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CROATIAN EXCURSIONS - AN AFFORDABLE ALTERNATIVE TO EUROPE



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It's been nearly a year since Croatia joined the European Union, however this mountainous sliver of a country on the Adriatic Sea is not about to give up its charm or its status as a great value for tourists.

With not a word of Croatian and with a pocketful of *kuna*, the local currency before the euro officially kicks in, my first challenge on arriving in the capital Zagreb was to find some dinner. An English-speaking clerk in a fine food

store directed me to the casual, playfully-decorated seafood restaurant Ribice i tri tockice, which translates as Fish and Three Dots. While I usually avoid tourist restaurants, when the tall waiter in a flowing white shirt and red Dalmatian sash offered to speak English, French, Italian or German, I almost hugged him.

The grilled orata was fresh and mild, with a crisp skin sweet as candy. It arrived with a plate of grilled vegetables, a dish of minced garlic in olive oil to sprinkle over top and a glass of local red wine. At 65 *kunas*, I had no idea whether I'd just eaten the cheapest or most expensive fish dinner ever. Happily, even with a generous tip the meal came to \$21.

Breakfast at Zagreb's Hotel Esplanade, which opened in 1925 for Orient Express passengers, was a more stylish affair, with crisp white linens and uniformed staff pouring orange juice and sparkling wine under glittering chandeliers. We needed energy for our Segway city tour. This battery-powered stick on two wheels is a technical marvel, with five gyroscopes constantly "reading" your body weight to keep you upright.

With a bit of practice we were soon zipping past green parks to the cathedral, its twin towers visible for miles. Nearby was the Dolac farmers' market, where strawberries and spindly wild asparagus reigned. We passed through the ancient Stone Gate separating the upper and lower town and emerged near cobblestoned St. Mark's Square; the cathedral roof at its centre glowed with coloured tiles. For a panoramic view of the city we stopped near Lotrscak Tower, where a cannon has fired daily at noon since 1877, then whizzed back down the hill for a well-earned cappuccino and a sliver of a Viennese-style torte at the chic Oranz coffee shop.

Off to Istria

The next morning we left for Istria, the teardrop-shaped peninsula that juts into the Adriatic, stopping first in Roc to pick up mountain bikes for the day's excursion. Between the 12th and 20th centuries, this picturesque town was the centre of Croatian publishing based on the Glagolitic alphabet. The letters reminded me of Elven Runes from *Lord of the Rings*. We set off with our guide on smooth single-lane country roads. The more experienced riders immediately disappeared, flying down the first hill in formation like a flock of Canada geese. It was hard to take in the view as I concentrated on keeping wheels, gears and handlebars aimed in the right direction, yet thrilling to be alone under the expansive blue sky, surrounded by green trees that arched toward the centre of the road, and breathing in the fresh air scented with wildflowers.

Our first stop was Kotli, a village situated beside a rushing stream with the remains of an old mill. Abandoned for years, the limestone homes are gradually being restored as summer cottages. On the road to Hum, the world's smallest town, we passed monuments devoted to the mysterious alphabet, including one Stonehenge-type circle that spells out Istria. We convened on the terrace of Humska Konoba to sample Istrian specialties, including scrambled eggs with flavourful bits of wild asparagus and *fuze*, pale hand-rolled pasta tubes warmed in butter and topped with finely-grated black truffle.



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While the athletes among us cycled to the next town, we drove to the hilltop town of Motovun to walk the ramparts and explore tiny wine and souvenir shops. The best part was sitting on a terrace with a bottle of Istria's aromatic white malvasia wine, admiring a carpet of green far below dotted with vineyards and olive trees. It could have been Tuscany or Umbria, for a fraction of the price.

The Truffle Hunt

After a night at the funky yet elegant Vela Vrata Hotel in Buzet, another delightful hilltop town, it was time to meet the Karlic family, experienced truffle hunters who host tourists in their Paladini home. Son Ivan and Blackie, one of the family's eight trained dogs, led us to the woods just five minutes from the house.

As we followed the well-worn path, he let go of Blackie's leash and the seven-year-old terrier began running back and forth through the damp leaves, head down, sniffing for truffles. "Shu! Shu!" Ivan called softly: "Go! Go!" Suddenly, the dog began digging furiously with his front paws. The young man raced to his side, determined to get the truffle before the dog sank his teeth in it. He knelt down, face close to the ground, and began brushing the black dirt away with his finger like an archeologist unearthing a rare bone. A familiar round black shape gradually appeared, snuggled against the root that had given it nourishment.

We returned to the house with four black truffles, ready for lunch. Ivan's mother Radmila set out a platter of local truffle-infused cheese and salami and another plate of crostini topped with truffle-infused cream cheese. An intense, earthy scent rose from the table and lingered in our mouths for hours. While we snacked, she set to work in her outdoor kitchen whisking eggs with a little truffle olive oil salsa and grating cleaned black truffles into a heap for the main event—scrambled eggs with truffles.

Although I brought home a jar of the family's truffle salsa, it wasn't the same. Perhaps, like the truffles that appear year after year, Croatia is a country to visit more than once.

Travel Planner

For more information, visit:

Croatia Tourism: croatia.hr

Istria Tourism: istra.hr/en/home

Hotel Esplanade: hotel.esplanade.hr

Truffle Hunt: karlictartufi.hr/eng/o_nama.html

Vela Vrata Hotel: velavrata.net/en

Zagreb Segway Tours: segway.hr/segwaycitytourzagreb/en

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