



Virtual adventure

Experience-rich “smart”
travel to Croatia

WORDS THELMA FAYLE > ILLUSTRATION SIERRA LUNDY

In November, for five days, from 8 to 11 am, guided by the weighty planning of a not-for-profit tour company with almost 50 years of experience, I came to know the history, the landscape and the remarkable people in five cities of the boomerang-shaped, parliamentary country known to its people as Hrvatska (Croatia).

It's 8 am and my study is dark as I slip into my chair and turn on the computer. Outside, it's a grey, drizzly BC winter day, but I am about to enter a different world.

After a lifetime of considering the Balkans as an arcane and unknown part of the European landscape, I wanted a visceral sense of the place. My curiosity about the exotic homeland of a friend prompted me to figure out how to see Croatia on its own terms—even though, for age and health reasons that are too unremarkable to describe, my husband and I can no longer travel as we once did.

An option presented itself: one that involved no airfare, no currency exchanges, no jet lag, no expensive hotels or meals, and a plan that offered a zero-carbon footprint. I signed up for what turned out to be an uncommonly rich, real-time, Zoom “trip”—for \$499.

In November, for five days, from 8 to 11 am, guided by the weighty planning of a not-for-profit tour company with almost 50 years of experience, I came to know the history, the landscape and the remarkable people in five cities of the boomerang-shaped, parliamentary country known to its people as Hrvatska (Croatia).

Pre-trip planning for my transformative adventure involved reading *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia* by Rebecca West. This unique travel book, a 1,100-page work published in 1941, is considered one of the best non-fiction books of the 20th century.

There were 23 smart, friendly participants in my program—seniors from several countries, who have enjoyed lifetimes of excursions. Most were people who no longer choose to travel, but still want to exercise their curiosity and attempt to deeply understand the “other” in our world. Two were practiced, high-end Zoom travellers, who consistently showed up each day with a virtual background to match the cities we were “visiting”—along with a glass of Croatian wine in hand. Obviously, not 8 am for them!

We hung out with a fabulous tour guide, aptly named Darko, which means “gift” in Croatian. He took us through a planned program, offering brilliant lectures and Q&As with a museum curator, an historian, an archaeologist and a renowned marine scientist—to name a few. The excursion happened in real time; we were not sitting back, looking at a documentary. We talked and laughed

together as if we were bona fide, on-the-road travel companions.

“Field trips” took us through Diocletian’s Palace in the historical town of Split (designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site), where we listened to a recording of the late Oliver Dragojević—a famous and beloved folksinger. We moved along the Dalmatian coast to Šibenik, where we discovered another UNESCO wonder. The Cathedral of St. James was built from Croatian limestone, using unique construction techniques for the dome, which is made of huge stone slabs put together like Lego, without mortar.

And then we moved on to two major settlements on the Adriatic island of Hvar, followed by a visit to an ancient farmer’s market in Korčula and the famed Dubrovnik. Along the way, we learned of eight spectacular national parks throughout the small country. For some reason, I had not expected to see national parks in Croatia. In a highly entertaining and friendly style, Darko gave us a rich, condensed version of the 2,000 years it took Croatia to become independent.

I was struck by the range of historical and cultural influences on Croatia, a country of 3.8 million people. (I was told the terms “Croatsians” or “Croats” are both acceptable.)

Like so many indigenous people around the world, there were the Illyrian tribes of the seventh to fourth century BCE, a great kingdom obliterated by the Roman Empire in the name of “civilization.” Croatsians also experienced the Byzantine impact, followed by Venetian rule, Hungarian, Ottoman, Napoleonic, Austrian-Hungarian and Yugoslavian. Each of these conquerors left stunning, distinct and uniquely patterned physical imprints still visible today. The city of Split has evidence of high-level Roman work in the preserved red roofs and brickwork. Even current roads/bus routes use the legacy grids created by Romans.

Another favourite carryover from the Ottoman Empire is the essential kava (coffee) practice you see in every city. It is not unusual for Croatsians to visit friends daily at a café—for two hours!—to drink a small, powerful coffee, similar to a finely ground Turkish coffee. Darko called the daily cultural and social routine “part of our Croatian mental health practice,” adding an important footnote—“We have fantastic pastry shops all over Zagreb.”

After a 90-minute lecture and chat with a curator and art histori-



an of the Split museum, I wondered why I had never heard the name Ivan Meštrović. In his lifetime (1883-1962), this Croatian sculptor and political activist created more than 2,000 sculptures, left in the best museums all over the world. One of my travel buddies, who lived in Chicago, described Meštrović's most famous work in her city.

Discovering the name of the famous town of Split is rooted in a cherished symbol—the resilient, bright yellow broom plant (brnista)—I found it wacky that the same plant so reviled in BC is revered in Croatia.

On the island of Hvar, we listened to the ancient, a capella tones of klapa singers, part of UNESCO cultural heritage since 2012. The century-old klapa is usually performed by a group of six men who meet twice a week and stand outside in a semi-circle to sing after mass. My travel mates and I were charmed to know that “sound” was a central piece of a UNESCO site.

Croatian marine scientist Alen Soldo was at an international conference in Australia, but he got up at 3 am and, via Zoom, introduced our group to his life's work and his love for the Adriatic Sea, speaking for 90 minutes about Croatia's 6,000-kilometre coast. The surface of the sea, which is shared by six countries, is roughly the same as the surface area of Croatia. He said there are 7,000 plant and animal species and 1,200 Croatian islands. Cruise ships on the Adriatic are strictly regulated, he said, because of pollution and noise, especially near Dubrovnik. In colourful detail, he described the responsible, ancient and selective tramata fishing that is unique to Croatia, and said Croatia is a world-leading champion of shark protection. In a voice that sounded more 10-year-old boy than 50-year-old scientist, he told us the Adriatic Sea was “the most beautiful place in the world.”



This was the moment I felt the greatest value on my trip. I love people who care so deeply about their work.

The last stop on our travels was Dubrovnik, once called Ragusa; a republic for almost 500 years until conquered by Napoleon. Croats' persistent desire to gain independence shows up in an early Ragusa flag with the single word "freedom" at its centre.

Once said to have been the "Hong Kong" of the Renaissance, Ragusa was a pioneer in public health measures and considered one of the most stable republics. Keeping people healthy in a trade centre was critical, and the Ragusa government was among the first in the 13th century to establish month-long quarantines. In the 17th century, they understood that disease spread by contact, and built a quarantining complex for incoming travellers. Public health measures included disinfecting imported goods with vinegar, flames or seawater; and mandatory 10-day self-isolation for potentially infected citizens. Penalties for noncompliance were severe. Our group agreed early Croats seemed to be centuries ahead of the vaccine-hesitant folks in the world today.

At the end of five days, I decided "lost tactile experience" was a reasonable travel-cost considering the stellar, zero-carbon footprint gain. When our holiday was over, there was no packing or unpacking, no checking flight schedules, and no tiring long voyages. Just time spent sitting back at home-sweet-home with a deeper appreciation of the lives of people who live a long way off in the Balkans.

I know them better now.

IF YOU DECIDE TO "GO":

Road Scholar offers curious people a huge helping of reliable information. roadscholar.org 

Cross your knees when you sneeze?

Say goodbye to bladder leaks & urgency, simply by sitting on a chair.

11,000 Kegels | 28 minutes | Non-invasive

URO^{SPOT}

We combine technology, education, and health coaching to restore your pelvic floor.

NOW OPEN IN VICTORIA | Ask us about coverage.

urospot.com | 778-247-2026

Pelvic Health Done *Differently*.

