

CROA

This young nation astride the Adriatic is at a cycling crossroads



WHO WOULD have guessed a decade or two ago that Croatia would become a trendy destination for American and European cyclists looking to discover a new country for long-distance touring? Croatia was a just-born nation then, stunned by the breakup of communist Yugoslavia and devastated by a civil war that left 20,000 dead and \$37 billion in damage. The country had virtually no bicycles, no bike paths, lanes, or maps, no bike shops, and no infrastructure for tourists who wanted to travel on two wheels. Not surprisingly, none of the international bike-touring companies had ever offered a tour in Croatia.

TIA



STORY BY **DAVID LAMB** | PHOTOGRAPHS BY **BETH PULITI**

But, hold on, big changes were coming. In 1998, seven years after Croatia's independence, 30 members of a German bicycle club approached Klaus Schenk, a bike-tour guide in Germany. "They said they wanted a tour that was entirely different," Schenk recalled. So he chose the most off-the-beaten-path place to cycle he could think of — Croatia, a country he had never visited. The group made the 14-hour drive from Stuttgart to Croatia, with no idea what awaited them. Schenk could find only one available ship to charter for his group's bike-and-boat tour, an old cargo vessel that used to haul gravel and sand and had been converted into a ho-hum boat for tourism. "This was the beginning," Schenk said. "We were the pioneers."

That maiden tour in Croatia didn't go entirely well. Schenk couldn't find any German speakers to hire as guides. His 30 riders had to share five toilets and showers. The boat quickly ran out of food. The cook — no one would have called him a chef — held up an empty pan to show everyone that the pantry



Traffic-free roads and varied scenery make Croatia a haven for cyclists — a far cry from its turbulent past.

Croatian people were friendly and eager to please. He persevered.

Today, Croatia attracts more than 10 million international visitors annually, thousands of whom are cyclists traveling on back roads and

that carry 5,200 cyclists annually on 250 year-round departures, a fleet of 200-plus specially designed 21-gear aluminum bicycles, and five mini-vans and trailers.

"Bike tourism has been recognized as one of the most important tourism segments that we are continuing to develop," said Andreja Cvitkovic, director of the Croatian National Tourist Office in New York City.

I asked her for examples of how Croatia has become more cyclist-friendly in recent years. She had a long list. Many hotels now cater to cycling guests, offering bike storage, cleaning services, and route maps. Zagreb, the capital, provides bike storage on an hourly and daily basis as well as bike repairs in the city center. More

FOUR OF THE 14 EUROVELO CYCLING ROUTES BEING STITCHED TOGETHER TO PROVIDE A 40,000-MILE-LONG CYCLING NETWORK ACROSS EUROPE PASS THROUGH CROATIA

was out of everything. But Schenk was sure he was onto something. Croatia's landscape was breathtaking; its 1,000 miles of coastline on the Adriatic Sea were perfect for cycling, and the

sign-posted paths across the country. And the company Scheck started after that first shaky trip, Islandhopping, now has 30 experienced, multilingual guides in Croatia, eight spiffy boats



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than 100 bike trails are signed with numbered routes for cyclists in Istria, Croatia's most developed region for cycling. Ice-cream shops and coffee cafés are now common along popular bikeways. Four of the 14 EuroVelo cycling routes being stitched together to provide a 40,000-mile-long cycling network of trans-border international trails across Europe pass through Croatia:

The Iron Curtain Trail (EuroVelo 13) takes bicyclists along the Croatian side of the Drava River on roads with low levels of traffic. It is flat with no ascents, and follows the old Cold War line that for nearly half a century divided Europe into East and West and passes through 20 countries, from the Norway-Russian border to Greece. When completed, the trail will be 6,500 miles long.

The Baltic-Adriatic Trail (EuroVelo 9) will carry riders through the beautiful hills and valleys of Croatia's Istria peninsula to Pula, a city built on seven hills with a population of 60,000 and a coliseum once used for gladiatorial combat. It is among the six largest surviving Roman arenas in the world.

The Mediterranean Route (EuroVelo 8) wanders through scenic parts of the Croatian coast and a series of ancient towns and villages.

The Atlantic-Black Sea Trail (EuroVelo 6) is completely flat and passes along many natural, cultural, and historical attractions in eastern Croatia.

The EuroVelo project (**Eurovelo.com**) was conceived in 1995 by British and Danish partners and operates with



The Adriatic Sea is a constant presence for cyclists whether taking in the views or enjoying fresh seafood dinners in the evenings.



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NUTS & BOLTS Croatia

GETTING THERE

Lufthansa flies nonstop New York (JFK) to Zagreb, Croatia's capital, via Munich. Comfortable, modern buses make the 167-mile trip from Zagreb to Pula though the day (buscroatian.com). Ferry



boats connect Venice and Pula in Istria (croatiaferries.com/venice-pula-ferries.htm)

RESOURCES

Croatian National Tourist Office in New York City, 917.488.6385. For detailed information on worldwide bike tours check out biketours.com. For top-of-the-line bike-and-boat tours in Croatia, contact the German-owned company Islandhopping (islandhopping.com).

FOOD AND DRINK

Various regions in Croatia have their own distinct culinary traditions. The country produces quality wines and excellent lamb and beef. But there is no denying that seafood is the star of the menu. Scores of restaurants — many with outdoor

patios — line the harbors and marinas of virtually every town and the fish they serve at dinner is likely to be part of that day's catch from the Adriatic Sea.

WHEN TO GO

The warm Adriatic gives Croatia a mostly mild climate and many cycling tours operate throughout the year. May through October is the peak tourist season with temperatures reaching into the 80s. Spring can be cool and autumn warm, much as one would find in North Carolina. Croatia has significant precipitation and there are ski resorts in the central mountains.

the support of the European Union and is managed by the European Cyclists' Federation whose motto is "More People Cycling More Often." Sections of the network already have been completed in several countries. Other segments are still in the planning or developmental stages. When they are completed in 2020, EuroVelo routes will wander through 42 countries.

"Croatia is interesting in terms of long-distance cycle routes because the country doesn't have a central organization coordinating things nationally, but infrastructure and services seem to be springing up at the local level to meet the demand," said Ed Lancaster, the federation's policy officer for cycling tourism and regional policy. The European Union parliament estimates cycle tourism is worth \$59 billion a year to the EU. Most of the funding for the EuroVelo project, Lancaster said, comes from local, regional, and national entities.

Every year for more than a decade, I've organized a bike tour in a different foreign country for 20 friends. Most of us are collecting Social Security. Croatia didn't appear on my radar screen until, while browsing biketours.com for a new destination, I ran across a description of one of Schenk's Croatian tours on a refurbished vessel called *Tarin*, which started its life in 1930 as a fishing board in Scotland named *Jessie West*. Its history alone was enough to captivate me. In this country of truffles, top-quality olive oil, vineyards producing fine wine, and 1,000 islands — most uninhabited —

we would ride through medieval towns on roads once used by Napoleon and the Romans.

So it should come as no surprise that I chose Croatia for our annual week-long foreign bike tour in 2014. On an overcast June day, my wife and I and 18 of our friends found ourselves walking down a long dock jutting into Pula's harbor to board the *Tarin*. It is a masted, motorized, 216-foot-long, 11-cabin vessel, which the captain and owner, Nevio Fafija, named for his daughter.

The *Tarin* was our floating hotel and restaurant. Every morning it headed off along the Adriatic coast while we and our two guides hit the road pedaling. Later, the sailors and the cyclists rendezvoused. Usually we docked in a different town every night. Unlike traditional inn-to-inn overland tours, we unpacked and packed only once during our tour and never had to lug our baggage.

One of our two guides, Tedi Debelić, greeted us at the gangplank and almost immediately began rhapsodizing about Croatia. "I was born in paradise," he announced. It was a sentiment we encountered time and time again. After their struggle for independence and the success they have made of sovereignty, Croatians are true patriots, considering themselves blessed to live peacefully where they do and eager to share the news of their good fortune with visitors.

On the fourth night out, we docked in Novigrad, a picturesque town of 4,000 residents. Most of us walked into town for our nightly ice-cream run. We passed the *Tarin's* first mate, Magla Zeljko, who everyone called "the admiral." Zeljko had piloted cargo ships around the world for 40 years before joining the *Tarin* crew a decade ago. He was standing in the darkness, alone on the dock, looking up at a perfect crescent moon. "Have you seen our beautiful Croatian moon?" he asked. We nodded.

Zeljko said this moon shone most brightly on Croatia. When we got home and saw a crescent moon, he said, we would think of it shining on his homeland and "it will always

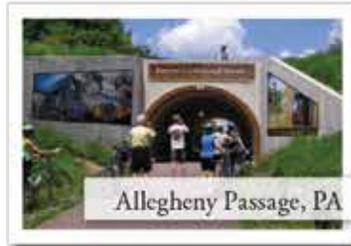
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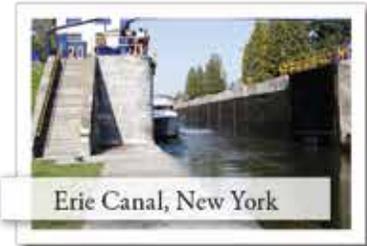
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Top: Croatia's history is rich, with some of the best-preserved and largest Roman architecture in the world.

Bottom: An Adriatic picnic is the perfect way to end a long day in the saddle.

remind you of this beautiful place.”

Even before we docked in Novigrad, the onboard atmosphere generated by crew and visitors had changed. The two groups were no longer strangers. As always seems to happen on a bike-and-boat tour after a day or two, the mood had taken on the feel of family.

Captain Fafija, in fact, spoke of having two families: his wife and kids at home and his five-member

crew on the boat, some of whom have worked with him for a decade. We happened to be on the *Tarin* on the 10th anniversary of its maiden voyage. After dinner, champagne was poured amid cheers and toasts. Fafija picked up his accordion, and the admiral fetched his guitar. They played some lively Croatian folk songs, then opened their songbook to Bob Dylan’s “Knocking on Heaven’s Door” and serenaded us. Soon all 20

of us were clapping and singing along. The captain’s smile was as wide as the crescent moon overhead.

His vessel carried us up the Adriatic coast and through the history of Croatia: Rovinj, Vrsna, Porec, Umag. We biked inland to Groznjan (population 80), the “City of Artisans,” which over the centuries had been governed by France, Italy, Austria, and Yugoslavia. Our seafood lunch there — fresh from the Adriatic — on the patio of Bastia restaurant deserved many stars. In each town we were reminded that Croatia remains largely uncommercialized. Shopping malls are few, fast-food eateries rare. As the slogan says, Croatia is the “Mediterranean as you remember it.” Gone are most remnants of war and the signs saying “Beware Active Minefield” that littered the countryside not so long ago.

When I got home to Virginia, my neighbor asked where I’d been. “Croatia,” I said, “biking a couple of hundred miles.” He recalled backpacking through Europe as a youth. “The Croatians are the friendliest people I ever met,” he said. “When I was hitchhiking in Europe, the Hungarians wouldn’t stop for me. Same with the Austrians. Then I got into Croatia. Not only would they pick me up, they’d invite me home for dinner.”

By way of reply, I told him about stumbling on the deck of the *Tarin* and taking a hard fall a week earlier. Debelić, the guide, hailed a taxi and took me on a Sunday morning to an emergency clinic. The doctor spent 20 minutes with me and said my ribs were bruised, not broken, which was a relief. I asked what I owed him. “Oh, there’s no charge for that,” he said. “Welcome to Croatia.” **AC**

David Lamb is an eight-time Pulitzer Prize nominee who has traveled the world for 25 years as a Los Angeles Times correspondent and is the author of six books, including Over The Hills: A Midlife Escape Across America by Bicycle.

In 2010, Beth Puliti unplugged from her full-time job as an editor in the Philadelphia metro area to embark on a full-time freelance career. She is currently exploring the world on an open-ended bike tour, working wherever there’s wifi and sleeping wherever her legs give out for the day.