

# A long road back

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA MOSTAR RECOVERS FROM CIVIL WAR

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**MOSTAR, BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA** — If you look past the bullet-scarred and bombed-out buildings here, you'll find a spirited old town center and a glimpse into fascinating Turkish culture.

This is Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the scene of intense fighting during Yugoslavia's civil war. Situated in a wide valley beneath weather-beaten mountains, Mostar straddles the Neretva River in southwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina. Its old Turkish town is compact. You can easily explore it on foot and cover Mostar's essential sites in just one day.

Mostar's highlight is Stari Most, the old bridge. With its high-arching, single-span design, the white limestone bridge stands seamlessly among the valley's rugged hills and swiftly flowing river, as if nature intended its construction.

Originally built in 1566, the bridge stood for more than 400 years before its destruction in 1993 during the Yugoslav war.

After a careful reconstruction process, the bridge was reopened in 2004. Stari Most is the symbol of the city and its recovery, even its namesake. It is believed the city took its name from the Mostari, the bridge keepers who guarded the span from the towers at either end.

About 40 percent of the country's residents are Muslim, and the domes and minarets of several mosques dot Mostar's landscape. One such mosque, Koski Mehmed Pasa, welcomes visitors. Built in the early 1600s, the mosque's colored-glass windows shine beautiful shades of red and blue on its elaborate wall decorations and plush carpets.

Near the mosque is the 17th century Turkish House. Visitors must remove their shoes before entering this well-preserved Ottoman home. Filled with original artifacts, the house provides an interesting peek into a culture and time very different from our own.

The official currency in Mostar is the Bosnian mark, but tourists should not be surprised to use any combination of marks, euros or Croatian kuna as they shop for handicrafts, souvenirs and Communist kitsch at the many shops and stalls in the old bazaar.

For a thrilling diversion, watch daredevil divers leap from the tip of the old bridge. To slow their fall, the divers position themselves in a Karate Kid-like crane pose, arms held

out above their heads and legs pulled up tight to their bodies, as they hurtle toward the water almost 70 feet below.

Just before plummeting feet-first into the river, the divers become ramrod straight. Because the current is so swift, these Balkan stunt men eventually resurface several yards downstream. It's quite a show.

Ancient history and recent tragedy stand side by side in Mostar. With its newly restored bridge, Ottoman heritage and ever-present war wounds, a day in Mostar is anything but ordinary.