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BY SCOTT HOCKER

Spin the Globe: Scott Hocker in Croatia

AFAR chooses a destination at random—by literally spinning a globe—and sends Scott Hocker on a spontaneous journey to Croatia.

I had been warned, and the alarm bell had pealed repeatedly: “Everyone’s at the coast.” I’d been sent to Croatia with less than 24 hours’ notice, and my trip coincided with a four-day weekend during an aberrant heat wave. All the residents of the Croatian capital, Zagreb, it seemed, were on a seaside exodus.

Hvar. Split. Pag. Dubrovnik. Pula. Vis. The names of Croatian coastal cities and islands conjured visions of epic parties and effortless seaside relaxation. After all, this 21-year-old country at the crossroads of Central Europe, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean is experiencing an unprecedented tourism boom, most of it concentrated on Croatia’s sprawling coastline and its more than 1,000 islands. I was raised near or in the ocean; there is saltwater in my blood. A trip to the Adriatic Sea, mere hours from Zagreb, was alluring. Alluring, but predictable. There had to be more to Croatia than sun, surf, and shots. So I resolved to stay inland and experience how its landlocked citizens decompress.

Zagreb was a ghost town. **Ban Jelačić Square**, which lies in the center of the city, was a chiaroscuro of absent bodies and varied architectures. Even the funicular on nearby Tomičeva Street was paralyzed at its highest point. The funicular, more than 120 years old and one of the shortest in the world, rarely closes. It was that kind of holiday.

It was not yet afternoon, and I was in need of a deep dive into Croatian wine. Steps from the sleeping funicular I spied Basement, a wine bar that had been open for less than three weeks. Its manager, Slavko Topić, was tending bar that day. He poured me a glass of rosé, then a glass of graševina, made from Croatia’s most widely planted white grape. It was delightfully acidic and oily.

Slavko told me he was studying optometry and mentioned that this particular day was a holiday. I nodded, grimacing. I asked him why most of his left arm was swathed in brown gauze that began at his index finger and trailed up his forearm. He sheepishly muttered something about a beer bottle and the Euro Cup quarterfinals.

After I left the bar, I circumnavigated the funicular by climbing one of its adjacent staircases. The ascent was short, the heat intense. The streets of Gornji Grad, “upper town,” straddle the undulating slopes in confusing tiers, so maps are of little use. A park speckled with palaces; a fleet of blue trams; a neo-Gothic cathedral with immense spires, the tallest building in Croatia. Up, down, over: I changed elevations so many times I felt like a one-man roller coaster. The stifling heat elicited thoughts of the panting Dalmatian dog I had spotted earlier, taunting me with visions of its



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Heading to Croatia in June, for just a short time sadly - any advice on how many days are needed in Zagreb, Split and/or Dubrovnik to get a flavor of each city? Any of those cities you'd pick over the others?

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namesake coastline.

The next night, I headed out to Rush Bar, Zagreb's (semi) famous gay club, to watch the capital's subculture unwind. More interested in alcoholic function than fashionable boutique spirits, I ordered a vodka soda. The bartendress grabbed a tumbler. She added a dribble of Finlandia vodka and flanked the glass with a Perrier bottle. I mixed, swigged the weak cocktail-of-sorts, then switched to Beck's. Cheesy remixes of Ke\$ha's "Tik Tok" and Rihanna's "S&M" had the fevered crowd mouthing along: "Sex in the air / I don't care / I like the smell of it."

Then the telltale swagger of Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring On It)" began. I jumped into the fray, alternately squatting low and locking. Drunk, I considered a visit to a club called Denis. Then, on my cell phone, I looked more closely at its website: A sex club, it turns out, is a lot less enticing when its layout resembles the kitchen of a suburban tract home.

Morning came, and I trolled for liquid souvenirs. As I sipped medica (honey), maraska (sour cherry), and trešnja (sweet cherry) liqueurs, Ivana Tolić, a saleswoman at [Natura Croatica](#), identified the two holidays that precipitated Zagreb's discomfiting quiet. The first, **Dan Antifašističke Borbe**, Anti-Fascist Struggle Day, honors the region's uprising against would-be World War II occupiers. The second, **Dan Državnosti**, celebrates Croatia's 1991 statehood. There is a beautiful irony in how a country's citizens celebrate their scrabbles for independence by embracing the unconditional right to do nothing.

The next morning I left Zagreb for the Velebit Mountains. Through a mutual acquaintance on Twitter, I had been introduced to a Croatian-American writer, Anja Mutić. She was the sole person I had contacted who had not scurried for the Adriatic. Instead, she was spending the week at a place called [Linden Tree Retreat & Ranch](#). I needed relief from Zagreb's heat and emptiness. Head for the hills, I thought.

One two-and-a-half-hour bus ride and innumerable music-festival billboards later, I arrived in Gospić, where I was met by Linden Tree's proprietor, a tall man who introduced himself as Bruce. Later, I discovered that his given name was Bozidar Yerkovich. He was Croatian-American. As we shook hands, Bruce asked if I was hungry. Always, I thought. We walked to a bakery, and, over weighty slices of savory pie filled with škripavac (farmer's cheese), Bruce told me that after living in Seattle for years, he'd searched the world for the ideal parcel of land where he could live a simpler life. "What made you pick this place?" I asked. He answered, "I did not pick it; it picked me." I was too tired to do more than smirk delicately.

We drove 20 minutes northeast to Velika Plana. Along the way, I spotted a sign announcing the birthplace of Nikola Tesla. Bruce waved his hand to the left, indicating Tesla's home across a series of fields. The way lightning bolts streak across this valley, Bruce explained, it was inevitable that Tesla harnessed electricity. We turned onto a gravel driveway and arrived at Linden, christened after the ubiquitous tree for which the lipa, a Croatian

coin, was also named. The property was riddled with dilapidated shanties, new constructions, and tepees. The lucid blue of the sky and the crack of the crisp mountain air were staggering.

In front of Linden's common area, replete with large dream catchers, Anja and her Angola-born husband, Hoji, met me with warm handshakes. "So nice to finally meet you," we said to each other. Both were tranquil from multiple days spent at the base of the mountains. Also staying here was a German-Croatian family, a father and his two sons, whose grandmother was raised here and had recently died. They had come to Linden for a weeklong horse-back expedition high into Velebit, a heartbreaking mingling of vision quest and intimate wake.

In the afternoon, after a substantial meal of blitva (boiled Swiss chard and potatoes), the Germans and I mounted horses and clomped into the valley. I rode Mama, who had given birth a few months prior. Brooke, our guide, led us over streams, under shrubby canopies, and through a brightly lit vale. There were once hundreds of residents here, she told us; now, because most have passed away or moved elsewhere, there are only handfuls. I thought about Bozidar's Croatian-American idea of leisure: a cross-continental homecoming that offers a remote getaway to people hungry for calm.

There was stillness and silence in the vale, slashed only by our trotting and cantering. Mama was obstinate, pausing for a grassy snack and laps from a rivulet. If I had given birth recently and had a remedial equestrian pressing on my thoracic vertebrae, I would have been willful, too.

Nighttime was a blur of šljivovica (plum brandy) and fresh horse milk and acoustic guitar strains and conversation. Anja told me of her recent wanderings through Croatia's neighboring countries, each a fractured remnant of the Yugoslavia of her youth. The horse milk I drank was delicate and infinitely lighter than cow's milk, like a fresh dairy breeze to cow's milk's dense fog. Davit, one of the Germans, picked his way through the notes of "Hotel California" as Hoji coached and sang, "How they dance in the courtyard, sweet summer sweat / Some dance to remember, some dance to forget." Shortly before midnight, the two had mastered the song. They played it flawlessly and finished to plum brandy-addled hoots and sloppy applause.

Refreshed, Anja, Hoji, and I began our return to Zagreb the next morning. Anja stopped en route at a villager's home to buy fresh škripavac cheese. As we waited in the kitchen, I was offered a shot of bootleg šljivovica. I said yes, even though it was 10 in the morning. Anja translated as the mother and son inquired if I would like to buy some. I said, "No, thank you," then changed my mind and requested a small bottle. The mother replied that they had no small bottles.

She grabbed an empty 1.5-liter Jamnica brand water bottle, rinsed it, then headed to the pantry. She reentered the kitchen, and the plastic bottle was now filled with opaque, dusky yellow šljivovica. I paid 90 kuna (\$15), and Anja, Hoji, and I returned to the car.

We crossed the Lika River, and I gasped. I had mentioned to Anja the night before that I desperately wanted to dive into water—any water—on our drive back to Zagreb. There was no time. So, from the backseat, I watched the river recede into the distance, much like my tenacious expectations. I never did immerse myself in a Croatian body of water. Still, that plastic bottle filled with šljivovica will do quite nicely. **A**

This appeared in the October 2012 issue. Photo by Jeffery Cross. [Discovery Scott's favorite places to see, shop, and sip in Zagreb.](#)

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