

## Day 1: Zadar, Croatia—Historic City Tour

Arrive in Zadar, where you are met at the airport and transferred to our hotel in the historic Old Town. Zadar lies on Croatia's northern Dalmatian Coast and is one of the most ancient cities on the Adriatic Sea—archaeologists have found traces of a Neolithic settlement here dating to the 9th century BC. Zadar was eventually conquered by the Romans as part of their advance to the eastern shore of the Adriatic that began in the 3rd century BC.

On a walking tour of the Zadar Old Town this afternoon, observe how the streets were laid out on a Roman rectangular grid, with a forum, thermae and water system fed by Lake Vrana. When the Holy Roman Empire split in the late 3rd century, Zadar became part of the Eastern Roman Empire, known as Byzantium, and remained the capital of Byzantine Dalmatia until the end of World War I. Highlights include the Roman Forum, ancient city walls and gates, prominent churches and cathedrals, and the Sea Organ, an architectural musical instrument “played” by sea waves. Reconvene this evening for a welcome dinner with our Expedition Leader(s) at a traditional local restaurant.

## Day 2: Plitvice Lakes National Park / Zadar

Travel inland to Plitvice Lakes National Park for an all-day discovery of one of the world's most impressive karst landscapes, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its extraordinary natural features and undisturbed production of travertine. Contained by natural limestone dams, 16 turquoise lakes are linked by crystalline streams, cascading waterfalls and terraced pools—a dynamic environment with a soundscape as enchanting as its visual beauty. On an easy guided hike over boardwalks that lace the park, discover the fascinating features of the karst environment, defined by soluble stone that has formed caves, sinkholes, sinking springs and terraces.

The healthy forest habitat that covers three-quarters of the national park supports plentiful wildlife, including native trout, deer, wild boar and even Eurasian lynx, although mammals are elusive and rarely seen. Keep an eye out for some of the 168 bird species inhabitants, however, which include woodpeckers, raptors and tits. Especially notable are Plitvice's 321 butterfly species, including several that are critically endangered. We'll hope to identify some as we follow the trails that wind among the lakes and lush forest. The park also shelters some 50 highly endangered European brown bears, but they stay far away from paths and people. More than 1,400 flora species and subspecies are also found within the park, representing nearly 30% of the entire Croatian flora. Return to Zadar late this afternoon.

### Day 3: Nin Saltworks / Hiking in Paklenica National Park / Pag

In the nearby town of Nin, we visit the famous Nin Saltworks. For 1,500 years salt has been collected by hand from the pans. Ecologically produced by the sea, sun and wind, salt from Nin is therapeutic and biodynamic, used for culinary, cosmetic and health purposes. A valued commodity over the centuries, during the Roman Empire it was exchanged ounce for ounce with gold, and soldiers were paid in salt. The Roman term for such compensation was *salarium*, from which the word “salary” originates. After a 500-year hiatus, Nin Saltworks reopened in 1954, producing salt using traditional methods. On a guided walk along the salt pools, learn how natural salt is made and harvested.

Later this morning, continue to Paklenica National Park, part of Velebit Mountain UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Lying on the southeast slopes of the Velebit range near the coast and cut by two deep, vertical-walled gorges, the park’s rugged karst landscape is one of the most pristine and dramatic in the entire Mediterranean. It contains the highest peaks in the Velebit Mountains, rising to nearly 6,000 feet and offering lofty views of coast and mountains alike. We take an easy hike through the beech and black pine forest, then continue to the island of Pag, where we have dinner and spend the night.

### Day 4: North Velebit National Park—Via Dinarica Hiking / Opatija

Head into the wildest part of Croatia to walk a few miles along the Via Dinarica, threading its way through North Velebit National Park. This 1,200-mile trekking route knits together Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania, tracing the spine of the Dinaric Alps down the Balkan Peninsula. Combining a network of old shepherd trails, ancient trading paths, strategic war routes and new connections, it weaves through limestone karst fields, meadows, valleys, beech forest and alpine lakes, traversing a pristine slice of wild Europe. The diversity of karst forms, plants and animals make this one of the most impressive regions of Croatia’s Dinaric Alps, which are among the most rugged and extensive of Europe’s mountains.

More than 1,500 species of mountain flora and fauna thrive here, including edelweiss and European mountain pine, ural owl, golden eagle, chamois and more. And while we are unlikely to see them, this well-preserved ecosystem also shelters brown bear, wolf and lynx. En route, we survey a vista over the Adriatic that includes the islands of Pag, Rab, Goli, Prvic and Krk. Cultural heritage within the park is a highlight, with remnants of centuries-old dwellings, old cattle pens and dry stone walls. Continue this afternoon to the Opatija Riviera where our 4-star boutique hotel overlooks the Adriatic Sea, backdropped by the green slopes of Mount Ucka. Popular in the 19th century with the Austro-Hungarian elite, the Opatija coast remains a stylish vacation destination. This evening, walk along the seafront promenade to a traditional restaurant where we enjoy local specialties, including fresh seafood, for dinner.

#### Day 5: Cres Island—Private Boat Tour to Griffon Vulture Reserve

A private boat tour to the island of Cres reveals a large colony of rare griffon vultures that nest on cliffs directly above the sea. Protected since 1969 in the world's first reserve for this species, they are among the largest birds on Earth, weighing 15-25 pounds and boasting a wingspan up to 9 feet. They live up to 40 years, feeding exclusively on the carcasses of large and mid-sized mammals, never eating live prey. In this regard, they play a hygienic role in the ecosystem, helping to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. We also visit the Beli Rescue Center for Griffon Vultures, dedicated to preserving this strictly protected species. Injured birds are brought here to be rehabilitated, mostly young ones that fall from their nests into the sea on their first flight attempts—the mortality rate for young vultures in their first year is a staggering 75%. They produce only one egg a year, so rescuing each bird is crucial. The Cres reserve is also home to other bird species such as the golden eagle, eagle owl, peregrine falcon, kestrel, raven, shag, blue rock thrush and more. During the day, there is also an opportunity to swim in the Adriatic Sea. Return to Opatija this evening for dinner.

#### Day 6: Hum / Truffle Hunting / Private Wine & Olive Oil Tasting / Buzet

Leaving Kvarner Bay, we drive across the Istrian Peninsula to reach the medieval hamlet of Hum, reputedly the smallest town in the world, with fewer than 25 residents. Our route follows the Glagolitic Alley, a road between Roc and Hum along which stone monuments erected in the late 20th century represent letters of the medieval Glagolitic alphabet, an archaic Slavic script that survived in Croatia until the late 19th century. Hum's size belies its rich thousand-year-old history, although its town walls and fortifications are a reminder of regular battles fought over the centuries.

This morning, visit with a local truffle hunter. Our friendly host tells us all about this coveted culinary treasure, and how they use dogs to sniff them out. We'll search the Motovun Forest for truffles with them, and then it's off to a nearby family-run winery, where we'll have a chance to sample assorted Istrian wines and olive oil, followed by lunch. Continue this afternoon through a landscape of green hills and white limestone soil planted in vineyards and olive groves. Springs nurture wildflower meadows and quiet woods where wild game flourishes. Ultimately we reach our hotel in Buzet, following narrow roads through old Istrian villages.

#### Day 7: Slovenia—Hiking the Pokljuka Plateau / Bee Farm / Bled

This morning we leave Croatia and enter Slovenia, crossing the forested Pokljuka Plateau. This rounded karst mountain in Triglav National Park provide habitat for varied plants and animals. The plateau is little traveled but exceptionally scenic, covered in pine, beech and Norway spruce and punctuated by hidden precipices and sinkholes, grassy pastures and scattered villages. We take a hike at the base of a

rocky hillside where birds are abundant: look for Western Bonelli's warbler, white-throated dipper, red-backed shrike and gray-headed woodpecker, numerous butterflies, and reptiles like the yellow-bellied toad and eastern green lizard. Reaching the endpoint, we are rewarded with a beautiful view of the high peaks surrounding us. We stop for lunch at a family-owned mountain hut, enjoying a visit with our hosts and learning about their traditional mountain lifestyle.

Slovenia is considered the heart and soul of beekeeping in Europe, and we visit a family farm this afternoon to learn about the long practice of apiculture. One of the apiaries here is 90 years old. Our hosts teach us about the life of bees and how honey is produced and extracted. Slovenia is renowned for the quality of its honey, which we will taste in different forms, including pollen (when in season), honey liqueur and homemade gingerbread. Late this afternoon we arrive in Bled, its fairytale setting offering Slovenia's most famous view. In the middle of Lake Bled lies Bled Island, crowned by the Church of the Assumption of Mary, the subject of countless idyllic photographs. The church on the island dates to 1142, but its current facade reflects its Baroque renovation in the 17th century. This evening, enjoy dinner at a local restaurant overlooking the picturesque lake.

#### Day 8: Triglav National Park / Organic Cheese Farm / Mostnica Gorge

Lake Bohinj is the crown jewel in the Julian Alps, and it's never far from view today as we explore Triglav National Park. We ride a cable car to the top of the Vogel ski area to access a hiking wonderland, with grand views of the snow-crusted peaks and sparkling lake far below. Ascending the ski slopes on a final chairlift through a dwarf pine forest, we reach a panoramic plateau below the summit of Mount Vogel, where there's time to wander alpine trails or simply enjoy the vista of the meadows at the top of the lift. From the top, we walk back down to the cable car (or ride the lift if you prefer), then descend to the valley far below.

This afternoon, stop for an artisan cheese tasting in a nearby village famous for its cheese production, which dates to the 13th century. The first cheeses were made by mountain farmers who grazed their cattle in summer on the lush slopes above Lake Bohinj. Then, take a walk through Mostnica Gorge, a narrow chasm cut by a clear alpine river that tumbles down the ravine in a series of rapids and waterfalls. We cap off our Balkan sojourn with a farewell dinner this evening.

#### Day 9: Bled / Ljubljana / Depart

Our trip comes to an end this morning with a transfer to the airport in Slovenia's nearby capital of Ljubljana.