

The Bar-Belgrade Railway

The Bar-Belgrade railway runs 300 miles through the Balkans from the Montenegrin port of Bar to the Serbian city of Belgrade. It is a feat of engineering dating from the Tito Yugoslavia era, constructed from 1952 to 1976 with 254 tunnels and 435 bridges between the Adriatic and the Serbian capital.

Our 7am departure from Bar is made easy by the synchronised cockerel and goat alarm calls at our Airbnb in a suburban smallholding. As we are dropped at Bar station, cows are grazing the roundabout.

Our taxi-driver had driven past the port to proudly point out NATO ships, Montenegro having joined only in May. This is a region at the crossroads of western/Russian influence; Serbia has a more ambivalent attitude towards NATO/NATO.

Our train is the slightly shabby second-class Tara; Tito's splendid Blue Train is used only for occasional excursions. The train line follows the Adriatic coast north to Sutomore (pronounced Sutomor-ay) the name of which had caused some confusion at the ticket counter the previous day

"Ticket tomorrow?", "Sutomore?", "No, tomorrow", "Sutomore?" and so on....



Montenegrin engine

At Sutomore, the train turns inland to cross Lake Skadar on a causeway running alongside the ruined 18th century Lesendro fortress. After Podgorica (the Montenegrin capital) we pass Bioče where a 2006 derailment into a ravine caused the deaths of 45 people. Since that accident, speed restrictions on the line have slowed the running time to 12 hours from the original 7 hours at the time the line was opened. A lack of proper maintenance in the 1990s is being addressed by a rolling programme of track upgrades which also aims to improve the freight capacity from Belgrade to Bar port. (A Bar-Belgrade motorway is also under construction for this purpose.)

Safety procedures are different to those in the UK. Some level crossings are without gates or signals and the train approaches these with caution. The train doors do not lock and we pull away from one station with a slow-moving elderly lady halfway down the steps shouting for help as the train picks up speed. We haul her back in and she complains bitterly at having being to stay on the train to the next stop which is the other side of a mountain.

The villages are notable for their impressive woodpiles stacked ready for winter. Women seem as likely as men to be wielding an axe to split the wood. The train climbs steadily through hills and mountains offering increasingly spectacular scenery, at first rocky ravines and then lush wooded valleys. This 1000m ascent from Podgorica to Kolasin (at 1032m above sea level) is made in the relatively short distance of 70km.

1 ½ hours into the journey we cross the Mala Rijeka viaduct. From its construction in 1973 to 2001 this 200m high bridge was the highest railway bridge in the world until surpassed by the Chinese Shuibai railway bridge over the Beipan river (height 275m). A dozen rail bridges over 210m have been or are being constructed in China since 2001. In 2019 the record will likely pass to India with the completion of the Chenab river bridge in Jammu & Kashmir (height 359m).

By 10am we are at the Montenegrin border post of Bijelo Polje, followed by a Serbian passport check at Kumanica Monastery. The Serbian passengers leap out of their seats to photograph the monastery, so it must have great religious significance.

At Prijepolje Teretna we are scheduled to make a 6 minute stop. 6 minutes turn into 60 minutes. Running low on snacks and drinks, due to unexpected absence of both buffet car and onboard vendors, we go in search of refreshments. There are no shops or facilities in this cargo depot. We ask other tourists, locals and evasive railway staff how long the stop will be and are told variously that there is a problem with the driver and/or the locomotive.



Mala Rijeka viaduct (l), mountains (r)

Our 4 words of Serbo-Croat are not enough to disentangle the explanations, but the conductor mutters “Minimum 1 hour”. Some passengers disembark to hitch a lift on the adjacent road. We wander up to the front of the train where various security staff are gathered around the locomotive and are told “No here” and “No photos”. The loco had changed at the border from a Montenegrin to a Serbian Railways unit (both electric) but is not undergoing any maintenance.



Driverless Serbian engine (l), one of many tunnels (r)

Back along the platform, a Belgian tourist (who happens to be a train driver back home) tells us that the loco is fine but the train driver has been arrested by police for smuggling and we have to wait for another driver. Sure enough, 3 hours after our scheduled departure time, a new driver arrives by car, we re-board and the loco pulls away. So whether or not the tale of the train driver in handcuffs is true, clearly there was some staffing issue rather than a technical issue.

Five minutes down the line the frustratingly brief stop at Prijepolje station does not allow time to visit the shops, but a coffee vendor boards with a pot of hot, strong coffee served in lurid pink plastic cups.

The train follows the Lim River past the Potpec hydro-electric dam and then briefly wriggles through the edge of Bosnia. Back in Serbia the Zlatibor tunnel is line’s longest tunnel at 4 miles, leading into the town of Branešci.

It is getting dark somewhere around Uzice so we do not see much of the Serbian plains. The Serbian Railways website had warned of works on the line after Valjevo so we are prepared for a mid-evening bustitution to Vreoci and then a modern suburban train. We pull in to Beograd Central at 10pm, relieved that we are only 3 hours later than the scheduled arrival time. And after a hungry journey, the sweaty cheese and limp lettuce bap from the station buffet tastes very good indeed!



Refreshments on the Lim (l), Belgrade refreshments imminent (r)