



With its brilliant cupola mosaic and crypt, the principal cathedral of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Saint Sava in Belgrade, rivals the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul as a masterpiece of religious architecture.

the alternative to the Hagia Sophia, Turkey

CHURCH OF SAINT SAVA

Serbia

With its astonishing size, cross-shaped floorplan and commanding dome, it's obvious that the Church of Saint Sava was modelled on Istanbul's Hagia Sophia. Yet this church, little known outside Serbia, also has breathtaking charms that are all its own, including an intricate cupola mosaic and a uniquely splendid crypt.

It may only be the second-largest church built for the Orthodox Christian faith (after you-know-where in Turkey), but few other churches dominate their city like Saint Sava towers above Belgrade. Whether you're promenading along the waterfront, climbing up Belgrade Fortress or shopping in Kalenić Market, you'll always find the church's mammoth dome peeking out over the city's rooftops – and providing valuable directional assistance for locals and visitors alike.

Venture a little closer and the Church of Saint Sava only becomes more impressive. With its foundations laid in

1935, on the supposed site where the remains of the namesake Serbian monk were burned by the Ottoman occupiers in 1594, the cathedral looms over the Vračar plateau in the heart of the city. Admire the elegant façade from every angle with a stroll around its four rigorously symmetrical sides, and peer up at the enormous main dome with its giant gold-plated cross.

Of course, the building's full splendour can only be appreciated after you step inside. The vast interior, illuminated by sunlight streaming through the dome above, can accommodate a frankly absurd 10,000 worshippers. You'll immediately find your eye drawn upwards to the cupola, the inner vault of the dome, as it's home to a magnificent mosaic depicting the Ascension of Christ. A masterpiece of Orthodox art, its millions of tiles, all curved around a length of 1,250 sq m (13,455 sq ft), also make it a great feat of engineering.



The graceful marble façade of the Church of Saint Sava, built in Serbian-Byzantine style

It's tempting to keep looking up forever, but an even greater treasure lies beneath your feet. Descend the marble staircase into a spectacular subterranean world quite unlike any other part of the church – or, in fact, of any church. With its shimmering gold ceiling, supersized chandeliers, Murano glass mosaics, and bright frescoes, this may be the most gloriously decorative crypt in Christendom.

For all these remarkable features, the church is still not quite complete – as evidenced by the scaffolding inside. It should be finished by 2030, but you won't want to wait until then. Even as a work in progress, Belgrade's Church of Saint Sava is an absolute must-see.

Still going to the Hagia Sophia?

You'll need time to explore it all, so come for the 9am opening. Start with the upstairs galleries and you might even get a corner (briefly) to yourself.

Getting There A taxi journey from Belgrade Nikola Tesla Airport to the city centre takes about 30 minutes.

www.hrmsvetogsava.com



Top The golden interior of the crypt, adorned with mosaics and frescoes **Above** The splendid Ascension of Christ mosaic in the shimmering dome