seen on my travels that the Nazis used to prevent prisoners from sitting or lying down when held in isolation.



A sculpture in Niš's modern city center



A monument to Constantine the Great and a view of the Nišava River in the Niš city center. The monument commemorates the 1700th anniversary of his Edict of Milan.



Not part of the tour – in fact, my driver never mentioned it – but our highway route passed through Serbia’s Sićevo Canyon Nature Park. Sićevo Gorge is 11 miles long and as much as 1300 feet deep, and made for a scenic drive.

As early man migrated north out of Africa and into Europe, their migration route took them through southeast Europe. A Homo Erectus jaw bone that could be 400,000-525,00 years old was found in the canyon in 2008.