

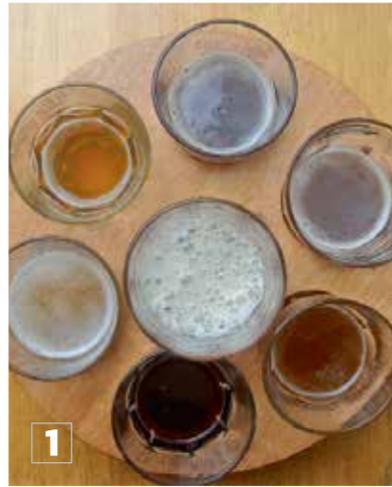
THE BIG CITY GUIDE

# Zagreb

As visitors flock to a host of new restaurants, bars and clubs, the Croatian capital is fast catching up with the rest of Europe as a serious city-break contender, says **Vicky Lane**

# Zagreb

CROATIA ZAGREB AIRPORT (ZAG) 🧑🏻‍🤝‍🧑🏻 4,464,844 📶 +385 🌞 16°C 🇭🇷 KUNA (HRK)



It's late on a Friday evening on **Tkalčićeva Street** and Zagreb's former red-light district, five minutes' walk from central **Ban Jelačić Square**, is living up to its historic reputation as a thriving social hub.

This pedestrian zone – a line of pretty 19th-century houses now converted into bars, restaurants and boutiques – is packed, and people rush to secure newly vacated tables even when it's unclear which venue they belong to. Which, among the chaotic layout of al fresco furniture under the beer-branded awnings, is often.

Not that it matters. Similar food – essentially meat-heavy plates of mixed grills with fries and a hint of salad, or pizzas piled high with toppings – are served at most places, usually for between HRK30-HRK80/€4-€11 a dish, and enjoyed alongside local white wines and Croatian lager such as Pan, for between HRK10-30HRK/€1-€3 a glass. At microbrewery **Mali Medo** [1] (Tkalčićeva 36), a wooden cavern of a place that fills both sides of the road about halfway up, you can enjoy a circular tasting board of seven beers for just HRK20/€2.60.

In fact, the low prices and lively atmosphere mean the street isn't dissimilar to a lot of European tourist strips. But there's a difference: there are as many locals here – if not more – as there are tourists.

"We're an outdoor nation," explains Alida Mezić, co-founder of **Blue Bikes Zagreb** [2] (zagrebbybike.com), the city's only cycling tour company, when we join her for a ride the following day. "And we're enjoying having new people to talk to. Tourists are still a novelty for Zagreb." Night or day, rain or shine, Zagrebians love nothing more than to socialise over a drink outside. However, it's actually more likely to be coffee than alcohol. "We have a serious habit," Mezić confesses.

This explains the abundance of cafes and coffeehouses and their equally expansive outdoor lounges that we're having to swerve as we whizz through bustling **Petra Preradovića** [3], or Flower Square as it's nicknamed thanks to the abundance of flower stalls that have been brightening up the place since the 14th century.

Zagreb is a very walkable city and its main attractions are all inside the same medieval nucleus, within a 15-minute radius. These include the towering 12th century neo-gothic **Zagreb Cathedral** (free entry; ulica Kaptol 31); **Markov Trg** [4] (Trg Svetog Marka 5) – or St Mark's Square – home to the iconic church with colourful roof tiles arranged into two coats of arms for Zagreb and Croatia, and **Kamenita Vrata** – or Stone Gate – the only surviving city gate and a sacred place, where a painting of Jesus and the Virgin Mary hangs that, according to local legend, miraculously survived a fire.

Those less inclined to tackle Zagreb's steep cobbled streets can take possibly the world's shortest **funicular** [5] tucked at the end of **Tomiceva Street** for HRK5/€0.67. It takes just 64 seconds to reach **Gradec** (the Upper Town), exiting next to the **Strossmayer parade** [6], a leafy, outdoor drinking spot high above the city that's great for trying local wines – especially in the summer months when there's live music – and the place to peruse the stalls of local arts and crafts. Just be sure to

cover your ears if you're in the area at 12 p.m. when the **Gric Cannon** is fired from the next-door **Lotrščak Tower** – an extremely loud daily tradition locals set their clocks to.

In terms of hotels, the grand if a little stuffy **Esplanade** (esplanade.hr) was built in 1925 to serve rich passengers disembarking the Orient Express that once stopped in the Zagreb and is a 10-minute stroll from the centre. More affordable options can be found through **InZagreb** (inzagreb.com), a company specialising in seriously stylish rental apartments that are never more than a couple of blocks away from the main buzz.

Despite the proximity of most attractions, there's no denying that touring by bike is a fun way to see the city. And it's extremely informative if you are accompanied by Mezić, who's a pedalling encyclopedia of the city's history, politics and culture. Born and bred in the capital, she set up Blue Bikes with husband Bruno in 2010 in response to the growing number of visitors to her home city (an increase of more than 50% in the past decade), and has been inundated with bookings since.

She points out sights of interest, and stops regularly to moan about the city's confused architecture. In some parts it's rather pretty, reminiscent of Budapest and Vienna thanks to its inclusion in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while in others it's full of stark, grey structures, a hangover from its years in the socialist state of Yugoslavia until the early 1990s.

Another relic is the Croatian love of shopping. "You have to remember that it wasn't that long ago that our clothes choice was white or black," Mezić explains. **Ilica** [7], the city's main high street running west from Ban Jelačić Square houses most big European brands, as well as the flagship stores for a number of local designers, such as **I-GLE** (Dežmanov prolaz 4).

Several new restaurants bode well for Zagreb's burgeoning culinary scene. World street food hot spot **Mundoaoka** (Petrinjska ulica 2) serves pulled pork sandwiches, citrusy ceviche and creamy black risotto and has had rave reviews. Gourmet burger bar **Rougemarin** [8] (Frana Folnegovića ulica 10), housed in a former lightbulb factory a bit off the beaten track, is a delightful find with its mismatched décor and huge outdoor deck. **La Struk** (Skalinska ulica 5), a minimalist spot with outdoor seating, just off Tkalčićeva, focuses on providing sweet and savoury varieties of Croatia's most popular dish **štrukli**, traditionally a baked pastry. Filled with cottage cheese and covered with cream it tastes ➤



### Getting around

**BUS** Take the airport bus from just outside the main arrival terminal to the city centre in 30 minutes. Return tickets cost HRK60/€6.

**TRAIN** Locals consider the national train service to be slow and expensive. The two most popular routes are to coastal destinations Rijeka (tickets from around €30, journey time from 3.5 to 5.5 hours) and Split (from around €50, journey time between six and nine hours).

**TAXI** A taxi to the city centre from the airport should cost HRK150-HRK200/€15-€20. Be wary of 'tourist prices'.

**TOURIST INFO** zagreb-touristinfo.hr



**Zagreb by tram**

Most of Zagreb's attractions and facilities are within its city centre. For everything else you can use its excellent, almost 24-hour tram service (4am-12am). Tickets: HRK10/€1 or HRK15/€1.50 at night.

- MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART** (Tram 6, 7 or 14)
- LAKE JURAN** (Tram 5 or 17)
- MAKSIMIR PARK** (Tram 4, 7, 11 or 12)
- MOUNT MEDVEDNICA** (Tram 8 or 14 to the end of the line, then tram 15 to Dolje)

## Further afield...

Zagreb is a great base for exploring some of Croatia's natural wonders (and those of neighbouring countries). Hire a car, or book a day tour with [zagrebtours.com](http://zagrebtours.com)

### Trakošćan Castle

Once the home of Ban Juraj Drašković, who ruled the country between 1567 and 1578, this striking 13th-century castle is today one of the most most visited attractions in Croatia. It's filled with genuine baroque furniture, and fronted by a large lake and picturesque 'English' gardens.

1 HOUR



### Plitvice Lakes

Up close, the water at this protected UNESCO World Heritage Site is so clear it looks like the fish are flying. From afar, it reflects the lush, tropical-like foliage to become a sparkling turquoise oasis of pools and waterfalls. Climb to the higher routes to avoid the crowds.

2 HOURS



### Ljubljana

Awarded second place on *Lonely Planet's* Best in Europe list 2014 for being one of the continent's "greenest and most liveable" cities, Slovenia's capital is widely acclaimed for its vibrant culture and buzzy nightlife.



1.5 HOURS

### Istria

Often called the Croatian Tuscany because of its rolling hills, vineyards, olive groves and medieval towns, the stunning peninsula of Istria also benefits from a coastline on the Adriatic. Take a day to explore (and be sure to stop by the world's smallest town, Hum).



3 HOURS

like a fancy macaroni cheese and is utterly delicious. Zagreb's must-see museum (quite a feat in a city with more than 50 of them) is the fabulously named **Museum of Broken Relationships** [9] (Ćirilometodska ulica 2, [brokenrelationships.com](http://brokenrelationships.com)). "Have a beer as cold as your ex's heart," reads the chalk board at the entrance to the museum, which, based on some of the heartbreaking letters detailing relationship break-ups on display here, must be pretty chilled.

As day turns to night back in Zagreb's central square, there's no let-up in the crowds around a statue of the man it's named after, Count Jelačić, who stands tall in the middle, pointing his sword south. Some sit munching on sandwiches and drinking coffee, while others pose for pictures using selfie sticks, suggesting an even mix of regulars and first-time visitors.

"People used to only come to Zagreb to travel on to the coast or the mountains," says Mezić. "But now, it's more common for people to stay for at least two or three days before moving on, and they're always pleased they did so."

"And so are the residents of Zagreb," she adds, smiling.



8



9

FLY TO ZAGREB SIX TIMES WEEKLY FROM 20 SEPTEMBER



## MEET A LOCAL... HOST Tatjana Novak

A year and a half ago my husband and I decided to start renting our second property out through rental website Airbnb. Over the past decade there's been a dramatic increase in the amount of tourists visiting Zagreb, and one result of that is the influx of rental properties now available on the market.

Go back 10 years and there were maybe 50, whereas today there are around 17,000. We knew it would be a good business opportunity for us, plus we were curious to meet new people from different countries.

I like to leave fresh fruit, coffee and creamer for new guests so they don't need to rush straight out if they're tired after a long journey. At Christmas, I also leave my guests fresh cookies from the wonderful **Torte i to** (Teslina ulica 7), a cake shop right across the entrance to the apartment building. They always have lots of options: vanilla star biscuits with jam, peanut cookies, oat cookies.

We've been very lucky to only have really lovely guests so far, the majority of whom have been Australians passing through Zagreb on their European travels. Most stay for at least three days and fall in love with the old city. It's very pretty: somewhere between Vienna and Budapest.

I like to give recommendations, such as local liquor *rakija*, which comes in many different varieties including plum, walnuts and honey.

I also tell people to try **Cogito** coffee, because it's made by Zagreb roasters and in my opinion is the best coffee brand in the city. You can find it in many cafes here, or at their own shop in the centre (Varšavska 11). We have a big coffee culture in Zagreb and everyone has their favourite, independent spots. A chain did try to open once, but only lasted a few months. I really like the **Dezman Bar** (Dežmanova 3), which is located down a small passage off the busy Ilica street. It's a smart, yet peaceful place to enjoy an espresso, and the bar staff also make excellent cocktails.

When people are here for more than a few days, I usually tell them about **Mount Medvednica**. It's just north of Zagreb, and is great for hiking and nice views of the city. In the winter, a number of skiing competitions are held on the slopes. [airbnb.com](http://airbnb.com)