

A bit of everything in the Balkans

In Serbia you can shoot quail, dove, duck and pheasant with your shotgun and a whole host more with your rifle, as **Mike Yardley** discovers.



The fast and exciting dove shooting takes place in sunflowers.



The level of accommodation and hospitality in Serbia is excellent.

Serbia is one of the world's best-kept sporting secrets. I shot there twice the year before last, once for birds and once for boar. Both experiences were arranged through Bogdan Srećić's Lasarotta sporting agency.

I would rate Serbia's bird shooting as some of the best in Europe if you're interested in wild quail or high-volume pigeon shooting. The duck and goose shooting are good too, and pheasants are available – both walked-up and driven, all at very competitive prices. Generally, Serbia offers good facilities and great value.

As for big game, you can shoot pigs as well as red, fallow, white tail and roe deer on open and fenced estates. Deer are no bargain anywhere in Europe or the Balkans because of high trophy fees. They also have mouflon and hare.

Shooting in Serbia is controlled by hunting associations. These are local, official bodies, which still have something of the feel of the old regime about them.

They tend to be very friendly, however, and any visitor may be assured of the warmest of welcomes, as well as a fascinating look at the way another country goes about its sport. There is as much in common as there is different.

The country is trying very hard to develop itself as a sporting destination. Serbian officials at both local and national level are keen to advance sport in their country. It is still subsidised

by the state to some degree and there are some excellent state-run shooting lodges. I have travelled with a gun quite extensively in eastern Europe and the Balkans, and I found the hunting experience in Serbia one of the best – not least because of the Serbians themselves.

Contrary to our foggy stereotypes, they are a laid-back, friendly people who enjoy themselves, food, and the good life whenever possible. In my experience, they are more like the Italians than the Russians, their Slavic brothers to the north.

Wing shooting

I was lucky to enjoy an interesting package of wing shooting with Lasarotta. Flying into Belgrade by JAT airlines, the first job was to sort out guns (a maximum of two) and cartridges (a maximum of 200) with the police. This was no real problem at all.

All you need is your UK Shotgun Certificate, or FAC if you are taking a rifle, and a letter from your hunting operator, the paperwork costing 20 Euros.

Equipped with my temporary firearms permit, Bogdan met me and we drove some 150km north east of Belgrade to the extraordinary Hotel Fantast, built by converting the storybook Dundjerski castle, which is famous as a riding centre too.

We were only 34km from the Hungarian border. It is notable that



Above: Some of the evening duck shooting is right up there with the best to be found anywhere in the world.

Above right: Pointers and Hungarian vizslas are the most common breeds.

Right: Electronic systems are used to attract birds in later months.



most hunting in Serbia is no more than an hour and a half from Belgrade.

There was an early call the first morning, and we set off to shoot quail over pointers. These were shot on flat ground and called in by electronic means, which is not usually the method of choice early in the season. Bogdan noted:

"We prefer to shoot without it during August, because there is an abundance of birds, but for late September you need it to attract birds because most of the domestic birds fly down south and we have to wait for birds from Ukraine and Hungary to fly over us."

The dog work was good. If you have not shot quail, they are a small bird, a lot smaller than a grey partridge, and not especially difficult to shoot once you have the knack. You must be quick, though.

They tend to be shot fairly low, so you must also take great care with your shots both as far as human and canine companions are concerned. One may shoot with a couple of fellow guns or in

line, as on a Scottish moor. In all cases keep your muzzles forward and up and watch your sides.

We finished mid-morning and moved to a nearby location where the quarry changed to dove. This was fast and

"Everywhere I went the locals were helpful and relaxed – apparently less stressed than the inhabitants of modern Britain."

exciting shooting in sunflowers and over stubble. The birds were plentiful and there was no need for much cover. I shot 50 and felt well satisfied.

In the afternoon we moved on 40km east to Kikinda near the Romanian border. This was our location for the smaller, but challenging, turtle dove,



which are much tougher than the variety with which we are familiar. I shot another 50-60 birds and the potential for huge numbers is there.

On the second day we moved to a Salasi private hunting lodge near the town of Senta. This is a more intimate location than the castle, set up with a restaurant and chalets, and was my preference – not least because it's run by an ex-Belgrade hotelier on a gastronomic mission.



Above: There is ample sport on offer and here the team are pictured with the bag from one session of shooting on a three-day trip.
Left: Lasarotta Hunting is run by Bogdan Srejc.



We shot our quail that morning near the town of Ada. The hospitality, as I began to expect, was fantastic. A new arrival was David McCombe, an Ulsterman with a big smile and a passion for shooting.

I was impressed (indeed, surprised) by what I saw of Serbia. The main roads are pretty good and the standard of living is relatively high. It is in a sort of 1970s time warp. People are not only friendly, but they seem relatively prosperous.

The shops are full and things like petrol stations tend to be as good or better than those at home. Everywhere I went the locals were helpful and relaxed – apparently less stressed than the inhabitants of modern Britain.

In the afternoon of the second day, we shot more doves. This time we were at Becaj, some 100km from Belgrade. On the third and final day there were more quail and dove, and in the evening, and most memorably, excellent high duck shooting back near Ada.

This was the best evening's wildfowling I have had for ages, made all the more memorable by my companion and picker-up, a local poet who was somewhat in his cups when we began, but extraordinarily amiable.

Wild boar

I enjoyed the bird shooting so much in that late summer, that I went back to Serbia for boar in the winter. I have shot one kind of pig or another in France, Poland, Croatia, Africa, and Australia.

Serbian pig shooting is much like the

A potted history

SERBIA WAS, of course, the major part of the old Yugoslavia, which included, before the chaos and conflict of the 1980s and 1990s, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Slovenia.

Serbia has borders with Hungary to its north, Bulgaria and Romania to the east, Macedonia to the south, and Croatia, Bosnia and Montenegro on its western side. There is also a disputed border with Albania, a country through which I used to run aid convoys, but which is like a Third World country in comparison.

After the break-up of Tito's Yugoslavia, a union of Montenegro and Serbia, still called Yugoslavia, lasted longer. This twinned state ended 10 years later when the two countries declared independence. Serbia's capital, as was Yugoslavia's, is Belgrade. The region has been the victim of political tension.

Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital (many Serbs live in Bosnia) is where assassin Gavrilo Princip set off the First World War when he shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

The Serbian empire battled for generations against Muslim invaders, and later Serbia fought against the Austro-Hungarian Empire and thus against the Central Powers in the Great War.

We may have bombed them during the Kosovo war, but surprisingly the Serbs bear us little, if any, ill-will. They blame the politicians who set them on the road to war and dislocated them from the rest of Europe, to which they feel they belong. Serbia is not an EU member yet. ■

sport on offer in Poland and Croatia, save for the fact that it is cheaper and more pigs may be shot. We were put up in the excellent Karakusa state hunting lodge near the town of Sremska Mitrovica towards the corner of Bosnia and Croatia, only about 70km east of Belgrade.

The food and drink were excellent and there are a number of good, reasonably-priced local red wines on offer, while main meals tend to be game or chicken.

I shot on the first day only with a gamekeeper and a cameraman, as we



The author with his boar.

were also making a film. Walking and stalking in the woods, we eventually put up a big boar. I shot him at no more than 15 yards.

I have been charged by elephant and buffalo, but not yet by boar – though I have seen it. Even though I have had a malfunction, I still prefer a controlled-feed (Mauser-style) bolt gun.

Most boar experts prefer a double 9.3. I think I would get in more of a muddle reloading after my first two shots – all my charges to date required more than two shots to finish the business.

On the second day a large party of British shooters arrived at the lodge. This, it transpired, was one of the most entertaining groups of people I have yet had the good fortune to shoot with.

“One thing I did not like was the requirement to shoot only behind the line.”

The following morning, travelling east some 50km towards Bosnia, we went to the Kucine estate. Shooting was on the ground, as is my preference, rather than in miradors.

One thing I did not like was the requirement to shoot only behind the line. This cost much sport, and encouraged tight-angle shooting on the tracks where shooters were also placed (typically 50-100m apart). Bogdan

assures me that he will not use estates where this is required in future.

The third day we shot on Kamariste estate, and I thought the quality of shooting not quite as good as previously – but there is always some luck involved with boar. Bogdan, meanwhile, tries as hard as anyone I know – and that is how I judge his operation.

One always takes something of a risk when booking shooting abroad, so you must deal with people you trust and who try hard. Bogdan scores on both counts and offers good value.

But you must have realistic in your expectations and understand the difficulties associated with trips like these before you embark on your sporting journey. 🦋

What you need to know

Option 1

The mixed package for quail, dove and duck is three days and four nights, all inclusive, with up to 50 birds per day per gun (quail and dove) and costs 1,450 Euros. Duck are charged at an extra 10 Euros per bird. Cartridges – and only 2 3/4"/70mm are easily on offer – are 25p each if you need to buy them.

Option 2

An unlimited package on three species of dove costs 1,900 Euros for three days and four nights (plus cartridges). The daily bag for a team of six to eight is 500 – 1,000 birds. If you are planning a trip for birds, the best time is the last 10 days of August and the first five days of September.

The season starts from August 1. Quail are best early and middle of the month, duck are better in late September. If one intends to shoot all three species then late August would be the best compromise. For boar hunting, budget on about 2,000 Euros and book as early in the year as possible to ensure prime sport. ■

For more information about shooting in Serbia with Lasarotta contact Bogdan Srejac on 07832 100 524 or 02476 639 779. Email: info@lasarotta.co.uk or alternatively visit the agency website www.lasarotta.co.uk.