

EASTERN EUROPE: CROATIA & SLOVENIA

Lecture by Cameron Hewitt

Croatia and Slovenia are the two most accessible parts of the former Yugoslavia. Croatia, with a long and varied coastline offering countless island adventures, is the perfect place for some fun in the sun. Tiny, undiscovered Slovenia's forté is high-mountain scenery and breezy café culture. A visit to both (plus Montenegro and Bosnia) is the perfect combination.

CROATIA

Istria: Wedge-shaped peninsula in northwest, with diverse attractions: Rovinj (crumbling Venetian-style coastal town with great ambience), Pula (big city with Roman ruins, including giant amphitheater). Hill towns in the interior (dramatic Motovun). Great wine, truffles, olive oil.

Zagreb: Underrated capital city, easy to see if passing through. Great cafés, parks, museums (e.g., Naive Art, Broken Relationships). Jelačić Square, funicular to old town and St. Mark's.

Plitvice Lakes National Park: Canyon with 16 gorgeous terraced lakes, waterfalls, crystal-clear fish-filled water, connected by footpaths and boats, 2.5 hrs south of Zagreb en route to the coast (bus or car).

War Damage: War damage in the interior from early 1990s. (The coast was virtually untouched, except Dubrovnik.) Still-destroyed homes belonged to Serbs who haven't returned. Today it's safe and stable.

Split: Biggest city on the coast. Ideal for urban people-watching, especially on busy harborfront promenade (Riva). Built in remains of Roman Emperor Diocletian's huge fourth-century palace. Roman ruins everywhere. Ivan Meštrović is talented local sculptor with a fine museum.

Dalmatian Coast: Stretches from Zadar to Dubrovnik. Several islands, but the best are...

- **Hvar** is ritzy and jet-set, with great nightlife, interesting museums, climbable hilltop fortress, and low-key island getaways.
- **Korčula** is a "mini-Dubrovnik" walled village, famous for *Moreška* sword dance and as birthplace of Marco Polo.
- Vacation-from-your-vacation activities include swimming (most beaches rocky or pebbly—bring wading shoes), kayaking, etc.

Dubrovnik: "Pearl of the Adriatic," walled town jutting boldly into the sea. Independent republic ("Libertas") until



Napoleon. Stroll the Stradun (main drag), visit churches and monasteries, cable car up to mountaintop, Old Port with excursions to nearby towns and islands. Walk the walls for stunning views and a look at the repaired roofs (Dubrovnik was the only coastal town attacked in recent war). Fine beaches. Drink bar ("Buža") clinging to the outside of the wall.

General Travel Tips

Food and Drink: Sample the excellent local wines and the Slovenian cola called Cockta. *Pršut* (prosciutto), olives, and sheep cheese are popular. Italian-type pastas and pizzas. Good seafood (fish, octopus, calamari, shrimp, anchovies, etc.). Also try Balkan grilled meat specialties (*ražnjići*, *čevapčići*), with spicy red eggplant condiment *ajvar*. *Peka* is lamb or veal slow-cooked with coals under a metal lid.

Accommodations: Avoid overpriced resort hotels (\$200-300+ doubles). Instead, focus on *sobe* (rooms in private homes, like B&Bs, \$70-140 doubles) or apartments—twice the cultural intimacy for half the price. Find *sobe* in my guidebook, online, or just show up and look for signs.

Transportation: Cruise between towns (or to Italy) on boats, no reservations for walk-ons (main company: Jadrolinija.hr). Towns are also connected by frequent buses (trains not as useful in most areas). Easy to connect to northern Croatia/Slovenia: expressway is 5 hrs from Zagreb to Split. Rental car is ideal for certain areas (Slovenian Alps, Istria, Montenegro) but unnecessary in others (Ljubljana, Bled, Dalmatian Coast). Beware high

international drop-off fees. Cheap flights within Croatia: Croatia Airlines (best deals far in advance, Croatiaairlines.hr); to other parts of Europe, try Skyscanner.com.

History: “Yugoslavia” was “Union of the South Slavs,” formed when Europe’s empires broke apart at the end of World War I. Made up of six different republics and several ethnicities—most notably the Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Slovenes, and Muslim Bosniaks. Held together by dictator Tito, who wasn’t allied with USSR and had a softer version of communism. After Tito’s death, Serbian president Slobodan Milošević upset the balance of power, so in 1991 Croatia and Slovenia declared independence. Slovenia’s separation was relatively easy (10-day skirmish), but Croatia was more ethnically diverse (large Serb minority), so it fell into a brutal war, ending in 1995. Since then, both nations are stable, peaceful, completely safe, and welcoming to travelers.

BALKAN SIDE-TRIPS

Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina: Handy and fascinating day trip from Dalmatia. War-damaged city now being repaired. Famous for iconic Old Bridge (once destroyed, now rebuilt). Turkish-style market, old Turkish houses, and mosques. Best side-trip from Dubrovnik.

Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina: A bit beyond Mostar, but well worthwhile for adventurous travelers.

Montenegro: Newly independent, easy/varied day trip from Dubrovnik. Highlight is dramatic, fjord-like Bay of Kotor and Kotor town.

SLOVENIA

Ljubljana: Charming capital city with picture-perfect setting and laid-back café culture. Prešeren Square (named for national poet) across the river from riverfront market and Dragon Bridge. Wonderful Art Nouveau architecture, plus many quirky structures by local architect Jože Plečnik, including Cobblers Bridge and National & University Library (NUK). Hilltop castle with city and mountain views.

Day Trips to the South: Karst region with some of the world’s best caves, including the tourable caves called



Škocjan and Postojna. Watch Lipizzaner Stallions perform at Lipica Stud Farm. Predjama Castle embedded in a mountainside.

Lake Bled: Slovenia’s top resort, in Julian Alps foothills. Picturesque lake with church on island (ride out on *pletna* boat). Castle overlooking the lake (great views), delicious cream cakes.

Julian Alps: Scenic mountain area with Baroque steeples, traditional Slovenian hayracks.

Vršč Pass/Soča River Valley: Best day in the Slovenian Alps. Dramatic mountain pass with 50 switchbacks; river valley Hemingway wrote about; excellent World War I museum and Italian mausoleum in Kobarid.

Piran: Best town on Slovenia’s tiny (29-mile) coastline. Tartini Square, bell tower, promenade

LEARN MORE

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