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KBFUS INSIGHT -

Reviving Sarajevo's Treasured Cable Car

Thanks to a generous gift from a New York couple, a cable car line will once again transport citizens and tourists to a favorite weekend destination.



From 1959 to 1992, the cable car in downtown Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was a favorite destination for citizens and tourists alike. It carried people up the steep slopes of Mount Trebević, where they could breathe fresh air, have a family picnic and enjoy breathtaking views of the surrounding area.

With its rich and rare flora and fauna, Mount Trebević is a source of pride for Sarajevo's citizens, who view it as an exceptional natural resource that should be preserved for future generations.

Trebević was one of three mountains used for the 1984 Winter Olympics. It featured a bobsled track, restaurants and warm-up huts, all easily accessible from downtown via the cable car.

However, during the Bosnian war, which took place from 1992 to 1995, the cable car and most of the attending infrastructure were destroyed.

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Revitalizing a national landmark

That changed when New York residents Eddy Offermann and his wife Maja Serdarevic set up a donor-advised fund at KBFUS to restore the historic and beloved landmark. Their recent donation of US\$ 3.9 million will give the mountain back to the people of Sarajevo and help rebuild the trust that was broken during the brutal war.

“The mountain really is a symbol of unity,” says Dutch-born Offermann. “The cable car will reconnect the different ethnic groups in Bosnia. The project draws interest from people on both sides of the former conflict. Everyone has a connection to the mountain. And everyone understands the economic benefit of restoring the cable car.”

Trebević got a bad reputation during the conflict, adds Serdarevic, who grew up in Sarajevo and whose family still lives there. “People didn’t want to go up the mountain because that’s where the Serbs had their frontline and were shelling the city from,” she says. “So for years and years after the war people did not want to return.”

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EDDY OFFERMANN

Cable-car operator Ramo Biber was the first casualty during the Sarajevo siege. Paramilitary forces were ordered to burn the cable car hill station to the ground. When Biber denied them access, he was executed. The City Council will honor his actions with a commemorative plaque, and is considering naming the station after him.

Building on personal connections

Serdarevic has pleasant childhood memories of riding the cable car with her family for weekend picnics. “We’d take backpacks with food and make the 12-minute trip to the top. We’d do a bit of hiking and have a little meal. It was very convenient, because not many people owned vehicles in those days. So the cable car was very easy.”

She says the mountain is so important to the people of Sarajevo that a famous local composer, Kornelije Kovač, wrote a song about it in 1964. A rough partial translation reads:

*Four young men going down Trebević, Followed by song and laughter,
Why wouldn't they be happy and perky, On a day so sunny and beautiful.
They stop here and there, They prefer woods and shade,
This is how they all spend their Sundays, Light and carefree.*

Offermann also fondly recalls his one and only ride on the cable car in 1991. "Sarajevo itself is surrounded by quite steep mountains. It sits in a valley where coal smoke and other pollution settles. I remember seeing the beautiful meadows during the ride and breathing the fresh air at the top of the mountain, which is 1,100 meters above the smog. It's a completely different world up there. Having the cable car operating again will be very good for families."

Tax-efficiency and due diligence crucial

In the fall of 2010, Offermann began to look at ways to restore the line. One avenue he explored was purchasing and relocating a cable car that was being removed from a neighboring town. However, after several years of negotiations, that plan fell through for complex political, economic and safety reasons.

He and Serdarevic realized that the only realistic option was to buy everything new and start from scratch. They agreed to cover the expenses for the new equipment on the condition that the government would provide the land, construct the necessary buildings, remove the old cable car infrastructure, and install the new.

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MAJA SERDAREVIC

Although Offermann and Serdarevic were ready to make the gift, they weren't sure how to do it efficiently and practically. "I knew that starting a foundation on our own would be too much work," Offermann says. "And then I was told about KBFUS and its international donor-advised funds. They were able to do it all for us, and our donation was tax-deductible in the U.S."

They were also concerned about due diligence. "Nowadays in the world we live in, if you want to transfer that amount of money to a country like Bosnia, you really want to be confident that the transaction is clean. That's another thing KBFUS, a very reputable organization, took care of for us. They absolutely did the research required to ensure everything was above board, which was important."

Exciting opportunities for the future

The cable car will be up and running in September of 2017. It will significantly reduce the car traffic on the mountain, which will help preserve the environment. At the top, a new city-owned restaurant will be built where people can enjoy local fare. The revenue will help pay for the maintenance and upkeep of the cable car and infrastructure.

The Italian company contracted for the project is providing 33 cabins that can each hold 10 passengers. At peak, the cable car will be capable of transporting 1,200 people per hour – seven minutes each way. "With the cable car coming in, you see locals, politicians and planners all having positive new ideas," says Offermann. "It will be easy to take up mountain bikes. So there will be new trails for biking and for hiking to and from the city. It's expanding all kinds of opportunities for locals and for tourism."

Offermann stresses that once he and Serdarevic made the donation, they adopted a 'hands-off' approach. "The entire site is the responsibility of the city. It's public transportation for the city. But it was really important for us that when the ship was sailing out of the harbor and we were saying goodbye, at least at that point we felt that to the full project was financially sustainable."

Because of his generous gift, Offermann officially became an honorary citizen of the city of Sarajevo in March 2017, the highest honor a foreign citizen can receive.

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