

# A MONTH IN SOME FORMER YUGOSLAVIAN COUNTRIES



Yugoslavia emerged from World War II as a six-country federation of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia under General Tito in a communist republic, independent of Russia. After his death, economic, political and religious difficulties began to mount, leading to the gradual disintegration of Yugoslavia. This resulted in the 1991-5 war, signs of which are still evident.

My trip to four of those countries began in Zagreb (Croatia) which is divided into two parts: Upper Town, full of historical structures, churches, restaurants, religious monuments, theatres and cinemas, and Lower Town. Donji Grad (Lower Town) is famous for its museums, parks, architectural monuments and shopping.

As I was there just prior to Easter, the shops were gaily decorated with Easter arrangements while outside the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary/Katedrala Marijina Uznesenja, there were giant Easter eggs decorated by community and church groups.

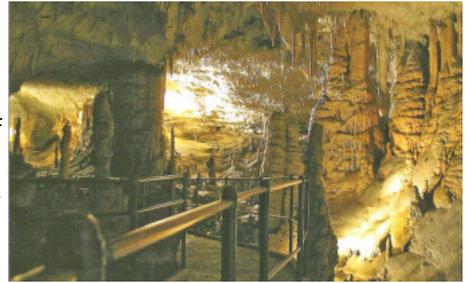


One of the eggs 2m high

Smoking is prevalent in all the countries that I visited. A packet of cigarettes costs approximately two Euros. In Trg Bana Jelacica (Jelacic Square), the central square of the city, a bustling market was underway and there I tasted some excellent cheeses and cakes. However, the sight of a chain-smoking butcher, cigarette dangling from his mouth as he arranged his goods, deterred me from sampling his wares.

From Zagreb I took a train to Ljubljana, in Slovenia, which is in the European Union. The train was thoroughly searched (ceilings, undercarriages) by both Croatian and Slovenian customs and immigration officers. The city, which fared better than most of the other countries in the 1991-5 war with only ten days of fighting, is dominated by its castle with its commanding views of the city. From there, I travelled to the subterranean two million-year-old

Postojama Caves where I, along with hundreds of other tourists from tour buses, took a tiny train deep



into the caves. There I marvelled at the different "halls" of stalagmites and stalactites. A short distance away was the Renaissance Predjama Castle, built into a cave on a 123-metre-high cliff. Here I left the crowds behind and was the only visitor there that afternoon.

Further north was Lake Bled with its picture-perfect views and idyllic atmosphere.



Lake Bled at night from my window

My GPS system then led me back into Croatia and the coastal resort towns of Pula and Opatija. In Pula I was again the only tourist to admire a well-preserved Roman floor "The Punishment of Dirce" hidden behind anonymous gates in a carpark.

The Plitvice Lakes National Park, with its grand collection of waterfalls, lakes, forest and animal life, is UNESCO listed. On Easter Sunday in 1991, the first shots of Croatia's war with Yugoslavia were fired in the Park; the war's first casualty a park policeman.

Returning south of the Park to the Adriatic coast with its clear, "Reckitts blue bag" waters, my next stop was Zadar, a Roman fortified walled town, which was badly shelled over several years in the nineties resulting in damage to homes and businesses as well as to UNESCO-listed sites.

Split's Old Town, encompassing many shops, retailers and restaurants, lies largely within the ruins of the remaining Romanesque and Gothic structures of the third century Diocletian Palace. Split also has one of the smallest cathedrals that I have ever seen.

Just north of Split, we took a local bus to Trogir and joined parents and grandparents there to see a cere-



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mony in the cathedral to bless all the town's 17 year olds.

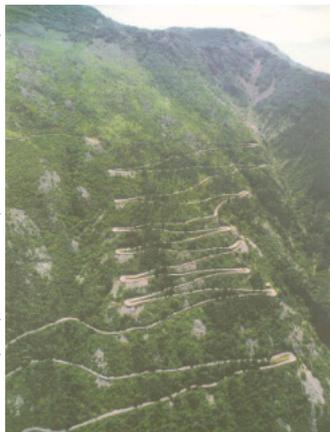
From Split, a friend and I spent an idyllic week aboard a small vintage sailing ship visiting Makarska and the small islands of Mijet (Greek legend says that Odysseus fell in love with Mijet), Trstenik, Korcula (said to be the birthplace of Marco Polo) and Hvar (vineyards clinging to the steep hillsides, lavender and herb growing) before returning to Split. Hvar's Old Town is a labyrinth of narrow streets beneath the fortress walls. On Easter Saturday in Makarska, we were welcomed by locals into the crowded cathedral to a ceremony of lighting the Paschal candle. In the Mijet National Forest, we hiked and then took a tiny boat across the lake to the ruins of a monastery disbanded in 1809 during the reign of Napoleon.

After a week of eating vast quantities of delicious fresh local seafood, drinking not-so-delicious local wine and sightseeing, we travelled to Dubrovnik. It is also in Croatia but we had to cross the 20-kilometre strip of coastal land which belongs to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which involved Croatian and Bosnia and Herzegovina's customs and immigration checks at both ends of the strip. I had assumed that this coastal strip was to allow shipping access for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but we were told that it was formerly the holiday resort of the communist elite and was retained when Yugoslavia was divided. With its vivid images of beauty, history and survival, Dubrovnik's Old Town is relatively unchanged since the 13th century although war damage is still evident.

Next we visited Montenegro, whose craggy, grey mountain range leaves just enough room between it and the coast for a ribbon of coastal towns and beaches. These include the historic walled towns of Budva and medieval Kotor while the interior is a setting of dramatic mountains, forests, lakes and bottomless canyons.

Away from the coast, our bus took us up, up, up and around a road of endless narrow hairpin bends towards Cetinje. The view would have been breathtaking but all we passengers were already holding our breath.

That white-knuckled bus trip made me decide immediately to give up ever driving again in Europe. Not only were the bends hair-raising, but the bus relentlessly forced oncoming cars to back uphill around those bends, sometimes for hundreds of metres, until they



found a passing space. A lunch of farm ham and cheese washed down with some rough red wine did nothing to cure our anxiety about the return trip.

In Montenegro's Bay of Kotor, a warship, which belonged to the Yugoslavian navy, is anchored. Now, no one country has the funds or the determination to move or restore it so it sits there - a reminder of former days. We also passed a deserted town which had formerly housed the disbanded Yugoslavian army.

From Dubrovnik, we took a bus to Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina, well known for its Old Bridge. Going inland, we passed through fertile plains where grapes and small crops were growing, but gradually the landscape changed to a more bare, rocky scene. The busy bazaar street of Kujundzije (coppersmiths) with lots of shops to attract tourists led to the Old Bridge and the Little Bridge (older than the Old Bridge).

The horror of the war was really exposed to us as we walked down the Boulevard, formerly a glamorous French-style boulevard lined with famous-name shops, now renamed by the locals as "Sniper Boulevard". It is a depressing sight of abandoned buildings partially or fully destroyed by fire or rockets. We stayed in the Hotel Era, which was the only hotel not attacked during the war because it housed international journalists.



Sniper Boulevard, Mostar

Although Sarajevo suffered large scale destruction during its 1991-95 siege, reconstruction commenced almost immediately afterwards so that there are few unrestored buildings. These usually belong to families who cannot be traced or who cannot afford to repair them. It was in Sarajevo that World War I was triggered by the shooting of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife.

The main industry of all the countries is now tourism, replacing the former thriving metallurgy, chemicals, textiles, automobile, furniture, and food-processing sectors which had been assigned to individual countries of the federation. Almost everyone that I met spoke very good English. This they attributed, not to their schooling, but to UK & USA television shows which have subtitles and are not dubbed. Driving on the motorways of Slovenia and Croatia was almost a delight - a visit there by the architects of our motorways and tunnels would teach them a lot.

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