

Destination Croatia

Sitting on a see-saw between the Balkans and Central Europe, Croatia has been suffering from something of a love-hate-love affair with the EU and its neighbours. Invited to join the UN Security Council in January 2008, its NATO membership was poised for 2009, but its dispute with the EU over its fishing laws saw displeased finger-wagging from the European officials and the already slightly elusive EU joining date (is it 2010? 2011? Perhaps 2012?) caught on yet another hurdle. March 2008 saw the beginning of the trial of Ante Gotovina, Croatia's wartime general whose arrest was the main prerequisite for the beginning of Croatia's talks for joining the EU back in 2005. Gotovina stands accused of 'joint criminal enterprise' for the expulsion of Serbs from Krajina in 1995. Revered and still seen as a hero by many in his native Zadar region, Gotovina's trial is sure to bring home some controversial elements of Croatia's Homeland War.

Still in progress at the time of writing were the judicial reforms, the struggle against corruption and the improvement of conditions for the setting up of private businesses in the country, all of which have to be fulfilled before Croatia can get its foot in the door of the desirable European club. Life for the average Croat remains on the tough side, however – the average salary of 6000KN per month is often too low to support a family – and there is a declining but still substantial rate of unemployment (11.18%). Statistics show that the support for joining the EU, which was once vast and palpable, is lately hovering around the 50% mark and is only threatening to sink further. Many Croats feel their progress is being scrutinised more carefully than that of other, recently joined, EU members, and while this may well be the case, it's an unsurprising sign of caution after the large EU expansions of 2004 and 2007.

Croatia's economy is looking brighter, however, with a steady GDP growth over recent years. This is, of course, thanks to the continuing growth of tourism and the ensuing development. The country has, with few exceptions, managed to keep massive development at bay and maintain Croatia's beauty – the very ingredients that keep the punters coming for more. New luxury hotels are sprouting up every year, especially on Hvar and in Dubrovnik, but smaller, budget-oriented and agritourism options are increasing, too, especially in Istria.

Croatia has also been doing well at sport, one of its most successful endeavours. The country won the World Handball Championship in 2007 (just don't ask 'What's handball?'), and the national football team reached the quarter finals in the 2008 Euro Cup, beating Germany but sadly losing to Turkey on penalties.

With its economic growth, sporting successes and great bars, restaurants, films and music festivals, plus a desire to further improve its infrastructure and sustainable development, Croatia seems to be saying 'never mind the EU, we're comin' atcha'.

FAST FACTS

- Population: 4.5 million
- Area: 56,538 sq km
- Head of state: President Stjepan Mesić
- GDP growth rate: 5%
- Inflation: 2.9%
- Average net monthly salary: 6000KN
- Unemployment rate: 11.18%
- Primary trading partner: Italy
- Population growth rate: -0.04%
- Life expectancy: male 71, female 78.5

Getting Started

It may not surprise you to learn that Croatia is at its most popular in the summer months. Its luxurious hotels, modest family-owned *pensions* (guest houses) or beachfront camping grounds all get busy with guests, local and international, especially in the peak season (July through August). It's a good idea to book a place to stay in advance during these two months, especially if you'll be staying on one of the islands. Spring and autumn are less busy and more attractive – think entire beaches to yourself, a plentiful choice of places to stay, and museums and churches serenely empty.

The high season does have its advantages, however: everything stays open later, there is more transport, the ferries and catamarans have extra and speedy service, and if you're into beach parties and lots of summer fun, this is the best time to visit. Out of season, be aware that taking ferries from island to island can be tricky; there isn't always a daily ferry connection. You may have more flexibility than you think in July and August, but less from September to June.

WHEN TO GO

Although Croatia's peak season is in July and August, the coast is gorgeous in spring and early autumn: the Adriatic is still too cool for plunging into in April, but it can be good during a warm May, especially in Central and Southern Dalmatia, and in September it is almost guaranteed that the sea's temperatures will climb up to 23°C! Unlike the sea's temperature, accommodation prices pleasantly drop during the off-season months.

Cities such as Zagreb are in full cultural swing during spring and autumn – you can attend the Zagreb Biennial of Contemporary Music, the Zagreb Film Festival, various street festivals or the Queer Zagreb FM Festival (see p83). May and June are great months for most outdoor activities (skiing aside, of course); during this time accommodation prices are also still reasonable and you'll enjoy long, sunny days. This being the end-of-term-excursion season in Croatia, you may come across lively battalions of school students at the end of May and beginning of June; hotels and transport around cultural highlights can fill up with boisterous youngsters and their harried chaperones.

July and August are the most expensive months to visit Croatia: accommodation prices skyrocket, popular cities, sights, hotels and restaurants get super-packed, and the beaches can get noisy and crowded. The main advantages of high-season travel are the extra boat lines to whisk you to the islands.

September is perhaps the best month in Croatia. The sea is warm (the weather too), the crowds are sparse and everything becomes cheaper. If you're a fan of Mediterranean fruit, you'll find figs and pomegranates in abundance. October is popular with some, and locals and foreigners alike use this month to really relax – it may be too cool for camping, but the weather should still be fine along the coast, and private rooms will be plentiful and inexpensive.

COSTS & MONEY

Croatia isn't a cheap country. This means that unless you stay in hostels and private accommodation or go camping, hotels – especially the new, refurbished and glitzy ones – can compare with those in any European destination, both in terms of price and comfort. Accommodation prices, boat fares and anything else relating to tourism skyrocket in summer, reaching a peak in

See Climate Charts (p297) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Rubber shoes to wade into the water along Croatia's rocky coast.
- High protection sunscreen.
- Valid travel insurance (p300).
- Anti-seasickness medicine just in case the Adriatic gets choppy.
- A small rucksack for any day trips you might take.

July and August. In the high season, a double room costs between 250KN and 300KN in a private residence, from 500KN to 1000KN in a three-star hotel, and anything from 2000KN in a boutique hotel. The premium prices are in Dubrovnik and Hvar, where the most luxurious hotels are and where most tourists tend to go. Rooms in Zagreb and continental Croatia cost about the same all year, and you'll find that accommodation in the Slavonia and Zagarje regions is less pricey than on the coast and in the capital. Note that private owners usually add a 30% surcharge for private rooms rented for less than three nights and some insist on a seven-night minimum in the high season – always check in advance. Hotels usually have no minimum-stay requirements. Car rental in Croatia is always incredibly expensive when compared with its EU neighbours, but also Montenegro and Bosnia and Hercegovina. Prices start from around 325KN for a day and go down for longer rentals.

Concert and theatre tickets and museums are reasonably cheap (concert and theatre tickets run from about 60KN to 200KN and museums are between 15KN and 35KN); boat transport is also cheap unless you take a car on board. The average intercity bus fare ranges from 40KN to 80KN. You can easily get a pizza for 30KN, and a plate of pasta costs about 50KN to 60KN even in the more expensive restaurants. Fish, meat and produce are about the same price as elsewhere in Europe.

Backpackers who stay in one place can plan on spending about 350KN a day. Staying in nicely appointed private rooms, eating in moderate restaurants and travelling along the coast costs about 500KN per day; it's more than double that to stay in the best hotels and eat at the best restaurants. Families and a bunch of friends travelling together are better off renting an apartment than staying in a hotel. A one-bedroom apartment sleeping three costs up to 600KN per night along the coast.

In a good, moderate restaurant expect to pay about 35KN to 55KN for a starter and 80KN to 120KN for a meat or fish main course. Bread usually costs extra and a few restaurants tack on a service charge, which is supposed to be indicated on the menu. Fish and shellfish are more expensive and usually charged by the kilogram. An average portion is about 250g, but sometimes you'll be expected to choose a whole fish from a selection – feel free to ask the waiter to weigh the fish so that you can better estimate the final cost. Squid runs at about 300KN per kilogram, but for fish and shrimp you'll pay from 320KN to 380KN per kilogram.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged our readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy the magic of independent travel. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring – but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on both the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

HOW MUCH?

Cross-country bus fare
150-300KN

Coffee in a café 10KN

Pizza 30KN

Museum visit 15-35KN

Island ferry 25-50KN

See also Lonely Planet
Index, on the inside front
cover.

Getting There & Away

Being a continental country, Croatia is easy to reach by land. Zagreb is connected to the rest of Europe by rail, while the coast can be reached by ferry from Italy. Ferry travel, however, is a major pollutant to sea life, which makes it unappealing in eco terms.

Slow Travel

There's no need to fly within Croatia – trains and especially buses cross every corner of the country. The recent building of a motorway from Zagreb to the coast makes travelling by bus or car faster than before. It's a small country, too, so the maximum a trip will ever last is a few hours (unless you decide to head all the way from Zagreb to Dubrovnik in one go). It's a good idea to base yourself in one place and take day trips – on the coast, many opt to island hop by sailing and the really sturdy grab some oars and cram themselves into a kayak. Others walk and explore – a gorgeous option in spring and autumn.

Accommodation & Food

Considering Croatia's ever-growing appeal, some of the coastal places are gravitating towards resort-style accommodation and aiming their developments at large groups. This, however appealing it may seem to big hotel owners, is damaging to the smaller, family-run hotels, guest houses and restaurants that give each destination its uniqueness and appeal, especially for the individual traveller. If you can, opt to stay in smaller-scale hotels or guest houses, or even at some of the eco-friendly campsites, such as Natural Holiday (p243), off Vis Island.

Croatia's small restaurants almost always offer better quality food than popular places with menus that feature hundreds of dishes. The rule of thumb is that the more selective the daily menu, the fresher the ingredients are bound to be. Eating at small, family-run restaurants and sleeping in independent accommodation mean you'll be contributing to the local economy and helping create a more sustainable future.

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READING UP

There are plenty of excellent pickings from Croatia for bookworms, both written about Croatia and by Croatian authors.

We have to start with the classic travel book on Yugoslavia: Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Written in 1941 as the world was becoming enmeshed in WWII, West recounts her journeys through Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, Macedonia and Montenegro, weaving her observations into a seamless narrative. Tony White, a British writer, retraced West's journey in *Another Fool in the Balkans* (2006), juxtaposing modern life in Serbia and Croatia with the region's political history.

White also co-edited and contributed to *Croatian Nights* (2005), together with Borivoj Radaković and Matt Thorne, an excellent anthology of 19 short stories by prominent Croatian and British writers such as Gordan Nuhanović, Vladimir Arsenijević, Zoran Ferić, Toby Litt, Edo Popović and the editors themselves.

Two important Croatian writers to look out for are Dubravka Ugrešić and Slavenka Drakulić. Ugrešić (www.dubravkaugresic.com) published *Nobody's Home* in 2007, a book that is part memoir, part travelogue, with stories of travels across Europe and the US, and essays on literature, geopolitics, the East and the West. Drakulić's *Café Europa – Life After Communism* (1999) is an excellent read, wittily detailing the pervasive infiltration of Western

TOP 10



NATURAL WONDERS

Croatia owes more than half of its beauty to its nature – the waterfalls, forests, mountains and, of course, the gorgeous Adriatic coast.

- 1 Plitvice Lakes National Park (p195)
- 2 Istria's truffle season (see boxed text, p179)
- 3 Krka National Park (p212)
- 4 Kornati Islands (p214)
- 5 Fresh fish and seafood (p51)
- 6 Paklenica National Park (p198)
- 7 Mljet Island (p277)
- 8 The Elafiti Islands (p276)
- 9 Cres Island (p136)
- 10 Susak Island (p134)

FAVOURITE FESTIVALS

Croats love to party and show off their culture. For an overview of national and major regional festivals, see p299.

- 1 Rijeka Carnival, Rijeka, February (p122) – dress up and party on the Kvarner.
- 2 Holy Week, Korčula, week before Easter (p285) – witness ancient religious rites.
- 3 Strossmartre, Zagreb, June (p83) – a quirky street festival.
- 4 The Garden Festival, Zadar, 4–6 July (p190)
- 5 Rab Fair, Rab Town, 25–27 July (p151) – religious rituals and folk fun.
- 6 Motovun Film Festival, late July/early August (p181) – Croatia's finest film festival.
- 7 Pag Carnival, Pag Town, 31 July (p207) – more dressing up and dancing.
- 8 Dubrovnik Summer Festival, Dubrovnik, July and August (p268) – culture and live performances galore in Croatia's most glorious city.
- 9 Full Moon Festival, Zadar, August (p190) – an all-nighter for moon lovers.
- 10 Varaždin Baroque Evenings, Varaždin, September (p100) – baroque music and culture feast.

TOP BEACHES

Get your kit off or don the latest designer bikini on one of these gorgeous beaches.

- 1 Brela (p239) – watch the sunset from this long beach with perfectly round pebbles.
- 2 Pakleni Islands (p254) – pine-shaded beaches for naturists and bikini-wearers alike.
- 3 Lokrum Island (p276) – a rocky beach that is a haven for nudies; it's always peaceful and the waters are crystalline.
- 4 Mljet Island's Veliko Jezero (p277) – it's not so much the beach here as it is the swimming location: a lovely salt lake in the middle of an island.
- 5 Split's Bačvice (p222) – active, fun and full of local life.
- 6 Baška on Krk Island (p146) – knockout crescent of fine pebbles with a mountain backdrop.
- 7 Lubenice on Cres Island (p140) – small, secluded, sensational and difficult to reach.
- 8 Beli on Cres Island (p138) – cosy, crystal-clear cove you won't have to share with crowds.
- 9 Paradise Beach in Lopar, Rab Island (p152) – sandy stunner with shallow waters and the shade of pine trees.
- 10 Rt Kamenjak (p160) Thirty virgin kilometres of inlets, coves, pebbles and rocks.

culture in Eastern Europe, and highlighting the reluctance with which the West handles Eastern European culture.

Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh by Slobodan Novak, originally published in Yugoslavia in 1968, has recently been translated into English. The book is set on the island of Rab, where an elderly Madonna is dying, and her carer – the narrator – reminisces about his life, love, the state, religion, duty and memory. It's considered to be one of the pivotal works of 20th-century literature and Novak's writing is compared to that of Chekhov, Borges, Beckett and Kiš.

Croatia: Travels in Undiscovered Country (2003), by Tony Fabijančić, recounts the life of rural folks in a new Croatia.

“Novak’s writing is compared to that of Chekhov, Borges, Beckett and Kiš”

INTERNET RESOURCES

Adriatica.net (www.adriatica.net) Cumbersome navigation, but allows you to book rooms, apartments, hotels and lighthouses all along the coast.

Balkanology (www.balkanology.com/croatia) Lots of good information on travel in Croatia and the wider region.

Croatia Homepage (www.hr) Hundreds of links to everything you want to know about Croatia.

National Tourist Board (www.croatia.hr) The best starting point to plan your Croatian holiday.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

CONTINENT TO COAST: ESSENTIAL CROATIA Two Weeks/Zagreb to Dubrovnik

Start at the capital, **Zagreb** (p70), and delve into its simmering nightlife, fine restaurants and choice museums over a long weekend. Head south to the World Heritage-listed **Plitvice Lakes National Park** (p195), a verdant maze of lakes and waterfalls. After spending the day here, head down to **Zadar** (p185), one of Croatia's most underrated cities. It's a real find: historic, modern, active and off the well-trodden track. Take a day trip to the island of **Pag** (p204) and try some of that famous cheese, or go partying on one of its beaches if it's the height of summer. Head over for a swim under the falls at **Krka National Park** (p212) or chill out at the gorgeous **Kornati Islands** (p214). Stroll through lovely **Trogir** (p232) and then meander around the Roman ruins of **Solin** (p231). Next, prepare for one of the region's best sights: Diocletian's Palace in **Split** (p220) is a living part of this exuberant seafront city. Take it easy down the winding coastal road to **Dubrovnik** (p260), a magnificent city whose beauty will blow you away.

From the urban and continental delights of Zagreb, the cascading waterfalls and tranquil lakes of Croatia's national parks, down to the coastal treasures of cities such as Zadar, Trogir, Split and Dubrovnik, this 600km-long itinerary gives you the cream of Croatia's aesthetic crop.



THE CREAM OF THE COAST

Two Weeks/Poreč to Dubrovnik

Start your journey in the town of **Poreč** (p169), admiring the World Heritage-listed Euphrasian Basilica. Head south to the Venetian-inspired architecture of **Rovinj** (p164) and splash in the waters off **Crveni Otok** (p169).

Wander Rovinj's cobblestone streets for a day, then go on to **Pula** (p155), where you can tour the evocative Roman ruins and amphitheatre before heading to the beach for some R&R. After two days in Pula, head north, stopping for a night in the old Austrian resort of **Opatija** (p125) for a healthy stroll along the seaside promenade and gorgeous views of the Kvarner coast. From nearby **Rijeka** (p118) you can take a catamaran to tranquil **Rab** (p149). After wandering the ancient town, relax on the aptly named **Paradise Beach** (p152) at Lopar. Next, head to historic **Zadar** (p185) for its wealth of museums and churches, promenade strolls, café life and bar scene. Head on south to **Split** (p217), an excellent city and great base to explore the beaches of **Brela** (p239), and the nearby islands. On Brač, head over to pretty **Bol** (p247) and hop over to **Hvar** (p250) and the offshore **Pakleni Islands** (p254) for some bikini-clad or nude sunbathing. If you want a few days of real rest and escape, head over to **Vis Island** (p240). From Split, drive down to **Dubrovnik** (p260), where you can explore the gleaming marble streets, vibrant street life and fine architecture. Don't miss a hop to the gorgeous island of **Mljet** (p277), where the verdancy, salt lakes and tranquillity heal the soul.

Get your sunscreen, sunglasses and sunhat for there'll be sun-soaking galore along this 660km route that covers old-school fishing villages, ancient towns, a dramatic and rugged coastline, spectacular islands and the sparkling waters of the Adriatic.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

BEAUTY'S ON THE INSIDE: INLAND CROATIA Two Weeks/Zagreb to Osijek

Start off in Croatia's dynamic capital, **Zagreb** (p70). Enjoy the museums, art and nightlife, then head to charming little **Samobor** (p93) for some top-class cakes and countryside treks. Go forth and explore where not many tourists have gone before in **Zagorje** (p96), a bucolic landscape of forests, pastures and farms. Start with **Klanjec** (p105) and discover the art of Antun Augustinčić in the town museum. You can't not see the birthplace of Croatia's most famous son – Josip Briz Tito – at **Kumrovec** (p104). It's not a communist site but a fascinating examination of traditional village life. If you have a thing for the mysterious aroma of times past, you'll revel in **Trakošćan Castle** (p102), and if you don't have enough there, head forth to the beautifully restored castle-fortress at **Varaždin** (p97). Immerse yourself in the baroque architecture before you dive into the waters at the **Varaždinske Toplice** (p101). On the way south, stop at the pilgrimage site of **Marija Bistrica** (p105) for heady views of the surrounding region. The green rolling hills of Zagorje flatten out as you head east to Slavonia. On the edge of Croatia is the Hungarian-influenced town of **Osijek** (p108) on the Drava River. Enjoy Osijek's unique architecture and take a day trip to the **Kopački Rit Nature Park** (p112), with its profusion of bird life. To finish, take a ride on one of the majestic Lipizzaner horses in **Đakovo** (p112).

Had enough of the sun, sea and crowds? You're in luck: Croatia's unspoiled interior is a real find. From the gentle hills of Zagorje to the wide-open landscape of Slavonia, you'll find castles, spas, villages, an unusual park and a refreshing absence of crowds on this 660km itinerary.



TAILORED TRIPS

FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD

Gastronomes, prepare for glorious gorging. **Zagreb** (p70) and continental Croatia are influenced by neighbouring Hungary and Austria, and excel at goulash and *paprikaš* (a pepper and beef stew with wine and herbs), as well as pork knuckle served with eye-watering horseradish. Move over to **Samobor** (p93) for some spectacular *kremšnite* (custard cakes) and follow your belly into **Zagorje** (p96) for *štrukle* (dough rolls with cottage cheese) and spit-roast suckling pig or lamb. Zagorje and **Slavonia** (p106) like their game served with buckwheat, and turkey comes with *mlinici* (baked noodles). Sausages, from *kulen* (paprika-flavoured) to blood or garlic ones, are much loved, too.

Moving down towards the coast, the cuisine changes markedly and looks upon its marine creatures with lip-licking glee. **Istria** (p154) carries the foodie region crown, with its delicate truffles, air-dried ham, gorgeous olives and excellent wines. Northern Dalmatia's island of **Pag** (p204) has the country's most famous cheese. **Split** (p217) does a mean *brodet* (fish stew with wine and herbs) and the unmistakably Mediterranean seafood *na buzaru* (wine, garlic and parsley sauce). The southern island of **Mljet** (p277) prepares the juiciest octopus, kid or lamb by putting it in a clay or metal pot and baking it from all sides. The **Pelješac Peninsula** (p288) is home to some of Croatia's best seafood, with farms of mussels and oysters that are sold by the kilo at little kiosks when in season.



CLIMB, DIVE, SURF 'N' HIKE

Hikers, bikers, windsurfers and divers have no shortage of options in Croatia. The hills around **Samobor** (p93) are favourite weekend hiking spots for Zagreb's urbanites, but real nature lovers head to the less-visited **Risnjak National Park** (p128) for gentle walks and demanding hikes. **Rovinj** (p164) is known for its many dives, especially the wreck of the *Baron Gautsch*, one of the Adriatic's most fascinating shipwrecks. From Lovran, hiking up Vojak in the **Učka Nature Park** (p129) provides unforgettable views of the Kvarner coast. **Mali Lošinj** (p131) is criss-crossed with bike paths, and nearby **Susak** (p134) is known for its reef, accessible to even rookie divers. **Paklenica National Park** (p198) is popular for its rock climbing and provides a good base for hikes in the Velebit Range. **Dugi Otok** (p201) has a spectacular underwater landscape for experienced cave divers and the **Pakleni Islands** (p254) off Hvar have an underwater reef and canyon to explore. **Makarska Riviera** (p236) has great rock climbing, while the dramatic **Mount Biokovo** (p237) is a treat for hikers. **Bol** (p247), on the island of Brač, is the windsurfing capital of Croatia, while **Viganj** (p289), a small village on Pelješac, is fast catching up as the windsurfers' favourite. **Mljet National Park** (p277) is excellent for biking.



The Authors



VESNA MARIĆ

Coordinating Author, front and back chapters, Zagreb, Northern Dalmatia, Split & Central Dalmatia, Dubrovnik & Southern Dalmatia

Vesna was born in Bosnia and Hercegovina while it was still a part of Yugoslavia, and she has never been able to see Croatia as a foreign country. A lifetime lover of Dalmatia's beaches, pine trees, food and wine, she expanded her knowledge of the region this edition by exploring Zadar and Zagreb, two cities she discovered anew. Researching this book was a true delight.



ANJA MUTIĆ

Food & Drink, Hrvatsko Zagorje, Slavonia, Kvarner Region, Istria

It's been more than 16 years since Anja left her native Croatia. She journeyed to several continents before making New York her base 10 years ago. But the roots are a'calling. She's been returning to Croatia frequently for work and play, intent on discovering a new place on every visit, be it a nature park, an offbeat town or an island. She's happy that Croatia's many beauties are appreciated worldwide, but secretly longs for the time when you could have a leisurely seafront coffee in Hvar without waiting for a table.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

Will Gourlay wrote the History chapter. Will ate his first *čevapčići* at a child's birthday party at Melbourne's Yugoslav consulate in the mid-1970s. Some 25 years later he had his next serve at Zagreb's Dolac market and he's never looked back. Now firmly fixated on all things Balkan, he has since made repeat trips to Croatia and its neighbours, sometimes with family in tow. A serious travel junky with tertiary degrees in history and editing, Will has worked as a commissioning editor for Lonely Planet for several years. He is now thinking that retiring to Lopud, with his family and a large trunk of books, would be more fun.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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