



mercial complex, to bring life back to the centre of Serbia's capital. The architecture here more than makes up for any demolition sites.

I visited the old Kalemegdan fortress and park in the centre of the town. The best preserved structure in Belgrade, it has witnessed much bloodshed and now, in more peaceful times, is an amazing place to take a leisurely stroll. Tourists can also visit one of Belgrade's 50 museums, 25 permanent exhibition galleries and collections and 20 theatres, as well as Ska-darska Street or Knez Mihaj-

lova Street for great shopping.

We hired a tour guide to take us on a trip off the beaten path and into the old city where you will find some of the most impressive and quirky buildings. The charm of Belgrade is that it is full of seemingly random buildings, like the Turkish-era burial chamber of Sheikh Mustafa, the dervish ruler of Baghdad. Also located only minutes from the city is the Sveti Sava Temple, the largest Orthodox church in the Balkans.

Serbia is one of the world's largest producers of plums and the world's second-largest rasp-

berry producer so it's no wonder fresh fruit and veg is in abundance here. The cuisine is mainly grilled meats and bread. One restaurant I highly recommend is Zaplet, where a main course will cost you no more than £5 and you can have the most sumptuous dessert for £1.50.

But do make the most of chatting to the locals. They have a great sense of humour and if you want to get to know their wild side, get down to party mad Belgrade – unlike this year's Eurovision, I'm certain you won't be disappointed.

FACT FILE

Steph stayed at the four star Hotel Balkan. A twin/double deluxe room costs from £90 per night (inc breakfast and taxes). She travelled to Belgrade from Heathrow by JAT airways (jatlondon.com). Return tickets start at around £140 per person (inc taxes).

For direct flights from Manchester to Belgrade visit lufthansa.com. Return tickets start from around £330 per person (inc taxes).

For further info on Serbia visit serbia-tourism.org.

Still time to enjoy unspoilt homeland of Dracula

THE outskirts of Sighisoara are not the most promising of holiday destinations.

The fringes of this small town in the heart of Transylvania are suburban and oppressive in a way only former Communist states can muster.

But as our minibus drives on, the country's fascinating, Disney-esque core gradually comes into view. We gasp with awe at the medieval citadel on the hilltop at the centre of the town. It is a phantasmagoria of towers, crenellations, gothic details and multi-coloured pantiles, soaring over the concrete urbanity of the modern-day settlement.

Heading uphill, we discover with a sense of glee that a wander around the streets is reminiscent of being in Venice.

There is ancient architecture, while roads to the citadel – founded by the Saxons in the 12th century – are steep, narrow and few in number. This is the pedestrian's domain.

The town's centrepiece is a 60 metre clock tower up Stairs Street, which must be one of the greatest unsung views in world architecture. A beautiful 14th century sheltered arcade runs alongside the steep, cobbled road, and the tower looms over us with its pastel-coloured fish scale tiles and pinnacles. This is what a Hammer Horror movie set would have looked like if they had a budget of millions.

We emerge into the citadel's main thoroughfare, then stumble across the building which has made Sighisoara famous – and threatened its future.

This is Casa Vlad Dracula, the birthplace of the real-life figure behind Bram Stoker's novel. Vlad Tepes, better known as Vlad the Impaler and Vlad Dracul, is a Romanian national hero for protecting the country against invaders.

The ochre-coloured property is now a restaurant and bar. Plans were drawn up to build a £23m Dracula theme park – Draculaland – alongside the remarkable medieval citadel, with many local businesses investing in a share scheme, tempted by the thought of extra tourist dollars.

The park was to create 3,000 jobs, and there were hopes of attracting a million visitors a year with blood-red candyfloss, impaled brain burgers and a fake castle with spooky underground tunnels.

Then Prince Charles got involved. He has made a series of visits to the region to admire the Orthodox monasteries and unspoilt architecture. The prince is said to have made known his views to former president Ion Iliescu and said large scale development would be "wholly out of character with the area, and will ultimately destroy its character".

The project was dropped in 2003 – a decision applauded by UNESCO's World Heritage Committee. It came as a bitter blow to those who make their



ANCIENT CHARM The clock tower at Sighisoara and an Orthodox monastery



living from tourists drawn to Dracula's birthplace, but should come as a relief to more discerning visitors.

Romania is going to alter dramatically over the next few years. The country joined the EU in January and people we met in Romania were in no doubt that it will be transformed as huge euro grants flood in. The characteristic 'peasant economy' will evaporate and tourists will no longer be charmed by the sight of horses and carts used as everyday transport.

We stumbled across a vision of this future when we arrived at Sibiu, this year's European Capital of Culture.

Every medieval building – and there are plenty – was being restored and the main square was a huge building site.

We met Count Tibor Kalnok, who returned from exile after the fall of Ceausescu to reclaim his family's property in the village of Miclosaora.

"Communism was like a deep-freeze. There was no evolution, no development," he tells us in his enchanting property in the foothills of the Carpathian mountains.

"Up to now it has been a subsistence society – that will change into a consumption society. With that will come a huge change in values. The multinational agriculture companies will come in and there will be none of these charming little plots of land."

David Barrett

» David Barrett travelled to Romania with Cox and Kings. Visit coxandkings.co.uk.