

CROATIA & MONTENEGRO with Bosnia-Herzegovina

Experiential Adriatica

15 days

Created on: 4 Apr, 2026

Day 1 Arrival in Zagreb

Today we arrive in Zagreb, capital of Croatia.

From its intriguing architecture to nearby natural havens, this underrated European capital has something for everyone. Unlike most western European capitals, Zagreb's cityscape is a fascinating mixture of classic Austro-Hungarian architecture and gritty socialist structures. With an electric mix of Italian, Turkish, and Austro-Hungarian influences, even the "coffee culture" here is steeped in history.

Overnight in Zagreb.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Zagreb City Touring

This morning we explore Zagreb on foot, discovering how two rival medieval towns grew into Croatia's intriguing capital. Zagreb began as two settlements: fortified Gradec on the western hill and ecclesiastical Kaptol on the eastern rise, separated by a stream and centuries of rivalry. Though officially merged in 1850, these twin towns retain distinct characters in their medieval streets.

We begin at Ban Jelacic Square, the capital's beating heart, where the equestrian statue depicts Josip Jelacic, who became ban (governor) in the mid-19th century. This bustling plaza marks the boundary between Zagreb's medieval Upper Town and its elegant Lower Town.

Steps away, Dolac Market has served as Zagreb's main farmers market since 1930, its red umbrellas sheltering vendors selling seasonal produce, mountain cheeses, and cured meats. The market's unique position reveals Zagreb's innovative use of hilly terrain.

Ascending to atmospheric Gradec, we pass through the Stone Gate, sole survivor of four medieval entrances. When fire destroyed the gateway in 1731, a painting of the Virgin Mary emerged miraculously unscathed. Today locals pause to light candles before this sacred image.

We reach St. Mark's Church, whose tiled roof displays medieval coats of arms. The church overlooks St. Mark's Square, surrounded by Parliament buildings and the baroque Ban's Palace. Before Parliament stands a bronze Statue of St. George slaying the dragon.

At Lotrscak Tower, a cannon fires daily at noon, a tradition begun to help citizens synchronise clocks. We cross Bloody Bridge, whose name recalls medieval disputes that occasionally turned violent.

Descending toward Kaptol, we encounter Zagreb Cathedral, whose neo-Gothic twin spires have dominated the skyline for over a century. The cathedral's history stretches back to medieval times, though it has been rebuilt several times following Mongol invasion, earthquake, and war. Following the 2020 earthquake that damaged over 2,000 city buildings, the cathedral exterior remains under scaffolding for seismic strengthening.

Our tour concludes at the Croatian Natural History Museum, spectacularly reopened in 2024 after extensive post-earthquake renovation. The historic Amadeo Palace now contains 39 interactive halls across three floors. After a brief orientation, you're free to explore at your own pace. Collections include the famous Krapina Neanderthal remains, and the atrium features a unique Rock Map of Croatia constructed from the nation's geological materials.

Your afternoon unfolds according to your interests. Zagreb's renowned cafe culture invites you to linger and observe daily life in Croatia's resilient capital.

Overnight in Zagreb.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Zagreb - Plitvice National Park Hike

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This morning we depart the capital by road and head to the iconic Plitvice National Park, where 16 lakes, each at a different level, join each other in a series of cascading waterfalls. We embark on a hike immediately upon arrival (hotel check-in after our hike).

Travertine terraces have been continuously reforming themselves over 10,000 years as calcium carbonate dissolves and settles, forming barriers and cascades. Imagine Niagara Falls diced and sprinkled over a heavily forested Grand Canyon. This lush valley of terraced lakes is laced together by waterfalls and miles of pleasant wooden-plank walks. Countless cascades and strangely clear and colourful water make the Plitvice Lakes National Park a misty natural wonderland. The ever-changing fluid landscape -- created by water, gravity, limestone and time -- is mesmerizing.

Look for wildlife as you hike -- the park is home to deer, wolves, wildcats, wild boar, and more than 160 species of birds (from eagles to herons to owls). The lakes (and local menus) are full of trout. The entire area is protected as one of UNESCO's Natural World Heritage Sites. We will follow wooden paths on our walk around the Lower and Upper Lakes, ending with a short boat ride across the largest lake.

TOTAL WALKING TIME +/- 4 hours (leisurely/easy, mostly flat)

Our hikes: Because some hikes can/may be adjusted at the discretion of your Tour Leader depending on things like weather and group interest, the final distances/durations of our hikes as indicated in our itinerary should be taken as guidance only. In the meantime, however, we can advise that, generally-speaking, our walks are leisurely on well-trodden pathways over undulating terrain (some walks are downhill), 2-5 hours in overall duration with plenty of breaks for refreshment, photos, and taking it all in.

Overnight in Plitvice.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Plitvice - Paklenica National Park Hike - Split

Today we travel to Split via Paklenica National Park where we enjoy a hike.

The park is situated south of the Velebit range of mountains (the largest in Croatia) and covers just under 100 square km, with a mixture of high peaks, deep gorges, and beech and pine forests. We take the trail from the main entrance, along a dry creek bed in the shade of mostly Adriatic black pine trees. The section of the route we cover is called The Educational Trail and is full of information boards describing the natural and cultural features of the area.

Next we come to an area where rock climbers from all over the world come to scale the limestone cliffs, making this National Park and UNESCO World Heritage site one of the best-known rock climbing places in all of Europe. Next comes a steepish uphill section of switchbacks that eventually takes us to a shaded, flatter trail. And finally we come to a simple hut that serves cold beer and simple home made food.

After a break here we descend on foot using the same trail we came up.

Our final destination for the day is Split (ancient Spalato), the second largest city of Croatia. The historic city centre actually lies within the walls of the enormous retirement palace of Roman Emperor Diocletian, built between 295-305 AD. The palace served as residence, military fortress, and later, fortified town. The city is enclosed by huge walls, pierced by four main gates.

TOTAL WALKING TIME (Paklenica hike): 4 hours. 8 km/5 miles. Elevation gain/loss 200 m/656 ft.

Overnight in Split.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Split Touring - Ferry to Brač Island & Hermitage of Blaca Hike

This morning we'll have a walking tour of Split's historic center, which actually lies in the walls of the enormous retirement palace of the Roman Emperor Diocletian built between 295-305 AD. The building served as a palace, military fortress, and later, a fortified town. The city is enclosed by huge walls, pierced by 4 main gates.

We then travel by ferry to the town of Bol on nearby Brač Island, the highest and third largest island in the Adriatic.

Today's excursion (prior to hotel check-in) on Brac takes us on a relaxing and panoramic boat ride along the coast of Brac to a hiking trail that leads us up to the intriguing Hermitage of Blaca, now a museum. Departing from Bol, our boat will pass Croatia's most famous beach, the Golden Horn (Zlatni Rat), before continuing past pine forests, olive groves and coastal vineyards to the trailhead in Blaca Bay.

The reward for our 45-minute uphill climb is a visit to the dramatically situated Hermitage of Blaca, whose stone structures cling to cliff overlooking a dry ravine. The hermitage was established in the 16th century by monks from the mainland town of Poljice who sought refuge from invading Turks. Originally situated in a cave, the hermitage was built up over the centuries to include a church, school, astronomical observatory and library. Today the museum houses a unique collection of ancient books, clocks, astronomical instruments and artifacts from the life of the last monk to inhabit Blaca, Niko Milicevic.

After a tour of the hermitage we return to our boat in travel back to Bol, where you have the remainder of the afternoon to explore the town or stroll/swim at Zlatni Rat (the Golden Horn). Even if you're not a "beach person," this stunningly unique stretch of idyllic sand is not to be missed. Considered one of the most beautiful in Europe, the strand has become an iconic symbol of Croatia and the whole of the Mediterranean.

TOTAL WALKING TIME +/- 2 hrs; elevation variation +/- 250m/820 ft

Overnight on Brac.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Brac Island - Ferry to Hvar Island: Walking Tour

Today we travel by ferry to Hvar, Queen of the Dalmatian Islands, considered one of the ten most beautiful islands in the world.

The island of Hvar receives 2,724 hours of sunshine per year, more than anywhere else in Croatia, and is thus called the Island of the Sun. Greeks from Paros first settled on the island in the 4th century BC in Pharos, the modern town of Stari Grad. In the 13th century, the capital of the island was transferred to the town of Hvar (a mutation of Pharos in Slavic) and prospered during 3.5 centuries of Venetian rule. This picturesque town and marina is alive with the constant hum of activity.

We will have a walking tour through narrow streets to the 15th century Franciscan Monastery where we visit the Renaissance cloister, the old rectory that today houses a collection of lace, manuscripts and books, and the church with its remarkable collection of paintings. We visit St Stephen's Cathedral, and see the Arsenal (perhaps closed for refurbishment), a thick walled fortress overlooking the harbour.

We'll also include a walk up to the Venetian fortress that looms above the town, definitely one of the highlights of our visit to this historic island.

Overnight on Hvar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Hvar & Sveta Nedelja Hike

Hvar sits on an east-west ridge of Mesozoic limestone and dolomite, which was part of the mainland until approximately 11,000 years ago. Around that time, sea levels rose, filling the valleys that are now the channels between the islands. Hvar has a typical karst landscape with limited surface water, despite adequate rainfall that disappears quickly into crevices in the ground. The water cisterns in the fields and the dry-stone walls on the slopes are necessary for the continued success of agriculture on the island. The island has typical Mediterranean vegetation, mostly bare with woody scrub at higher elevations, turning to pine forests on the lower slopes.

This morning we drive to the village of Sveta Nedelja where we begin our uphill hike. We then walk to the highest part of the island. You will enjoy a cave with a monastery, views of beaches, and vineyards. From near the top, we are met by our vehicles and transferred back down to Hvar (45 min) with time at leisure to enjoy this charming town.

NOTE: We walk uphill to reduce slipping on loose material. This is the tour's most technical hike with some crumbling limestone requiring alertness. Your Tour Leader can suggest easier alternatives.

TOTAL WALKING TIME 3 hours, 6 km/3.7 miles. Elevation gain 550 m/1,804 ft.

Overnight in Hvar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Hvar - Ferry to Korcula Island

Today we travel by ferry to the breathtaking island of Korcula (+/- 1 hour).

The cluster of brilliant red-tiled roofs stand out vibrantly in contrast with the aquamarine harbour waters, clear to a depth of 21m! Korcula was settled by the Greeks who called the island "Korkyra Melaina" or "Black Corfu" because of the dark appearance of its densely wooded forests. Today the island is covered with olive groves and vineyards. The island is also proud of its heritage -- traditional shipbuilding, stone masonry, and Croatian folk traditions of costume and dance.

Upon arrival we'll have a walking tour of the old town (our luggage will be transferred to the the hotel). The street plan of the town is unique and often compared to a fishbone pattern: the north-south streets allowed the defenders of the town to reach the walls and towers, and the east-west lanes were designed to capture the pleasant maestral winds and minimize the force of the cold "bora." The Venetian Cathedral of St. Mark is an architectural delight, squeezed into a small square. Tucked into a narrow lane nearby is the small house where it is believed Marco Polo was born. We will also visit the Treasury and Town Museum with exhibitions of Korcula's history and traditions from prehistoric times to the present.

After our tour we'll enjoy lunch together (included today) and then check-in to our hotel. The balance of the day and evening is yours to rest and/or explore at your own pace (dinner on your own this evening).

Overnight in Korcula.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 9 Korcula: Walking 'Napoleon's Road'

Today we walk a historic rural path toward Pupnat village, following an ancient route that connected interior settlements on Korcula. While Napoleon's army did use and widen this existing trail during their occupation, the path itself predates that era by centuries. Our walking route passes small farms and vineyards surrounded by stone walls dotted with "kucice," traditional dry stone huts used for housing livestock. The prehistoric life that existed in the area was found in Jakasove Spila (cave). Zrnovo has numerous small churches that one can see walking along the road.

Pupnat is a village in the interior eastern part of the island of Korcula, located on the regional road running along the island. The population of Pupnat is about 500, making this the smallest village on the island. The name Pupnat, according to some interpreters, derives from "pampinata," which means vine leaves. The Illyrian lived in the area of Mocila, where remains of Illyrian graves have been found. The location of the village was chosen by its settlers in the hilly part of the island so as to be invisible from the sea and passing pirates.

We transfer by road back to Korcula in the early afternoon (ie in time for you to find some lunch) and have the balance of the day at leisure.

TOTAL WALKING TIME +/- 4 hrs; elevation variation +/- 100m / 330 ft.

Overnight in Korcula.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Korcula - Ferry to Mainland - Drive to Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina via Poticelj

Today we ferry back to the mainland and head inland where we cross the border into Bosnia and Herzegovina (have your passports ready), a country made up of two regions separated by the Dinaric Alps, with Bosnia to the north and Herzegovina to the south.

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Our route takes us through the Bosnian Mountains, with a break in Pocitelj. This unique oriental style town is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site with its Ottoman architecture and feel. Here one will find the longest operating art colony in southeast Europe. The most striking object in Pocitelj is the Sahat Kula, a silo-shaped fort that towers on the top of the hill above the town.

We continue to Mostar (located in Herzegovina), where we have a leisurely walking tour upon arrival. Mostar began as a small hamlet at a strategic crossing of the Neretva River. A multi-ethnic and multi-cultural settlement, the city has possessed an independent political identity since the 12th century. The architecture is a unique combination of Turkish ingenuity plus Herzegovinian and Dalmatian workmanship.

Our tour will include the historic oriental old town, which developed in the 15th and 16th centuries as an Ottoman frontier town. Today, the reconstructed Old Bridge and Old City are considered by some to be a symbol of reconciliation, international cooperation, and the coexistence of diverse communities. In 2005 the Old Bridge Area of the Old City was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We also include the Museum of War and Genocide Victims, a poignant memorial dedicated to the victims of the Bosnian War (1992-1995).

Overnight in Mostar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Mostar - Blagaj - Trebinje, Herzegovina - Kotor, Montenegro

Getting an early start this morning, we depart Mostar and travel 15 minutes to the nearby village of Blagaj.

The Buna Spring flows out of a 200 m cliff wall and creates the Buna River. The Ottoman sultan ordered a Tekija to be built right next to it. This 16th century house/monastery was built for the Dervish cults and is still one of the most mystical places in all of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We enjoy a walk around the town, visiting the 17th century Velagic house. From near the Tekija Dervish House, we can pick up a path that takes us to the Stjepan Grad Fortress that looms over the town. We'll take the goat path option that zigzags up (rather than the extremely steep path). From the top (273 m above town), the views are expansive, and the ruins atmospheric.

After our visit, we continue to Trebinje, our last stop before crossing the border into Montenegro. We detour to the Tvrđos Monastery, a working monastery dedicated to the Dormition of the Mother of God with a long winemaking tradition. An old epic folk poem mentions the monastery Tvrđos and its monastic cellars filled with wine. The warm and dry conditions here suit the native grape varieties Zilavka and Vranac, grown since ancient Greek times. We'll taste some wines before crossing the border into Montenegro.

Our final destination is Kotor, a UNESCO World Heritage Site whose history is entwined with the Illyrians, Romans, and Venetian Empire. The last part of our journey parallels the scenic shoreline of Boka Kotorska (Bay of Kotor), the only fjord in the Mediterranean, a bay of 32 km/20 miles cut deep into the stone of the Orjen and Lovćen mountains.

NOTE: Women must wear long sleeves and men shouldn't wear shorts when visiting the monastery (you can borrow used clothes at the entrance).

Overnight in Kotor.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Kotor: Walking Tour

This morning we enjoy a walking tour to see a number of the city's fortifications and monuments dating from the time of Venetian rule, including the Cathedral of St Tryphon, which contains a rich collection of artifacts. Older than many famous churches and cathedrals in Europe, the Cathedral of St. Tryphon has a treasury of immense value. In its interior there are frescos from the 14th century, a stone ornament above the main altar in which the life of St. Tryphon is depicted, as well as a relief of saints in gold and silver. The most representative works of Kotor's masters and craftsmen are kept in this Cathedral, making its collection quite unique.

After our formal tour, you can take some well-deserved time off for a free afternoon, or join your Tour Leader for a climb up the city walls to the Fortress of St Ivan, passing the Chapel of Our Lady of Salvation along the way. It's a steep ascent so don't set off without something to drink: there are 1,350-1,500 steps according to various guidebooks! From the highest point the ground drops away sharply on three sides

with the rooftops of Kotor immediately below; to the north you can see the whole inner part of the bay. Look out for a dome near the shore to the west -- it belongs to the implausibly large church in the village of Prcanj.

When we have finished admiring the view we can scramble around the crumbling ruins with a freedom rarely found in more litigious countries -- the only ones likely to challenge you are the goats. After our hike, you'll have some free time to enjoy Kotor. Browse the town at your leisure and discover souvenir, antique and craft shops, boutiques and market stalls.

TOTAL WALKING TIME ON OPTIONAL HIKE (not including the morning walking tour in town) +/- 3 HOURS. Elevation gain/loss 530m/1,738 ft (this is likely one of the most strenuous hikes of our trip, given it's steepness and amount of vertical rise).

Overnight in Kotor.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Kotor - Perast, Montenegro - Dubrovnik, Croatia

This morning the first part of our journey retraces our journey to Kotor of a couple days ago; this time, however, we make a stop at the town of Perast, where we take a small boat to Perast's most famous site, Gospa od Skrpjela (Our Lady of the Rock), a picturesque chapel built on the only artificially built island in the Adriatic. The island was built upon a rock after two Venetian sailors from Perast miraculously found a picture of the Virgin Mary on it in 1452.

We then make a left turn and head west to the Croatian border (have your passports handy!) and onto Dubrovnik, ancient Ragusa, whose story begins in the 7th century when it was under the protection of the Byzantine Empire. In the 12th century, Ragusa, formerly an island, merged with mainland settlements and the channel between was filled in with carted-in material. After shaking off the yoke of Venice in 1385, Ragusa became an independent republic and remained one of the most powerful maritime powers in the Mediterranean for over four centuries. After changing hands a number of times, the city was finally ceded to Croatia (the former Yugoslavia), and in 1918 the Slavic name of Dubrovnik was officially adopted.

On arrival we'll walk the walls of Dubrovnik, considered by many to be a highlight of our visit. The total circuit is nearly 2km/1.25 mi, and from the bastions you will have magnificent views of the city's monuments, including the Minceta Tower, Revelin Tower, and the mighty fortress of St. Lawrence, with walls 12m/40 feet thick!

Overnight in Dubrovnik.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Dubrovnik: City Tour

This morning features a walking tour of Dubrovnik's historic center. Dubrovnik has been called "Croatian Athens" and the "Pearl of the Mediterranean" for its astounding beauty, sophisticated history and culture, and prosperity.

Over the course of its tumultuous history, the city had to be extensively reconstructed; the earthquake of 1667 destroyed much of the city; and in recent memory, the town was bombarded by over 2,000 shells in 1991-92. After great international efforts, the city has been restored to its former glory, with its towering fortifications, magnificent medieval architecture, red tiled roofs, winding paved streets and picturesque harbours.

The afternoon is yours for independent exploration in this magical place.

Overnight in Dubrovnik.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Departure

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Departure from Dubrovnik.

SRETAN PUT/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast