

Zagreb: Croatia's Elegant & Cultured Capital

By Karen Tina Harrison

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Zagreb: Don't Just Change Planes Here



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St. Mark's Church in Upper Town, a Zagreb landmark, was built mainly in the 1300s.
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First of All, Where is Croatia and Why Is It a Trophy Destination?

The coastal country just east of Italy, [Croatia](#), is a trendy darling of adventuresome luxury travelers. And Croatia delivers, offering visitors so much: medieval hamlets reborn as arts villages; wonderful, Italian-influenced food and wine; and aquamarine Adriatic waters lapping pristine beaches.

Typically, North American visitors land in **Croatia's capital, Zagreb**, and then head either east or west. Most travelers pursue Croatia's tourism hotspots: its eastern islands, best known for the spectacular castle town of **Dubrovnik**; or the green western peninsula, **Istria**, a onetime Roman colony that dazzles with its landmarks.

- Find out why "the new Tuscany" is what luxury travelers are calling [Istria](#)

Understood, Croatia's Great. But Why Spend a Few Days in Zagreb?

Zagreb is little known, but deserves to be considered much more than a hub city you fly into and rush out of. On the contrary, Zagreb is a **dignified, vibrant, culturally progressive** Central European capital. I recommend staying at least two nights. Why?

- Zagreb is architecturally lovely, clean, and a walker's paradise
- It is a historic hothouse of Croatia's hybrid culture, formed by millennia as a European crossroads
- Zagreb is very affordable, even after the recent changeover to the Euro currency
- And, let's face it, Zagreb is an **exotic destination**: do you know anyone who has been here? You can be the first to come home raving about Zagreb's theaters, parks, jazz clubs, cafés, pastries, and thriving youth scene.

Interested Yet? Here Are Some of Zagreb's Visitor Appeals

- Its grand official buildings, clustered near the hotels. Zagreb bloomed in the late 1800s, with lofty architecture strongly reminiscent of **Vienna**. That's because much of Croatia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. (It later became Yugoslavia).

- The [Croatian National Theater](#), called HNK Zagreb, is the resplendent home of music, opera, ballet, and more
- The central **Dolac Market**, a pleasant hangout and photographer's dream, has vendors of artisanal Croatian food inside and artisan booths and cafés outside
- The ultra-charming **Upper Town**; visitors can walk or take a scenic funicular up to this medieval quarter, with café-lined cobbled streets and mysterious courtyards. Not to miss in Upper Town: the [Museum of Broken Relationships](#); Zagreb City Museum; the 600-year-old St. Mark's Church (pictured)

Zagreb's Thriving Food Scene

Zagreb's culinary heritage is like Croatia's culture as a whole: part Italian, part Slavic, and 100% unique. You'll encounter lots of pizza and pasta, but it will be dotted with Croatian truffles; and you'll also find classic Slavic [burek](#) pies and Balkan *pljeskavica* burgers

- [Gallo](#), the city's most famous restaurant, is an experience, with engaged service, a patio in season, and everything house-made; pasta is a specialty
- [Dubravkin put](#), modern and fashionable, is set in a beautiful parkside neighborhood, *Tuskanac*
- [Trilogija](#), across from the landmark Stone Gate in Upper Town, has an ancient vaulted ceiling, tasting menus of Croatian food and wine, and a kind tolerance of spend-the-afternoon diners
- [5/4](#) is run by a passionate young chef, Dina Galvagno, who became known for his modern Croatian cuisine at [Prasac](#). [5/4](#) is even more cutting-edge, with stone, glass, and wood interior and an open kitchen putting out nose-to-tail delicacies (the name refers to the "fifth p," the Romans' term for organ meat and offal)
- [Mak na konac](#), a *patisserie*, is the talk of Zagreb for Petra Jelenic's exquisite sweets
- Zagreb's [traditional dishes](#)

Where to Stay in Zagreb: Esplanade Zagreb

Esplanade Zagreb is the city's [grand hotel](#): the hotel with a century's worth of name-droppy stories and ongoing status as the most prestigious address for visitors. This elegant hotel is the luxury traveler's top choice.

The hotel was built in 1925 to house well-heeled passengers traveling from Paris to Istanbul on the **Orient-Express train**, which stopped at Zagreb's imposing railroad station across the boulevard.

You will feel like an **Agatha Christie character** here. Esplanade Zagreb buzzes with the confident banter of posh European and Croatian visitors. The hotel's quaint décor brings you back to the Roaring Twenties: a circular lobby, an Art Deco ballroom, green travertine marble bathrooms, damask drapes.

- Esplanade Zagreb's top-floor rooms with garret roofs are wonderfully quiet and atmospheric

In-house dining is excellent, especially at breakfast, in the hotel's cozy bistro, and on the seasonal, ineffably European Oleander Terrace

- [Esplanade Zagreb](#) website

Where to Find Out More About Zagreb

- Zagreb [tourism site](#)
- About's Eastern Europe Travel expert's [take on Zagreb](#)
- In-the-know, English-fluent young pros like Antonija Buntak show off Zagreb at [ESA Tour Guides](#)

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