

On June 23, Serbia's national airline launched its first flight between Belgrade and the U.S. since American sanctions halted the route in 1992 amid the Balkans war that resulted in the breakup of Yugoslavia. Serbia's current government, however, is eager to move past those dark days; the nation is a formal candidate for EU membership, for example. Meanwhile, the government partnered with Etihad Airways in 2013 to invest a combined \$80 million into JAT, the legacy Yugoslavian national carrier that was rebranded later that year as Air Serbia. Senior editor Robert Silk spoke with Air Serbia CEO Dane Kondic last week about the carrier's new New York JFK route and its broader vision and challenges.

Q: Air Serbia flies to 44 destinations in more than 30 countries, but Belgrade-New York will be your first transatlantic route and your first long-haul route of any kind. Tell us about that decision.

A: It's about trade, investment, opportunity, growth, jobs. This decision is also a cathartic one. It's about changing the ways of old and the path this country was on beforehand and moving forward.

The fact that Serbia has expressed a very strong desire to join the EU should be a strong signal about where Serbia sees itself in the broader scheme.

Q: Do you have more U.S. routes planned?

A: Today we have seven destinations that we operate in codeshare with Air Berlin, which is part of the Etihad partner group. We still codeshare with them to New York, since our flight will be only five days a week, and we codeshare to Chicago, Miami, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston and Fort Myers [Fla.]. We go via Dusseldorf [Germany] and Berlin.

We can't fly everywhere. We obviously chose New York as the first staging post, and we are organically growing our footprint through codeshare relationships.

Q: Tell us why U.S. travelers should go to Serbia. What does it offer?

A: A path less traveled is one probably that you should travel.

Flying as a young brand is no easy feat, but we're lucky in that we have a fairly sizable diaspora in the U.S. There are 200,000 people who are Serbian and of Serbian descent coupled with just as many people who are from the remainder of the former Yugoslavian federation.

Apart from that, as Serbia grows as a leisure destination, we hope to draw more passengers. Read many publications; they will tell you Serbia is a great destination to go out and see. Third, we are positioning Belgrade as a gateway into the Adriatic coast of Croatia and Montenegro.

Q: Do you face additional challenges due to the hangover for Serbia, reputation-wise, from the Balkan wars?

A: Serbia has a bad rap, and it's still hanging over [its] head, but everybody has moved on. The quickest and best way to change those old perceptions is for people to come and visit and see what the modern Serbia is and the changes that are taking place. We have the

biggest summer music festival in the world. It's called the Exit Festival. So Serbia is pushing forward on a lot of fronts.

Q: Etihad owns 49% of Air Serbia and you are part of the Etihad Aviation Group. What has that meant to you?

A: For us it has meant everything, because without that we wouldn't be flying to the U.S.  
Source; Travel Weekly