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Why Eastern Europe Will be 2017's Hot Travel Destination

DECEMBER 29, 2016 12:00 PM
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Krakow, Poland

Photo: Alamy



Gazing up at the Eiffel Tower post-baguette, or tossing coins into the Trevi Fountain before devouring bowls of cacio e pepe are dreamy European experiences that will forever inspire flights to Paris and Rome. Beyond such timeless locales, however, curious itinerants are increasingly looking east for inspiration, dreaming of washing down braised beef and bread dumplings with Pilsner in Prague, or hatching holiday plans around the Glühwein-fueled Christmas markets of Vienna. Now that these majestic capitals are swelling with tourists, the intrepid are seeking out the rough-around-the-edges delights of less-developed nations like Montenegro, Slovenia, and Georgia, a predilection poised to intensify in 2017.

Jack Ezon, president of New York-based travel agency Ovation Vacations, works with a number of Generation X and Y clients. Fear, he believes, incited by the likes of terrorism and Zika, dictated many of their sojourns in 2016. "The world of possibilities shrunk for most American travelers. While frustrating and initially disappointing, it forced people to explore secondary, less-touristy destinations," he says.

This motivation, coupled with an affinity for immersive, sophisticated experiences unfolding in local neighborhoods rather than dime-a-dozen designer-store-anchored shopping drags, led many to seek out cities like Dubrovnik, Berlin, and Budapest. What do they have in common? Robust artistic and culinary identities that help unleash what Ezon calls the “Indie Brooklyn Effect.” While Danube River cruises often afford glimpses of Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, java aficionados prefer to actually wander the picturesque streets of Old Town for an impressive café scene. Likewise, a tour through Dracula’s Bran Castle in Romania should be paired with a tour of the capital, Bucharest, where the opulent mansion of executed dictator Nicolae Ceausescu is now open to the public. An episode of the Netflix favorite *Chef’s Table*, devoted to Ana Roš of the countryside restaurant Hiša Franko, (a two-hour drive from scenic Lake Bled) has also given Slovenia a boost in tourism.

“We are witnessing a significant growth of arrivals to emerging European states,” explains Siniša Topalovic, managing director of hospitality consultancy Horwath HTL’s Zagreb office. “Once predominantly visited by aging baby boomers, now the regions are attracting younger customer segments looking for excitement, safety and a ‘different’ Europe, where there is the charming reminiscence of past socialist times with modern twists.”

Consider Poland, where Kraków is a fusion of a gorgeous preserved medieval-era historic center with an energetic nightlife and the deep, haunting Wieliczka Salt Mine just a quick jaunt away. The country has a rich arts legacy, as underscored by Wrocław’s 2016 European Capital of Culture Awards. The year also saw the release of *VeryGraphic: Polish Designers of the 20th Century*, a book chronicling the expansive history of Polish graphic design, and the opening of the exhibition-filled Centre for the Meeting of Cultures in Lublin. Warsaw, rebuilt after significant World War II-era damage, draws raves for a slew of attractions like the Neon Muzeum. When the city’s circa-1857 Hotel Europejski transforms into a luxe Raffles property in 2017, Ezon predicts it will be “a game-changer.”

That’s the same word Michael Holtz, founder and CEO of the high-end New York-based travel agency SmartFlyer, uses to describe Croatia’s impact on Southeastern Europe’s heterogeneous collection of Balkan countries. One might uncover a wonderfully burgeoning wine scene in Bulgaria or hang out in a kitschy bar sipping the indigenous fruit brandy *rakija* in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s once war-torn Sarajevo. Other draws include gawking at Ottoman architecture in Macedonia or hiking Mount Dajti, located just outside the Albanian capital of Tirana. Yet it’s Croatia, mixing pristine waterfalls in Plitviče with the stone walls of Dubrovnik and Roman ruins like Diocletian’s Palace in Split that compels travelers to visit the area. Along with Slovenia and the heady landscape of Montenegro, Ezon says Croatia propelled 80 percent growth in the Balkans market over the past five years.



Photo: Aamy



“Croatia is, at the moment, the busiest country in the region in terms of the development pipeline, and it is only warming up. New hotels, including luxury, boutique, and resort-style, are set in beautiful natural surroundings, while a number of virgin locations are still waiting their turn,” says Topalovic, pointing to the success of the opened-in-2015 Hotel Adriatic in Rovinj, where contemporary European artists were commissioned to dress up the property. In Dubrovnik, Holtz says it’s the Hotel Dubrovnik Palace that resonates with clients: “It’s right on the Adriatic Sea and it looks like a Richard Meier building.” Zagreb, the capital, has experienced double-digit tourist growth in the last three to four years, Topalovic adds. It’s decidedly more urban, but its atmospheric, café-lined streets are alluring, as are landmarks like the quirky Museum of Broken Relationships, an ode to failed dalliances that has spawned an outpost in Los Angeles.

Must-sees, like the Museum of Yugoslav History and the Nikola Tesla Museum, as well as nighttime carousing on floating barges called *splavs*, make the enchanting Serbian capital of Belgrade another up-and-coming hotspot. Holtz says that the debut of Air Serbia’s direct flight from New York to Belgrade, the only non-stop between the U.S. and Balkans, has invigorated interest in the city. “People want to see new places. When there is a convenient flight like this, run by the quality Etihad Airways, it certainly makes the decision easier,” he says.

Well-known hotel brands synonymous with top-notch service and accommodations also help solidify interest. Montenegro, for instance, is fast catching up to Croatia thanks to the arrival of Aman Sveti Stefan and a One&Only Resort in the works. Ezon notes that 73 percent of his clients headed to the Balkans to squeeze in a stay at the Aman, a seaside oasis with centuries-old red-tiled roofs. “Montenegro and Croatia definitely opened people’s minds,” he continues. “They got infected by its beauty and people and heard about

neighboring regions, so now they have places like Albania, Macedonia, and Serbia on their list to go back to.”

Northward, the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea promises just as much stimulation courtesy of the Baltic States Latvia and Estonia. Latvia’s capital, Riga, is a captivating Art Nouveau haven, while Estonia’s Tallinn, a popular port of call on cruise ships, is a walled fairy-tale city melding the sleek and the baroque. Interest in the adjacent Scandinavian countries continues to spike, so Holtz suggests tacking on an easy-to-plan stay in Tallinn via Helsinki, Finnair’s home base. “Helsinki is the gateway to Tallinn,” he says. “Just a 30-minute flight away and there is so much great history.” For hotels, he recommends the 19th-century Telegraaf, complete with Elemis Spa.

Straddling Europe and Asia is Georgia, a former Soviet Republic bordering the Black Sea. One of the world’s oldest wine regions, its lively capital is Tbilisi, where a cable car whisks one up to the ancient Narikala Fortress and pedestrians walk over the Bridge of Peace, a space age steel-and-glass marvel. Here, Adjara Group Hospitality lent its design expertise to the Rooms Hotel and converted an old sewing factory into La Fabrika, an industrial multi-use space bringing together a gallery, courtyard, and guestrooms. A former publishing house with a fireplace lounge, retreats at the Rooms Hotel feature leather and handmade wallpaper. A timber-clad sister property in Kazbegi ensures that even the rugged Caucasus Mountains now make for a fashionable getaway.