

The Best of Croatia

Until recently, July and August in Croatia belonged to Germans and Italians, who clogged border crossings in their annual migration to the country's endless beaches and clear blue sea. Finally, the rest of the world has discovered Croatia's charms: its wealth of Roman ruins, medieval hilltop castles, and staggering cache of natural wonders. Even though the summer crowds are now larger and more diverse, it still is possible to find a secluded cove or patch of beach where it seems you're the only person on Earth. When all the name-brand hotels are filled, there always is a room 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.

This chapter is a "road map," directing you to some of our favorites. We know you'll add to the list when you find some of your own.

1 THE BEST TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Listening to the Sea Organ** (Zadar): Waves create music as they move water through this organ's undersea pipes. Add a set of white stone steps leading into the crystal water above the submerged organ and shooting beams of light from sister installation **Greeting to the Sun** on Zadar's Riva. The result is a matchless venue to enjoy a multimedia symphony courtesy of the sea and sky. See p. 171.
- **Viewing Mummies** (Vodjnan): They look a little like skeletons shrink-wrapped in leather, and they are billed as the mortal coils of holy people who died centuries ago but miraculously never decomposed. You can't get too close to these relics because viewing distance is restricted. You can, however, recognize these mummies as former human beings even in the dimly lighted area behind the altar of St. Blaise Church in Vodjnan. Soulful background music and overly dramatic piped-in commentary make the experience creepy but riveting. See p. 237.
- **Watching the Sunrise over Vis Town Harbor** (Vis): Vis Town and its harbor were the view from our balcony at the Bellevue Apartments in the hills above. It was a perfect vantage point for witnessing a kaleidoscope of color washing over the landscape as the sun moved above the horizon each morning. At night everything was black and gray, then just before dawn, the scene was painted in liquid gold. Pinks and blues were next, and finally the buildings and sea came into focus in silver, turquoise, and red. It was such a glorious sight that we were up before dawn every day just to catch the show.
- **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 to make it tourist-friendly. See p. 269.

- **Strolling Through Mirogoj Cemetery** (Zagreb): As much sculpture garden as burial ground, this 19th-century cemetery was designed by architect Hermann 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. 285.

- **Descending into Iločki Podrumi** (Ilok): You'll get the chills from two sources in this second-oldest wine cellar in Croatia: the temperature and the history. The cellar was looted by the Serbs during the Homeland War, but not before the owners concealed 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. 361.

2 THE BEST NATURAL WONDERS

- **Plitvice Lakes National Park** (145km/90 miles southwest of Zagreb): Plitvice is Croatia's best-known natural wonder. The park's 16 crystal-clear, turquoise lakes and countless waterfalls put on a great show. The lakes flow into one another and tumble over deposits of travertine, creating waterfalls that drop a few feet or plunge 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. 315.
- **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 is rocky and lightly blanketed with vegetation (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 into the water. Sixty-nine species of butterflies live here. Perhaps the most interesting part is

Kornati's offshore underwater landscape. Its rock formations support flourishing flora and fauna. See p. 183.

- **Paklenica National Park** (btw. Zadar and Karlobag): Paklenica's raw beauty is best appreciated by hikers and nature lovers. But even motorists respect the imposing Velebit peaks because the limestone cliffs that soar above deep gorges and dense vegetation are visible for miles from nearby highways. Even from afar you can see cave openings and imagine what's inside. See p. 177.
- **Krka National Park** (less than half an 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 jaw-droppingly steep Skradinski Buk and Roški Slapovi are the most impressive. Between the two are Lake Visovac and Visovac Island, home to a Franciscan monastery. See p. 186.

3 THE BEST OPEN-AIR MARKETS

- **Dolac** (Zagreb): The urban market is above the main square at the foot of Old Town, but it is more than just a place to buy fruits and veggies. Dolac is a crossroads where people come to see and be seen; to trade gossip; and to relax with a cup of coffee. 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. 278.
- **Pazarin** (Split): Pazarin 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. Pazarin has the usual assortment of produce plus a variety of textiles and the country's most persuasive vendors. See p. 109.
- **Bjelovar** (Bjelovar): This market is quite civilized and partially covered. It is noteworthy as the place where 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 open until 6pm or so. The later it gets, the lower the prices go. See p. 343.

4 THE BEST SMALL HOTELS & INNS

- **Hotel San Rocco** (Brtonigla): San Rocco's location deep in Istria adds to the romance in its lovingly restored stone buildings and grounds. Flowers, olive groves, and an assortment of ruins comprise the hotel's sensual "curb appeal." But it's really the beautifully put together guest rooms with their mélange of antique and modern touches, the inviting pool, and the magnificent gourmet restaurant that seal the deal. See p. 254.
- **Lešić Dimitri Palace** (Korčula): Each of the six *pied-à-terre* in this lavishly renovated urban palace has a personality of its own and each is drenched in luxury. Privacy, elegance, and whimsy are built into each unit, any of which would be a fitting home for royalty in Manhattan or Marrakesh. See p. 146.
- **Villa Kukuljica** (Zaton Mali): Villa K is a modest inn compared to most of the splashy accommodations in the Dubrovnik area, but in a single night its authenticity made a lasting impression. Experience real Croatian hospitality in the person of Kukuljica's owners. It's a revelation of culture, food, and hospitality. See p. 82.
- **Hotel Waldinger** (Osijek): Waldinger packs a lot of elegance into its 18 rooms, each of which drips with period elegance in the heart of a city that has not altogether recovered from the Homeland War. From here you easily can walk to the banks of the Drava, shop the city market, and explore medieval Tvrđa. See p. 353.
- **Hotel Boškinac** (Novalja, Pag Island): Boškinac is in the middle of nowhere even for Pag, but that's part of its charm. The country-chic hotel is surrounded by gardens, olive groves, vineyards, and forest, far from the madding weekenders who descend on nearby Novalja all summer long. Boškinac's restaurant is one of most food-forward in Croatia, and the wines from its vineyards are prized all over the country. See p. 163.
- **Hotel Palazzo** (Poreč): When the Hotel Riviera opened a century ago, it was

standing on Istria's first landfill. Today the Riviera has been reincarnated in the same spot with all its original charm and elegance. It's the Palazzo now, with the soul of 1910 Italy in a 2010 body, a heady combination of history, romance, and comfort. See p. 249.

- **Hotel Vestibul Palace** (Split): The Roman Empire meets the 21st century at the Palace, where most rooms share at least part of a wall built by Diocletian. History and gourmet delights align to make this one of the best hotel experiences in Croatia. Each room has a

personality of its own, complete with cleverly designed windows carved into the stone walls to reveal views of various aspects of Old Town. See p. 112.

- **Valsabbion** (Pula): This hedonistic experience is not to be missed. The hotel's seven rooms, three suites, and spa are decorated with flair in a breezy, romantic style that carries over to its exquisite restaurant, one of the best in Croatia. You might come here for the beach, but you'll stay for the food and the pampering. See p. 233.

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 concierge who is a gallant repository of Croatian history, a stay at the Esplanade is an experience you'll never forget. See p. 290.
- **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, and you'll be treated as an honored guest here. See p. 76.
- **Excelsior** (Dubrovnik): We love the Excelsior for its understated profile and for the way it channels the graceful elegance of the 1930s in style and attitude. Every service is personalized and every visitor is treated as if he or she is the hotel's guest of honor. In Dubrovnik's frenetic tourism environment, that is no small feat. See p. 77.
- **Le Meridien Lav** (Split): Le Meridien's seaside location in Podstrana, 20 minutes from Split's Old Town, gives it a resort feel. Its spacious, well-appointed

rooms, spa, casino, and high-design public areas contribute luxury, and its marina, tennis courts, and pools make it a destination hotel. If you are looking for a place you don't have to leave to have fun, this is it. See p. 112.

- **Monte Mulini** (Rovinj): The Monte Mulini is Rovinj's first true luxury hotel. Even the lowest priced room has a huge glamour bathroom with a shower that is separate from the tub and an array of designer toiletries. MM's world class restaurants, services, and a people-centric staff cater to guests' every whim. The spa is the ultimate in decadence with a floating bath filled with water that has such a high concentration of salt that you stay suspended in water no matter how hard you try to touch bottom. See p. 241.
- **Radisson BLU** (Orašac): Orašac is 12km (7½ miles) from Dubrovnik and an idyllic spot for getting away from it all without going too far. The nice thing about the BLU is that you never have to leave its lavishly landscaped grounds. You can veg out right there and still experience Dalmatia's natural beauty, fine food, and hospitality. Even better, the BLU provides all the above while being environmentally responsible. See p. 78.

6 THE BEST ROMAN RUINS

- **Pula Amphitheater** (Pula): Smaller than Rome's coliseum but in much better shape, the amphitheater is more accessible to tourists than its Rome counterpart. Don't miss the restored underground chambers and their exhibits featuring Istrian history. And if you're in town when a concert is scheduled, get a ticket no matter who is headlining. See p. 230.
- **Salona** (Solín): The grandeur that was Rome still is evident in the crumbling buildings and foundations of 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 Salona 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. 118.
- **Diocletian's Palace** (Split): Diocletian built his estate on a scale so grand it was converted into a city after he died, but its landscape has been tinkered with so much during the last 15 centuries that the character of the original complex has been all but obliterated. What remains of the palace and what has been built on its footprint is now Split's Old Town. If you walk around it, through it, and under it enough, you'll begin to understand Diocletian's enormous ego. See p. 107.

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 now the sand is covered with pebbles that extend a few feet into the water. See p. 210.
- **Novalja** (Pag Island): Any cove off Novalja can be a private beach. The water 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. 161.
- **Zlatni Rat** (Brač Island): Visit this beach just so you can say you did. This is the famous strip that appears in all the Croatia ads, usually in an aerial view. From above, 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. 129.
- **Orebić** (Pelješac Peninsula): Orebić is a civilized place where families linger 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. The water is warm, the sun constant, and the people as nice as they come. See p. 94.

8 THE MOST CHARMING RUSTIC VILLAGES

- **Kumrovec** in the Zagorje region is like a Croatian Williamsburg, Virginia, with restored cabins and barns furnished as they were when Croatia's most famous son, Josip Broz Tito, was born in the late 19th century. Some of the rustic buildings in this open-air museum contain photos and displays,

while others feature docents in traditional costumes who explain weaving, candle making, and some of the crafts of the times. See p. 320.

- **Čigoč** 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 keep them there for hours. See p. 336.
- **Štrigova** isn’t exceptionally rustic, but it is a quaint launching pad for a visit to

the surrounding Međimurje region. From Štrigova, you can explore the rolling vineyards and wineries of northern Croatia. See chapter 11.

- **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 the ateliers of Josip and Ivan Generalić. It is the cradle of the naive art movement in Croatia. Many works from these artists are on display in the town’s galleries, one of which is the Generalić home. See p. 340.

9 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 posted signs. According to one scientist, the little white stone church is also a giant sun dial and was constructed according to mathematical calculations. See p. 179.
- **Euphrasian Basilica Complex** (Poreč): A must-see sight in this city of superlatives, the UNESCO World Heritage church is the last of four that were built on top of each other. One of the basilica’s premier attractions is the collection of Byzantine mosaics on display. Euphrasius is not just one church, but a series of church buildings, each with its own story. See p. 247.
- **St. Donatus** (Zadar): Notable for its unusual shape (circular inside), St. Donatus is void 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. 171.
- **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 St. Mary’s remoteness is what protected the eye-popping frescoes that dance on its walls. You’ll need to pick up one of the church’s keepers in Beram and drive her to the chapel in the woods so she can unlock it. See p. 260.

10 THE BEST CASTLES

- **Pazin Kaštel** (Istria): One of the best-preserved castles in Istria, this is a surprising “must-see” in the Istrian interior. Pazin Kaštel is 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. 261.
- **Stari Grad** (Varaždin): The Gothic Renaissance defensive complex includes a castle and the Varaždin Town Museum. As a whole, Stari Grad is this

- Baroque town's best attraction. The museum is an excellent showcase for artwork and historical items. Multilingual docents are happy to help visitors. See p. 328.
- **Veliki Tabor** (Zagorje Region): North of Zagreb is an imposing, solid brick fortress that looks like the place Rapunzel let down her hair. Veliki Tabor has its own legends, including 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 in the process of renovation. See p. 322.
 - **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 tacky. However, Trakošćan is worth the trip if for no other reason than to ponder the plastic deer mounted on the walls outside the entrance. See p. 326.

11 THE BEST RESTAURANTS

- **Valsabbion** (Pula): Valsabbion is so avant-garde that it defies categorization. It is innovative yet traditional; stylish yet not overly so; a mecca of haute cuisine but not intimidating. This is a temple to Istrian ingredients and dishes that are a perfect match for its talented chef. Together they make magic. See p. 233.
- **Mala Hiza** (Mačkovec): Mala Hiza is one of the finest restaurants in the country. The building was constructed in 1887 and once stood outside Zagreb—it later was taken apart, plopped in the middle of a gorgeous garden, and reassembled 4km (2½ miles) outside Čakovic. The menu is full of creative interpretations of regional Croatian cuisine, and the chef will prepare any old-time recipe if you call ahead with your request. See p. 333.
- **Klub Gastronomada** (Zagreb): Dining at this upstairs room off Jelačića Square awakened taste buds we didn't know we had. The restaurant's bent clearly is locavore, but its soul is experimental theater. From clear tomato soup to nettle sauce to Istrian beef to a dessert made with black olive jam, we were surprised (and wowed) with every bite (and every sip of IQ wine). See p. 297.
- **Zinfandel's** (Regent Esplanade, Zagreb): We dined at Zinfandel's on several occasions over the years and found it to be a solid, traditional choice. This time (2009), we were blown away by its new attitude, menu, and the deftness of its chef. The old school elegance of the room and impeccable service still are there, but the food is lighter, more contemporary, and the preparations and presentations are as creative as any we encountered. This is a special occasion place and a don't-miss-it for anyone who cares about gourmet dining. See p. 296.
- **Zigante** (Livade): Behold truffle king Giancarlo Zigante's gourmet palace. Almost everything on the extensive menu here utilizes the truffle, the precious fungus with which Zigante made his fortune. The restaurant is not a gimmick: Everything on the menu is expertly prepared and even flirts with creativity. See p. 267.
- **Boškinac** (Novalja, Pag Island): Boškinac has a knack for turning fresh produce and local ingredients like Pag

lamb and Pag cheese into dishes that surprise the palate. Whether it's a Saturday lunch on the sunny terrace or a gala dinner in the elegant dining room, Boškinac's creations are sublime. We don't know how the chef did it, but the four cuts of lamb in a single sauce each had a personality all its own. Go out of your way for Boškinac and take home a bottle of its boutique wine. See p. 164.

- **Bitoraj** (Fužine): Bitoraj is a 75-year-old restaurant in a new setting, which only enhances the dining experience. Game dishes available nowhere else are on the menu in company with traditional delicacies. From bear steak and deer ham to Bitoraj's signature dish of young wild boars baked under a lid on

an open fire (*peka*), Bitoraj utilizes the best ingredients the surrounding woods can offer. See p. 191.

- **Riblji Restaurant Foša** (Zadar): Foša has one of the best locations in Croatia. It is 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. 174.
- **Palača 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, and it offers superb Dalmatian cuisine that tastes as good as it smells and looks. See p. 142.