

CROATIA & MONTENEGRO with Bosnia-Herzegovina

Experiential Adriatica

15 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Zagreb

Today we arrive in Zagreb, capital of Croatia.

From its intriguing architecture to nearby natural havens, this underrated European capital has something for everyone. Unlike most western European capitals, Zagreb's cityscape is a fascinating mixture of classic Austro-Hungarian architecture and gritty socialist structures. With an electric mix of Italian, Turkish, and Austro-Hungarian influences, even the "coffee culture" here is steeped in history.

* PLEASE NOTE: In 2000 the region experienced an earthquake which damaged 2,000 buildings in Zagreb, many of which are still closed off for repairs. This means that many/most of the buildings, including museums have been closed without a clear sense of when they may re-open. This is why, in part, we are including a day trip to nearby Samobor (tomorrow) in order to make the most of our time in the region.

Overnight in Zagreb.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Zagreb: Day Trip to Samobor

This morning we depart the capital and travel by bus to Samobor, a charming small village is located just a short drive from Zagreb.

A famous writer, Antun Gustav Matoš, once said that Samobor was the most Croatian of all Croatian towns. This charming little town near the border has officially been a town since 1242 when the King Bela IV awarded it with a charter giving it the status of a free royal market town. A special spirit and atmosphere nurtured in Samobor to his day is largely the result of the efforts made by a number of local people and settlers who felt at home in. After an informal orientation, you will be free to explore on your own and find some lunch before we head back to Zagreb mid-afternoon.

A good place to start is King Tomislav Square, a true highlight of the town. The square dates back to the 19th century, and today this historic square is filled with cafes, boutique shops, and restaurants. Standing tall in the center of town is the beautiful yellow-coloured Parish Church of Saint Anastazija. This church is one of the earliest Baroque style churches in Croatia, and was built in 1675, upon the site of an earlier wooden church that was built in the 14th century. The church is known for its lovely Baroque style, stained glass, and for its famous wounded Christ sculpture. The church is also adjacent to the park Domovinske Zahvalnosti, a nice green space in the town.

Sitting atop Tepec Hill is the ruins of the Samobor Castle. The castle was first built between 1260-1264 by supporters of the Czech King, Ottokar II of Bohemia who was at war with the Hungarian empire. The last residents of the castle left in the 18th century, which has left it to the current state it is in today as castle ruins. To get up to the castle, you will need to hike around 20-30 minutes. The hike is steep and it is necessary to wear sturdy shoes. At the top, you'll have a chance to explore the historic castle ruins, which is a really unique experience.

Samobor Museum is located in the town center and is a small museum with artifacts about Samobor's history. It doesn't take very long to visit this museum, but is a nice stop to learn more about the area.

One of the big draws of Samobor is food! The region offers a variety of dishes, including local trout, sausages, salami, special mustard, mushrooms, pork chops, kotlovina (meat prepared outdoors in a cast iron pot), and local miners' cake - greblica. The town is most famous for its kremsnita cream cake. Although you can sample this delicious custard cream cake all over Croatia, the Samobor version is fluffy and airy, and you eat it while its still slightly warm.

Return to Zagreb.

Overnight in Zagreb.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Zagreb - Plitvice National Park Hike

This morning we depart the capital by road and head to the iconic Plitvice National Park, where 16 lakes, each at a different level, join each other in a series of cascading waterfalls. We embark on a hike immediately upon arrival (hotel check-in after our hike).

Travertine terraces have been continuously reforming themselves over 10,000 years as calcium carbonate dissolves and settles, forming barriers and cascades. Imagine Niagara Falls diced and sprinkled over a heavily forested Grand Canyon. This lush valley of terraced lakes is laced together by waterfalls and miles of pleasant wooden-plank walks. Countless cascades and strangely clear and colourful water make the Plitvice Lakes National Park a misty natural wonderland. The ever-changing fluid landscape -- created by water, gravity, limestone and time -- is mesmerizing.

Look for wildlife as you hike -- the park is home to deer, wolves, wildcats, wild boar, and more than 160 species of birds (from eagles to herons to owls). The lakes (and local menus) are full of trout. The entire area is protected as one of UNESCO's Natural World Heritage Sites. We will follow wooden paths on our walk around the Lower and Upper Lakes, ending with a short boat ride across the largest lake.

TOTAL WALKING TIME +/- 4 hours (leisurely/easy, mostly flat)

Our hikes: Because some hikes can/may be adjusted at the discretion of your Tour Leader depending on things like weather and group interest, the final distances/durations of our hikes as indicated in our itinerary should be taken as guidance only. In the meantime, however, we can advise that, generally-speaking, our walks are leisurely on well-trodden pathways over undulating terrain (some walks are downhill), 2-5 hours in overall duration with plenty of breaks for refreshment, photos, and taking it all in.

Overnight in Plitvice.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Plitvice - Paklenica National Park Hike - Split

Today we travel to Split via Paklenica National Park where we enjoy a hike.

The park is situated south of the Velebit range of mountains (the largest in Croatia) and covers an area of just under 100 square km, with a mixture of high peaks with stunning views, deep gorges, and beech and pine forests. We take the trail that leads from the main entrance, along a dry creek bed in the shade of mostly Adriatic black pine trees. The section of the route that we cover is called "The Educational Trail" and is full of information boards describing the natural and cultural features of the area.

Next we come to an area where rock climbers from all over the world come to scale the limestone cliffs, making this National Park and UNESCO world Heritage site one of the best-known rock climbing places in all of Europe. Next comes a steepish uphill section of switchbacks that eventually takes us to a shaded, flatter trail. And finally we come to a simple hut that serves cold beer and simple home made food.

After a break here we descend on foot using the same trail we came up.

Our final destination for the day is Split (ancient Spalato), the second largest city of Croatia. The historic city center actually lies in the walls of the enormous retirement palace of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, built between 295-305 AD. The palace served as a palace, military fortress, and later, a fortified town. The city is enclosed by huge walls, pierced by 4 main gates.

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TOTAL WALKING TIME (Paklenica hike): +/- 4 HOURS. 8 km/5 miles. Elevation gain/loss 200 m/656 ft.

Overnight in Split.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Split - Ferry to Brac Island & Hermitage of Blaca Hike

This morning we will take an early ferry to the town of Bol on nearby Brac Island, the highest and third largest island in the Adriatic.

Today's excursion (prior to hotel check-in) on Brac takes us on a relaxing and panoramic boat ride along the coast of Brac to a hiking trail that leads us up to the intriguing Hermitage of Blaca, now a museum. Departing from Bol, our boat will pass Croatia's most famous beach, the Golden Horn (Zlatni Rat), before continuing past pine forests, olive groves and coastal vineyards to the trailhead in Blaca Bay.

The reward for our 45-minute uphill climb is a visit to the dramatically situated Hermitage of Blaca, whose stone structures cling to cliff overlooking a dry ravine. The hermitage was established in the 16th century by monks from the mainland town of Polijice who sought refuge from invading Turks. Originally situated in a cave, the hermitage was built up over the centuries to include a church, school, astronomical observatory and library. Today the museum houses a unique collection of ancient books, clocks, astronomical instruments and artifacts from the life of the last monk to inhabit Blaca, Niko Milicevic.

After a tour of the hermitage we return to our boat in travel back to Bol, where you have the remainder of the afternoon to explore the town or stroll/swim at Zlatni Rat (the Golden Horn). Even if you're not a "beach person," this stunningly unique stretch of idyllic sand is not to be missed. Considered one of the most beautiful in Europe, the strand has become an iconic symbol of Croatia and the whole of the Mediterranean.

TOTAL WALKING TIME +/- 2 hrs; elevation variation +/- 250m/820 ft

Overnight on Brac.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Brac Island - Ferry to Hvar Island: Walking Tour

Today we travel by ferry to Hvar, "Queen of the Dalmatian Islands," considered one of the ten most beautiful islands in the world.

The island of Hvar receives 2,724 hours of sunshine per year, more than anywhere else in Croatia, and is thus called the "Island of the Sun". Greeks from Paros first settled on the island in the 4th century BC in Pharos, the modern town of Stari Grad. In the 13th century, the capital of the island was transferred to the town of Hvar (a mutation of Pharos in Slavic) and prospered during the 3.5 centuries of Venetian rule. This picturesque town and marina is alive with the constant hum of activity.

We will have a walking tour through narrow streets to the 15th century Franciscan Monastery where we visit the Renaissance cloister -- the old rectory that today houses a collection of lace, manuscripts and books, and the church with its remarkable collection of paintings. We visit St Stephen's Cathedral, and see the Arsenal (perhaps closed for refurbishment), a thick walled fortress overlooking the harbour.

We'll also include a walk up to the Venetian fortress that looms above the town -- definitely one of the highlights of our visit to this stunning place.

Overnight on Hvar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Hvar & Sveta Nedelja Hike

Hvar is a set on an east-west ridge of Mesozoic limestone and dolomite, which was part of the mainland until approximately 11,000 years ago. Around that time, sea levels rose, filling the valleys that are now the channels between the islands. Hvar has a typical karst landscape, which means limited or no surface water, despite adequate rainfall, which disappears quickly into crevices in the ground. Farming in such areas requires careful conservation of water, and protection of the soil against erosion. The water cisterns in the fields and the dry-stone walls/terracing on the slopes are necessary for the continued success of agriculture on the island. The island has a typical Mediterranean vegetation, mostly bare with woody scrub at higher, steeper elevations, turning to pine forests on the lower slopes.

This morning we drive to the village of Sveta Nedelja where we begin our uphill hike.* We then walk to the highest part of the island; you will

enjoy beautiful scenery, a cave with a monastery, views of beautiful beaches, and vineyards. From (near) the top, we are met by our vehicles and transferred back down to Hvar (45 min) with time at leisure to enjoy this charming town.

* Please note that we choose to walk uphill as past travellers and guides have noted that we are less likely to slip on loose material than if we descended. This is one of the most beautiful walks of the tour, but it is also the most "technical" in that you need to be steady on your feet on some sections of crumbling limestone that require alertness. In consultation with your Tour Leader (who will be familiar with your capabilities by this point), if you'd prefer something a little easier, there is plenty of alternative walking in and around Hvar and it's waterfront.

TOTAL WALKING TIME +/- 3 HOURS, 6 km / 3.73 miles. Elevation gain 550 m / 1,804 ft.

Overnight in Hvar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Hvar - Ferry to Korcula Island

Today we travel by ferry to the breathtaking island of Korcula.

The cluster of brilliant red-tiled roofs stand out vibrantly in contrast with the aquamarine harbour waters, clear to a depth of 21m! Korcula was settled by the Greeks who called the island "Korkyra Melaina" or "Black Corfu" because of the dark appearance of its densely wooded forests. Today the island is covered with olive groves and vineyards. The island is also proud of its heritage -- traditional shipbuilding, stone masonry, and Croatian folk traditions of costume and dance.

Later this afternoon we will have a walking tour of the old town. The street plan of the town is unique and often compared to a fishbone pattern: the north-south streets allowed the defenders of the town to reach the walls and towers, and the east-west lanes were designed to capture the pleasant maestral winds and minimize the force of the cold "bora." The Venetian Cathedral of St. Mark is an architectural delight, squeezed into a small square. Tucked into a narrow lane nearby is the small house where it is believed Marco Polo was born. We will also visit the Treasury and Town Museum with exhibitions of Korcula's history and traditions from prehistoric times to the present (note that recent tours have reported that the museum has been closed due to staffing shortages).

Overnight in Korcula.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Korcula: Walking 'Napoleon's Road'

Today we begin our walk along 'Napoleon's Road' toward Pupnat. We'll detour briefly to see an old everygreen oak (*Quercas ilex*) forest growing in and around some giant limestone boulders.

Pupnat is a village in the interior eastern part of the island of Korcula, located on the regional road running along the island. The population of Pupnat is about 500, making this the smallest village on the island. The name Pupnat, according to some interpreters, derives from "pampinata," which means vine leaves. The Illyrian lived in the area of Mocila, where remains of Illyrian graves have been found. The location of the village was chosen by its settlers in the hilly part of the island so as to be invisible from the sea and passing pirates.

Our walking route passes small farms and vineyards surrounded by stone walls dotted with "kucice," traditional dry stone huts used for housing livestock. The prehistoric life that existed in the area was found in Jakasove Spila (cave). Zrnovo has numerous small churches that one can see walking along the road.

We transfer by road back to Korcula in the early afternoon (ie in time for you to find some lunch) and have the balance of the day at leisure.

TOTAL WALKING TIME +/- 4 hrs; elevation variation +/- 100m / 330 ft.

Overnight in Korcula.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Korcula - Ferry to Mainland - Drive to Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina via Poticelj

Today we ferry back to the mainland and head inland where we cross the border into Bosnia and Herzegovina (have your passports ready!), a country made up of two regions separated by the Dinaric Alps, with Bosnia to the north and Herzegovina to the south. They each have their own unique cultural histories but share many similarities in language, ethnicity, culture and identity. Also confusing is the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina is a single country consisting of two 'Entities', one of which is The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the other is the Republic of Srpska. Each of these entities includes part of Bosnia and part of Herzegovina.

Our route takes us on a breathtaking drive through the Bosnian Mountains, with a break in Poticelj. This quaint and unique oriental style town is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site with its stunning oriental architecture and Ottoman feel. Here one will find the longest operating art colony in southeast Europe. The most striking object in Poticelj is the Sahat Kula, a silo-shaped fort that towers on the top of the hill above the town. It used to house watchmen and military guarding against possible invasion from the Neretva Valley.

We continue to Mostar (located in Herzegovina), where we have a leisurely walking tour upon arrival. Mostar began as a small hamlet at a strategic crossing of the Neretva River. Its hinterlands consisted of a broad agricultural plain on the west bank and steep terraces on the east bank surrounded by barren mountains. A multi-ethnic and multi-cultural settlement, the city has possessed an independent political identity since the 12th century. The architecture is a unique combination of Turkish ingenuity plus Herzegovinian and Dalmatian workmanship.

Our tour will include the historic oriental old town, which developed in the 15th and 16th centuries as an Ottoman frontier town. Today, the reconstructed Old Bridge and Old City are considered by some to be a symbol of reconciliation, international cooperation, and the coexistence of diverse communities. In 2005 the Old Bridge Area of the Old City was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We also include the Museum of War and Genocide Victims, a poignant memorial dedicated to the victims of the Bosnian War (1992-1995).

Overnight in Mostar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Mostar - Blagaj - Trebinje, Herzegovina - Kotor, Montenegro

Getting an early start this morning, we depart Mostar and travel 15 minutes to the nearby village of Blagaj.

Blagaj's raison d'être is likely the Buna Spring, which flows out of a 200m cliff wall and single-handedly creates the Buna River. Unsurprisingly, the Ottoman sultan was impressed and ordered a Tekija to be built right next to it. This 16th century house/monastery was built for the Dervish cults and is still one of the most mystical places in all of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This sleepy town moves at a slow pace and many of its old structures are reminiscent of Ottoman days.

We will enjoy a walk around the town, visiting the 17th century Velagic house, a beautiful example of Ottoman stone masonry. From a point near the Tekija Dervish House, we can pick up a path that takes us up to the Stjepan Grad Fortress that looms over the town. Once we reach the upper parking lot (20 min), we'll take the "goat path" (another 20 min) option that zigzags up (rather than the extremely steep path). From the top (273m above town), the views are expansive, and the ruins extremely atmospheric.

After our visit, our journey continues southerly to Trebinje, where we'll pause for lunch and an informal look about this charming town, our last stop before crossing the border into Montenegro. Trebinje is a city located in Republika Srpska (Serb Republic), a small region of Bosnia and Herzegovina and predominantly Serbian. Trebinje's walled old town is tiny, but what it lacks in size it more than makes up for in rustic charm. Admire the picture-perfect stone houses, shuttered buildings and leafy squares.

Prior to continuing to the border, we detour to the Tvrđos Monastery,* a must-visit even if you aren't a fan of the finest drink, but wine lovers have extra reason to visit. Not only is this a working monastery dedicated to the Dormition of the Mother of God, it also has a long tradition of winemaking. An old epic folk poem mentions the monastery Tvrđos and "its monastic cellars filled with wine", proof that the monastery was already well known for its winemaking in the Middle Ages. These warm and dry conditions here are particularly well-suited to the native grape varieties Zilavka and Vranac -- grown by the ancient Greeks -- which thrive in the region. We'll taste some wines before crossing the border into Montenegro and onto Kotor. The last part of our journey parallels the scenic shoreline of Boka Kotorska Bay of Kotor), the only fjord in the Mediterranean, a bay of 32 km/20 miles cut deep into the stone of the Orjen and Lovcen mountains.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kotor was inhabited even at the times of Illyrians and Romans. Its history is also entwined with that of the Venetian Empire. Within its walls, the city of Kotor has retained a mediaeval feel.

* Please note: women must wear long sleeves and men shouldn't wear shorts when visiting the monastery (you can borrow used clothes to cover knees or shoulders at the entrance).

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Overnight in Kotor.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Kotor: Walking Tour

This morning we enjoy a walking tour to see a number of the city's fortifications and monuments dating from the time of Venetian rule, including the Cathedral of St Tryphon, which contains a rich collection of artifacts. Older than many famous churches and cathedrals in Europe, the Cathedral of St. Tryphon has a treasury of immense value. In its interior there are frescos from the 14th century, a stone ornament above the main altar in which the life of St. Tryphon is depicted, as well as a relief of saints in gold and silver. The most representative works of Kotor's masters and craftsmen are kept in this Cathedral, making its collection quite unique.

After our formal tour, you can take some well-deserved time off for a free afternoon, or join your Tour Leader for a climb up the city walls to the Fortress of St Ivan, passing the Chapel of Our Lady of Salvation along the way. It's a steep ascent so don't set off without something to drink: there are 1,350-1,500 steps according to various guidebooks! From the highest point the ground drops away sharply on three sides with the rooftops of Kotor immediately below; to the north you can see the whole inner part of the bay. Look out for a dome near the shore to the west -- it belongs to the implausibly large church in the village of Prcanj.

When we have finished admiring the view we can scramble around the crumbling ruins with a freedom rarely found in more litigious countries -- the only ones likely to challenge you are the goats. After our hike, you'll have some free time to enjoy Kotor. Browse the town at your leisure and discover souvenir, antique and craft shops, boutiques and market stalls.

TOTAL WALKING TIME ON OPTIONAL HIKE (not including the morning walking tour in town) +/- 3 HOURS. Elevation gain/loss 530m/1,738 ft (this is likely one of the most strenuous hikes of our trip, given it's steepness and amount of vertical rise).

Overnight in Kotor.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Kotor - Perast, Montenegro - Dubrovnik, Croatia

This morning the first part of our journey retraces our journey to Kotor of a couple days ago; this time, however, we make a stop at the town of Perast, where we take a small boat to Perast's most famous site, Gospa od Skrpjela (Our Lady of the Rock), a picturesque chapel built on the only artificially built island in the Adriatic. The island was built upon a rock after two Venetian sailors from Perast miraculously found a picture of the Virgin Mary on it in 1452.

We then make a left turn and head west to the Croatian border (have your passports handy!) and onto Dubrovnik, ancient Ragusa, whose story begins in the 7th century when it was under the protection of the Byzantine Empire. In the 12th century, Ragusa, formerly an island, merged with mainland settlements and the channel between was filled in with carted-in material. After shaking off the yoke of Venice in 1385, Ragusa became an independent republic and remained one of the most powerful maritime powers in the Mediterranean for over four centuries. After changing hands a number of times, the city was finally ceded to Croatia (the former Yugoslavia), and in 1918 the Slavic name of Dubrovnik was officially adopted.

On arrival we'll walk the walls of Dubrovnik, considered by many to be a highlight of our visit. The total circuit is nearly 2km/1.25 mi, and from the bastions you will have magnificent views of the city's monuments, including the Minceta Tower, Revelin Tower, and the mighty fortress of St. Lawrence, with walls 12m/40 feet thick!

Overnight in Dubrovnik.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Dubrovnik: City Tour

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This morning features a walking tour of Dubrovnik's historic center. Dubrovnik has been called "Croatian Athens" and the "Pearl of the Mediterranean" for its astounding beauty, sophisticated history and culture, and prosperity.

Over the course of its tumultuous history, the city had to be extensively reconstructed; the earthquake of 1667 destroyed much of the city; and in recent memory, the town was bombarded by over 2,000 shells in 1991-92. After great international efforts, the city has been restored to its former glory, with its towering fortifications, magnificent medieval architecture, red tiled roofs, winding paved streets and picturesque harbours.

The afternoon is yours for independent exploration in this magical place.

Overnight in Dubrovnik.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Departure

Departure from Dubrovnik.

SRETAN PUT/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast