

Letter from Serbia

Chris le Breton works in Serbia. Here he describes some of the dangers, not least cycling around Belgrade

Having been driven off the road by a bus the other day, I muttered to a Serbian friend that Belgrade was the most dangerous city in Europe to cycle in. "Oh no, he replied, Istanbul is". When not cycling the only Brompton down the main street of Belgrade, now, I tend to head for one of the three cycle lanes in this city, hugging the river, to escape being knocked over by cars and buses alike. The other nine cyclists or so in the city often take to the pavement, dodging pedestrians, and never stopping at red lights.

Surely the air must be worse than Istanbul with the huge numbers of poorly maintained cars and vans? Admittedly, as the numbers of imported cars (stolen from Germany?) increases, the vehicle air pollution problem diminishes. Some recent research from the UN showed that the Government's subsidy to the district heating used in the flats of educated Belgradians made possible budgets to run a small car. Belgradians feel that, despite all the problems they suffer, they can run a car. Rather than building a relief road, the government could tackle the congestion by increasing the price of heating fuel to market levels thus reducing the traffic and pollution.

Near to home is the 'green market' in Banovo Brdo where in summer I can buy all kinds of soft, tasty fruits and vegetables of a quality unavailable in the UK. Many farmers cannot afford pesticides,



The copper slag heap and artificial dead lake at Bor

so the fruit is largely organic and healthy. On the waste side, Serbia is not so rosy: sewage gets released directly into the rivers, and household, municipal, and hazardous waste is dumped around the country without any proper enforcement of standards or monitoring of the drip of leachate to the water table.

And the environmental effects of NATO's bombs in 1999 remain: - Belgradians who went to witness the smouldering wrecks of Milosevic's buildings believe themselves poisoned from inhaling smoke from uranium depleted bombs; the Pancevo canal, just to the east of Belgrade remains severely polluted after bombs apparently caused the release of the toxic chemical dichlorethane into the canal, and crude oil from the bombed refinery leaked into the soil and river near Novi Sad.

There are other environmental hot spots across the country too - stemming from the Communist era, and its lack of concern for the environmental consequences of industrial and agricultural activities. For example, in Bor - in the former pristine east of the country - copper mining has resulted in a huge slag heap beside an artificial lake which is completely dead because of the run off of heavy metals. Animals drink the poisoned water, and the nearby crops pick up the residues.

I take great care not to fall into the river, fearful of the pollution in the water, heavy metals in the mud below, and syringes or hepatitis detritus that the local hospital dumps neat into the drain nearby! In that sense, perhaps Belgrade is the most dangerous city in Europe to cycle in!



This illegal tyre dump features a small 'Do not dump tyres' notice