

ABOUT CROATIA

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Here, the tensions of life seem to fade into insignificance. In the rays of the setting sun as your lighthouse throws its lengthening shadow across the beach towards the sea, you will look towards the coastline and wish for nowhere else.

A real opportunity for a month or two of pure escapism where you can get to examine yourself without strangers examining you. Swim in a bay of your own, without neighbours, without witnesses. Just you and those you choose to be with. It won't cost you a fortune and, for one brief moment of your life, you will have something nobody else has.

All this can be yours when you make the right choice and come to Croatia.

ABOUT THE COUNTRY

Croatia, is a country with a thousand year old history and culture, first appeared on the political map of Europe in 1992. It covers an area of 56,542 sq. km, with 31,900 sq. km of territorial waters. The coastline, including 1185 islands, is 5,789 km long. According to the 2001 census figures, 4.43 million people live there.

The official language is Croatian, and the official script is Latin. The currency is Kuna. The capital is Zagreb (779.145 inhabitants), which is also the country's administrative, cultural, academic and economic center. The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia was adopted on 22 December 1990, and the country received international recognition on 15 January 1992.

Croatia lies at the meeting point of the Mediterranean, the Alps and the Pannonian plains. The characteristics of each have merged into a unique and charming harmony of opposites. Although its main attraction is the Adriatic coast and islands, Croatia is full of surprises and challenges, like the woods of Gorski Kotar, the mountainous region between Northern Croatia and the Croatian coast close to the sea which attracts nature lovers, mountaineers, hikers, winter sports fans and hunters. Then there is Lika, the region separated from the sea by the huge mountain of Velebit. The Baroque castles and thermal spas of Hrvatsko Zagorje, the region of Podravina, between the river Drava and the wooded slopes of Bilogora, and the fertile plains of Slavonija - all this is Croatia.

However, the country's most impressive region is its thinly populated coast with its Mediterranean charm and its rough backcountry in the south (Dalmatia) and "Croatia's Tuscany" in the north (Istria) – unsurpassed by the familiar but packed coasts of Spain, Italy and France.

Pristine waters, an abundant submarine life, undiscovered bays and beautiful beaches. Most beaches in Croatia are fine gravel beaches, keeping the water crystal clear, and one of its most popular ones is the Golden Horn beach in Bol on Brac island,

In addition to its variety and natural beauty, another point in Croatia's favour is its preserved environment. Croatia is undoubtedly one of the least saturated tourist centres in the northern Mediterranean. Croatian regional planning has avoided the ecological pitfalls of industrial and urban development. Today some 7.5% of Croatian territory is protected within the national park system or under some other regional protection, and the intention is to double this area, representing a remarkably valuable and environmentally preserved asset in the very heart of Europe. Of the seven national parks, three are in the mountains (Risnjak, Paklenica and Plitvica Lakes), and four are on the coast (Kornati, Mljet, Brijuni and Krka). Of the latter four, all but the park of Krka are on islands.

Croatia is also one of the few European countries which can pride itself on its clean environment and rich flora and fauna. About 4,300 plant species can be found in Croatia, while in the Adriatic Sea there are about 400 edible fish, cephalopod, shrimp and shellfish species.

The country has a long tradition of tourism. It was no accident that the Austrians and Hungarians saw the benefits of the mild climate and beautiful landscape and began the development of tourism in the Croatian south. The Viennese Society of Southern Railways built the Kvarner Hotel in Opatija in 1884. Their aim was to turn it into an organised seaside health resort. The Therapia Hotel in Crikvenica was built with Hungarian capital in 1894 and three years later Austrian Lloyd opened the Imperial Hotel in Dubrovnik.

And so it has continued up to the present as in 2003 international tourist experts and statisticians have established – Croatia was the great tourism surprise and the hit Mediterranean destination, with growth rates bravely defying the global recession! The majority of guests stayed in hotels and villas, followed by camps, rooms and suites, and there were also many nautical tourists (8 percent of the total number of visitors). In 2003, the most faithful guests of Croatia's tourist centers were the Germans, who are traditionally the majority, followed by Italians, Slovenians, Austrians, Czechs, Dutch, Hungarians etc. Hotels, tourist sites, camps, agrotourist options and other types of accommodation, as well as modern nautical centers, are equipped in line with international tourism standards. A rich cultural offer, together with wellness, sports, recreational and entertainment facilities, many kilometres of well-kept footpaths or wine roads, excursions including sight-seeing of natural and cultural treasures, of the right combination of experience and adventure make for a pleasant and rich vacation.

There are also strict rules regarding coastal construction to avoid the same mistakes that have been made in the western parts of the Mediterranean.

The country's architecture is characterised by the many historic city centres. Depending on different regions the structures reflect Roman, Venetian, Austro-Hungarian and Byzantine influence. The Diokletianpalast in Split, the historic centre of Dubrovnik, the amphitheatre in Pula as well as old island communities and medieval villages in Istria are particularly impressive.

Croatia is a country undergoing major changes from Tito-socialism into west European society. It declared itself independent from Yugoslavia in 1991 and is a sovereign parliamentary democracy. Croatia's new-found optimism is a refreshing

contrast to western Europe's economic gloom and young Croatians view themselves as a modern people and do not like to be linked to the Balkans.

Fashion is an important part of the country's urban lifestyle and there's no small town along the coast with a Riva or promenade lined with shops and cafes inviting locals and guests to stroll and look.

Most Croats have a high level of education, are open-minded and convivial. Croats love humour and only the Hungarians can possibly top their repertoire of wearwords.

The war has left its marks, not just on buildings but also on people's souls – but no one likes to talk about it. In most city centres there are virtually no signs of the conflict and it seems difficult to believe that a war has been raging here only a decade ago.

Today Croatia is one of Europe's safest countries, political stability is high and crime is low. The communist influence, which is still visible on some public buildings, is being rapidly pushed aside and many bars can take it up with their counterparts in London, Berlin, Vienna and Milan. The question is whether those can offer the same fresh fish as in Zagreb – we doubt that!

Croatia is close by, not just geographically, but thanks to its airport network and the high-quality service of its national air companies. The network of newly built free-ways and semi-freeways means that Croatia is more easily reached by the road than even. For example Munich is only 576 km from Zagreb, Vienna only 371 km, Graz 188 km, and Trieste is just 126 km from Pula.

ISLANDS

1,185 islands, islets and reefs

4,012 km of island shoreline

36, 000 ha of land in three island national parks thousands of berths in island marinas 2,600 hours of sunshine per year

"You don't have to be a millionaire to have an island all to yourself. Thousands of them have been breaking away from the coastline of middle Europe into the Adriatic for millions of years. There's bound to be one to suit you. Perhaps with your own lighthouse. A refuge from everyday life. A real opportunity for a month or two of pure escapism where you can get to examine yourself without strangers examining you. Swim in a bay of your own, without neighbours, without witnesses. Just you and those you choose to be with. It won't cost you a fortune and, for one brief moment of your life, you will have something nobody else has."

There are more than one thousand islands scattered along the Croatian coast, each unique, the vast majority uninhabited. Each has its own exceptional story and place in history. Battles were waged for them. Great rulers surrendered to them. Powerful potentates were seduced by them. They have left poets speechless and artists agog. You too, will be stunned by their beauty, intoxicated by their tranquillity, and left yearning to return over and over again. They say we all have one weakness. Those who have tasted the Croatian islands have a thousand. The first journey to the Adriatic is always an adventure, a trip into the unknown. Subsequently, familiarity distils the hidden depths of beauty, personal recognition enhances sights and sounds. Don't rush it. Like good wine or a first love affair, true fulfilment comes only after anticipation, cultivation and dedication. You will know it when you feel it. It

is like an emotional longing which has suddenly been satisfied. A place where the search for yourself comes to an end and you love what you have found. Somewhere you will return to gladly and will be as gladly welcomed back.

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Croatia has 1,777 km of mainland Adriatic shoreline and no fewer than 1,185 islands, islets and reefs. Only 66 of them are inhabited. Any of the others could be yours.

The sea is life here. And always has been. It gives plenty but also takes a lot. It's been battlefield, harvest field and graveyard. Farewells are said at its edge as ships slip their moorings and carry fishermen and sailors beyond the horizon. Hence the melancholic island songs and the thoughtful look of black-draped island women. Hence the joy of every return. And the delight of each new arrival. Hence the tables full of fish, figs and home-made wine.

So it is that new meets old here. The island lives at its usual rhythm, but will take over whatever modern civilization has to offer to make life easier. Legends live on in church pageants and only their own patron-saints can save the people from storms and sickness. As do the statues, black scarves and prayers. Prayers for sailors, fishermen and all men of good will.

The old fisherman, even today, knows no retirement and little rest. The sea is a drug, too powerful to resist. It cannot be cured, especially by foreign lands. As it takes away, so it ever returns. Sail out with a Croatian island fisherman and you will understand why the sea is both menacing and enchanting. The other part of your life seems irrelevant and distant.

Back on your own island everything becomes more precious. The shrill alarm clock, the crowded commuter train, the noisy next door neighbours are forgotten. Concerns become smaller until only one remains: a bountiful catch.

Life on the islands has a special rhythm. Everybody knows everybody here. They count each other's years in wrinkles.

Everywhere, in an old fisherman's house or a five-star hotel, you feel the special spirit of the islands. It is equally strong in the streets, near the fountain where people meet to exchange hidden glances and begin new romances.

Summers on the islands are particularly delightful. Old sea salts open their doors and show off the treasures from their journeys overseas. They are from better days when every arrival meant riches of fabric and gold. Now even though there is little to be gained, seamen still leave to seek their fortune.

WHAT DO THE ISLANDS MEAN TO CROATIA

It is difficult to define the significance of a group of islands to a country and its inhabitants. You will certainly agree that there is something special about that moment when you set off from the mainland into the unknown. All your worries become unimportant and the everyday routine is left further and further behind.

Statistics will hardly tell you anything about the island villages and the isolated places enlivened by the local people and tourists who wish to get closer to nature. While separation from the mainland can sometimes be a handicap, it also provides some protection from the factory chimneys and other misfortunes which come with civilisation. Instead, there are vast fields of lavender, ancient olive trees and vineyards, in immaculate harmony between man and nature. There are wine and olives, so a guest wishing to get closer to nature will stop at a small inn rather than a top quality restaurant. He will taste real home-made wine instead of some famous sparkling wine, he will sing the old island songs and forget the monotony of the everyday routine. Through the centuries and life's sufferings, an oasis of culture has remained here, a testimony to the identity, despite the many attempts, some temporarily successful, to destroy it.

The islands undoubtedly build their present and their future mainly on tourism. Statistics on growth in production and dry indices on increases or decreases in numbers of guests are not important.

Every guest is really The Guest here and his every wish is a command. Hard-working hosts are well aware of this. They will offer home-made bread and smoked ham or freshly picked mandarins or fish garnished with home-pressed olive oil. Without additives or preservatives but with that natural taste that you sense when you feel a togetherness with unspoiled nature during your visit to the island.

Each island has something unique of its own. Everyone expects something different. Today, when the islands are well connected to the mainland by sea and air links, they take a special place in the life of Croatia. Although Croatia has become famous for its untouched nature and the harmony between development and environmental protection, its islands are something special. The harmony between the best of man's and nature's creations reaches its culmination on the islands, leaving its testimony to the traditional and dynamic lifestyle.

Every person in this country will speak about the islands with special pride and longing. If life is prose, then a visit to the islands is poetry.

Island Superlatives

Each one of the Croatian islands has its special beauty and characteristics. Each has its own "most". We will reveal a few of them to you, but we know that every one of you will discover at least one island superlative of your own in the Croatian Adriatic. There's really plenty to choose from...

- The biggest island in Croatia is Krk with a total area of 409 sq. km.
- You might guess from its name that Dugi Otok ("Long Island") is the longest, but it isn't. Hvar is the longest at 68 km, with an area of 300 sq. km.
- The highest island is Brac: Vidova Gora (779 m) is the highest peak in the Adriatic archipelago.

- The most wooded island is Mljet. As much as 72% of its area is covered by woods, 22% is cultivated and 6% is rock.
- The sunniest island, indeed the sunniest place in Croatia, is Hvar, which enjoys 2718 hours of sunshine per year. The average for the whole Adriatic is 2600 hours per year.
- According to the statistics, Dubrovnik, Korcula and Hvar are among those parts of Croatia with the highest January temperatures. The average temperature in Dubrovnik in January is 9.2°C, on Korcula 9.0°C and on Hvar 8.7°C.
- The largest natural lake in Croatia is Vransko Jezero on the Island of Cres. It is 5.5 km long, 1.5 km wide and covers 5.75 sq. km.
- Insiders would say that Elaphites Island (especially Sipan) with their mild climate and a large number of sunny days per year and the special vegetation counts to the most beautiful and green ones while Island Brac it's belong to the few most versatile and busiest island along Croatian coast

Island Brac

Arriving in Split and Dubrovnik, monument cities under UNESCO protection, which belong not only to the Croatian people but also to world heritage, it's like an emotional climax. Just out to sea from Split, a city of exceptional grace and cultural and historical value, with its own harbour and airport, lies the island of Brac, the highest and third largest island in the Adriatic. Surface of the island is 394,14 km² and Brac is one of the sunniest with 2.700 hours of sun annually.

One of the most accessible islands in the Croatian Adriatic – ferries run almost every hour from Split to Supetar (with bus connections on to other resorts). There is also a small airport near the resort of Bol, with several flights a week from Zagreb in the summer.

The highest peak, Vidova Gora (778 m) is also the highest peak of all Adriatic islands. The Karst lime-stone relief with cracks, cavities, valleys and bays are characteristics of the landscape. Rains fall in the winter period of the year and winds influencing climate are: north-east winds, south winds and landward breeze which blows from the sea.

The island is known for its agricultural products and the locals produce good wine, olive oil, figs, nectarines and other fruits. But the main export is, and has been from ancient times, the famous Brac stone from which many buildings in the world have been built, including the white House in Washington D.C.

Traditional seaside pleasures are to be found in the numerous bays, on sandy and gravel beaches which form the long, well-indented coast of Brac. The biggest attraction is Bol, the largest tourist centre on the south of the island. The beaches have something special, particularly Zlatni rat (Golden Horn). Its gravel promontory shifts from side to side as the wind and waves constantly change its shape.

The island was already in the Neolithic age, through the Bronze and Iron ages until today. The Antic name for Brac is Brattia. During the rule of empire Diocletian the numerous quarries started to be exploited. In the early Middle Ages Brac was under

the rule of Byzantium, and in the 9th century it was occupied by Slavic tribe Neretljani, and then it became part of the Croatian state. In 13th century Brac was under the rule of Omis, and in 1240 came under the rule of Split (1420 – 1797). Brac was under The Venice which recognized it the old privileges. In 16th century the new settlements were built by the sea as well as protective towers (Pucisca and Sutivan). After the fall of Venice, Brac was under Austrian rule until 1806. Then it became the base of Russian fleet for North Adriatic and afterwards again came under the rule of Austria until 1918.

There are many seaside resorts on the island: Bol, Postire, Milna, Supetar, Pucisca, Sutivan and Sumartin. The main resorts are Supetar and Bol. All have their sandy beaches, hotels and campsites. All have their stone stairways where the local a capella singers croon long into the night. On these same stairs everlasting friendships are made, new loves begin and old ones are strengthened.

When you return to everyday life, you will remember the olive groves and fishermen of Brac. You will remember elderly ladies peering at you through slightly opened windows as you promenaded below. And you will certainly remember how your world and theirs was bridged by an encounter made deeper with dry figs and homemade brandy.

THE ELAPHIT ISLAND

"If Dubrovnik is the pearl of the Adriatic, then the Elaphite Islands must be the emeralds!"

There are fourteen islands in the Elafiti group, the same number as those of Brijuni. They lie facing Dubrovnik, that pearl of the Adriatic, in an area of 90 sq. km, but they actually take up only one third of that space. Among them is the Island of Lokrum. Vladimir Koppen, a German meteorologist and climatologist described Elafiti as having a "climate of vives". The coast opposite the Elafiti islands rises steeply, thus creating a natural protection against cold continental winds. The uninhabited coastal cliffs are exposed to the southerly wind and the high seas, while the inhabited places are protected in the bays. The days here are pleasant even during the most scorching heat. The stony sea bed is covered in green, black and red algae and is rich in white fish, shrimp and shellfish. Here, fish comes straight to the dish. In the area of the Mljet Channel and around Sveti Andrija (St. Andrew) there is an area of coral reefs. The rich and varied world of the sea bottom is especially interesting for fishermen, who should, if they get up early enough, follow the boats of the local people who know where to cast their nets.

On the Elafiti islands, the steep rocks are adorned by a green crown of giant pine-trees. Nature and man have been on good terms here for centuries. On the small island of Kolocep and Sipan, the vegetation is subtropical, so pine trees, cypresses, palm trees, aloe, cactus, and southern fruits all grow here. There are a lot of fragrant flowers as well. Those who want to escape the hustle and bustle of the city will enjoy the pleasant promenades, beautiful beaches and numerous small bays, where they will be undisturbed.

This chain of islands are situated between the Peljasac peninsula and Lapad and are close to Dubrovnik. They are called the Elafit islands because of the Greek word elafos, meaning deer - in ancient times the islands were apparently home to a large deer population. There are actually six islands in the group, and they were particularly famous as the most skilful mariners came from there. The islands are very beautiful and are perfect for a relaxing holiday, although there is very little hotel accommodation.

Island Sipan

Called Golden Island since time out of mind. Sipan island is in the far South of Croatia, situated 12 kilometres northwest from the historic Port town of Dubrovnik. Among the group of "Elaphite Islands", Sipan is the biggest populated island. The island's mild climate, its subtropical vegetation and its clean and pristine waters make Sipan a perfect travel destination from early spring to late autumn.

Sipan is an experience hard to find anywhere else in the Mediterranean, a place for true originality and romance, an experience of the real Croatia unspoilt by mass-tourism and its consequences.

The Elaphiti archipelago has a special microclimate that gives Sipan its wonderfully mild weather and lush subtropical vegetation. Crystal clear water, wonderful promenades, a hinterland full of live trees and vineyards make Sipan a pleasant destination throughout the year. Two of the island's leading settlements have been populated since Roman times, Sipanska Luka, is in the northwest of the valley and Sudurad is in the southeast.

The island of Sipan was first mentioned under this name already in 1371. The summerhouse of the Sorkocevic family build in the 15th century has a prominent place in Sipanska Port. A Gothic Prince's Castle deriving from the same century rises above the Port. A fortified castle from 1539 is in Sudurad. Ruins of the summer residence of the Archbishops of Dubrovnik can be seen in the area between Sipanska Port and Sudurad.

Sipan is well connected to the other Elaphiti islands, with up to 12 daily connections during the season. Most boats from Dubrovnik terminate at Sudjuradj, which is a seven-minute drive from Sipanska Luka. There is a bus connection between the two sides of the island, as well as a Vivendum private shuttle service.

TRADITION AND CULTURE

Croatia is indeed unique, not only for its crystal clear, clean blue sea, but also for a thousand years of different cultures that have replaced each other and sometimes assimilated in these areas. The Adriatic Sea is not only a deep gulf in the Mediterranean cut into the Continent of Europe thereby creating most economical trade route between Europe and the East; it is also the cradle of ancient civilizations. There is much material evidence about that which is finally beginning to come to light, from the depths of Adriatic caves and from the deep blue sea. The east coast of the Adriatic Sea was inhabited as early as the beginning of the early Stone Age, and there is proof that most of the accessible islands were also inhabited (archaeological findings in caves near the islands of Hvar and Palagruza, etc.). Archaeological

findings prove that in the 6th century BC the ancient Greeks had commerce with the Illyrians by means of the sea, and that they founded their colonies there.

On the coast have Romans, Italians and Frenchmen left their traces; the towns on the coast abound in monuments dating back to Roman times (the amphitheatre in Pula, the Diokletian Palace in Split...). The Romans arrived, and they not only built palaces and summer residences but they also spent a considerable amount of time on the sea, and there are many underwater findings located between Pula and Cavtat which show this to be true. Such findings are mainly amphorae, which were at the time commonly used for storing everything from wine to wheat, oils and perfumes. Wherever you choose to go diving, you will find the remains of Antique ships and their cargoes. One of the most precious findings from that time are remains of pythos or dolias, large pottery vessels which were built into ships and used to transport bulk cargo (wheat, etc). One such site is near Cavtat, while another is near Murter.

Slavic Croatian tribes settled in the area in the early 7th century (arriving from present day Poland), accepting Christianity in around 800 A.D., and soon establishing their own state ruled by princes or dukes. In 925, Croatia became the first kingdom under the rule of King Tomislav. From this period date first early Croatian churches and written funds. From the 12th century until 1990 Croatia had many different rulers, among which there was the Habsburg Monarchy, which left deep traces in Culture and every-day living in the continental part of the country.

In the 18th century, Napoleon ruled for a short period of time, after which he was replaced by the Austrian monarchy. During the next hundred years, Italy and Austria fought each other for supremacy of the east coast, culminating in the battle of Vis in 1866.

Inland Croatia is a part of the Central European cultural circle and is distinguished by numerous prehistoric findings of world significance, by old towns, fortresses and castles dating from the late Middle Ages, and cultural monuments and architecture from the Baroque era.

Three Croatian cities and two monumental complexes have the status of monuments of world cultural heritage accorded by ENESCO. These are the Late Antique Palace of Diocletian, remodelled through the centuries into the medieval city of Split, the cities of Dubrovnik and Trogir, the Basilica of Euphrasius in Porec and the Cathedral of St. James in Sibenik.

The National Park of the Plitvice Lakes, Croatia's most beautiful and celebrated national park, is also part of UNESCO's world heritage.

CULINARY HIGHLIGHTS

Croatian cuisine mirrors the country's turbulent history. There is large variety between the Italian-influenced Mediterranean fare available in coastal regions and the cookery in the hinterland, which has been inspired by Austria, Hungary and Turkey which includes Schnitzel, Strudel and pancakes.

The traditional art of cooking has been preserved in Croatia, giving a nostalgic touch to the culinary experience. The variety of Croatian cooking is difficult to put into a few words and can best be experienced in a Dalmatian Konoba, old fishermen's cellars where fish, meat and vegetables are being roasted on an open fire. In many places away from the main tourist areas small cheerful family-run restaurants offer a unique and unforgettable taste of Croatian cuisine with food prepared by the wife and served by her husband and the other family members helping out. Prsut, dried ham, and fresh cheese can be bought from farmers' roadside stalls in the countryside, which also offer wine, homemade olive oil, fruit and vegetables.

To many connoisseurs, the white fish and crab of the Adriatic is the best in the world. That is why this coast has become a place of pilgrimage for the most sophisticated gourmets. Those who enjoy the taste of exquisitely prepared lobster, shrimp, oyster, date shells and high quality white fish, complemented with excellent wine, will have their senses uplifted in this part of the world. Similarly enthused will be those who choose the delicious roast lamb from Cres, with its unique taste derived from salty island grass. The cheese from Pag will please the palate as much as the finest from France and the quality is equally excellent. The secret lies in the environment and special technology. It is made from ewe's milk which, during maturation, is covered with olive oil, giving it a unique aroma and flavour. Take it as a gastronomic pleasure and also a souvenir. The Mediterranean influence on the cuisine means food will often be prepared "na leso" - boiled and seasoned. This produces meals which are both tasty and light. The added advantage is you can enjoy them more often.

Istria grows one of the most desired truffles in the world and the best places to find those culinary treasures are Motovum and Buzet, where the biggest truffle ever was found weighing 1,310 grams.

Rich vineyards and a special talent of the locals to please themselves and their guests result in fine wines, which are highly valued. Red wines are famous along the coast: Teran, Merlot and Cabernet in Istria, and Opolo, Plavac, Dingac, Postup further south. The renowned coastal and continental white wines include Malvazija, Zlahtina, Posip, Kujundzusa, Grk, Rizling, and Grasevina which in a meanwhile could easily compete with the world's top wines.

This has been but a taste of what you will experience as you become familiar with the Croatian cuisine. Each region will add some special ingredient, producing a flavour of its own, often tastier than before. Bon Appetit and Cheers!