

[The Free Library](#) > [Communications](#) > [News, opinion and commentary](#) > [The People \(London, England\)](#) > [January 20, 2013](#)
[The Free Library](#) > [General Interest/Informational](#) > [General interest](#) > [The People \(London, England\)](#) > [January 20, 2013](#)
[The Free Library](#) > [Date](#) > [2013](#) > [January](#) > [20](#) > [The People \(London, England\)](#)

Give Serbia a shot.

Byline: Jessica Mellor

HOLIDAYS are all about getting away from it all, breaking your routine and doing something different.

But they don't have to include lying on a beach or looking at crumbling monuments.

Instead, you could wake yourself up with a pulse pounding, adrenaline rush of a holiday that takes you out of your comfort zone. And the holiday in question was a shooting course in Vrnjacka Banja, 125 miles south of Belgrade, in Serbia.

I was engaging in such an out-of-the-ordinary activity to celebrate the release of video game Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2. But this clearly wasn't going to be a game, as I was told the tactical firearms instructors train everyone from civilians to police and military personnel and have sniper experience in the real world.

Thankfully, on arrival at Belgrade airport, smiley and affable Vukasin, part of the Risks Incorporated team that would put me through my paces, immediately put me at ease. Travel Not so much Nebojsa, the beast of a man who resembled Arnold Schwarzenegger on an off day, who would lead sniper training.

Displaying a demeanour so icy I thought he would crack when he walked, it was clear from the beginning that Nebojsa took his job of making snipers out of his charges extremely seriously.

I'm not one to shy away from a challenge but this felt like a blindfolded step off a precipice, especially as I had been asked to supply a letter before I flew out stating I wasn't affiliated with any military organisation.

But, despite clues to the contrary, I still expected a tough version of paintball. How naive. This was like paintball... if the instructors were replaced with ex-military hardmen, the air rifles with real guns and the paint pellets with live ammo.

The first lesson was to get to know my custom-made sniper rifle and shoot at targets a mere 100 metres away, whereas the military routinely practice at 200 to 300 metres.

TIPS Vukasin told me to watch the recoil, relax, breathe into my shot and gently squeeze the trigger.

The first shot took me by surprise. Even with ear protectors, the sound was deafening. Much to my delight, I got my first five shots in the chest of my paper target.

So far, so fluke. And as Nebojsa piled on the pressure, my positioning went, my breathing became laboured, my heart started beating faster and the gun sight started shaking. The nearest I got to my target's head was the throat.

The second day involved shooting moving targets then sitting targets while under duress. Hitting my stride, I found it strangely exhilarating trying to pick off the enemy while being shouted at and targeted with smoke bombs.

The next day was spent hiding out in a forest, wearing a camouflage suit and shooting a blank when I saw my target. The said target then had to determine where I was in the thicket using only the sound of the shot as a reference.

In suit my to thic sh e I gave my location away too early, much to Nebojsa's dismay, but I later saw a flicker of pride in his steely eyes when, on my turn, I quickly discovered my target.

t Vukasin and Nebojsa saved the best until last - my final morning saw me conduct an assault on a cabin in the forest where I had to be saw cab crawl through prickly bushes get crawl through prickly bushes, get stuck in mud, spot a target and fire a blank before being found out.

They spotted me long before I had the target in my sights but, much to their amusement, let me stew in my sodden suit as a small dog from the cabin barked at the bush in which I was attempting to hide.

After training each day, the spa and treatments on offer at Hotel Vila Aleksandar provided a retreat from the gunpowder, aching arms and bangs of the rifle range.

Food in Serbia is functional and not fancy. It's best to go for something meaty, as Serbians tend to do carnivorous dishes well.

A yummy Serbian favourite is pljeskavica, a spicy ancestor of the hamburger, and delicious sarma - cabbage wrapped around a filling of minced beef and pork with rice.

Risks Incorporated's experience is perfect for discerning stags. It will test the nerves, muscle memory

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and hand-eye co-ordination. Which at least will come in handy for playing all those video games.

FACTFILE: Return flights from London to Belgrade start from PS180 at jat.com. A single room at Hotel Vila Aleksandar is PS37pn at aleksandar.todorhoteli.rs. A four-day sniper package with risks-inc.com is PS1,200pp, including equipment, accommodation in the forest for a night and transfers. Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 is out in March.

SLATHER on the sunscreen and take a sun hat with you because Serbia gets proper summers and the temperature can sometimes reach above 35degC. ||LEARN a few phrases out of respect for the friendly locals

I ||CHECK out the thriving, bustling markets and fairs that are hugely popular with Serbians across the whole of the country.

CAPTION(S):

SIGHTS SET: Jessica eyes her target, with Vukasin and on assault run

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