



# The Croatia You Don't Know

By Suzanne Morphet

"Who was Nikola Tesla?" asked the middle-aged journalist from Brussels with the puzzled look on her face. I was stumped too. Was he a hero from the civil war that tore Yugoslavia apart and that's still a painful memory here in Croatia?

Our guide at the Nikola Tesla Memorial Centre in Croatia's quiet countryside set us both straight. We had heard of Thomas Edison, yes? Well, Nicola Tesla was an even bigger genius, transforming the world with inventions and beating Edison in the race to develop electricity. If you took high school physics or chemistry you would know this of course, and a visit to the Nicola Tesla Memorial Centre ([www.mcnikolatesla.hr](http://www.mcnikolatesla.hr)) would be a must-see on a visit to his mother country on the Mediterranean. Even if you don't have a science background, the centre is a fascinating mix of images, words and sounds that describe the life and work of the genius who 'lit up' the world. During my two weeks in Croatia in October 2011, Tesla became a metaphor for the country itself. Like him, much of Croatia is largely unknown, at least by North American travelers, yet offers much of interest, particularly in the way of active adventure.

Croatia isn't much bigger than Switzerland, but it's got about 2,500 miles of coastline, eight national parks and adventure tourism outfitters offering everything you need for a variety of outdoor fun.

Climbers head to Paklenica National Park with its 1,150-foot vertical rock face. Mountain bikers choose from 186 miles of track near the ski resort of Bjelolasica. For hikers, the white limestone of North Velebit National Park is crisscrossed with trails. Speleologists can spend days exploring the country's caves, including the recently discovered Velebita cave with the longest underground vertical drop in the world,

over 1,640 feet. And for canoeists and kayakers there's an abundance of clean rivers, lakes and, of course, the island-studded coast.

First though, our group of international writers wanted to see a bit of Zagreb, the country's chic capital. "Showing off is the main sport," laughed our guide, Hela Markanovi, as we strolled through the city's old town, where locals lounged in fashionable clothes, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee at back-to-back cafes. (Mercifully, there are no Starbucks here.) While walking a pedestrian-only cobblestone street we notice a cravat shop, then learn that cravats (men's ties, that is) were first worn by Croats and the word 'cravat' comes from a French pronunciation of Croat. (For pure silk ties made in Croatia, Markanovi recommends Salon Croata in the Oktogon Passage.) Besides coffee and cravats, Zagreb offers other kinds of culture; a neo-Gothic cathedral, a new Museum of Contemporary Art and a stunning cemetery – the Mirogoj Monumental Cemetery. With its black and white tiled arcades, ivy-covered columns and interplay of lights and shadows, it's considered one of Europe's most artistically significant.

A modern four-lane motorway (with tolls) leads out of Zagreb; rent a car and it's easy to get around. When Croatia joins the European Union in 2013 the motorway will extend all the way to Dubrovnik on the southern-most coast.

Two hours south of Zagreb is the Lika-Karlovac region. Leaving the motorway and driving the 'old' road is like taking a trip back in time. Old women wear kerchiefs, shepherds stand watch over sheep in fields and water wheels still grind grain. And yet, modern adventure tourism has arrived.

## LET THE ADVENTURES BEGIN

When we stop for lunch at Mrežnica House

([www.mreznicka-kuca.com](http://www.mreznicka-kuca.com)) on the bank of the river by the same name, a fleet of red canoes awaits us. After a traditional lunch of meat and potato dishes (lamb is a specialty) on the outdoor patio, some of us pair up to paddle while others join a tour guide for a cycle.

The beautiful green water of the Mrežnica River is slightly acidic, and over time it has dissolved some of the underlying rock, creating 93 waterfalls over about 40 miles.

Paddling here means lots of portaging if you're going upstream, but downstream it's pure play. Most of the 'falls' are short ledges. After watching other paddlers go over a ledge, my partner and I nervously follow suit, then realize the flexible plastic canoes were designed for this! And even if we capsize, the water's warm, so warm that we eventually 'park' our canoe on a ledge and jump in for a swim.

The next day we're paddling another river, this time in traditional American canoes. We're on the lazy Gacka River, enjoying bucolic scenery; an old water mill, fields with grazing sheep, a white stone chapel against a cloudless blue sky, a fisherman casting for trout. The Old Town canoes are from the USA but we're clearly in a different country, maybe a different century.

This delightful disconnect was reinforced when we stopped for coffee a few hours later. Sipping a cappuccino, I noticed something big and furry in one corner. A large brown bear stood with its mouth agape and tongue lolling out, while a red fox lurked at its feet. Then I noticed a rabbit standing on its hind legs, dressed in a man's vest and hat, with a walking stick in one paw. Where am I again, Alice's Wonderland?

You get that otherworldly feeling at Plitvice Lakes National Park too. Here, at this UNESCO World Heritage Site the bears and other wildlife are alive, but so too, it seems, is the karst landscape. Once a confluence of rivers, there



are now 16 lakes of different shades of blue, grey and turquoise all interconnected by gurgling, gushing, delightfully noisy waterfalls. The landscape is constantly evolving as carbon dioxide in the water calcifies underwater plants, building rock ledges and forcing water to change course.

In a word, Plitvice Lakes is stunning. A trail follows the perimeter of some of the lakes, along with boardwalks. A boat takes passengers across one lake. However private boating and swimming are not allowed; the park doesn't want people to disturb the delicate ecology.

No trip to Croatia is complete without seeing some of the coast and it's a cheap, 50-minute flight from Zagreb to Dubrovnik. When the rest of my group heads home, I hop on a plane for Dubrovnik, where I'm met by Željko Kelemen, the owner of **Huck Finn Adventure Travel**.

Another hour and I'm barefoot on Kelemen's

44-foot sailing catamaran, cruising through azure blue water. Two kayaks are lashed to the bow and a half a dozen bicycles mounted to a rack on the stern. Snorkeling gear is tucked out of sight. For the next three days we (Kelemen, two of his guides and one other guest) will explore the Elaphiti group of islands by just about every possible means.

These small islands off Dubrovnik are rich in history, yet relatively unspoiled. Only three of the 13 are inhabited and two are car-free. Fewer people live on them now than in the past. Šipan, for instance, was once home to 7,000 and boasted 38 churches and chapels. Today, about 400 people call this sun-drenched island home. Fortunately, half a dozen of them are fishermen; our first night we dine on smoked tuna, pasta with fresh shrimp and octopus patties at Kod Marka, an acclaimed restaurant on the water.

me there; a three-hour journey.

#### TRUFFLES AND MORE

Every weekend from the beginning of October until mid-November is the annual Livade Days of Truffles Festival in the tiny town of Livade. There are food and wine tastings, cooking demonstrations, a truffle hunting demonstration and a truffle auction. This is also the home of Restaurant Zigante ([www.restaurantzigante.com](http://www.restaurantzigante.com)), whose owner found the world's largest truffle – a beefy 2.8 pounds – in 1999. Before looking around we head straight to the restaurant's outdoor patio to learn what these prized and pricey fungus taste like in the hands of gourmet chefs. Surprisingly, we discover they're best eaten raw. The waiter begins by waving an offensive smelling nugget under my nose (to attest to its freshness), then grates it over a plate of venison carpaccio. The paper-thin slices meld beautifully with the meat. The next dish, grated truffle over fresh tagliatelle with melted butter couldn't be simpler, yet tastes extravagant. Each course of our four-course menu features white truffles, the last dish being the most surprising: vanilla ice cream with truffles. It's... well, different. "You either like them or you don't," explained Tanja Prodanovi, marketing manager for Restaurant Zigante afterwards, adding that "the truffle has to be the king" with other ingredients playing second fiddle.

After lunch we wander over to a grassy field to watch a truffle hunting demonstration. A man with a large paunch is standing with two mid-sized dogs. When he gives the command, they immediately start sniffing the ground. A truffle had been 'planted' earlier and within seconds the older dog, Jackie, is digging at the precise spot. The hunter rewards her with a biscuit, then digs up the truffle for himself.

The hunters go out at night, explains my guide, Antonio Giudici, when the scent of the truffles is most intense. Because of the prices white truffles command – over \$8,800/lb last October – hunters are secretive. "A hunter will never tell you where he found truffles or how many he found," Antonio says, "and the dogs don't talk!"

Under the festival's big white tents, visitors sip wine – the region has three main varieties of grape, the white malvazija, red teran and sweet

We kayak under the towering cliffs of Koloccep, walk the palm-treed waterfront of Lopud and cycle the narrow country roads of Šipan. We snorkel in turquoise bays, visit 400-year old monasteries and hike to a hilltop farm looking over the Adriatic where we lunch on homemade goat cheese, salty prosciutto and hand-pressed olive oil under a grape-covered arbor. It's all divine.

In mid-October, the water is still a delightful 77 degrees F and the air temperature feels just as summery, though restaurant closures signal high season is quickly coming to an end. But the arrival of fall means it's truffle time on Croatia's Istrian peninsula on the north coast. I fly back to Zagreb and hire a car and driver to take

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## CROATIA

muskat – and dip cubes of bread into truffle-based sauces. Other products are on display too; cheese, honey, prosciutto, and lots and lots of olive oil, some mild, some spicy. The Istrian peninsula is agriculturally rich; the free guidebook *Istra Gourmet* lists 136 olive growers and 110 winemakers in its 2011 edition.

The hardest part for travelers to Croatia, I decide that night, is narrowing down all your choices. Happily, the country is small enough that you can pack in a lot in a short time.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Zagreb:** The **Sheraton Zagreb Hotel** is within walking distance of museums and restaurants. Visit [www.hotel-sheratonzagreb.com](http://www.hotel-sheratonzagreb.com)

**Otocac:** **Hotel Park Exclusive**, ([www.hotel-park.com.hr](http://www.hotel-park.com.hr)) is priced from \$74 /night including breakfast.

**Plitvice Lakes National Park:** **Hotel Jezero** ([www.np-plitvicka-jezera.hr/en](http://www.np-plitvicka-jezera.hr/en)) has accommodations starting at \$112/night

**Carload:** **Hotel Koran** ([www.hotelkorana.hr](http://www.hotelkorana.hr)) offers rooms from \$138/night.

**Motovun:** **Hotel Kastel** is located at the top of an ancient hilltop town, and of-

fers rooms from \$53 night with breakfast. [www.hotel-kastel-motovun.hr](http://www.hotel-kastel-motovun.hr)

All hotels listed above have one or more of heated indoor pools, steam baths and/or fitness facilities.

### TOUR AND ADVENTURE GUIDES

**Huck Finn Adventure Travel** offers single and multi-day guided tours (kayaking, canoeing, cycling, hiking) throughout Croatia. On the coast you can choose to sleep on the company's catamaran or at small inns. Highly trained English-speaking guides. [www.huckfinncroatia.com](http://www.huckfinncroatia.com)

**Adria Veleticia** offers multi-activity holidays including caving, canoeing and sea kayaking in the Lika region. [www.adria-velebitica.com](http://www.adria-velebitica.com)

**Ranch Jelov Klanac, Rakovica**, offers horseback riding near Plitvice Lakes National Park. [www.horseriding-croatia.com](http://www.horseriding-croatia.com)

**Kanuking-Avantura** offers canoeing on the Mreznica River and cycling in the area. [www.kanuking-avantura.hr](http://www.kanuking-avantura.hr)

**Tourist Boards:** **Croatia** ([www.croatia.hr](http://www.croatia.hr)), **Zagreb**, ([www.zagreb-touristinfo.hr](http://www.zagreb-touristinfo.hr)), **Dubrovnik**, ([www.tzdubrovnik.hr](http://www.tzdubrovnik.hr)), **Istria** ([www.istra.hr](http://www.istra.hr))



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