JAKOV BULJAN

HOW TO SURVIVE IN

AND EVEN ENJOY

CROATIA

A GUIDE FOR SMART FOREIGNERS
Jakov Buljan

How to survive in and even enjoy Croatia

A guide for smart foreigners
Location

Where do you look for Croatia on the map? Well, you can locate it even without a magnifying glass: look for the northernmost tip of the Mediterranean Sea, move your finger a bit to the east of Venice and Trieste, one more centimetre and you’re there.

Zagreb, the capital, is a bit to the west of Stockholm and Vienna and at almost the same latitude as Geneva; the 45° northern parallel nearly splits Croatia into two halves.

Too lazy to think of geography? OK, whether you’re in Frankfurt, Zürich, Prague or Strasbourg you’ll need some six to eight hours by car to enjoy excellent coffee at one of the delightful cafés in Zagreb’s main square. Add two more hours and you can relax in the crystal blue waters of the Adriatic Sea.

Landscape

Green plains dotted with oak forests between the Danube, Drava and Sava rivers. The snow-capped mountains of Gorski Kotar and Lika, home to a large brown bear and wolf population. Sixteen emerald green Plitvice lakes cascading into one another. Over a thousand islands in the Adriatic Sea, with tiny coves and picturesque bays. All this squeezed into an area only slightly larger than Denmark or Switzerland and smaller than the state of West Virginia in the USA.

Small wonder that there is a widespread belief among Croats that they have been given the land that St. Peter (reportedly a somewhat mischievous apostle) had originally discreetly put aside for himself.

However, do make sure you take along a very good map, because the locals are evidently firmly convinced that too many road signs would confuse travellers.

People

The people here are like a broth made of many known and unknown ingredients. The prevailing theories tell us that predominantly Slavic waves splashed onto the shore between the fifth and seventh
centuries, eventually reaching the Adriatic Sea, merging with and gradually absorbing the local Celtic-Illyric-Thracian tribes. It took them a bit more time to fully penetrate the well fortified cities along the Adriatic coast, the well organized population of Roman origin of the island of Rab resisting the longest. It took them even longer to fully integrate with the other sophisticated urban dwellers, let alone conquer the hearts of the refined womenfolk: even today most beauty contests are won by tall, slender, dark-haired girls from the South of Croatia, who are born with a special grace.

Additional flavours were added by the migration of Vlachs from Romania, of Hungarians, Italians, both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, Czechs, Slovaks, Austrians and Germans (mainly farmers from Schwaben, who came down the Danube on rafts!), Slovenians, and, who knows, perhaps some Mongolian warriors who didn’t spend all their time on horseback ……. So, there’s not much point in looking for a ‘typical’ Croatian appearance: they could be tall, short, slim, stocky, dark or fair-haired, with hazel, green or sky-blue eyes.

That might also be one of the reasons why there is such an amazing difference between the styles of the traditional folk costumes proudly displayed at folklore festivals and, increasingly (in original or stylized form), on formal occasions.

Should you by any chance be looking for the origins of our sometimes excessive national rhetoric, you’ll discover that, as often happens, past expatriates are also to blame. For one reason or another – very often it was an irresistible Croatian beauty – they fell in love with the country and its people and adopted them as their own.
Recent advances in genetics, investigations of y-chromosome in particular, may soon solve the mysteries of the origins and composition of every nation.

On second thoughts, though, what's that all about? Why should anybody, except scientists and possibly doctors, be seriously interested in any nation's origins?

**History**

Both the origin and the name of the Croats are steeped in legend, myth and hypothesis, but short on reliable proof. What is known for sure is that in the course of the 7th century, they settled the area between the Drava and Danube rivers in the North and the Adriatic Sea with Franken (later also Venice) as their powerful western and the Byzantine Empire as their eastern neighbour. The line of dukes, tough and capable warriors and rulers, now supplied the Croats, who were tired of foreign and saints' names, with attractive, fashionable names for boys: Borna, Ljudevit, Domagoj, Branimir, Trpimir...

Finally, after defeating the Hungarian and Bulgarian tribes, a duke named Tomislav took control of the entire territory between the Drava river in the north, the Adriatic Sea in the south, the peninsula of Istria in the west and Boka Kotorska bay in the east, and was declared king. The year inscribed on monuments erected in many towns to mark the millennium of that event (925-1925) may not be quite correct but has the advantage of being easy to remember.
It took the Hungarians about one and a half centuries to at least partially settle that score by using the famous *Pacta Conventa* peace treaty to impose a personal union with Hungary. From now on, the joint ruler would be crowned twice: first as king of Hungary and then as king of Croatia.

Dynastic succession games brought to that throne the Anjou descendants, one of whom saw fit to fill his permanently empty kitty by selling the region of Dalmatia to Venice! On one occasion, they even cunningly used crusaders to invade for them (and thoroughly loot for themselves) the prosperous Dalmatian city of Zadar, conveniently overlooking the fact that its citizens had already been converted to Christianity several centuries before.

The successive tidal waves of the formidable Ottoman armada, one of the best organized military machines in the history of mankind, easily winning one battle after the other, eventually forced both the Hungarians and Croats to join the Habsburg Empire.

The battle at Mohač, in Hungary in 1526, was crucial. The king himself lost his life: he drowned while trying to flee, his offer of “my kingdom for a horse” going unheeded.
The net result was that in the 16th century, northern Croatia became part of the Hapsburg (later Austro-Hungarian) Empire, with its own parliament, albeit with varying levels of genuine autonomy. For example, the Croatian vote in support of the ‘Pragmatic sanction’ tipped the scales in the joint Hungaro-Croatian parliamentary session, in favour of Maria Theresa succeeding her father Charles (Karl) VI, whose only son had died. The southern part (Istria, Dalmatia) would be more or less effectively ruled by Venice, Dubrovnik remaining the only free enclave.

For several centuries, the Republic of Dubrovnik was Venice’s less powerful but almost equally successful rival, thriving on its favourable strategic location and on the outstanding skills of its merchants and diplomats. Eventually, the long autonomous life of the Croatian Athens ended in the same way as that of Venice – at the hands of Napoleon’s Army at the beginning of the 19th century.

Interestingly, in Dubrovnik, the names of individual holders of public offices, including that of the Duke, were deliberately avoided in the otherwise very detailed records of the City Council’s decisions. Also, most likely it was due to the presence and importance of Dubrovnik’s merchants and diplomats that Croatian was one of the official languages at the Ottoman court in Istanbul. Not surprisingly, Turkish is possibly the only non-Slavic language in which the word for Croat is the same as used by Croats themselves (Hrvat); Croatia is Hrvatistan.

The Croats take pride in the fact that their country was the very first on European soil and the only one among the South Slavs (the Slovenes had never had a state of their own!) that the Ottoman Empire, invading from the South, failed to put under its control. Also, it was Croats, at the battle of Sisak, who dealt the Ottoman armada its very first heavy defeat on European soil, and this as early as the end of the 16th century, nearly 100 years before the second Turkish siege of Vienna.

The heroic martyrdom of a tiny platoon of soldiers led by Nikola Šubić Zrinski, defending the fortress of Siget (a sort of Croatian Masada or Alamo, now part of Hungary!) a few decades earlier, has been inspiring composers, poets and - certainly - warriors, ever since.
In the complex, multinational architecture of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Croatian position was none too favourable. Two events are of particular importance. The first, the beheading of two eminent noblemen from the Frankopan and Zrinski families, accused of plotting against the king at the end of XVIIth century, left a deep scar on the national conscience. The second event was when the Croatian banus (term used to denote a Croatian ruler) Josip Jelačić took advantage of the turbulence between Austrians and the Hungarians in 1848. After defeating the Hungarian army, he reunified the northern and southern halves of Croatia and introduced many reforms, including putting an end to the feudal system, earning himself a monument on Zagreb’s main square.

*A monument to a Croatian hero from the 19th century was too much for the communist radicals: after WWII, it was almost secretly removed, to be put back only after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the return of democracy.*

As soon as the revolutionary storms were over, pressures of Germanization and Hungarization returned. Small wonder that the idea of joining the other Slavic brethren, who were gradually breaking away from the weakened Ottoman Empire, was born and enthusiastically promoted among the leading Croatian intellectuals.

*In that spirit, the newly founded science academy in Zagreb was named the Yugoslav (not Croatian) Academy of Science and Art.*

The whole idea met with a rather cool reception by the other side, heavily influenced by Russia and the Orthodox Church, and the idea was shelved until the end of Great War, when, after the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy, the “old Yugoslavia” was established.

Like many a couple, initially fond and supportive of each other, only to discover incompatibility shortly after marriage, the union turned out to be a failure. Only a few days after the union was created, the first blood was shed on the streets of Zagreb. Although the demonstrations had been peaceful, they were something totally new and unacceptable to the Serb-controlled police.

The steady deterioration of relations between Zagreb and Belgrade culminated with the murder of several members of parliament, including
the mortal wounding, during a parliamentary debate in Belgrade in 1928 (and apparently on the orders of the Serbian king), of the most prominent Croatian leader, S. Radić, a very moderate politician and declared pacifist.

As a result, most Croats lost any trust they might still have had in the future of a joint state with their eastern cousins.

The more radical nationalists, working hand in hand with their allies from the region, retaliated a few years later by assassinating the Serbian king, Alexander, during his visit to France.

Nonetheless, let me give you a tip here: avoid the mistake so often made by foreign diplomats and journalists, who conveniently refer to the deep-rooted hatred generated by centuries of bloodshed in this region. Although this is quite true in the case of the Serbs and Albanians, who fought over the same territory, before the joint state of Yugoslavia was created (and apart from some irrelevant and forgotten medieval skirmishes), there was never any war between Croats and Serbs: on the contrary, if they were persecuted in their own country, they would traditionally find a safe refuge on their neighbour’s soil.

For hair-splitters: in the battle of Nikpolje (Nicopolis) at the end of the 14th century, the Croats were part of the broad Christian coalition while the Serbs, fulfilling their feudal obligations, fought at the side of the triumphant sultan Bajazid. Also, at the beginning of Great War, following the assassination of Prince Ferdinand in Sarajevo by Serbian extremists as part of plans for a ‘Great Serbia’, initial Serbian successes against the Austrian army were greatly assisted by the unwillingness of Croatian soldiers (including Josip Broz Tito) to fight their Slavic brethren.

A country torn by internal conflicts was easily taken over by Hitler’s military machine, helped by local quislings: Pavelić and his puppet regime brought in by Mussolini in Croatia, and Nedić and Ljotić in Serbia. However, the antifascists didn’t take long to organize a strong resistance movement, making life difficult for the occupying troops.

Josip Broz Tito, a master maverick of the communist school, gained western support, only to subsequently outmanoeuvre all his rivals
from the antifascist coalition, and shortly after the end of WWII, turned Yugoslavia into a rigidly communist country, skilfully eliminating any actual or potential party rival. Also, it was very convenient to label any opposition to communism as a lack of enthusiasm for antifascism, as reactionary – a handy weapon even in today’s politics.

Today Croatia is still slightly frustrated that hardly anyone abroad is aware of the fact that the very first territory to be liberated in occupied Europe during WWII was in the heart of Croatia, that it was fully controlled by the resistance movement and consisted of a broad antifascist coalition led by ethnic Croats. Also, the percentage of the population in Croatia who sympathised with or supported the quisling regime was considerably lower than in most European countries.

The story of A. Stepinac is paradigmatic. A catholic priest, a pro-Yugoslav volunteer in WWI, Stepinac was made an archbishop mainly on the strength of support from the Serbian king. Disappointed by the Serbian domination, he originally welcomed the creation of the Croatian state, only to find himself horrified at crimes committed by the utosashe (the Croatian quislings), which he protested in the strongest terms. His subsequent rejection of Tito’s proposal to secede from the Vatican and establish an independent Croatian church resulted in him being sentenced to death in a mock trial. However, in 1998, he was canonized by Pope John Paul II.

The consequence was that in the Serb-dominated diplomacy, secret services and media abroad, Croats were deliberately and systematically portrayed as former collaborationists and fierce nationalists. Croatian disappointment with the joint state and their desire for a state of their own was conveniently equalled with allegiance to the quisling regime.
Many vocal, uncompromising Croatian extremists abroad were nothing but well-paid agents of the Yugoslav secret police!

Tito was richly rewarded by the West for his disobedience to Stalin, the West choosing to ignore his ruthlessness (according to former inmates of the camp for political dissidents on the island of Goli, sadistic torture there was comparable to the worst anywhere in the world), hoping that leaders of the neighbouring communist countries would follow suit.
Relying on a privileged army, a powerful secret service and generous western aid, Tito was able to retain a single-party system, attain unlimited personal power, and suppress any sign of discontent, or craving for more democracy or the articulation of stronger national feelings.

Gradual softening of the original rigidity, reasonably open borders and above all, a considerably higher standard of living compared to other communist countries, ultimately made Tito’s regime almost acceptable to the population. However, in three taboo areas there was no flexibility: Tito’s person; the army, with its pampered and privileged military officers; and nationality (ethnic) matters. Many a visitor, seeing a picture of a stable and harmonious society, did not realise that deep fear had been instilled in the population in the early days, reinforced by draconic punishments for the infrequent infringements of those taboos.

The pragmatists in the West felt that the stability Tito lent to the sensitive and strategically important region was more than worth the continuous flow of grants and soft loans, and disregarding his autocratic rule and pharaonic living style. For the armchair leftists, fascinated by the loudly proclaimed concept of self-management Tito was not only a prophet leading the way, but also somebody who exculpated the Leftist world of all its sins.

The bill for Tito’s extravagant lifestyle arrived only a few years after his death: bitter quarrels about the distribution of repayment of the huge debt were the main trigger of the conflict between the constituting republics.

Small wonder that the world was caught by surprise by the rapid and bloody collapse of the Second Yugoslavia. The fall of the Berlin Wall had opened the floodgates, removed the old fears. Milošević’s attempt to preserve the old communist system was doomed from the start. Playing the nationalist card in order to remain in power in the Great(er) Serbia that was to be created at the expense of its neighbours made the collapse definitely irreversible and, very sadly, turned it into a bloodbath that had not been seen on European soil since WWII.
Croats, with the dream of once again having a state of their own being fulfilled, suppress the feeling somewhere deep inside that the price paid might have been too high. They comfort themselves that the choice was either to resist or to succumb to Milošević and his cohorts and remain oppressed, second rate citizens for many years to come. After all, so many “useful” dictators were not only tolerated but cooperated with and supported by western democracies: the lesson of Tito’s long rule hasn’t been forgotten.

And now the Croats are counting the days until they (re)join Europe where, they strongly believe, they have always belonged. Conveniently overlooking the fact that respecting pedestrians and traffic signs is also part of the European heritage.

**Croats Abroad**

Emigration, mainly for economic reasons, seems to be a Croatian fate. Comparable to the failure of the potato crop in Ireland were the consequences of the attack of the root louse *phylloxera* and also *peronospora*, which practically wiped out entire vineyards and forced the population to emigrate.

To make matters worse, the “wine clause” of the Austro-Hungarian trade agreement with Italy from 1891, three years before the arrival of *phylloxera* to Dalmatia, had exposed the local wine market to cheap wines imports from Italy.

In a few waves, many villages, particularly in the south and on the islands, were virtually abandoned. Today, more people originating
from the island of Susak live in New York than in the country of their ancestors. So you won’t be too surprised to find that the main currency of the islands of Susak and Olib is the US dollar.

Under communist Yugoslavia in the 1960s, the rapid deterioration of economic conditions meant a new wave of economic emigration, mostly into Germany but also to Austria, France and Sweden. Officially they were called “workers on temporary work abroad”, but most of them, and as a rule their children, remained there forever. The most recent wave of emigration was the consequence of the collapse of Yugoslavia.

Communities trying to preserve something of their Croatian roots (often nothing more than traditional dances and singing) can be found from Australia to Canada, from Tierra del Fuego to Pennsylvania and California, from the Republic of South Africa to New Zealand, making Croats a people with one of the proportionally largest diasporas in the world i.e. close to the level of the Irish and the Armenians.

In terms of their position on the social ladder, Croatian immigrants have possibly been most successful in Chile, where they were involved
not only in their traditional trades such as wine growing and fishing, but also in setting up the first breweries and shoe factories, as well as being involved in academia and state administration.

Croatian communities in countries neighbouring Croatia, mostly resulting from migrations at the time of the Ottoman conquest, are a special case. There are still some 30,000 people in Vienna and the province of Burgenland in Austria, who still retain something of their Croatian identity after nearly five centuries of being surrounded by German-speakers. There is a similar, substantial Croatian agglomeration in Hungary. The tiny pockets of Croats in Slovakia (near Bratislava) and Romania are now only of symbolic significance.

A considerable Croatian minority live in Srijem and Bačka as well as in the Bay of Boka Kotorska (Serbia and Montenegro). Three enclaves in Kosovo, left over from the trade caravans from the time of Dubrovačka Republika, were abandoned during the last decade.

Politics apart, for many centuries the Croatian population in Bosnia and Herzegovina provided the main replenishment for population losses in Croatia, especially in Slavonia and inland Dalmatia. The latest war has put an end to that: the Croatian population in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been halved!

Interestingly, variations of the last name Horvat (meaning a Croat), are among the most frequent last names in Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia and Burgenland, Austria!

**Language**

To better understand what might sometimes seem obsession or unreasonable sensitivity when it comes to language in Croatia, one should know that here, more than elsewhere, language is a crucial component of national identity; it was the armour that protected a tiny nation situated at a crossroads against all attempts made by its neighbours to swallow it by trying to impose (at one time or another) the Italian, Hungarian, German (Austrian) or Serbian language and culture.
A tip: When you’re in Croatia, in the unlikely event that you feel short of a stimulating topic of conversation, just innocently ask whether Croatian and Serbian are the same language.

Most Croats are perplexed by the fact that many foreigners fail to appreciate the obvious fact that, as the Finns speak Finnish, the Croats speak Croatian, and they are irritated by visitors who continue to call the language so sacred to Croats by the name (Serbo-Croatian) that was forced upon them during the time of the failed union of Southern Slavs. Yet, unlike in France, there is no fine for disrespecting the sanctity of language, nor is a language exam a prerequisite for acquiring citizenship, as there is in neighbouring Slovenia.

Beware of using the argument that Croats and Serbs need no interpreter to be able to communicate! You’ll then be asked to try to convince a Norwegian to call his or her mother tongue Danish, Danish-Norwegian (despite the Bokmål/Nynorsk saga) or – heaven forbid – Swedish. Others will bring up the case of the British and Americans, two nations separated by the same language.

Linguistics apart, it’s actually rather simple: multiply the well-known differences between British and American English by five (the Croatian purist will claim by ten, at least!!) and imagine that the Americans keep trying to stick to the Cyrillic script, and you’ll begin to get a good idea of the differences between the Croatian and Serbian languages.

A tip: Whether you are in their home, or in the relaxed atmosphere of a domjenak (a kind of reception held outside the home, the Croatian version of
a somewhat casual cocktail party, except that there is normally more to snack on than at similar events in Anglo-Saxon lands), you’ll be sure to capture the heart of your hosts if you almost casually remark that you are fully aware that Latin was the official language of the Croatian parliament until 1847.

In any case, for a better understanding of the local language sensitivities it is useful to know that a complete official document in the Croatian language, in a local script (glagoljica), referring to the Croatian king Zvonimir, was carved in stone as early as 1100. Also, the first dictionary of the Croatian language was compiled already at the end of 16th century by F. Vrančić. Croatian grammar was first written down, and a Bible translation made by Bartol Kašić as early as the beginning of the 17th century!

That the Vatican gave special permission for Holy Mass to be celebrated in the Slavic language and not in Latin in some parts of Croatia, an exception that the Croats are so proud of, is proof of the Vatican’s respect for Croatia’s role as “antemurale Christianitatis” (Bastion of Christianity). Mind you, this was before ideas about the benefits of interactions between different cultures became fashionable.
In reality, most Croats are at least bilingual: they speak the local dialect (čakavski, kajkavski or ikavski) at home, and only later in school acquire the language used in public life, newspapers and television.

Local dialects, ideally not easily acquired by outsiders, have become very fashionable lately. The inhabitants of a tiny village will happily point out that people from the nearby village on the same tiny island will never fully master their special vocabulary (often corrupted Italian words).

The form of address varies from the strictly formal and polite form (equivalent to the French “vous” or the German “Sie”) used in the north, especially among the older generation, to an almost instant and informal, familiar form of address (equivalent to the French “tu” or German “Du”) and using only the first name in the south, and among the young.

The communist party cadre zealously ensured that greetings such as “Servus” and “Ljubim ruke” (I kiss your hand!), representing the values of the rotten bourgeois society, quickly disappeared from the streets of cities such as Zagreb and Osijek after WWII.

Religion

Unlike Norway or Great Britain, for example, Croatia has no single state religion, but the fact that over 80 % of the population is of the Roman Catholic faith has certainly left its imprint on society. Also, Catholicism has remained an important part of the national identity, helping to resist the sometimes brutal, sometimes more subtle attempts by the Communist Party to suppress the religion.

Also, unlike in Poland, any indication of religious affiliation (including celebrating religious holidays such as Christmas) was not only forbidden for Party members but often not tolerated for anybody holding public office, including school teachers.

Understandably, after the fall of communism, there was a kind of revival, but the number of regular churchgoers remains rather modest.
Of course, one could only speculate what direction history would have taken if the split between the Eastern, Orthodox and the Roman Church in the 11th century had not run along the very middle of this region, or – as some optimists believe – if the local orthodox church had adopted the Gregorian calendar, like many others had done.

The achievements of Croatian theologian M. Vlačić Ilirik, whose teaching was somewhat similar to that of Martin Luther, were successfully counteracted. However, several reformed churches have been established here for quite some time, primarily due to the presence of German, Hungarian and Slovakian minorities. A certain enthusiasm for oriental sects such as Sri Sai Baba, or, for example, Mormons is more recent.

**Contributions to humanity….to help explain some of the national pride we Croats have (hey, who doesn’t like to brag a bit?)!**

- Rudjer Bošković, an 18th century astronomer and mathematician from Dubrovnik, was one of the first scientists of continental Europe to accept Newton’s gravitational theory. He elaborated the first geometric procedure for determining the equator of a rotating planet. A pioneer in geodesy, he measured a meridian arc between Rome and Rimini and, interestingly, led an expedition to California to observe the movement of the planet Venus from there.

- For millions of women all over the world, the Croats solved the tricky problem of choosing a gift for boyfriends, husbands and
fathers: they introduced the necktie, a habit quickly adopted by the fashionable French after the Thirty Years War. The French word for necktie, “cravate” (“Krawatte” in German), clearly indicates its origin, which is “à la Croate” (you may want to remember this little bit of trivia, it’s asked on quiz shows).

Many details from the life of eccentric loner Nikola Tesla remain shrouded in mystery but modern civilization would not be possible without his many inventions in the field of electricity and communications. The most important among them was the discovery of the rotating magnetic field, the basis of practically all alternating current motors, the prime movers of the modern industry. The world’s very first hydro-electric plant, built at Niagara Falls, used his invention. As early as the end of the 19th century, Tesla invented a teleautomatic boat guided by remote control, discovered terrestrial stationary waves, a special coil used in radio communications, high frequency currents and made many practical innovations. Very appropriately, the unit of magnetic induction was named Tesla after him.

*Tesla, born in the province of Lika, also made himself famous and respected for his statement that: “I am equally proud of my Serbian roots and of my Croatian homeland.”*

According to legend, Icarus was a pioneer of flying but it was a Croat, Faust Vrančić, who in the early 17th century elaborated the principle of a parachute (*homo volans*) in a scientific manner. Regrettably, as in so many other cases, this noble idea was often misused for military purposes!
You’d most probably have to be a chemist to really be impressed by Lavoslav Ružička’s research in the field of insecticides and terpenes, or by the fact that he revolutionized the chemistry of ringed molecules. But whether you’re male or female, your life is greatly affected by the sex hormone testosterone (which he investigated and synthesized). Similarly, he carried out research into the composition of perfumes (Now we know somebody by name whom we men have to thank for quick gifts and women have to thank to help them smell so good!)

Well, both cases are somehow linked to the 1939 Nobel Prize. And Ružička’s assistant and successor to the same chair in Zürich, Vladimir Prelog, was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1975 for his work in stereochemistry.

I. Andrić, the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1961 was born a Croat in Travnik, Bosnia (some claim he was the illegitimate child of a Franciscan monk) and in his mature years moved to Belgrade and became a member of the political establishment.

Together with A. Just, Zagreb university professor Franjo Hanaman introduced the wolfram-filament with a working temperature of about 2500° C; the first of the two critical steps in making the Edison electric light bulb suitable for use in everyday life.

The town and the island of Korčula have yet to produce hard evidence that Marco Polo, the first European who made himself a favourite of the Mongol ruler of the medieval Chinese Empire, was indeed born in their midst. They challenge those who disagree to provide
proof to the contrary. The debate continues (remember Columbus?)

- Even after the dawn of the computer era, many a drawing is still made using a Croatian invention, a mechanical pencil with a sliding graphite stick, patented by S. Penkala, who also, incidentally, constructed the first Croatian two-seater airplane.

- It is quite natural for somebody from a nation of sailors and fishermen, like Mario Puretić from the island of Brač, to have invented a very simple and yet very efficient system, the “Puretić Power Block” for hauling fishing nets, a device that has revolutionized the fishing industry. As a matter of fact, a ship with his power block is depicted on the Canadian five-dollar bill.

Shoul Croats still be proud of that invention or should they have started feeling guilty for the depletion of fishing areas?

- The word ‘dirigible’ (airship) is usually associated with the name of Graf Zeppelin and Friedrichshafen, but in actual fact, Graf Zeppelin bought his first design from David Schwartz from Zagreb.

- Despite the development of DNA testing, fingerprinting remains one of the most valuable tools in tracking down criminals. Well, Josip Vučetić, a Croat, was the one who discovered something that was always under the very nose of so many policemen.

- In the 14th century, nearly fifty years before its rival, Venice, the city state of Dubrovnik (Dubrovačka Republika) was the first state
to introduce the institution of quarantine, strictly imposed on all visitors.

- Peace-loving Croats are not convinced that the nation should be proud of the fact that the first torpedo was made in Rijeka in 1866 according to a design made by naval officer Ivan Vukić-Lupis. Originally it was intended to be used from the shore and the launching ramp is still in Rijeka. To counterbalance this, Leo Sternbach, born nearly a century ago in Croatia, invented the tranquilizer Valium – one of the world’s most prescribed medicines (for the stressed out “housewife”).

...and some titbits

- Without the oak pylons from Dalmatia, Venice would sink.
- Without the spotted dog of the same origin (Dalmatia), how could have the famous movie have touched the hearts of millions of children and what would American fire fighters do?
The wall erected to protect the town Ston and the peninsula Pelješac from the Ottoman attacks is the second largest in the world, surpassed only by the Great Wall of China.

The cathedral of St. Dujam, built within the palace of the Roman emperor Diocletian in Split, is the oldest cathedral in Europe. Incidentally, the construction of the palace itself strictly observes the sun’s movements at that latitude, so that the dates of important festivals and also the time of the day are accurately marked.

Speaking of calendars, some of the images on the late Neolithic pottery excavated at Vučedol near Vukovar depict the constellation of Orion and constitute the oldest calendar found on European soil.

In the 16th century, Pavao Skalić of Zagreb was the first to employ the word ‘encyclopedia’ in its present meaning.

Oak wood from Slavonia, the region between the Danube and Sava rivers, lends its special flavour to European drinks such as cognac and whisky.

One of the richest finds of the Neanderthal era was unearthed less than an hour’s drive from Zagreb, near the town of Krapina.

Knowledgeable tourists will bring back Croatian souvenirs such as lavender oil, umbrellas with traditional, colourful patterns on them from Šestine, lace and/or a few kilos of sea
salt from the island of Pag. The salt is highly valued for its magnesium
content and has been produced there since Roman times.

Real connoisseurs will bring back hand-made lace, made of
specially-worked agave fibre, from the Benedictine monastery in the
town of Hvar, or sophisticated items of jewellery called morčići from
the elegant jewellers in the town of Rijeka.

➢ In the 15th century Benedikt Kotruljić, who served at the Aragon
court in Naples, wrote the first European book about trade
and bookkeeping. It was printed, in Italian, some one hundred
years later, which is still pretty fast compared with its Croatian
translation – five centuries after it was written (1989)!

➢ Possibly the first purpose-built public theatre in continental
Europe was opened in the city of Hvar in 1612.

➢ The first film was shown in Croatia in 1896, a year after the process
was invented by the Lumière brothers.

➢ Genetic investigations indicate that the Californian “zinfandel”
grape originates from Croatia.

➢ The restless explorers, brothers Seljan served the Ethiopian Emperor
Menelik II and explored the jungles of the Amazon, whereas
Dragutin Lerman was a member of Stanley’s expedition and was
appointed Commissaire Général of the Belgian government in
Congo.

➢ The city of Dubrovnik (Dubrovačka Republika) traded with
India and the Americas and afforded asylum to King Richard I
of England. (Also, well, no point in denying it, Dubrovnik sent its
men-of-war to Spain for the abortive invasion of England in the
16th century).

➢ In the 18th century, the law of the Dubrovačka Republika stated
that only the Roman Catholic faith could have a place of worship
in the city; the only exception being a synagogue.
The same city was possibly the first in Europe to introduce the *Liber statutorum* legislation, regulating the work of pharmacies in the 13th century.

The world oldest sailors’ association, the ITF, was founded in 1896; the sailors’ Brotherhood of St. Nicolas in Kostrena (near Rijeka), a traditional source of the finest sea captains, was founded thirty years earlier. You think that’s old? Well, then, how about the “Bokeljska mornarica” sailors’ association of Boka Kotorska (now in Montenegro) established in 809?

A stone carver from Dalmatia named Marin founded San Marino, a city state in Italy, the very first republic in Europe. Too small? Well, how about this, then: a Croat by the name of Dzauhar, administrator and commander at the court of the Fatimids in what is now Tunisia, conquered Egypt in 969 and founded the city of El Kahira (Cairo) Big enough? Too big?

One of Zagreb’s landmarks and prestigious exhibition area, Umjetnički paviljon (Art Pavilion) was first built for the (Hungarian) Millenium Exhibition in Budapest in 1896, its iron structure moved and (in a slightly larger version) set up at its present site, Zrinjevac Park, three years later.

Matija Zmajević, a Croat from the bay of Boka Kotorska was the admiral of the Russian navy at the time of Peter I the Great.

The third-oldest oil refinery in Europe began production in Rijeka in 1883.

A few years ago, a Croatian pharmaceutical company developed (and launched worldwide) a medicine called Sumamed (azithromycin), one of the most efficient antibiotics of our times.

Germans standing to attention to their national anthem might not realise that they are in fact listening to a re-arrangement of a Croatian love song from Burgenland, modified by J. Haydn.
Art

Traces of Celtic blood are believed to be responsible for the particular attachment to art of any kind. Before the arrival of electricity, reciting heroic epics, telling fairy tales or posing riddles was a highly regarded skill, competing only with group singing of love songs with eternal themes, to liven up the long winter evenings of the country folk.

In addition to books written in the standard vernacular, such as the comedies by the Croatian Shakespeare, Držić, there is unusually extensive range of medieval literature in Latin. The books written by M. Marulić, for example, were real European bestsellers.

A tip here. Even if you are familiar with local contemporary literary works, it might be prudent to refrain from offering your own views: sympathies towards one author or another are likely to be taken as representative of your political standing. In any case, it might be a good idea to wait until the filter of time sifts genuine valuables from the flotsam floating on the current of any direction. What’s almost certain is that the works of both I. Aralica and M. Jergović, now fierce political opponents, are bound to be considered classics in the very near future!

In general, admiring the work of past artists, such as writers Krleža, Ujević, Nazor, A.B. Šimić and the Croatian female counterpart to H.C. Andersen, I. Brlić-Mažuranić; sculptors Meštrović, Rendić and Augustinčić; composers such as Lukačić with his motets and Gotovac’s comic opera “Ero s onog svijeta”; painters such as Bukovac, Kraljević, Becić, Murtić and Trokut) and the Croatian version of Secession architecture is certainly less risky.
A word in your ear, but be sure to keep it to yourself: practically any kind of concert, and most exhibitions, are likely to be good. When it comes to plays, however, only go to see one recommended to you by somebody you trust. Good acting in Croatia is about as frequent as snow on the island of Hvar (when it snows on Hvar, all hotel accommodation is free of charge!!).

Of course, to properly enjoy the art treasures of Dubrovnik, Trogir, Zadar or Šibenik, take a good guide or a casual stroll under the pleasant Mediterranean sun. And as for Zagreb, there are certainly interesting works of various categories, including a museum housing rare Etruscan mummies and papyri. However, some people feel that Zagreb has entirely too much Fernkorn or Bollé, and instead would advise you not to miss the baroque churches less than an hour’s drive away, and to end your excursion with a visit to Varaždin, one of the former capitals of Croatia.

Another tip: if anyone tells you that Hinterglasmalerei (naïf painting on glass) is passé, ignore them, and dive into the fantasy world of artists such as Generalić, Večenaj, Rabuzin and Lacković.

Pleasures of the palate and beverages to quench your thirst ....

In the old days, the typical staple foods of the poor were grah (a thick bean stew with or without a piece of sausage or smoked meat in it) and palenta, also called žganci or pura (boiled maize flour). The first has
held its ground as a cheap gablec or marenda, a meal frequently taken by working people at mid-morning and the latter, ideally with yoghurt, is making a comeback as health food.

Sarma (rolled cabbage leaves stuffed with minced beef and pork) is one of the best inventions for women who go out to work: the more often it’s reheated, the better it tastes. Ideal to serve to unannounced guests (perfectly normal in Croatia!), say, during the long Christmas holidays.

Preparing the best fish, short for fish paprikaš, a spicy, hot fish and noodle stew is a favourite pastime for men (it’s almost exclusively ‘man’s work!’) living along the Drava and Danube river banks. Rows of cauldrons hanging over an open fire are like something out of a scene from Asterix and are a familiar sight during formal, outdoor competitions. It is a matter of elementary politeness to sound very convincing when you assure your friend that his fish is something very special. And don’t worry, the sweat running down your forehead while eating it will be spontaneous!!

Of course, you will never make the mistake of even mentioning a freshwater fish to anybody from the Adriatic coast: the previous night’s catch prepared na gradele (fish grilled on grapevine wood and generously laced with locally
produced olive oil and fresh rosemary) will make you feel like a god of ancient times. Small wonder that thousands of Italians travel for hours just for the sake of that heavenly taste!!

The idea of “home, sweet home” in the North-West is normally associated with *purica s mlincima* (roast turkey with baked noodles) and štrukli (boiled, then oven baked crêpes with walnuts, cheese etc.): both are, beyond any doubt, authentic Croatian delicacies. *Kulen* from Slavonia (a kind of pork sausage, formerly served only on special occasions or given as a gift to doctors or lawyers; now a popular first course), could also claim to belong to the same category, as could *paški sir* (sheep’s cheese from island Pag).

Some of the locally-produced, green-gold olive oil comes from olive trees planted at the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and is still perceived as both food and as a universal medicine.

If you’re in the south, you must try the *drniški pršut* (cured ham from Drniš) traditionally dried in the cold wind outdoors, and if you happen to be at a folk festival in Zagorje, be sure to try the delicious *kotlovina* (meat and vegetables prepared in a special shallow, wide-brimmed pot).

Ignore the advice of any locals pretending to be very cosmopolitan or refined, and enjoy food that the poor used to be able to afford only on special occasions, such as *janjetina na ražnju* (lamb roasted on an open fire – or you could try suckling pig as an alternative) with fresh onion or *janjetina ispod peke* (lamb baked on a hot clay surface under a conical hood surrounded by hot embers).
Specialities from the “roštilj” (barbecue) such as čevapčići (spiced mixed minced meat) and ražnjići (a kind of kebab), newcomers from the Orient, are now well established and fully accepted.

And last but by no means least, you don’t have to be a millionaire to treat yourself to the taste of Istrian truffles unearthed in the forest undergrowth by specially trained, pretty expensive truffle dogs (and sometimes pigs). As most of you will know, the truffle has proven, magical effects on (but not limited to!) marital relations.

Locally made sweets and chocolates, not yet famous abroad (perhaps due to poor marketing) certainly compare favourably with the best in the world. The absolute leaders are the authentic Croatian brand of bajadera (nougat with almonds), griottes (Mediterranean cherries in dark chocolate with alcohol, made according to a recipe nearly a century old) and a great export item, chocolate with rice.

As you might expect, one of the sharpest dividing lines amongst Croats has nothing to do with politics, football teams or dialects. No, the safest identification mark is what one orders when one is leaning up against a šank in a tiny buffet or a konoba frequented by ordinary people. The sacrilege of asking for a gemišt (white wine with mineral water) can be committed only by somebody from the North where, allegedly, mineral water was added to the local wine in the old days, in an attempt to neutralize its acidity. The proud son of the South (Dalmatia) will drink a bevanda (red wine with water), only exceptionally drinking it neat (cijelo). This division is not unlike that separating wine and beer drinkers among the Europeans, the split only partially affecting Croats.
as they do not mind imbibing either, depending on the occasion, weather, type of meal, etc. ....

In the old days, the only source of water on most islands was rainwater collected from the roofs into tanks carved in the rock. To improve the taste some wine would be added even for ordinary thirst-quenching. The alternative was kvasina, diluted sour wine.

A mobile copper still which can be moved from one house to another is still a common sight in villages and small towns upcountry. A few plum trees in the back yard and you have your own home-made sliwowitz as a libation and to share (and compete!) with your friends, to offer as a sign of welcome to a visitor or as an aperitif (and after all that food earlier it will help with the digestion!).

Loza, short for lozovača, a grape based brandy, used to be the preferred strong drink of the country people from the South. Nowadays, the more sophisticated often drink a smoother version called travarica, its healing herbal extracts providing a good reason for imbibing it at any time of the day, both as an aperitif and a digestif.

Local preferences apart, the idea of a state monopoly on alcohol applying to the owners of small orchards is incomprehensible to the natives. State control is limited to large manufacturers of hard liquor and producers of quality wines.

To foreign connoisseurs, Croatia used to be first and foremost a country of rather heavy, full-bodied red wines such
as dingač, postup and a number of plavac varieties from Dalmatia (the Pelješac peninsula and the islands of Hvar, Brač and Vis). The vineyards in the North (Kutjevo, Djakovo and Ilok) date back to Roman times and, until recently, primarily supplied wines for local consumption.

The fragrance of traminac was possibly most successful in finding its way to the tastebuds of specialists abroad. The revival of the private sector has brought out quite a number of enthusiasts making good and reasonably priced wines in small but well-equipped cellars.

A tip: Should you get to know a gourmet from the region of Lika (Ličanin), you might be taken to a simple eatery or (even better) to his home and your taste buds are in for a treat: the robust, unique taste of homemade Sauerkraut with smoked pork spare ribs. Of course, the path is smoothed with sliwowitz and every few mouthfuls are washed down with a good, heavy red wine.

Health

Echange of information about one’s illnesses is a favourite pastime in Croatia. It’s a kind of never-ending competition, something like “Who can claim poorer health?” A sturdy, healthy looking person will surprise you by detailing a long list of every type of physical ailment ruining his or her life, unless – as nearly always happens – he or she is interrupted by somebody who succumbed to or somehow miraculously escaped the same ailment or a risky operation.

Given the slightest opportunity, the locals will not fail to pour on you all the details of their personality, eating and drinking habits, preferences and inclinations. If health (or rather, illnesses) is the number one national sport in Croatia, then talking about oneself comes a close second. It is of precious little comfort to know that as you move eastwards, it gets much, much worse.
Young Croatian doctors from Zagreb easily pass the American competence tests, and a large number of dentists in Switzerland actually come from Croatia. Should you select a well-equipped health institution here, you can expect care which is equal to, if not better, than elsewhere and, as a foreigner, a more friendly attitude from the staff.

Sports

Football (soccer) has been the most popular sport since the first footballs were brought from England and Prague at around the same time. It was given a fresh impulse when Croatia won third place in the World Cup of 1998, with D. Šuker and Z. Boban as the main trademarks, the real climax being the 3:0 triumph over Germany. On the other hand, don’t expect too much from the national championships: the best players are promptly exported.

The Croats are traditionally always in the upper world echelons in handball, water polo and bowling.

Basketball has never recovered from the national team winning a silver medal in the 1992 Olympics when Croatia played the American dream team in the finals. Tragically, the charismatic captain of the team, D. Petrović, the first European to jump over the wall of American scepticism towards European players and prove himself on NBA turf, died in a car accident.

Short of good skiing areas of their own, Croatians often go to neighbouring Slovenia and Austria. However, skiing remains more a popular leisure time activity and a kind of social status symbol rather than a competitive sport By the way, visitors from Croatia make up a large proportion of the total number of tourists visiting Austria.
Yet, by some paradox, Janica Kostelić has succeeded in piling up an enviable collection of championships and medals, including several of them in different alpine disciplines in the Winter Olympic Games and curtailing the Austrian domination in women skiing. Small wonder that to her admirers she is the one and only Snow Queen.

Almost equally paradoxical is the situation in boxing: almost non-existent in terms of organized competition, Croatia has produced several world and European amateur and professional boxing champions.

A long tradition of tennis and rowing almost regularly secures if not the highest titles and medals, at least a steady supply of news for the sports media, the peak reached with Goran Ivanišević, who conquered Wimbledon in 2001 and the Croatian team winning the Davis Cup in 2005.

Fishing, in the waters of the Danube, Drava, Sava, Neretva or their tributaries, or in the prime trout waters of Gacka and Dobra, is a favourite pastime. And fishing in the Adriatic commands a special respect, and the prestige enjoyed by the masters makes them part of an elite.
Hiking is very popular in the North-West. People often go on weekend excursions to the nearby mountains (hills, if the truth be known!): to Kapela, Velebit and Biokovo for more demanding hikes, organized by several local amateur associations.

Sailing is a favourite with the very rich, mainly high-class sports-people, who earned their money playing abroad (and never seriously pressed by the local tax authorities) and foreigners. Connoisseurs swear that sailing conditions in the Adriatic are absolutely superior to any other place on earth. Of course, surfing sails can also be seen everywhere.

With valiant support from the media, those with a more modest income and those who are health conscious successfully popularize less exclusive activities such as jogging and cycling. Group jogging for a good cause, for example, at the Jarun lake in Zagreb, now attracts tens of thousands of runners of all ages, something virtually unheard of only a few years ago.

Leisure time and social life

Several centuries ago, a wire instrument called the tamburica took the place of the gajde (drum pipe, similar to its Scottish cousin), the main musical instrument to accompany the traditional form of dancing in kolo (where dancers holding each other’s hand or waist make a fully closed or open circle).

It is easy to distinguish a Croatian kolo from similar dances in the region: with very few exceptions, a Croatian kolo always rotates clockwise.

Now the soft, lyrical sound of a tamburica orchestra, together with the traditional red and white chequered field has become the unmistakable trademark of Croats, especially those who have emigrated to other countries. In Croatia itself, it is saved for special occasions such as folk festivals, local celebrations and some country restaurants.

A more urban sound is that made by the usually melancholic, subdued singing of octets called klapa, one of the trademarks of Dalmatia and until recently, an exclusively male domain.
The meeting point for teenagers, time-pressed managers and pensioners alike is the *kafić*, a type of coffee bar. You can choose from espresso, *duplu* (double), cappuccino, *bijelu* (white – with milk) or *produženu* (larger black coffee, similar to the Austrian ‘Verlängerte’). Whatever you choose, brace yourself for the noise produced by several people at the table all talking at the same time at the top of their voices, the force of the voice prevailing over the strength of the argument.

It is still customary to invite friends to a *slastičarnica* (patisserie), where the range and appearance of cakes are very similar to those in Viennese coffee-houses and the taste is perhaps more home-made.

Traditional ballroom dancing still features at formal receptions, New Years’ Eve celebrations, weddings and similar occasions. The atmosphere in a typical disco or dance club is much the same as anywhere in Europe, and people get to know each other easily. Although Croatian womenfolk are anything but shy, good old-fashioned romance is still very much appreciated.

Croats will gladly invite you into their homes, unless they are embarrassed because of their modest circumstances. You are expected to accept it without hesitation or lame excuses!

Flowers for the hostess (on their own or with a box of chocolates) are an absolute must and a bottle of wine for the host is very appropriate for a home visit. For God’s sake, don’t kiss the man, but you may kiss your hostess on the cheeks. (Remember, no hand-kissing unless you are Hungarian, Austrian or Polish!)

Kissing three times is strictly forbidden in Croatia, and keeping the lips on the cheek too long is considered inappropriate. Make sure to pay attention to
the children and try your best to sound sincere and convincing when admiring their appearance and cleverness.

Should the poor children be forced to mumble a few words in your language (say English, German or Italian), possibly learned in an expensive, private Kindergarten, it is obligatory for you to sound very impressed with their perfect pronunciation!

Your hostess is sure to apologize profusely for something that supposedly went wrong in the preparation of the delicious food she sets before you, and the only way to comfort her is to take a second helping when it is offered. But don’t worry, you’ll most probably enjoy it, as good home-cooking, including a variety of sweets, can be taken for granted.

Resistance towards smoking (including passive smoking) is rapidly growing, and even if there is an ashtray in sight, make sure to ask your host’s permission first.

For those of you who live in Croatia, it’s good to know that guests in your home will gladly follow your ways, but be sure to serve some local delicacies to show your appreciation of the local cuisine.

Remember that offering some refreshment to workers carrying out repairs in your home is seen as basic courtesy and good manners and is also taken as a sign of appreciation of their work.

A warning: Be very careful of using words which you would not normally use in the presence of ladies or children, as the tolerance of such language varies greatly and depends on region, education, family background, tradition etc. And please, don’t fall into the trap of acquiring some of the local swear words, as the initial enthusiasm for your imitation skills can evaporate much faster than you might imagine!

Tipping here doesn’t follow any strict rules and is linked to your satisfaction with the service provided. The usual minimum tip is obtained by rounding up the amount on the bill for taxi rides or pizza deliveries, typically by declining to take any small coins (and sometimes even notes) given in change, and some 10% of the bill in restaurants. It is also a nice gesture to tip your postman and chimney-sweep at special times of the year such as Christmas time.
It used to be the privilege of a popular girl, the town beauty to be deliberately late for a date (which used to be called a *rendez-vous*, and now is called a *spoj*). Also, university lectures traditionally start 15 minutes later than scheduled (the “academic quarter of an hour”). Otherwise Croats tend to be rather punctual, unless, of course, the traffic was too heavy, the business lunch, conference or... whatever, lasted longer than planned.

And after all, that has to be the privilege of a nation which is proud of being part of Central Europe and the Mediterranean.

**Laughing in Croatia**

Like anywhere else, telling jokes, preferably at the expense of the inhabitants of a certain region reputed not to be excessively bright or generous, is a popular pastime, and priests, nuns and mothers-in-law are other categories of typical victims. With the collapse of communism, politicians, once a favourite source of inspiration for jokes (even when it meant risking a few days or months of imprisonment), seem to have fallen out of favour.

Rumour has it that the favourite pastime of the people of Zagorje is suing their neighbours on the slightest pretext.

*After working abroad for several years and having accumulated substantial savings, Štef is on the way back to his home village in Zagorje. The villagers on the train are impressed by the pile of notes he’s counting out, and they’re curious to know what he’ll be using the money for.*

*Are you going to buy a house?*

*No.*

*A vineyard, perhaps?*

*Definitely not.*

*A car?*

*No way.*

*Then what are you going to spend your money on?*

*I’m going to sue you all!*

*But whatever for? You’ve been away for so many years and none of us has ever done anything to harm you in any way.*
Well, all I can say is, I don’t know myself yet, but I’m sure I’ll have thought of something by the time I reach my lawyer’s office!

The inhabitants from Zagorje are also well known for their very special brand of logic.

A tourist driving through a small village in Zagorje hits a cyclist, who indicated right but then turned left. The cyclist, gets up, unsteady on his feet due not only to being hit, but obviously because he’s had a few glasses too many, and curses the driver for not paying attention to his signals. “But you indicated right!”, exclaims the driver! “You idiot!” comes the reply, “Don’t you think I know where to turn in my own village? The signals were for you!!”

People from Dalmatia are famous for making the least possible effort.

In the deep south of the country, a Swedish tourist asks directions of two men, Mate and Jure, who are lazing in the shadow of a large tree at a crossroads. When he sees their blank expressions, he tries asking in English, German, French and Spanish, but to no avail. After he leaves, disappointed, Mate turns to Jure and suggests that they learn at least one foreign language, so as to avoid a similar embarrassment in the future. Jure rejects the proposal outright: “And what exactly is the point of being able to speak a foreign language? That tourist speaks quite a few, doesn’t he, but that didn’t help him, did it?!?”

The islanders are renowned for their tightfistedness, and the inhabitants of the island of Brač are the top of that league.

The smell of “fritule”, a local poor man’s delicacy, reaches the room where the grandfather is on his deathbed. His dying wish is for his grandson to bring him a tiny piece of fritule from the kitchen. Very soon, the boy comes back empty handed, saying “They say you can’t have it - it’s for the wake after your funeral”.

The same islanders seem to be able to amuse themselves without spending too much.
During an important feast-day celebration in Dalmatia, it’s customary to fire cannons and set off firecrackers. Villages compete to see whose display is most impressive. When no sign of fireworks was seen in a village on the island of Brač, just across the strait, the surprised visitors were given a very simple explanation. “You see,” they said, “this year the weather was very fine, and the sea was very calm, so that the lights and sounds from the coast were sufficient for us too!

However, joke telling comes second to teasing, something deeply ingrained in the social fabric, which comes so naturally, that it’s hardly noticed anymore. The near absence of the art of self-deprecation or understatement is more than compensated for by this skill, which Croats tend to develop from an early age. Friends will often mercilessly tease each other because of real or imagined ugliness, excessive weight, submissiveness to a shrewish wife, foolishness committed the previous evening when a few too many drinks were had, the game lost by the favourite football team, a broken heart, and absolutely anything else that comes up.

And when your Croatian friends, ordinary folk, start to tease you mercilessly, you’ll know that you’re no longer a stranger, that you’ve been accepted.

If you notice a certain sullenness, it’s shared by the populations of all of the “countries in transition”, and is probably of a temporary nature. People here are slowly maturing and overcoming their disappointment in the cruel market economy and (perhaps even worse), the unexpected levels of hypocrisy and selfishness of the “western” nations that had somewhat naively been idealized until very recently.

Where to go, what to see ......without wading through piles of tourist brochures or ploughing through too many websites

Young people looking for fun and those particular about good facilities and comfort flock to Istria. Lovers of the genuine Mediterranean atmosphere (cicadas included) go to the islands in the south. People of
all ages with respiratory troubles go to the island of Lošinj. Art lovers enjoy the mysterious mixture of styles, including gothic, renaissance and baroque churches, palaces and sculptures, and paintings of towns such as Šibenik, Trogir and Dubrovnik.

It’s worth trying to time your visit to Korčula to coincide with the performance of the moreška, a ritualized re-enactment of battles of bygone ages. Since this is not just a show put on for tourists, but a regulated event, check the dates with your local Croatian tourist office before you go. And out of season, the island of Hvar (Pharos), with its strong Greek flavour, is your safest bet for sunny weather.

Kopački rit, in the Danube’s backwaters, is deer hunter’s (no, please, disregard the famous movie!) and birdwatcher’s dream. The virgin forests and the lakes of the island of Mljet and the more distant, less developed islands of Vis and Lastovo (inaccessible to foreigners until a few years ago) for those who prefer unspoiled, authentic atmosphere to more developed infrastructure.

Čigoč is a village where the white stork’s population exceeds the number of inhabitants. Opatija, a distinguished lady, is the preferred escape from the sunless days of winter months, the flavour of the Habsburg times still in the air.

And now, for something very special: How about joining the world of the reticent dormouse-hunters in Gorski Kotar and spending a few nights in the autumn setting traps (tiny baited boxes) on branches of trees? Even if you decide that the taste of the edible, fat dormouse not quite to your liking, the serenity of forests, creeks and wildlife will definitely recharge your batteries. And on top of that, you can take home some dormouse fat, reputed to be the best cure for burns.

The last few tips: A visit to Modra špilja (Blue Cave) on the island of Biševo near Vis is an absolute must. As is a visit to slapovi Krke (Waterfalls of the Krka River), and the mysterious forests and virgin meadows of the Velebit mountain. Fancy something completely different? Then try open-air concerts and plays in the authentic medieval setting of
Dubrovnik. Or how about sampling the culinary delicacies at the delta of the river Neretva or fresh shellfish at Ston? I’m going to stop here. After all, something has to be left for you to discover on your own...
Jakov Buljan has been travelling for some 40 years, criss-crossing all the continents except Antarctica. He has lived and worked in countries as diverse as Austria, Burundi, India and Libya, among Christians, Sikhs, Moslems and Hindus. At home in Vienna (Austria) but also in Madras (now Chennai), Shanghai, Paris, Bujumbura, Porto Alegre (Brazil) and Lahore. He has set his foot in Copenhagen, Rangoon, Quito, Pécs, Bergen (Norway), Kathmandu, Stockholm, Maputo, Chengdu, Philadelphia, Tibet, Florence, Cape Town, Geneva, Melbourne, Antananarivo, Northampton, Reutlingen, Nairobi – and the list goes on. J. Buljan is happily retired and back in Zagreb.