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Croatia: The Istrian Peninsula

Travel Style - Guided Walking Tour

This small-group Guided Walking Adventure offers an authentic travel experience, one that takes you away from the crowds and deep into the fabric of local life. On it, you'll enjoy 24/7 expert guides, premium accommodations, delicious meals, effortless transportation, and local wine or beer with dinner. Rest assured that every trip detail has been anticipated so you're free to enjoy an adventure that exceeds your expectations.



Following ancient forested footpaths, grand seaside promenades, and tranquil mountain trails, experience an idyllic region along the shimmering Adriatic Sea. Istria seamlessly blends a stunning range of influences: you'll delight in its remarkably preserved Roman ruins, glorious Venetian-style churches, savory Italian-influenced cuisine, and Austro-Hungarian spas. Traveling from "Blue" to "Green" Istria—from the sea to the peaceful interior—you encounter the region's extraordinary nature, culture, and cuisine with expert guides, even strolling along the summit of Croatia's highest mountain. Take part in a hunt for the elusive Istrian white truffle, taste fine wines poured by the vintners who nurture them, and wander an amazingly intact first-century Roman amphitheater. Each night, come home to luxurious lodgings, including a chic modern seaside hotel and spa, a renovated Belle Époque villa, and a city hotel that once welcomed Orient Express travelers.

Tour Only Itinerary - 2019

Day 1

Join Your Country Walkers *Croatia: The Istrian Peninsula* tour

5 miles, easy to moderate

After brief introductions, and a 30-minute drive through the little village of Bagnoli, you reach the trailhead for today's walk in the Val Rosandra Nature Reserve, situated on the border between Italy and Slovenia. Throughout history, this lovely low-lying alpine reserve has been a vital trade route between inland regions and the Adriatic Sea. Today it's part of the famed Alpe Adria trail. Your path varies between white stone and dirt, with some larger rocks and roots, as it climbs gradually above the Rosandra River through oak and black pine forest. Along the way, you see unusual karst rock formations caused by acidic water seeping into limestone bedrock to form cracks and eventually caves, sinkholes, and spectacular cliffs. The area teems with wildlife; chiefly small mammals like



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hares and hedgehogs, but also lynx, deer, wild goats, and (binocular alert!) more than 130 bird species. You enjoy breathtaking panoramic views of the Gulf of Trieste en route to the beautiful Glinščice Waterfall, which once powered the mills operating downstream into the early 1900s. Then you descend to Bottazzo, a former mill village, and join the rail trail created along a former track built in just 20 months in 1885. If the day is clear, you have views of the oldest church in the region, Santa Maria in Siaris, built on 13th-century foundations on a nearly inaccessible scree bluff.

After, relax during a one-hour transfer through Slovenia into Croatia, where your first stop is to refuel on a lunch of traditional specialties, paired with a tasting of Croatia's top wines from the strikingly modern Kozlović winery. Family-run since 1904 and recognized for both quality and innovation (some of their Malvazija, for example, is aged in acacia barrels), Franko Kozlović, the winemaker, boasts that they make a wine for every palate. You will savor the meal (and wines) on the terrace that affords great views of the vineyards below and the hilltop town of Momjan above.

An hour ride brings you to Poreč for a guided tour of one of the most beautiful examples of early Byzantine art in the Mediterranean, the 6th-century Euphrasian Basilica, a UNESCO World Heritage site noted for its mosaics. After a 45-minute transfer, you reach your home base for three nights, a splendid seaside property. Refresh; then reunite for a welcome drink and orientation meeting. A feast of fresh local seafood paired with a local wine (or craft beer) follows at your hotel's elegant restaurant.

Accommodation: Hotel Lone, Rovinj

With a splendid setting amidst the Punta Corrente Forest and steps away from the pebbled beach on Lone Bay, the Hotel Lone was designed for comfort in a contemporary and cutting-edge style. Croatia's top architects and artists have created a bright and airy haven. Enjoy a soothing treatment at the spa or take a dip in the outdoor pool. The hotel's three restaurants serve regional cuisine from small plates to lavish meals. Your guestroom features an urban aesthetic, stylish bath, complimentary WiFi, a balcony, and more.

Day 2

Završje to Grožnjan

5 miles, easy

This morning, after a leisurely breakfast, you head into the green heart of Istria and the Mirna River valley near Buzet, where rare Istrian white truffles (*tuber magnatum*) as well as black truffles can be found. You join third-generation truffle hunter, Karlo, and his specially-trained dogs on an actual search for these underground *tuberous fungus* (a gastronomic prize!). Afterward you have a chance to sample both white and black truffles and other truffle products.

Continuing on, you reach Motovun, a medieval hilltop village where you enjoy a special lunch on the restaurant's terrace. Truffles will accent the fare; perhaps atop the chef's legendary homemade *fuzi* pasta, a traditional Istrian specialty.



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This substantial lunch calls for another walk; a two-hour stroll on a converted rail trail dubbed the *Parenzana*, or “Friendship Trail”, from nearby Završje to the artsy village of Grožnjan. Mostly abandoned after World War II, this medieval town high on a sandstone hill began to revive in 1965 when artists moved into the many empty houses. Today, the village is a beehive of activity in the summer, inhabited by musicians and actors as well as artists. Enjoy wandering the maze of cobbled streets and browsing the galleries, studios, and artisan shops, or find a café with a terrace; to soak in views of the surrounding hillside villages. Returning to your hotel late afternoon, you enjoy an evening on your own, stepping out into the historic center of town for dinner, perhaps, with restaurant recommendations from your guides.

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Day 3

Zlatni Rt (Golden Cape) Park Forest and Rovinj walking tour

5 miles, easy

Depart on foot from your hotel this morning for a coastal stroll on well-groomed paths through the nearby Golden Cape Forest, the oldest protected natural site in Istria, used for many types of recreation. Your walk is enhanced by a profusion of native plants: Himalayan cedars, cypresses, and a rich variety of pines, including Aleppo and Calabrian pine. There’s also dense undergrowth consisting of holm oaks and other Mediterranean shrubs. The meadows are surrounded by Douglas firs and by the exotic solitary cypress.

After the park circuit, you continue directly into the historic heart of Rovinj for a guided walking tour. Medieval, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque periods are reflected in the buildings rising from ancient cobblestone streets. You explore the outdoor market, landmark buildings, and the town’s symbol: St. Euphemia Parish Church, an impressive three-nave church built in 1736 over the remains of earlier Christian churches. Its striking bell tower is similar to the iconic tower on St. Mark’s in Venice; inside, you find significant religious paintings and sculpture. Enjoy lunch on your own and time to browse Rovinj’s shops and galleries, or return to your hotel where you may opt for a spa treatment or to relax poolside, before reconvening for dinner at a nearby favorite *konoba* (tavern).

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Day 4

Brijuni National Park & Pula. Transfer to Opatija

4 miles, easy; 1 mile, easy

You bid Rovinj farewell today and head to “Blue Istria”, first traveling 35 minutes down the coast to Fažana, where you catch a ferry to Veliki Brijun, an island where Marshal Josip Broz Tito, former president of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, spent half of every year enjoying a very lavish lifestyle. Tito's first visit was in the late 1940's when he immediately set about restoring the island to its former glory. Thereafter, his villa hosted more than 100 heads of state, film stars, as well as other VIPs.

On a fascinating circuit walk, you quickly see the attraction of this 1700-acre island (the largest in the archipelago) that was established as a national park in 1983, following Tito's death. Your walk passes Roman ruins from the first century A.D.—a Temple of Venus and a Roman residential villa. You walk through meadows, oak and laurel forests, and see some 1,000-year-old olive trees. You may spot rare plants, such as wild cucumber and marine poppy. Soon you arrive to a small but interesting ethnographic museum established by Tito himself, to gain insight into the region's diverse population.

Returning to the mainland, you enjoy lunch at an authentic Istrian estate dating from Roman times. Early in the 20th century, Austrian military officers established it as a rest and relaxation retreat close to their military facilities. Recently the estate has been completely renovated and is now renowned for its wines and olive oil. You have the opportunity to sample these and other specialties in the tasting room and restaurant.

Later this afternoon you continue south to Pula, whose complex political history dates from 177 B.C., when it was conquered by the Romans. Despite millennia of devastating wars and changes in governance, Pula's Roman amphitheater—one of the six largest in the world—has survived largely intact and is still in use. A local historian brings the site to life on a brief tour. Afterward, press eastward (on a two-hour drive) through forested hills to Opatija, the genteel grand dame of Adriatic seaside spa resorts during the height of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Evidence of those glory days remains in the many Belle Époque villas, one of which will be your home base while here. After settling into your boutique hotel, you step out for dinner on your own (with recommendations from your guides) or perhaps enjoy the hotel's own *osteria* and energy-permitting, pop over to the adjacent park to visit Opatija's symbol, the Maiden with the Seagull statue.

Accommodation: Hotel Sveti Jakov, Opatija

The former home of Viennese physician and scientist, Julius Glax, is now a boutique hotel where you experience firsthand the Belle Époque esthetic that prevailed under Austro-Hungarian rule. Its



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classical elegance features archways, lavish draperies, and gleaming parquet floors enhanced by desirable modern amenities. You also enjoy access to the luxurious spa and beach facilities of Sveti Jakov's sister hotel right next door. The delightful hotel restaurant has outdoor seating protected by an arcade.

Day 5

Učka Nature Park

5 miles, easy to moderate

After a 45-minute transfer, today's walk offers (on a clear day) one of the most stunning panoramas of the Istrian peninsula from the top of Mt. Učka. This magnificent nature park was established in 1999, partly because of its unique climate and the species of flora and fauna sheltered here. Human settlement on the mountain dates back 13,000 years. In recent centuries people have lived in tiny villages and earned their living by cattle breeding and agriculture; clearing the land and leaving traces—stone walls, shepherds' huts, animal shelters—that remain today. Among the park's fauna are birds, amphibians, insects, and mammals including deer, roe deer, wild boar, badger, and recently bear; plus rare birds, in particular the griffon vulture which is virtually extinct elsewhere. Plant species include the Učka bellflower, found only on Mt. Učka.

Your path (beginning about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up the mountain) leads you through a unique littoral beech forest on a gradual ascent to the summit of Vojak, Učka's highest peak at 4,596 feet. There is a stone observation tower at the summit from which you have a magnificent view over the entire Istrian peninsula, the Bay of Trieste, the Julian Alps, and the islands of the Adriatic. After you've had a chance to absorb and cherish these amazing views, you descend (via minibus) to a charmingly rustic restaurant. Refueling options include hearty soups, salad, cured meats, and for those who enjoy game, venison and wild boar.

Late afternoon finds you seaside in Opatija once again, where you may wish to sample the luxurious spa services at Hotel Milenji next door, shop, stroll the waterfront promenade, or simply relax. This evening, you reconvene to stroll along the beautiful Franz Josef I Promenade (Lungomare) past majestic villas and gardens graced with laurels, palms, fig trees, and oaks, to the charming little harbor of Volosko, where working fisherman repair their nets and flowers cascade from the balconies of small stone houses. You are rewarded for your efforts with a festive dining experience.

Accommodation: Hotel Sveti Jakov, Opatija

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Day 6

Plitvice National Park

5 miles, easy to moderate

We bid the Adriatic farewell today and travel inland three hours to Croatia's oldest and most beloved national park: Plitvice Lakes, a UNESCO World Heritage site recognized and studied by scientists for more than two centuries. Today, Plitvice's rare flora (including the lady's slipper orchid and several carnivorous plants) and fauna (including brown bear and nearly 160 bird species) are closely monitored and protected. Your guides lead you on a network of wooden walkways and hiking trails that crisscross through the cascades, waterfalls, streams, and lush green scenery of both the upper and lower lakes, stopping en route for a picnic lunch. You learn how geography and the karst geology have shaped this amazing area. An electric boat ride offers a different perspective and an opportunity to appreciate the powerful force and crystalline waters of this magnificent park.

Mid-afternoon, you continue towards Croatia's capital, Zagreb, where you are welcomed in style at a hotel that was a stopping point for Orient Express travelers on the route between Istanbul and Paris. After refreshing, you reunite for a farewell feast at a favorite restaurant. The menu features locally-sourced products and offers middle-European flavors and a touch of the Mediterranean.

Accommodation: Hotel Esplanade, Zagreb

Perfectly situated in the heart of Croatia's vibrant capital, the Esplanade is an imposing building outside, while inside it's lavishly appointed throughout in Art Deco style, with marble walls, beautiful woodwork and elegant furnishings. Guest rooms are spacious and sophisticated, with sumptuous marble baths. Amenities include complimentary Wi-Fi and a fitness facility. Attentive professional staff will ensure your comfort. There's a fine restaurant, Zinfandel, as well as a bistro with terrace seating.

Day 7

Your Country Walkers Croatia: The Istrian Peninsula tour concludes

The tour concludes after a leisurely included breakfast at the Hotel Esplanade in Zagreb. Check out time is 12:00 p.m. The hotel can help you book transportation for onward travels or store luggage should you wish to continue your exploration of Zagreb.