

November, 2006

Our tour through what was until recently Yugoslavia was not up to our usual standards of adventure. We took a group tour and were picked up at the airport in Venice, Italy and shuttled around to the various sites on a very comfortable bus. Our tour was put together by [Gate1 Travel](#). Nik, our guide, was excellent and we can recommend Gate1.

We visited four countries which have been struggling to transition from communism to capitalism; Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and, the world's newest country, Montenegro. There is a long history of war and conflict in this region. Our guide's grandfather was born Austro-Hungarian. His father was born Italian. He was born Yugoslavian and his children were born Croatian. They were all from the same town. It's difficult to understand the tenuous relationships between these provinces. Most Americans vaguely recall the war centered in Bosnia just over a decade ago. It's an interesting historical perspective to note that the bad guys were largely Christian and America was primarily supporting the Muslim population. After the war in the 1990's, these countries have been gradually declaring their independence from the Serbian dominated Yugoslavia. Montenegro was the most recent, with the necessary two-thirds majority having voted for independence in May, 2006. The Montenegrins we met were very proud of their new flag and status as a country. Kosovo is still part of Serbia and will probably be the next breakaway. The irony of all this is that these independent countries have been then applying for entry into the European Union. Slovenia is a member of the EU and Montenegro has adopted the Euro as its currency. As they split up, new border checkpoints have to be built and staffed. As they enter the EU, the checkpoints will likely be abandoned.

Croatia and Montenegro have a beautiful coast. One day we ditched the group and walked 14 miles on a seaside path which followed the rugged shore. There were several private yachts and the scenery was similar to Monaco and the French Riviera, but the yachts considerably smaller. Bosnia has a narrow strip of sea access and we had to cross it to travel to the southern section of Croatia. The weather was mostly sunny with highs in the 60's near the coast, but we had a dusting of snow as winter approached in the central mountains. The food was unremarkable but good. Menus included a diverse blend of Italian pizza and pasta, German schnitzels and sauerkraut, and Hungarian goulash.

Croatia and Slovenia are the two most affluent countries. The roads were uniformly excellent. The country, cities and towns were litter-free. For some reason, we expected third-world, but the tap water was safe to drink and everything was neat and orderly. We felt safe on the streets at night. You had to look hard to find damaged buildings left from the war. When Croatians see garbage, they pick it up, and when their houses need repair, they fix them. Prices in Croatia and Slovenia are low for Europeans, but about the same as the USA. The standard of living is relatively high. English is widely spoken. Most olive trees and vineyards are overgrown as few people are willing to work for the agricultural level wages. The walled city of Dubrovnik is a UNESCO world heritage site

and tourist center. We enjoyed walking the walls and wandering around the ancient streets and alleys.

Montenegro and Bosnia are not in nearly as good repair as Croatia and Slovenia. Tourists are still a novelty, and several schoolchildren waved happily when our bus passed them. The struggle to escape Socialism is taking longer. There are lots of abandoned Soviet-style factories, closed by their inability to compete in a global economy. About one in ten cars driving on the road, belching blue smoke, is a Yugo. We saw a couple of Yugo's being pushed and several rusting by the side of the road, standing silent sentinel, as testimony to the failure of Socialism in a market economy.

Gate1 returned us to Venice for our flight home. We took some extra time to visit Venice. We were surprised to see the hoards of tourists in November, so we rode the public ferries to the outlying islands of Murano and Burano which are famous for glass blowing and lace. The prices on the lace are so low that we suspect that much of it comes from China.

We spent our final day on an independent odyssey to the tiny country-within-a-country; San Marino. The round-trip required nine hours on three trains and two public buses, but it was worth it. The centerpiece of San Marino is a walled city perched on a rock above the fertile fields below. We figure that it managed to stay independent over the centuries because the foreign invaders looked up at the rock, figured it wasn't worth it, and continued on conquering everything else. Apart from having to share Italian industrial air pollution, the city is everything Italy isn't. The people are polite and helpful, the streets are neat and people pick up after their dogs. San Marino counts as our 108'th country.

If you are considering a trip, go soon. Tourism is developing rapidly and things are changing quickly. We may return to Croatia for a week sailing in the offshore islands and to Slovenia for a week hiking in the Julian Alps. Otherwise, it's been-there-done that.

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