

48 HOURS

ZAGREB

George Clode
finds festive
cheer in Croatia's
Christmas
market capital

@George_Clode

Zagreb is full of surprises. If you had told me that my civilised weekend would end in a cocktail bar, surrounded by skulls and the severed limbs of children's dolls, as the chain-smoking owners blasted psychedelic guitar music, well, I would have been surprised to say the least. But I'll come back to that.

Tourism accounts for a fifth of Zagreb's annual GDP, an already impressive figure that is expected to rise further with the addition of a new airport terminal. That and its Christmas markets, of course.

Think of festive markets and your mind might conjure up images of Bruges or Berlin if you're lucky, or seething masses of Londoners waddling through Winter Wonderland if you're not. Zagreb has so far managed to remain a comparatively untapped, vibrant source of genuine Christmas cheer.

Between November and January, the picturesque Croatian capital breaks out the marquees and becomes one joyful interconnected market. Live music and food stalls fill the streets, and each segment of the city offers something a little different.

But it's not all about Advent - there are plenty of museums, sculptures, parks, architecture and heritage sites to explore before hitting the gluhwein.

DAY ONE

09.00: Begin at the Oktogon in central Zagreb, a short

passageway with glass ceilings and quirky boutique shops connecting Illica Street - the longest, busiest street in Zagreb - with Petar Preradovic Square. This building from 1899 hosts fashion shows in the latter part of the year. Be sure to pick up one of the beautiful cravats from fashion accessory specialist Croata while you're there.

Make your way through Preradovic Square, have a look at the statue of Romantic poet and revolutionary Petar Preradovic, and head down Preradoviceva Ulica towards the Green Horseshoe. En route, look out for the monument of Nikola Tesla by sculptor Ivan Mestrovic, described to us as the Croatian Rodin.

10.30: The Green Horseshoe is a system of city squares and parks forming a U-shape across the Lower Town of Zagreb. It is home to various national institutions and organisations, as well as museums, galleries and theatres. Start at Republic of Croatia Square, home of the Croatian National Theatre since 1895. All buildings in this square are buttery yellow thanks to Habsburg empress Maria Theresa, who decreed that all public buildings must, by law, be made of yellow stone.

The Museum of Arts and Crafts there has an impressive range of unique pieces and costs about £5. The building was designed by Herman Bolle, a Croatian architect who, I would later discover, designed half the city. Before leaving the square, take in



→ another beautiful if haunting Mestrovic sculpture, *The Well of Life*.

Prestige Holidays offers three nights' B&B at the Hotel Esplanade in Zagreb, flying with Croatia Airlines from Gatwick on December 1, from £568. prestige.holidays.co.uk

Cyplon offers three nights' B&B at Palace Hotel Zagreb, flying BA from Heathrow on November 16 and transfers, from £425. cyplon.co.uk

12.00: Walk on to Marko Marulic Square, past the Croatian National Archives to the Botanical Gardens. Open April to October, the gardens form the east-west branch of the Green Horseshoe and are home to 10,000 species of plants. Around the corner of the horseshoe you come to Ledeni Park, home in winter to a large ice rink – a great spot for families.

Once you've killed it on the ice, refuel at one of many food stalls in the park. For those hungry for culture, the park adjoins King Tomislav Square, where the stunning Art Pavilion hosts large-scale exhibitions. Originally built as the Croatian Pavilion at the Budapest Millennium Exhibition in 1896, the building was disassembled and transported to Zagreb, where it became a dedicated space for art shows.

15.00: Wander through Strossmayer Square and finish your walk with a

look around the arty Archaeological Museum in Zrinjevac Square, where ambient sounds and lighting guide you through the building's 450,000 artefacts and monuments.

16.30: Relax in the picturesque square with a glass of Zlatan Plavac (Croatian red wine) and watch the musicians set up at the bandstand. Check out stalls selling all sorts of cakes, waffles, trinkets and booze. Zrinjevac was my favourite square, especially when the sun went down, the twinkling fairy lights adorning all the trees came on and the band struck up for the happy crowd.

19.30: Kurelceva Ulica in the Lower Town is where you want to be at night. This trendy street is alive with gin bars and music. Watch the action unfold from on high – over dinner at charming restaurant Agava – before heading to European Square for a bustling atmosphere fuelled by live DJ tents and steaming cups of mulled wine.



09.00: Oktogon



16.30: Zrinjevac Square



10.30: Museum of Arts and Crafts



16.30: Ledeni Park ice rink

one of Zagreb's most multi-sensory experiences. Inside, locals buy their meat, fish and dairy products, but outside, stall upon stall is crammed into the square, with charismatic Croatian traders meeting to sell fruit, vegetables, honey, bee pollen, wooden toys, liqueurs and accessories. It's loud, colourful, busy and a lot of fun. Saturday is the best day to go.

11.30: Leave the market and head to Ban Jelacic Square, seen by most as Zagreb's 'main' square. During Advent, a massive Christmas tree is surrounded by street performers, and in the evenings, traditional singers and dancers perform on the large stage. Pop into mega-trendy cafe and nightclub Johann Franck to pause for a bit of people watching.

13.00: If there's one place that comes recommended by just about everyone for the city's best street food, it's the Upper Town's Tomiceva Ulica, the street at the bottom of Zagreb's →

DAY TWO

09.00: Zagreb's Upper Town is quaint and quirky, connected by narrow, winding streets and interesting attractions. Start in Kaptol Square for a look round Zagreb Cathedral, a

distinctive Gothic structure with two huge spires dominating the skyline. Inside lies a beautiful sarcophagus containing an effigy of Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac sculpted by – you guessed it – Ivan Mestrovic. Stepinac

was imprisoned, allegedly poisoned and became a symbolic victim of the Communist Regime in the 1960s.

10.00: Dolac Market is a short walk from the cathedral and provides



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09.00:
Zagreb
Cathedral



10.00:
Dolac
Market



17.30:
St Mark's
Square

PICTURES: IGOR NOBILO; M VRDOLJAK; J DUVAL; I VINKOVIC; S KATELAN

→ famously short funicular. This is a well-known haunt for Croatian chefs trying new recipes, and a popular meeting place with artists and musicians, who are known to give impromptu performances after a few glasses of *gemist* (white wine mixed with sparkling water).

14.00: The walk up to Strossmarte is steep but not too long, and at the top of the climb is gorgeous restaurant Pod Grickim Topom, serving fresh seafood and top-quality (expensive) wines. It's almost directly beneath Lotrscak Tower, from which the city cannon fires at noon every day. Strossmarte, so named as a hat-tip to Montmartre in Paris, is a bohemian hub of creativity made up of small streets and little climbs to hidden bars.

15.00: A standout attraction is the Museum of Broken Relationships, just a short walk from Lotrscak Tower. Only slightly more cheerful than it sounds, the museum is an often amusing, at times harrowing, emotional travelogue through thousands of failed relationships, told by everyday objects. This really is a must-see for anyone visiting Zagreb.



Mio Corazon's decor is as bonkers as the hosts are hilarious, and it's very popular with local residents

16.30: Dry your tears and walk to the Croatian Museum of Naive Art, a centre established in 1952 to exhibit art by regular people unschooled in special academies. Croatia's untrained artists were supposedly among the best in the world, and this was the first such museum anywhere.

17.30: Around the corner is the Stone Gate, a shrine to the Virgin Mary and pilgrimage site for religious Croatians. The painting of Mary and Jesus next to the gate survived a fire in 1731, which reportedly destroyed everything else, but the original painting and gate remain. Take in the Stone Gate before looking in to St Mark's Square, where parliament and government buildings stand alongside St Mark's Church. Between April and October, a changing of the guard ceremony takes place here every

Saturday, with soldiers dressed in traditional uniform.

18.30: Walk or take the funicular back to Tomiceva Ulica for a pre-dinner drink at Basement Bar, an underground wine bar selling Croatian wines away from the bustle of the street.

20.00: Return to the Lower Town for dinner at Vinodol, a beautifully designed high-end Mediterranean restaurant a stone's throw from the Tesla Monument. After dinner, make

your way to Bacchus Jazz Bar just off King Tomislav Square, a buzzing vaulted den with exposed brick walls, book-stuffed shelves and first-rate live music.

If you're still feeling adventurous, walk off your dinner back to Upper Town for a weird and wonderful night at Mio Corazon tapas and cocktail bar, the aforementioned grotto of skulls and psychedelia. The decor is as bonkers as the hosts are hilarious, and it's clearly very popular with local residents – which is no surprise at all. **tw**

Where to stay

Hotel Dubrovnik

This reasonably priced hotel is right in the heart of Zagreb, comprising 245 rooms and suites, with classical decor and modern amenities. A business centre, gym, bar, restaurant and free Wi-Fi are available. It's a great base from which to explore the Advent markets, with the main square just round the corner. Outside is a bustling hive of activity in the pre-Christmas period, with stalls, street food and local traders mixing with tourists and business people.

hotel-dubrovnik.hr

Esplanade Zagreb

This five-star property was built in 1925 to host wealthy tourists travelling on the Orient Express. The art deco design includes gorgeous marble walls, vast sweeping staircases and a fairytale ballroom. Located conveniently in the city centre next to the main railway station, the hotel is close to all the major attractions in Zagreb and is another well-placed, decadent HQ for travellers looking to get to know the city's Christmas markets.

esplanade.hr