

# spring, storks and trains — a visit to **Brčko**



A three-legged dog scuttles past the Pirana fast food joint with a chicken leg in its mouth. The ragged mongrel settles in the tattered dark of a long abandoned telephone kiosk to make the most of a free meal. The storks will be back any day now. As will the train. At least that's what they say here.

Only the slow train comes to Brčko. When it comes at all, the train dawdles down the Tinja valley, hopping to and fro across the river on its way to the plains of Posavina. Along the valley there are old fortresses like the weathered ramparts that tower on a rocky butte at Srebrenik. Slow, slow wanders the train, past minarets and mosques, out onto the plains where women

dressed in black work in fields that are as neat as a grave on the day of its digging. There are plum trees and pear trees, half-built churches and telegraph poles that wait for the new season's storks.

Who knows if the train ever actually comes to Brčko. "Not during the heating season," says the man who is affixing a death notice to a lamp post outside the station. Seventy years of life summed up in a little green-rimmed notice with a picture of a woman and a few lines announcing her death last night. "Every day she looked

ABOVE: a Brčko street scene: the town, more than any other in Bosnia, has become a haven of uncontrolled free enterprise



Brčko is in north-east Bosnia, right on the country's northern border with Croatia (colour scheme: Croatia is shown in light grey, Serbia in dark grey and Bosnia & Herzegovina in yellow; map scale: 1:3.3m); the Sava river marks the border between Bosnia and Croatia at Brčko

out from her bedroom window for signs of spring. She wanted to see the first storks return. I thought she'd hang on for another week or two, just for the warmer days. But it wasn't to be."

Brčko station is an odd sort of place. Surely one day very long ago officials sat in some distant office, perhaps in Vienna or Budapest, sketching out plans for a country station that

had a dash of style — the sort of handsome structure that spoke of a community proud of its good connections to Europe's great cities. Waiting rooms, a booking hall where a bespectacled clerk in a smart suit would write out tickets for distant destinations. Brčko may have been only on the margins of the Habsburg world, but it still had its share of K&K style.

The dog has done with its meal and limps off lazily towards town. Who knows from where the next snack will come. And who knows if the train will arrive today.

The timetable is extraordinary. It announces that the train to Drenovci, just a dozen kilometres away on the Croatian side of the Sava river, runs once a day. There is nothing in Drenovci. But still the timetablers have decreed that a daily train of the Bosnian railways should trundle over the border to the first station in Croatia. Not during the heating season of course, when there is little point in wasting fuel on a train for which demand is minimal.

Brčko has the feel of a place at the end of the earth. When the international community wrestled with the question of how to impose peace on troubled Bosnia, Brčko was a thorn in the side of any settlement. Long and hard they pondered at Dayton as to whether Brčko should be awarded to the Republika Srpska or to the Muslim-Croat Federation. How diplomats and peacemakers worry about places that for them are mere dots on maps. In the end, they couldn't decide about Brčko and the town on the bank of the Sava river where the storks come for summer was left in a frail political limbo.

To guess what will happen to Brčko in the longer term is as difficult as giving a precise date to the end of the heating season. There has been a palpable spring warmth for days now but no train to Drenovci. Every day stray dogs wander

fading Habsburg villas and shopfronts in the centre of the Bosnian town of Brčko



past the Pirana, and every day new death notices are affixed to trees and lamp posts. Green edges on notices for Muslims. Black borders on notices for Christians. Every day women in black work in the fields on the plains of Posavina. And the newly tilled soil is as neat as a grave on the day of its digging.

The waiting room at Brčko station is locked. A warm spring breeze catches the pages of newspaper that has lain all winter on the silent railway platform. And the breeze brings the distant tones of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer. From the southern sky, a stork flies lazily over the orchards in search of a summer home. Slowly, slowly it glides, past the minaret and on towards the chimney stack of an abandoned house near Brčko station. There sit the remains of last year's nest. And then there is that unmistakable rattle of an ancient Bosnian diesel engine, cluttling into town on rusty tracks and pulling two carriages that have a certain antique appeal. The heating season, it seems, is finally over. ■

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Brčko station. The daily train to Drenovci leaves at 9.41 am, returning just over an hour later. But, as our story relates, the train is seasonal. It is a warm weather only service!