



Europe Trip, Visiting Central Europe (E26A-3)

Croatia – Zagreb and Day Trips

After Slovenia, I continued on to Zagreb, Croatia’s capital city. When I first started planning this trip, I was hoping instead to visit Split and/or Dubrovnik, both of which are on Croatia’s Adriatic Sea coast and both of which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Unfortunately, both are also now so overrun with tourists – and especially the thousands of cruise ship passengers dumped daily into small city centers that now cater to them – that their charm has been buried. Zagreb has a lot to see, and I would get a more authentic Croatian visit there.

For my third use of Daytrip.com on the trip, I hired one of their drivers to transfer me from Ljubljana, Slovenia to Zagreb, Croatia, adding two sightseeing stops along the way – one in each country. For my Croatia stop, I chose the small town of Samobor, Croatia, a one-time medieval market town. Samobor has a small castle ruins site on a hill above the city center, and it is in a wine-producing area, but I was content to explore its pretty city center area for this 75-minute stop.



Samobor’s King Tomislava Square



Samobor Castle, now in ruins, dates back to the 13th century

Zagreb is the capital of Croatia. Croats first settled in the area in the 6th century, creating two duchies. Croatia was granted independence in 878 and became a kingdom under King Tomislav in 925. It joined Hungary in the 12th century. Later, it was reorganized into the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs before merging into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1918. It was occupied by Axis powers in World War II. A resistance movement restored sovereignty during the war, and it became the Socialist Republic of Croatia within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1943. Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, fighting a war for its independence until 1995. Today, Croatia is a democracy and a member of the European Union and NATO.

Romans settled near present-day Zagreb, which itself dates back to the founding of Kaptol in 1094 on a hilltop just north of today's city center. The town of Gradec was established on an adjacent hilltop. Both of these fortified towns eventually merged into Zagreb. Their hilltop locations led to this part of the city to be referred to as Upper Town, and the downhill expansion is referred to as Lower Town. During the socialist years, the city expanded further to the south, creating Novi Zagreb (New Zagreb), filled with drab socialist architecture to provide housing for workers.

Upper Town is the focus for historical sightseeing, and includes the Zagreb Cathedral and the seat of the federal government. Lower Town has more shopping, restaurants and museums. These were the parts of Zagreb that I explored.

If you walk to Upper Town, Zagreb Cathedral will be your first stop. The Gothic-style cathedral is the second tallest building in the country and one of the tallest churches in the world. Unfortunately, the cathedral, along with a number of other buildings, suffered significant damage in a 2020 earthquake, and the spires are still undergoing significant reconstruction.



Zagreb Cathedral, still undergoing repairs and restoration after a 2020 earthquake



Kaptol's fortifications date back to the 1400s. A surviving segment can be seen next to the cathedral.



Along historic Kaptol Street, including the Church of St. Francis



A gradual uphill walk will take you from historic Kaptol to historic Gradec, passing through the old Stone Gate. Inside the gate is a shrine to the Virgin Mary.



While exploring Zagreb, I came across a number of quirky private “museums”, including these two in Gradec – the Cravaticum Necktie Museum and Café and the Museum of Broken Relationships, neither of which interested me in the least beyond their quirkiness.



St. Mark's Church dates back to the 13th century. It shares St. Mark's Square with the Croatian Parliament and the seat of the Croatian government.



The Upper Town Observation Point features views of Lower Town. The funicular that connects Lower Town and Upper Town stops here, although it is currently out of service. At just 217 feet long, it is claimed to be the shortest public transit funicular in the world (for comparison, the Angels Flight funicular in downtown Los Angeles is 298 feet long).

I had plans for two Gradec museums, the Croatian History Museum and the Zagreb City Museum, but the Croatian History Museum was damaged in the 2020 earthquake and remains closed. But the Zagreb City Museum is a very good history museum, just more narrowly focused on Zagreb's history.



Artifacts from an Iron Age settlement dating back to 8000 BC have been found in what is now Upper Town. Prehistoric burial sites, Bronze Age artifacts, a Roman necropolis and medieval finds have been unearthed in Upper Town, sometimes through focused archaeological digs and sometimes as accidental discoveries during construction projects.



The Zagreb Cathedral and Kaptol fortress



Tools of the trades



KVAK was a humor-based social club established in Zagreb in the late 1800s



The walking route to Kaptol and then to Gradec that I took was steadily uphill but gradual enough that it wasn't at all strenuous. But there are a handful of more direct routes – staircases like the Mill Stairs, shown here. I took the Mill Stairs down to a valley between the Kaptol and Gradec hills to Ivana Tkalčiča Street, now a restaurant and nightlife district.



But Ivana Tkalčiča Street was once the heart of Europe's first legal Red-Light District, a history that this sculpture pays tribute to. *Lady in the Window* is a memorial to prostitutes. It took me a while to find it, as I didn't think to look for a memorial to prostitutes on a children's playground (that's the American in me, I guess). And I couldn't very well ask people along the street if they knew where I could find a prostitute.



The restaurants along Ivana Tkalčića Street drew quite a crowd, even in the middle of a Sunday afternoon.



Ban Josip Jelačić Square is located at the base of Upper Town, and serves as the main square for Lower Town.



Pizza by the slice is one of your “grab a quick bite to eat” options along Ban Josip Jelačić Square. And, yes, that is corn on the pizza. Corn has popped up in unexpected places as I have toured countries in Eastern Europe.



Inventor/engineer Nikola Tesla was an ethnic Serbian born in the village of Smiljan in what is now Croatia. Zagreb honors him with this statue, a street named after him and the Nikola Tesla Technical Museum, the most visited museum in Croatia.

Although the Croatian History Museum was closed, the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb did an excellent job of telling Croatia's history through archaeological finds, at least up until the Middle Ages. It starts with finds dating back to the Neanderthals, an early species of humans not found in North American archaeology. They went extinct about 40,000 years ago, about the same time that modern humans made inroads into Europe.



A Vučedol culture bird-shaped vessel from about 2-3000 BC



The Idol from Dalj, a Bronze Age find



Ethnic Slavs began moving into the area during the 6th to 8th centuries



Croatian jewelry and coins from the Middle Ages

Although Zagreb's Ethnography Museum was much smaller than the one I toured in Budapest, I was hoping for at least a nice introduction to Croatia culture, folk art and so on. It is actually famous for its collection of regional Croatian costumes.



Unfortunately, one of the museum's exhibit areas was undergoing a change in exhibits and thus was closed, and the regional costumes exhibit area was closed for some unexplained reason. That pretty much just left an exhibit area of cultural items that Croatians brought back to Croatia from other countries. Interesting enough to see, of course, but not at all insightful into Croatian culture.



King Tomislav Square, a block west from my hotel

As in Ljubljana, I lost the better part of a Zagreb sightseeing day to some seriously bad weather, missing a cemetery and some neighborhood walks. But I did meet all of my priority sightseeing goals, except for the ones closed because of the 2020 earthquake.

For my final use of Daytrip.com, I hired a driver to take me to Plitviče Lakes National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site near Croatia's border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Korana River flowing from the south carries a lot of minerals that have resulted in the creation of travertine dams along the river that in turn have resulted in a series of sixteen cascading lakes connected by small waterfalls. A second stream tumbles down a mountain side, creating the Great Waterfall, the tallest in Croatia. The two streams meet, and the Korana River continues north to Rastoke and beyond, its waters eventually reaching the Black Sea. The park has a number of hiking trails, along with limited boating, lodging and restaurants. I hiked a trail that featured the Great Waterfall and a handful of the lakes.



The Great Waterfall – and a line of tourists on the boardwalk leading towards its base. The park is a popular tour group day trip destination from several cities in the region, although the park does limit how many people can enter the park in any given hour.



Hiking at Plitviče Lakes



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On the drive back to Zagreb, we stopped in Rastoke. Similar processes resulted in more waterfalls here. Rastoke was a small mill village built here to take advantage of the waterpower, with the first mill dating back to the 1600s. There were as many as 22 water-powered mills in Rastoke at one time.

With my Croatian sightseeing completed, I flew back to London for a few days to wrap up the trip.