

CROATIA

THE JEWEL OF THE ADRIATIC

BY TRAVIS GILL OF VIAJARMOTO.COM

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As we rolled up to the Croatian border control checkpoint, the feelings of worry and excitement were heavy on our minds. Although the US Embassy website showed that American citizens were currently allowed into Croatia, we worried that the rules could quickly change and we would be turned away. We were also very excited because getting into Croatia would mean another 90-days of travel in a country we've both wanted to experience more of.

We handed our passports, registration, and "green card" insurance documents to the stern-eyed looking woman wearing a black mask that covered her nose and mouth. She studied each of them carefully and then scanned them into her computer before typing on the keyboard. Although the process only took a few minutes, it felt like eternity due to our anxiety.

The border patrol officer handed back our passports and documents, and said "Welcome to Croatia." We both breathed a huge sigh of relief! We could now continue our full-time motorcycle over-landing and the beautiful country of Croatia was ours to explore!







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RIDING THE TRANS EURO TRAIL

One of the first things we did was get off the beaten path to enjoy the isolation and natural beauty of the Trans Euro Trail (TET). A 371 km (231 mile) portion of the TET runs through this country from the northern border of Slovenia to the eastern border of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This trail winds through small villages, forested trails, mountain roads, fertile valleys, and dirt ridges that provide incredible views of the Adriatic Sea. You can read about our four-day ride along the Croatia TET in **Upshift issue 52**.

MUCH MORE THAN THE TET

If you're strapped for time, then the TET is a great way for a dirt or adventure motorcyclist to experience Croatia. However, one would miss out on some other remarkable places. If you're looking for more off-road oriented adventure, be sure to check out the trails around White and Samaritan Rocks. We visited this area during the autumn season and were left in awe of the vibrant hues of reds, oranges, and yellows that burst from the surrounding forests.

The Martian-like terrain of Pag Island is another place we enjoyed riding the rocky roads in search of what some believe to be a landing area of a UFO. Near the town of Novalja is a large triangle-shaped phenomenon where the rocks inside the triangle are of a different structure than the rocks outside. Some believe this was caused by a UFO, which superheated the rocks during landing and takeoff. Regardless of your feelings about UFOs, the area is definitely worth exploring the unique landscapes of barren rocky terrain contrasted against the clear blue-green waters of the Adriatic Sea.

Mali Alan Pass is yet another "must ride" for those looking for off-road adventure! This gravel pass road snakes through the southern part of the Velebit Mountains and provides stunning views of the surrounding Adriatic Sea. Be sure to stop and enjoy the conglomerate of limestone cliffs of Tulove Grade where an old legend says that a dragon lives. Why not? After all, Croatia was the filming location for many scenes of the television series Game of Thrones.



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ISLAND HOPPING AND NATIONAL PARKS

Motorcyclists who visit Croatia should not feel they have to go off-road to enjoy the wonderful beauty of this diverse country. There is a lot to see and experience via the tarmac as well. The coastal route is especially enjoyable offering incredible views of the Adriatic Sea and the hundreds of islands that dot the coastline. During our time in Croatia we boarded numerous ferries between islands to include: Cres, Pah, Brač, Hvar, and Korčula. The island roads were perfect for carving around corners and taking in the sites, landscapes, and relaxed coastal towns unique to each of these islands.

Although Croatia is a relatively small country, it features eight national parks. We were able to visit six of these parks: Plitvice Lakes, Krka, Kornati, Risnjak, Paklenica, and Northern Velebit. Each one offered unique hiking opportunities for those willing to park their motorcycles. The most popular parks are Plitvice Lakes and Krka with their crystal clear water and picturesque waterfalls connected via well-designed wooden pathways and hiking trails.



KA TODORIĆ ARAN TODORIĆ
C MILKA TODORIĆ MILORA
RO TODOROVIC BOSILJK
VIC ĐURAB TODOROVIC
VIC KOJO TODOROVIC
ROVIC MILICA TODORO
ROVIC PERO TODORO
ROVIC STEVO TODOR
VIC LJUBA TONOL
VIC DRAGOMIR TONIC DRAGANKA TON
TODOROVIC NARA TONIC MIRALA
TODOROVIC SLAVKO TONIC SPASO
TODOROVIC NOVAKOVIC FRANKO



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CROATIAN CUISINE

Part of enjoying a culture is eating some of the local foods. One of our favorite meals was Cevapi. This is a minced meat rolled into a finger-like shape and then grilled. It is often served with delicious pita bread, chopped onions, and a red pepper sauce called Ajvar. Another delicacy is Peka – a meal consisting of meat, potatoes, and vegetables baked for 3-4 hours under a bell-like dome (ispod čirpnje). Eating Peka felt like the country-style meals that I remembered as a kid growing up in Colorado.

A TURBULENT PAST

As you travel around Croatia, you're reminded of a difficult part of their history. This was a region of Europe that has experienced numerous wars throughout its turbulent past. The 20th century conflicts of WWI, WWII, Croatian War of Independence, and Bosnian War have left their impression upon the country. Abandoned military sites and villages, large land-mined areas, and war memorials are a common site in the backcountry. The most memorable were the Jasenovac Memorial Site, the Red Fićo, and various abandoned military installations.

Jasenovac Memorial Site is a museum and memorial dedicated to remembering the hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Roma, ethnic Croats, and Muslims that died here in the forced labor and extermination camp. The six petal, flower-blossom shaped monument was designed by Serbian architect Bogdan Bogdanović and houses a crypt lined with railroad ties that were used to bring prisoners to the death camp. The surrounding landscape features earthen mounds where camp buildings used to be, and shallow mounds where graves once existed. This monument is regarded as one of the most striking genocide memorials in the world and it definitely left an impression on us.





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The Red Fićo (also called Red Fiat) is a monument dedicated to an act of defiance during the Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995). Branko Breškić, a 31-year-old Croatian, was fueling his red Fiat when he noticed military tanks from the Yugoslavs People's Army rolling through his city in a demonstration of force. Breškić quickly got in his car, raced ahead, and parked in front of the advancing tanks. He hardly had enough time to casually open his door and walk away. He hoped his actions would create a road block, however his red Fiat was no match for the advancing tank! The Fiat's front end was crushed and the entire car was shoved aside as the tank continued rolling down the road. In 2011 a monument, where the red Fiat is now crushing a T-55 tank into the ground, was built to symbolize the Croatian victory over the Yugoslav Army and Serbian aggressors.

Croatia also has a number of unique abandoned military installations. While riding on the TET, we visited Željava Air Base and a Yugoslav Douglas C-47 (UPSHIFT issue 52). While visiting the Island of Brač, we were told by some locals about a couple of former Yugoslavian submarine pens. A dirt road along the south of the island took us to a seaside concrete bunker where submarines could dock and be serviced while remaining hidden from satellite and reconnaissance aircraft. It was especially enjoyable to don my swim trunks and swim around in the same dock that was previously used during the Cold War to house Yugoslav submarines.

GENEROSITY OF STRANGERS

Although the country has had a tumultuous past, it doesn't define the people of Croatia today. Everyone we met was genuinely happy, extremely helpful, and interested in our travels. We were asked numerous times "How are you enjoying our country?" We have one particular story where we were overcome with gratitude after experiencing a minor breakdown.

While riding through a curvy corner, I noticed my left foot peg felt like it was flexing. We pulled over to the side of the road and, sure enough, the peg's metal bracket that attaches to the frame was broken in half. A proper fix would require a welder. We managed to attach enough paracord to the peg and frame to keep it from getting worse while we went in search of a weld shop. We noticed that Chantil's left peg was also in need of repair since it was cracked as well.

We found a place called TREA TRADE d.o.o. where, within seconds of explaining the problem, there was a group of men assembling tools and equipment needed to help us. Within an hour, they had removed the bracket, ground off the paint, welded the break, strengthened it with a backing plate, painted it, and had it back on both motorcycles. The foot peg bracket was now better than new! When we thanked them and asked "How much do we owe you?" they replied "It's our favor. We hope you enjoy traveling in our country!" As much as we tried to pay, they would not accept it. They were just pleased to help a couple of travelers from a far-away country.



DEFINITELY WORTH VISITING

Every motorcyclist, given the opportunity, should put Croatia on their “must ride” list. You won’t be disappointed with the off-road isolation, diverse natural beauty, coastal Mediterranean towns, delicious cuisine, historical monuments, and the wonderful people of this beautiful country.

ABOUT VIAJARMOTO.COM

Travis and Chantil Gill started full-time motorcycle overlanding in early 2020. You can follow them on their website www.viajarMOTO.com, and on YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook.

