

The Best of Croatia

German, Austrian, and Italian travelers have been well-versed in what Croatia has to offer as a vacation destination for more than a century. Until recently, every time they poured into the country in July and August, they had Croatia's endless beaches and clear blue sea almost all to themselves. Today, the rest of the world has opened its eyes to Croatia's charms and miles of coastline, wealth of Roman ruins, medieval hilltop castles, and natural wonders, as well as its warm and welcoming people. This makes the crowd of summer people who swoop down on the country larger and more diverse, swelling tourism to one of the country's biggest sources of income. Even when crowds are at their largest, it is possible to find a secluded cove or patch of beach where it seems you're the only person on Earth. And when all the name-brand hotels are filled, there is always a room with personality waiting in a private home where the landlord welcomes you like a long-lost friend.

Every town and village has at least one restaurant where the locals hang out and where the slice of life you get with your meal is the best dessert there is. In Croatia, each building has a story that adds another facet to this gem of a country, an ancient land with a rocky past that also happens to be a magnificent work in progress.

This chapter is a "road map" meant to give you, the reader, an idea of highlights that await you in Croatia. All you have to do to create an unforgettable Croatian adventure is fill in the blanks and connect the dots as you make discoveries of your own.

1 The Best Travel Experiences

- **Listening to the Sea Organ (Zadar):** Imagination and engineering created this incomparable music maker, which "broadcasts" sounds made by water movement through openings in the organ's pipes beneath the sea. Add a set of white stone steps descending into the water; they make a matchless venue on which to sit in the moonlight (or sunlight), let the water lap at your feet, and luxuriate in the organ's haunting sounds. See p. 139.
- **Viewing Mummies (Vodnjan):** They are billed as the bodies of holy people who died centuries ago and miraculously never decomposed. They look a little like skeletons shrink-wrapped in leather, but they are a compelling sight. You won't be able to get up close and personal with these relics, but you'll get close enough to recognize them as human. The curtained-off area behind the altar of St. Blaise Church—where the light is dim, the music soulful, and the piped-in commentary a little exaggerated—contributes to an atmosphere that is creepy but riveting, like watching a car wreck about to happen. See p. 203.
- **Exploring the Village of Hum (Istria):** It calls itself the smallest town in the world, and population-wise, it might be. But so many people

visit this village high in the Istrian interior that it always seems crowded. The village fathers have done a wonderful job of restoring the buildings in town and making it tourist-friendly. See p. 225.

- **Strolling Through Mirogoj Cemetery (Zagreb):** As much sculpture garden as it is burial ground, this 19th-century cemetery was designed by Herman Bollé. It is home to Croatian patriots, common folk, and people of all faiths and nationalities. The tombstones range from small and simple to enormous and elaborate, but each is a story in itself. Don't miss the black granite slab at the grave of

former president Franjo Tuđman or the sculpture-rich arcades on either side of the entrance. See p. 254.

- **Descending Into Iločki Podrumi (Ilok):** It's like walking down steep steps into a root cellar. You'll get the chills in this second-oldest wine cellar in Croatia from two sources: the temperature and the history that resides in this subterranean chamber. The cellar was looted by the Serbs during the Homeland War, but not before the owners were able to conceal bottles of the best vintages behind a false wall. Today those bottles are out of hiding and on display along with the barrels and vats used to store the winery's newest vintages. See p. 311.

2 The Best Natural Wonders

- **Plitvice Lakes National Park** (145km/90 miles southwest of Zagreb): Croatia's best-known natural wonder, the park's 16 crystal-clear turquoise lakes and their countless waterfalls, put on a great show. The lakes flow into one another and tumble over deposits of travertine, which creates waterfalls dropping a few feet or plunging as much as 64m (210 ft.). All this beauty is set in a dense forest accessed via footpaths and populated by bears and wild boar. See p. 269.
- **Kornati National Park** (part of the Zadar Archipelago): Kornati's 140 islands are really the tops of mountains that were above sea level 20,000 years ago but now are mostly submerged. One side of each island consists of land that is rocky and lightly blanketed with vegetation (even a few grapevines and olive trees). The side facing the sea is a sheer rock wall known as a "crown" that plunges almost 76m (250 ft.) straight down into the water. Sixty-nine species of

butterflies live here. Perhaps the most interesting area to explore is Kornati's offshore underwater landscape. Its rock formations support flourishing flora and fauna. See p. 150.

- **Paklenica National Park** (between Zadar and Karlobag): Its raw beauty is best appreciated by hikers and nature lovers. Even motorists respect the imposing Velebeite peaks because the limestone cliffs soar above deep gorges and dense vegetation that hides caves bored into the rock. See p. 146.
- **Krka National Park** (less than a half-hour from Šibenik): The park was formed to protect the Krka River, which runs from its source near Knin to the sea near Šibenik. The river has created a series of spectacular gorges, waterfalls, lakes, and rapids on its trip through the mountains. The most spectacular falls are the jaw-droppingly steep Skradinski Buk and Roški Slapovi. Between the two are Lake Visovac and Visovac Island, home to a Franciscan monastery. See p. 153.

3 The Best Open-Air Markets

- **Dolac (Zagreb)** above the main square at the foot of Old Town is not just a place to buy fruit and veggies. It is a crossroads where people come to see and be seen; to trade gossip; to relax with a cup of coffee; and to meet friends. Early morning is the best time to visit because that's when the bread is freshest, the displays the prettiest, and the people the most interesting. See p. 248.
- **Pazarin (Split)** is reminiscent of a Turkish bazaar in looks, sounds, and smells; booths and tables line both sides of Hrvojeva Street outside the east wall of Diocletian's Palace from

the Riva to the Silver Gate. You'll find the usual assortment of produce here. You'll also find a large variety of textiles and some of the most persuasive vendors anywhere. See p. 83.

- **Bjelovar's** market is quite civilized and partially covered. It is noteworthy as the place to which farmers from Croatia's agricultural belt bring their best produce, dairy products, fish, and meat every day. The market is at its busiest from 7am to noon, but a few vendors stay around until 6pm or so to catch people on their way home from work. The later it gets, the lower the prices go. See p. 296.

4 The Best Small Hotels & Inns

- **Villa Filipini (Poreč):** Despite its location a couple of miles outside Poreč's center and the lack of a beach in the vicinity, the warmth of the hosts, the casual but elegant decor of this tiny inn set in the woods, and the innovative gourmet cuisine in Filipini's restaurant make up for any shortcomings. This is Istrian hospitality at its best. See p. 213.
- **Hotel Waldinger (Osijek):** It packs a lot of elegance into its 18 rooms, each of which drips with class in the heart of a city that has not altogether recovered from war. From here you can walk to the banks of the Drava, the city market, and even medieval Tvrdá without even breathing hard. See p. 308.
- **Hotel Korana-Srakovčić (Karlovac):** The Korana's sleek guest rooms are a nice surprise in Karlovac, which is still putting itself back together after the 1991 war. The hotel's big porch

overlooking the river and riverwalk is a vacation all by itself. See p. 268.

- **Hotel Peristil (Split):** Opened once more for business in 2005, Peristil's walls have witnessed 1,500 years of history. Peristil is tucked in a corner inside the walls of Diocletian's palace, and while its facade is respectful of the magnificent Roman ruin, its interior is brand new and comfortable. Staying here makes you feel as though you've gone back in time. See p. 85.
- **Valsabbion (Pula):** This hedonistic experience is not to be missed. The hotel's seven rooms and three suites are decorated with flair in a breezy, romantic style that carries over to its exquisite restaurant, one of the best in Croatia. There is also a spa with a long menu of beauty treatments. You might come here for the beach, but you'll stay for the food and the pampering. See p. 199.

5 The Best Big Luxury Hotels

- **The Regent Esplanade (Zagreb):** The most gracious hotel in Croatia compares favorably with luxury

hotels in New York and Paris for a fraction of the cost. From rich furnishings in the guest rooms to a

conciierge who is a gallant treasure trove of Croatian history, a stay at the Esplanade is an experience you'll never forget. See p. 237.

- **Hilton Imperial (Dubrovnik):** This is the U.S. chain's first foray into Croatia. Rather than build a hotel from scratch, Hilton had the wisdom to restore what was salvageable from Dubrovnik's historic 19th-century Imperial and graft a modern hotel onto the base. Every detail has been taken care of here, and whether you hail from America or Azerbaijan, you'll be treated as an honored guest. See p. 61.
- **Miramar (Opatija):** Resembling a huge, ornate sand castle overlooking the sea, the Miramar was built at the end of the 19th century for swells who frequented Opatija for their health. But a 2005 face-lift has turned this stately grande dame into a modern spa hotel with every opportunity

for pampering a traveler could want, including a world-class restaurant. See p. 170.

- **Diamant (Poreč):** Though it looks like one of those impersonal '70s package-style hotels from the outside, it is much more—management has thought of everything, and the hotel has an activity to match guests' every whim. The Diamant deserves special kudos for its efforts to accommodate guests with disabilities. Every room can accommodate wheelchairs; even the pool and locker rooms are outfitted to accommodate the disabled. See p. 213.
- **Funimation (Zadar):** The ultimate resort hotel. Funimation is elegant, all-inclusive with excellent restaurants, right on the beach, and scheduled up the wazoo with activities to keep kids busy and out of their parents' hair. This is as close as it gets to a Disney World hotel outside of the U.S. or Paris. See p. 140.

6 The Best Roman Ruins

- **Pula Amphitheater:** Smaller than Rome's coliseum but in much better shape, the amphitheater is a lot more accessible to tourists. Don't miss the newly restored underground chambers and their exhibits featuring Istrian history. And if you happen to be in town when a concert is scheduled there, try to get a ticket no matter who is headlining. See p. 197.
- **Salona (Solín):** The grandeur that was Rome is still evident in the crumbling buildings and foundations that grace this former outpost of the empire. It isn't difficult to imagine what Salona looked like in its prime, but it is tough to imagine why this magnificent city was left to sink into the Earth for a couple of centuries.

Do not approach without sturdy walking shoes, sunscreen, and a full water bottle. See p. 91.

- **Diocletian's Palace (Split):** It isn't what you think of when you hear the word "palace." First, Diocletian built his estate on a scale so grand it was converted into a city after he died. And second, the city's landscape has been tinkered with so much during the last 15 centuries that the character of the original complex has been all but obliterated. However, what remains of the palace and what has been built on its footprint is now Split's Old Town, and if you walk around it, through it, and under it enough, you'll begin to understand Diocletian's enormous ego. See p. 80.

7 The Best Beaches

- **Baška (Krk Island):** This is a sun-lover's paradise, with more than 30 beaches of varying size and a promenade that skirts most of them. Baška's beaches once were sand, but today the sand is covered with pebbles that extend a few feet into the water. That doesn't diminish their appeal because beach chairs, umbrellas, and padded mats are readily available on the promenade. See p. 176.
- **Novalja (Pag Island):** Any cove off Novalja can be a private beach. The water just a few feet offshore is so clear you can see the white, sandy bottom 6m (20 ft.) below. If you have a boat, drop anchor for a while, take a dip, and let your stress float away. See p. 129.
- **Zlatni Rat (Brač Island):** You must visit this beach just so you can say

you did. This is the famous strip usually photographed from the air in all the Croatia ads. In aerials, Zlatni Rat resembles a green finger rimmed with sand and tipped with a curling tendril extending into the sapphire sea. From ground level, it is a sun-blasted, pebbled landscape covered with a huge international crowd soaking up the rays and the local culture. See p. 98.

- **Orebić (Pelješa Peninsula):** The civilized beach gently rolls into the sea. This is a place where families spend the day together and, at the end of the day, Mom brings covered bowls full of fruit down to kids who don't want to leave their sand castles and snorkels for dinner. The water is warm, the sun constant, and the people as nice as they come. See p. 117.

8 The Best Promenades

- **Tkalčićeva Street (Zagreb):** This is a designer's runway, a shopper's paradise, a gourmet's delight, and a historian's fascination. This is where Zagreb's cafe society holds court and where everyone—including tourists—takes a stroll in the evening to see what's happening. See p. 248.
- **Riverwalk (Osijek):** The promenade along the mighty Drava is never empty. People walk their dogs, couples take romantic strolls, kids ride skateboards, and tourists stretch their legs at all hours of the day and night as they follow the river from Tvrđa to the winter harbor. Near Tvrđa, a little bridge leads to the opposite bank and Copacabana, a popular swimming area. See p. 305.
- **Stradun (Dubrovnik):** The walled city's main thoroughfare is broad and bricked and lined with shops and cafes. During the day, the Stradun is

a tourist path crowded with hordes rushing to and from Old Town's famous churches and monuments trying to see as much as they can. When the sun wanes, the traffic doesn't diminish, but slows to promenade pace, and the crowd's style changes from comfortably dressed to their showy best. See p. 57.

- **Obala Hrvatskog Narodnog Preporoda—The "Riva" (Split):** Split's Riva is caught between the city's two busiest places: Diocletian's Palace and the ferry landing. Consequently, foot traffic is shoulder-to-shoulder, with the occasional detours to cafe tables and portable ice-cream stands. The Riva abuts the palace's south wall and was once under water, but today it is the location of some of Split's liveliest nightlife. See p. 80.
- **Riva (Trogir):** Croatia's most entertaining promenade may be the Riva,

especially during the summer. Besides the restaurants that line this path between the city walls and the sea, a cappella singers, fire-eating dancers, vendors selling candy by the kilo, and

other entrepreneurs mingle with strollers taking in the sights. For a visual treat, go to the top of Kamerlengo Fortress at the end of the Riva and take a picture of the lights and action swirling below. See p. 139.

9 The Most Charming Rustic Villages

- **Kumrovec** in the Zagorje is like a Croatian Williamsburg with restored cabins and barns furnished as they were when Croatia's most famous son, Josip Broz Tito, was born in the early 20th century. Some of the rustic buildings in this open-air museum contain photos and displays, while others are home to docents in traditional costumes who explain weaving, candle making, and some of the crafts of the times. See p. 275.
- **Čigoć** is known as the “Stork Place” because of the long-legged birds that perch atop roofs in this Lonjsko Polje village. The storks are the hook that gets tourists to stop in the middle of the marsh, but the historic cabins and

natural surroundings are what keep them there for hours. See p. 291.

- **Štrigova** itself isn't exceptionally rustic, but it is a quaint launching pad for a visit to the surrounding Međimurje region. From here you can explore the rolling vineyards and wineries of northern Croatia. See p. 272.
- **Hlebine** in the north-central part of inland Croatia is home to a colony of nearly 200 painters and sculptors, the country's naive art movement, and Josip and Ivan Generalić, all of whom give it the largest concentration of proponents of naive art in Croatia. Many works from these artists are on display in the town's galleries, one of which is the Generalić home. See p. 294.

10 The Best Cathedrals/Churches

- **Holy Cross Church (Nin):** Holy Cross is the oldest church in Croatia and also the world's smallest cathedral, according to signs posted outside. According to one scientist, the little white stone church is also a giant sun dial and was constructed according to mathematical calculations. See p. 147.
- **Euphrasian Basilica Complex (Poreč):** A must-see sight in this city of superlatives, the UNESCO World Heritage church is the final of four that were built on top of each other. One of its premier attractions is the collection of Byzantine mosaics on display. This is not just one church, but a series of church buildings, each with its own story. See p. 211.

- **St. Donatus (Zadar):** Notable for its unusual shape (circular inside), St. Donatus has a dearth of decoration. The church is no longer used for Mass, but its great acoustics make it a hot venue for classical concerts. Like other churches of its time (9th c.), Donatus is one of several buildings in a clerical complex. See p. 137.

- **Church of St. Mary (Beram):** This chapel in the woods is so small and so remote that you would never notice it if it weren't in a guidebook. But its very remoteness is what protected the eye-popping frescoes that dance on St. Mary's walls. You'll need to pick up one of the church's keepers in Beram and drive to the chapel in the woods so she can unlock it, but it's worth it. See p. 221.

11 The Best Castles

- **Pazin Kaštel (Istria):** One of the best-preserved castles in Istria, thanks to renovations, this one is a surprising “must-see” in the Istrian interior. Pazin Kaštel is built next to one of the scariest-looking gorges ever, a feature that was conveniently utilized as a dumping ground (literally) for enemies of whoever controlled the castle at the time. What may be Croatia’s best ethnographic museum is inside. See p. 221.
- **Stari Grad (Varaždin):** The Gothic Renaissance defensive complex includes a castle and the Varaždin Town Museum. As a whole, Stari Grad is one of this baroque town’s best attractions. The museum is an excellent showcase for the town’s artwork and historical items. Multi-lingual docents are more than willing to help visitors. See p. 281.
- **Veliki Tabor (Zagorje Region):** North of Zagreb is an imposing solid

brick fortress that looks like the place Rapunzel might have let down her hair. Veliki Tabor has its own legends that include murder, mayhem, and a ghost. While the exterior of the 12th-century structure looks like it could withstand a nuclear attack, the inside is still a ruin in search of renovation. See p. 275.

- **Trakošćan Castle (near Varaždin):** North of Zagreb is one of Croatia’s most visited sites and one of its most impressive castles—from the outside. The grounds are extensive and the structure itself is everything you’d expect a storybook castle to be—stone walls, turrets, a drawbridge—but inside, renovations have been less than meticulous and sometimes border on the ridiculous. However, Trakošćan is worth the trip if for no other reason than to muse on the plastic deer mounted on the walls outside the entrance. See p. 280.

12 The Best Town Squares

- **The Forum (Zadar):** The city’s main square, the Forum is notable for the Roman ruins that lie in situ just outside the St. Donatus church complex. These are not ruins you’ll tread on lightly: They are used daily. Merchants display their wares on what’s left of the walls; kids ride their trikes over them; and people sit anywhere. This is the heart of the city. See p. 137.
- **The Peristil (Split):** Once Diocletian’s reception room, the Peristil is just inside the Silver Gate. It is perhaps the one place in what’s left of the palace

besides the cellar where you can grasp the scope of the place and how it looked in its prime. The Peristil is also where Split puts on its famous opera performances during its celebrated summer festival. See p. 82.

- **Forum Square (Pula):** This is the city’s center and the site of its second-best Roman ruin, the Temple of Augustus. The 2nd-century B.C. temple is now a museum. Extensively restored after severe damage during World War II, it still is an exceptional example of Roman engineering. See p. 196.

13 The Best Restaurants

- **Valsabbion (Pula):** This is one of those restaurants that defies categorization. It is innovative yet traditional; stylish yet not overly so; a

mecca of haute cuisine but not so haute that it is intimidating. Valsabbion is a temple to Istrian ingredients and Istrian dishes that are a perfect

match for its talented chef. Together they make magic. See p. 200.

- **Zigante (Livade):** Behold truffle king Giancarlo Zigante's gourmet palace. Almost everything on the extensive menu here utilizes the truffle, the precious fungus upon which Zigante made his fortune. The restaurant is not a gimmick, however: Everything on the menu is expertly prepared and even flirts with creativity. See p. 224.
- **Gallo (Zagreb):** Tucked in the courtyard of a drab building in downtown Zagreb, Gallo is an oasis of fine dining that relies on freshly made pasta, just-caught fish, a strong wine list, and superb service. Both the terrace and the dining room are beautiful settings for the beautiful food. See p. 244.
- **Porat (Dubrovnik):** The Hilton Imperial's signature restaurant offers a menu that pushes the creativity

envelope. The food here is Dalmatian fare with complex sauces and side dishes that surprise you. Both the dining room and the piano bar (which serves light snacks) are very sophisticated spaces. See p. 66.

- **Riblji Restaurant Foša (Zadar):** Foša has one of the best locations in Croatia. It is right at the water outside the Zadar wall and it has a view and sea breeze that make the food taste that much better. The restaurant is a favorite hangout for locals. See p. 143.
- **Palāča Paladini (Hvar Town):** This restaurant appeals to all five senses: It is set in a beautiful garden with blooming lavender and orange trees frequented by songbirds. It has a great list of wines that please the palate; and it offers superb Dalmatian cuisine that tastes as good as it smells and looks. See p. 108.