

A Week in Croatia

Croatia boasts a mainland coastline of over 1,000 miles. Take a look at any map and it's the first thing that will catch your eye. It stretches down alongside the Adriatic Sea, seemingly robbing Bosnia of all of its coastline. This access to the sparkling Adriatic is a major factor in driving tourism to Croatia. From all over Europe, visitors flock to Croatia in the hopes of enjoying their crystal clear waters. I myself knew little of the country before visiting, only purchasing my tickets at the behest of my colleagues.

Only a little over two decades ago, Croatia had found itself ensnared in conflict with Serbian troops as they sought independence. The war lasted the better part of four years and left much of the country, especially the northeastern parts, in ruins. The war ended in November of 1995, and since then Croatia has been picking itself back up and attempting to establish itself as one of the more developed and desirable destinations in what was formerly the Eastern Bloc. Its joining of the European Union in 2017 was seen by many as validation of their efforts to form a legitimate democracy.

Croatia is just as much a destination for the traveller looking to relax and recuperate as it is for one looking to blow off a little steam. Following two months of teaching English in Switzerland, I had an appetite for both— so Croatia seemed like an ideal destination for me and my fellow teachers.

We flew into Split and headed straight for our hostel that was located right in the middle of the old town. With the possible exception of Dubrovnik, which has seen a boon in tourism in large part thanks to it being a filming location for the venerated Game of Thrones series, Split is the largest and most prominent city in Croatia. It's central attraction is the Diocletian Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the best preserved Roman remains in the world. The Palace isn't blocked off at all, in fact it is completely integrated into the city, with many local citizens living within its walls. Our hostel was about a 30 second

walk from the Palace's entrance, and still no more than \$15 a night.

The old town was charming, with a maze of alleys and a seemingly never ending amount of nooks and crannies that need to be explored. It would almost feel intrepid if not for the street vendor waiting to sell you something around every corner. Once outside of the old town you're right at water's edge, and it all feels far more cosmopolitan, an endless stream of cruise ships docking for a few hours before setting sail again.



Figure 1: The view from right outside my hostel in Split, the architecture was a constant reminder of the rich history of Split.

We proceeded to spend the following 3 days and nights feeding the Croatian economy in every possible way. Whether it be at restaurants splashing out for seafood pasta and red wine; or strolling the city purchasing gelato or coffee and paying to enter museums; or in the evenings, where we gladly payed exorbitant prices for vodka sodas or rounds of shots. It was a blast.

But I woke up that fourth morning well aware that I couldn't keep it up. I'd spent the past two months surrounded by people and I was longing for a little solitude, some time to myself. On a whim I took a stroll to the nearest car rental and received a quote for a 4 day rental. The process was remarkably quick. Within 15 short minutes I was sat behind the wheel of a 2015 Volkswagen Passat, fiddling around with the gear stick, attempting to recall the last time I'd driven stick.

I had no plan. My only priority was getting out of the inner city and learning how to drive the thing before crashing it. I fidgeted around with the GPS for awhile before building up the courage to pull out of the parking lot.

I was simultaneously pleasantly surprised by my ability to handle the car, and appalled at my lack of knowledge of Croatian road signs and rules. Within minutes, I was being shouted at by both my GPS and the locals informing me that I was headed down a one-way street in the wrong direction. A few sheepish smiles and hand waves later I was reversing back; quickly second-guessing my judgment in embarking on this adventure.



Figure 2: My view as I dozed off to sleep each night.

Thankfully I found my way out of the city, and before I knew it I was cruising down the Croatian highway with the intoxicating blue of the Adriatic Sea to my left. I drove over 200 miles that day, heading north along the coastline with no direction nor purpose.

As the newest member of the EU, Croatia has recently seen a sharp boon in the quality of its infrastructure. The roads I was driving on were smoothly paved and made for a decidedly pleasant driving experience. I listened to music, both new and old, caught up on podcasts, and enjoyed the sea wind whipping past my face. Eventually I settled on a small town named Karlobag to rest up for the night.

My sleep deprivation over the previous couple weeks worked in my favor as I simply stretched out on the front passenger seat and was fast asleep on the side of the road by 9pm. I remain unsure as to the legality of sleeping on the side of the road in Croatia, but after a full day of driving and not having one sighting of the police, I felt fairly comfortable with my decision.

I woke at 6am with the rising sun. Feeling understandably stiff and sore after a night sleeping in a car, I immediately got out of the car, stripped down to my underwear and went for a swim in the Adriatic. Right afterwards, I dried myself off and took a stroll into the town centre. I found a cafe, ordered a couple croissants and a cup of coffee, and set about planning the day ahead.

Planning consisted of little more than downloading a couple of podcasts to listen to on the road, and firing off a couple of pictures to friends and family. I was fast discovering that planning was entirely unnecessary, I was beholden to nobody else. I had over 1,000 miles of coastline to explore, each mile as stunning as the last.

My visit to the Krka National Park stood out as a highlight. I arrived early to purchase my day pass and get to see the main attractions before the masses arrived. By 9am, I was swimming at the foot of some of the Skradinski Buk, leaving myself the rest of the day to explore the expansive park. I went on multiple different hikes, each one promptly followed by a refreshing swim in the nearest body of water. Croatia's coastline receives much of the attention— and rightly so, but its inland national parks are well worth the trip for any traveller.

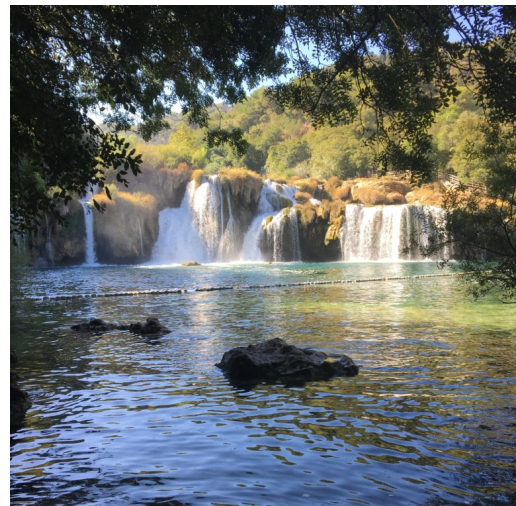


Figure 3: The swimming hole that I was lucky enough to enjoy at the foot of the Skradinski Buk waterfalls.

When prompted to come up with traveling destinations around the Mediterranean, most Americans would neglect to mention Croatia. Spain, France, Italy, and Greece would likely be brought up prior. It's not a large country, and its turbulent past half-century is likely a good cause for this omission. But if recent trends are anything to go by, then that certainly won't remain the case for long. It possesses a rich history that is well-deserving of attention, as well as gorgeous landscapes that are grossly under-appreciated. I recommend it to all who inquire, and am eagerly anticipating returning the next time I make it to Europe.