

Croatia, at last

It's third time lucky for these determined travellers as they finally reach their wish list country and find it was everything they hoped for, and more...

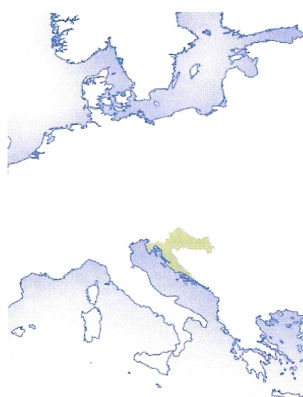
WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki





Carol Kubicki...

...and her husband, Anthony, use their Devon Tempest to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring historical and natural environments



RIGHT Rovinj is a cluster of colourful houses in a blue sea

Finally we have reached Croatia. We planned to visit some years ago, but got sidetracked in Slovenia. Croatia stayed on the wish list, but the next trip in that direction was thwarted by an accident in the 'van! This time, we drove with determination through Germany and Austria and shut our eyes as we sped through Slovenia, feeling a sense of achievement as we crossed the border.

The idyllic campsite near Duga Resa was a fantastic start; situated next to the crystal clear Mrežnica river and surrounded by rural lanes, vineyards and pretty farms, we spent hours walking, cycling and river watching. On our first evening we strolled to the old watermill and, leaning on the bridge, listened to the prolonged call of a bird in the reeds; a song that became the backing track for our Croatia tour. Clinging onto a wavering stem, its tiny conical nest strung between two reeds, was a great reed warbler.

Many visitors to Croatia skip Zagreb, which is a shame. It is a lovely capital and, with a railway station just five minutes from our campsite, made an easy day trip. Zagreb's horseshoe of seven interconnecting parks makes sauntering to and from the city centre a pleasant experience.

We enjoyed the large open-air market with stalls piled high with fresh produce and the unusual fortified cathedral. For lunch we sought out a regional speciality, Štrukli from La Štruk café whose only dish is this filling and tasty baked cheese and pastry fare that we walked off by climbing the steps to the old town.

At a viewpoint over the city a young couple were having wedding photographs taken. They looked blissfully happy and I hoped that their story wouldn't end up in the nearby Museum of Broken ►

Trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB 2.3-litre. This is our second Devon 'van. At 5.3m we think it's enormous and, with a washroom, also luxurious



THE JOURNEY

We travelled from Salford via the Hull-Zeebrugge ferry, through Belgium, Germany, Austria and Slovenia to enter Croatia near Karlovac. We spent 21 days exploring Croatia in May

THE COSTS

Fuel average 34mpg (HRK 3,811).....	£482.84	Relationships, national parks, Rastoke
Ferry Hull-Zeebrugge return,		Museum, Veliki Tabor Castle, Kumrovec
outside cabin with meals.....	£488.78	Museum, Rovinj church tower.....
Site fees (HRK 2,513).....	£318.39	Public transport two adults: return train Duga
Tolls Croatian motorways (HRK 241).....	£30.53	Resa-Zagreb and return water taxi to Rovinj
Attractions two adults: Museum of Broken		(HRK 145).....
		£18.37

2015 Devon Tempest

2,871 miles

Total £1,538.03



Relationships. Take a box of tissues when you visit this unique and quirky museum that displays mementos of relationships from across the world alongside heart-breaking stories.

Zagreb's winding Tkalčićeva is lined with cafés and we chose one to people watch over a coffee. In Croatia the cultural significance of coffee encompasses more than just a drink; being seen in the latest trendy café is a factor.


Among the hip cafés of Tkalčićeva I found the statue to Marija Jurić Zagorka, Croatia's first female journalist, who died in 1957. Wearing a long, high-collared dress, her hair pulled into a bun, she could look out of place in this fashionable street. Instead, she looks approachable and I felt she summed up how Zagreb perfectly combines the old and new to create a lively and beautiful city.

Croatia's network of national parks is excellent and we headed south for Krka National Park. We generally shun organised tours, but at Krka the excursion offered by the campsite proved an excellent choice.


The day started early enough to miss the crowds at Skradinski Buk, where cascades tumble down 17 travertine levels. I happily

INFORMATION


Croatia's tourism website is good for general destination information

 croatia.hr


The Croatia camping website is a useful resource that includes details of smaller campsites in the inland rural parts of Croatia

 camping.hr

Krka National Park's website shows biking and hiking trails as well as more

 np-krka.hr


Plan your trip to Paklenica National Park

 paklenica.hr

Plitvice Lakes is the oldest and largest national park in Croatia

 np-plitvicka-jezera.hr

Find the wineries and more at

 samobor.hr

wandered under luxuriant trees with submerged roots on walkways spanning rushing water. The roar filled the air, along with birdsong (including great reed warblers) and croaking frogs.

In the clear water we watched shoals of fish, while dragonflies danced around us. With different views around every corner of rapids and pools and, finally, the large falls and old watermills, this was captivating.

For the rest of the day, the minibus took us along narrow country roads with viewpoint halts over dramatic limestone gorges, an island monastery and more cascades. Lunch was served at an old mill, where we sat under vines and drank sharp Croatian wine with bread and local cheeses. The excursion finished with the tranquil and richly decorated Serbian Orthodox Krka monastery.

Šibenik was our first encounter with the Croatian coast. From the tidy esplanade we watched boats coming and going on the blue sea and explored the winding medieval streets up to a rambling and crowded cemetery, with the walls of the ruined castle above and stunning views over the town.

Following the coast north we reconnected with the great reed warblers ►

ABOVE The old mills between the falls at Skradinski Buk in Krka National Park

TOP TIPS

We found Croatian campsites were generally of a high standard, providing good facilities and free WiFi. But we hopped across the border in one area to Campsite Terme Tuhelj in Slovenia as we were having trouble finding a site

Credit and debit cards are accepted in most places, except small shops and cafés

Croatian cafés, away from tourist centres, generally serve drinks only. In quiet cafés it is generally OK to buy a cake or sandwich at a nearby bakery and eat this with your drink. Croatian coffee is very good and reasonably priced; I like a bijela kava, which is similar to a latte. No one will ever rush you to drink up in a café

Croatian people are over the moon if you speak a few words of their language. Hvala (thank you), dobar dan (hello) and molim (please and sorry) will get you a long way

BELOW CLOCKWISE Zagreb is a colourful and lively city; the coast near Starigrad is perfect for exploring; the thirteenth century church of St Mark is in the heart of Zagreb's old town

on Lake Vrana and spotted a marsh harrier and ibis over the wetlands. Further north we stumbled upon the romantic island town of Nin. Reached by two stone bridges this was once the seat of Croatian kings.

The mountainous Paklenica National Park, with limestone gorges, towering crags and excellent walking, was high on our list. Velika Paklenica, the main gorge, is rightly popular and we joined the throng climbing the valley trail. Ramblers and mountaineers were here, but most were lithe young climbers with their karabiners clanking.

To really experience Paklenica you need to leave this main trail and follow one of the steep paths up the canyon side. Our rocky path zig-zagged through the tree-covered slopes to Grabove Dolina with a cuckoo's call reverberating around the gorge.

At the viewpoints the vistas over Velika Paklenica were stunning and we had them to ourselves. At the top we followed a delightful limestone path along the canyon edge through low-growing trees surrounded by sweet-smelling herbs and accompanied by multitudes of butterflies.

Velika Paklenica runs down to the sea near the resort of Starigrad and this makes a great base for exploring these mountains. We cycled along the old road that contours the slopes with views over to Pag Island and explored the coastal villages, finding Večka Kula, a ruined Venetian castle, on a bay.

We followed the steep path up a pretty gorge to a flower-rich col to see the mirila – clusters of upright engraved stones

that mark the last resting place of a body before burial and once thought to be where the soul remained. Bodies often had to be carried long distances from village to cemetery and bearers were only allowed to lay the body down and rest once.

Each mirila marks where someone's head and feet lay. Near the mirila we found a shrine and a herd of goats grazed around the stones watched over by a tanned goat herd in cut-off jeans.

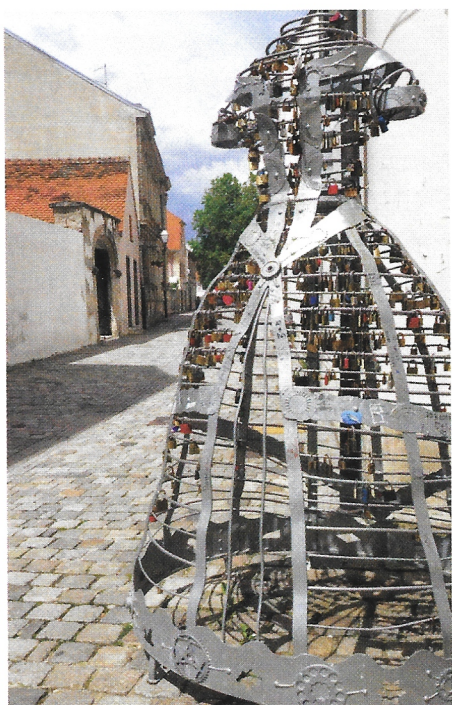
Mala Paklenica is a narrow and wilder gorge and the tranquillity here is almost overwhelming. Walking and scrambling along the dry river bed, confined by limestone cliffs, you can easily twist an ankle or get bitten by one of the many snakes we saw slithering away.

The wildflowers are numerous: I spotted yellow sedum, large Mediterranean spurge, gladioli and cyclamen. In a shady corner I watched a group of white butterflies finding moisture from the damp sand while Anthony (my husband) watched crag martins flying high among the cliffs.

Despite loving everything about Paklenica, including the cute red squirrel that scampered around the tree next to our pitch, we had to move on. We headed north, calling in at Croatia's must-see Plitvička Jezera national park, a wonderland of 16 lakes with waterfalls running between them.

Well-made paths and wooden walkways snake among the sparkling waterfalls. The sweet smell of the elderflowers and the beauty of the landscape went to the head ➤





of one fellow who held up the crowds to kneel on one knee and propose to his girlfriend – another story I hoped wouldn't end up in the Museum of Broken Relationships.

Rastoke, a settlement of restored watermills among water channels, wooden bridges and waterfalls in the town of Slunj, proved to be a hidden gem.

Keen to try some local cheese we followed a sign that took us along the track for over a kilometre. At the farm, I climbed out of the 'van and was greeted by four excitable dogs and the cheese maker. She took me into her well-stocked shop, asking where we had visited in Croatia. "Croatia is very safe," she declared, clearly missing the irony as I struggled to fight off the dogs bounding energetically around my ankles. I left happy with four wedges of my sharp and tasty award-winning cheeses.

We enjoyed discovering Croatian wine and food. Many wines are produced around the Samobor hills, west of Zagreb, and we had a stunning drive through this area of pretty villages and hillside vineyards.

The town of Samobor has elegant baroque and art nouveau buildings, a pretty river, woodland walks and lively parks and its main square is lined with cafés that are perfect for people watching. Many cafés offered the local speciality, kremšnita (a fluffy vanilla and pastry concoction). It would have been rude not to try it!

Samobor is proud of its gastronomy and we also found burek – a cheese pastry – and rudarska greblica (miner's cake), a Croatian

ABOVE LEFT The Love Crinoline sculpture in Varaždin

ABOVE RIGHT The scenery in Paklenica National Park is awe inspiring

BELOW Samobor's main square has its fair share of attractive buildings

equivalent of the Cornish pasty filled with cheese, walnut and local mustard.

In the undulating countryside north of Zagreb we came upon the village of Kumrovec with its open-air museum displaying old rural houses. Many of the charming houses are thatched and with traditional stone lower floors for store rooms and workshops where artisans demonstrated traditional crafts. The wooden upper living rooms are reached by steep steps on the outside of the buildings.

With its hilltop position, round towers and central courtyard overlooked by a three-tiered gallery, Veliki Tabor is the ➤





perfect medieval castle. As we arrived, schoolchildren were playing with bows and arrows bought in the shop, their voices bouncing off the courtyard walls. We were pleased to find information on the building and its history was in English.

The population of Croatia is small and driving is pleasurable, often on quiet roads with bucolic views. Around Varaždin people were working in the fields and selling their fresh produce at roadside stalls.

We had come to Varaždin to see the cemetery – a special place designed as a garden, with long avenues, colourful flowers, neat hedges and tombstones peeping through the greenery. Varaždin was briefly Croatia's capital in the eighteenth century and retains a legacy of opulent pastel-coloured Baroque palaces with rococo mouldings. In the main square we bought ice creams and ate them on the grassy mound around Varaždin's picture-perfect moated castle.

After a few days back on the coast visiting the headland town of Rovinj packed with colourful villas, I was itching for some walking in inland Istria. From the medieval walled village of Gračišće we followed the waymarked St Simeon Way, a 10km (six-mile) circuit that descends steeply to the Sopot waterfall, a captivating single 98ft drop into a blue pool.

From the camperstop in Motovun we followed sections of the cycle route along the truffle-rich and verdant Mirna River valley. In the sunshine this was idyllic level cycling. The song of the great reed warbler filled the air and hordes of butterflies of every colour fluttered around us and would

WE STAYED AT

Camp Slapić, Mrežnički Brig 79b,
47250 Duga Resa, Karlovac, Croatia

☎ 00385 98 860601

🌐 campslapic.hr/en/

📅 1 April – 31 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric:
From €17 (£15.70) with ACSI

Camp Marina, Skočići 6, 22221
Lozovac, Sibenik, Croatia

☎ 00385 913 683323

🌐 camp-marina.hr

📅 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric:
From €15 (£13.85) with ACSI

Camp Paklenica, Dr Franje Tuđmana
14, 23244 Starigrad-Paklenica,
Croatia

☎ 00385 23 209062

🌐 bluesuncamping.com

📅 6 April – 25 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric:
From €17 (£15.70) with ACSI

Campsite Amarín, Monsena 2,
52210 Rovinj, Croatia

☎ 00385 52 802100

🌐 maistracamping.com

📅 19 April – 29 September

£ Two adults, pitch and electric:
From €17 (£15.70) with ACSI

Hostel Plitvice Rastoke Camperstop,
Ulica Nikole Zrinskog 3, 47240 Slunj,
Croatia

📅 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From
€15 (£13.85)

Vugec Plac Camping, Barbarina 7,
Hrastina Samoborska, Samobor 10430,
Croatia

☎ 00385 992 262515

🌐 campsamobor.eu

📅 1 May – 31 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From
€25 (£23.09)

Campsite Natura, Terme Olimia,
Zdraviliška cesta 24, Podčetrtek 3254,
Slovenia

☎ 00386 38 297836

🌐 terme-olimia.com

📅 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From
€17 (£15.70) with ACSI

Motovun Camping, Rižanske Skupštine
1A, 52424 Motovun, Istria, Croatia

☎ 00385 52 681607

🌐 motovun-camping.com

📅 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From
€17 (£15.70)

ABOVE Varaždin's Castle is
surrounded by a moat
and parkland

occasionally brush against me.

I couldn't have staged our last night in Croatia better. We climbed the winding cobbled paths to the beautiful hilltop town of Motovun. Sitting under the town walls at a restaurant terrace, we had views over vineyards and the luxuriant valley bathed in gold in the evening sunshine. We watched the sunset and raised our glasses to the wonder of Croatia. Third time lucky indeed! **mmmm**