

## WONDERS OF THE WORLD

## PLITVICE LAKES

## A dazzling, Technicolor water wonderland

In Croatia, turquoise waterfalls spill from one lake to the next

ADAM HODGE

Throughout the former Yugoslavia's boom years, the country's touristic pride and joy was not its bleached Dalmatian coastline or its historic centres such as Sarajevo and Belgrade. Rather it was a small park in Croatia called Plitvice Lakes, made a national park in 1949, which drew hundreds of thousands of visitors each year to the hinterland of the Dinaric Alps.

During the halcyon days of Balkan tourism in the 1960s and 1970s, the silver screen played a big part in the park's popularity. The vibrant, shifting colours of the lakes and the park's dramatic waterfalls provided a dazzling backdrop to numerous spaghetti westerns of the time. European tourists flocked to what must have looked like a trick of the camera: 16 Technicolor blue terraced lakes connected by tumbling waterfalls.

Approaching the park on State Highway 1, the blue lakes twinkle through the slim apertures of a dense beech forest, which is home to bears, wolves and wildcats. From this distance, the colour of the lakes seems unnatural. At ground level, it's apparent there's no illusion.

Depending on the season and the time of day, the water comes in vivid, cartoonish colours of turquoise, teal, azure and cobalt.

Countless rivers, streams and waterfalls in more than 300 square kilometres feed the 16-lake centrepiece. Underground, in massive chasms, caves and channels, billions of gallons of water churn through the subterranean karst landscape. The water leaches lime from the rock, gushes into the lakes laden with suspended chalk, and then deposits it on abundant mosses.

Over hundreds of years, the mosses become encrusted with a layer of travertine, a form of limestone. This travertine forms natural dams in the lakes, which result in thundering waterfalls and burbling cascades.

Plitvice Lakes' water wonderland was recognized by UNESCO, which added it to the list of world heritage sites in 1979. But it wasn't long before disaster struck. The bottom dropped out of the Balkans and the region went economically and politically downhill. Tourism dried up.

In the depth of winter in 1991, the park was again the backdrop for drama, only much grimmer. The Plitvice Lakes Incident, an armed confrontation between Croatian Serbs and the Croatian police over control of the national park, kicked off the Croatian War of Independence. The Lakes became a key strategic location, as they straddled the main road midway from the coast to the Croatian capital of Zagreb.

As the late summer mists rolled back over the lakes in 1995, the Croatian army retook the park as part of Operation Storm, and the fog of war was lifted. Croatia's crown jewel was dusted off and polished. Plitvice Lakes was one of the first areas to be cleared of landmines and restored to the status quo in the aftermath of the conflict.

Plitvice is again the most popular park in the country. However, escaping from the queued, gawking tour groups is as simple as taking a side path or walking a trail in reverse.

Almost anywhere in the park provides for picturesque vistas, idyllic woodland and otherworldly colours. Once alone, you can gaze to your heart's content.

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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## IF YOU GO

**What is it:** A series of 16 sparkling turquoise lakes linked by moss-covered cascades and waterfalls.

**Where it is:** Central Croatia.

**How to get there:** Flights to Zagreb leave daily from Toronto, usually with one stopover at a European hub. From Zagreb's main bus terminal, there are at least a half-dozen buses making the roughly two-hour journey every day to the national park. However, renting a car is a more reliable method of getting around.

**Where to stay:** The family-run Plitvice Miric Inn is within walking distance of one of the national park's entrances (\$90-\$210 a night). [plitvice-croatia.com](http://plitvice-croatia.com).

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Depending on the season and the time of day, the water in Plitvice Lakes comes in vivid, cartoonish colours of turquoise, teal, and cobalt. The site has been recognized by UNESCO. DAMIR FABJANIC/CROATIAN TOURIST BOARD