



6 Rastoke

The perfect stop-off on the way to Plitvice from Zagreb, Rastoke shares certain similarities with Croatia's most popular national park. Both are picturesque, both developed, in terms of activity, because of an abundant supply of rushing water and both feature travertine barriers, natural dams created by a build-up of calcium carbonate deposits upon algae, moss and bacteria. Both are under national protection.

Rastoke, however, was a mill town, but the water-powered mechanisms were superseded by electric ones elsewhere around the country. By the late 1960s, depopulation was such that Rastoke was granted special status to protect its traditional waterside buildings from decay. Locals, some 100 in number, still live in Rastoke, occupying the traditional wooden houses saved by heritage status.

These days, the main income is from tourism, this bucolic settlement 90 minutes from Zagreb providing both a relaxing and a thoroughly active day out.

At the confluence of the Slunjčica and Korana rivers, Rastoke would be pretty enough to visit whatever its other attractions. But, as you'll find out if you pop into the Tourist Center Mirjana Rastoke (mirjana-rastoke.com/en), a tourist resource, a comfortable hotel and a traditional restaurant focused on organic local produce. Activities organised from the hotel are many: kayaking, rafting, hiking, horseback riding and quadbiking, to name but five. You can fish for trout, explore Baraćeva Caves and swim in the clear green waters of the



7 Samobor

The most obvious day trip from Zagreb, and one made by many city dwellers on a Sunday, is to Samobor. Only 20km west of town, Samobor has always been a destination designed to alleviate the stresses of urban life. A spa and public park were added in the 1800s, when it became a district capital and, perhaps more importantly, a meeting place for writers, composers and politicians away from the prying eyes of Zagreb.

Here, intellectuals would meet

to explore the possibilities of a Croatian nationalist revival, a movement that would lay the groundwork for independence from Austria-Hungary after World War I. Ferdo Livadić, for example, created the stirring anthem of the day, *Još Hrvatska ni propala* ('Croatia Hasn't Fallen Yet'), taking tips from Franz Liszt who would journey down from Budapest the composer's estate here. Antun Gustav Matoš, a revered poet and travelogue writer, was also resident around the same time.

The Town Museum (samobor.hr/muzej, closed Mon), though set in the house where Livadić once lived, has a broader approach to local history, showing the long tradition of glass-making and, still popular today, hiking in the nearby wooded slopes.

The setting-off point for many of these treks is still Šoićeva kuća, despite the fact that this rustic restaurant has long closed. From here, locals head to the hilltops of Japetić and Oštrc.

Rewards for their travails might include a slice of the famed samoborska kremšnita cream cake, traditionally taken on the picturesque main square, Trg kralja Tomislava. Confectioners U prolazu is the classic choice of many but if too many, and there isn't a table free on the sun-catching terrace, then the Hotel Livadić on the next corner also specialises in local pastries. For something more substantial, then Samoborski klet on the same square serves hulking portions of veal and game – phone ahead (01 332 6536) and they'll slow-cook it for you under a peka cooking bell. Reserve a table on the terrace while you're at it.

→ Autotourist buses (autotourist.com.hr) Nos. 151, 153, 155 and 156 regularly serve Samobor from Zagreb Črnomerec, Ljubljanka and the main bus station.



8 Varaždin

If you're going to visit one town from Zagreb, it should probably be Varaždin. And if you're going to visit Varaždin, you should do it during Špancirfest (spancirfest.com/en), this year taking place between August 23 and September 1, ten days of street performances, 30 concerts on four stages, exhibitions, wine and local gastronomy.

This segues nicely into Baroque Music Evenings (September 20-October 1), a 40-year-old institution where the sounds of Bach, Handel and Vivaldi provide the soundtrack for this most Baroque of Croatian towns.

Here, in the country's former capital where the borders of Croatia, Slovenia and Hungary all meet, you'll see Baroque almost everywhere you turn, in the palaces, churches and concert halls where some of these classical music performances are staged. Varaždin is a very alfresco city, one of parks, gardens and pedestrianised streets, and it's hard to think of it now as the stern stronghold built to sustain any attack from Turkish foes.

Dominating the historic centre, stark white Varaždin Castle contains the City Museum (gmv.hr/en), whose collection of arms, crafts, Old Masters and insects also extends across nearby palaces. The World of Insects numbers some 4,500 examples, preserved and documented, curated by local schoolteacher Franjo Koščec and housed at the Hercer Palace since 1954.

Varaždin Cathedral (Pavlinka 5) is another Baroque landmark, dating back to 1647, while an air of nobility is maintained every Saturday with the changing of the guard outside the Town Hall.

Don't leave without taking a stroll around the Town Cemetery near the Castle, part graveyard, part public park, whose creation in the early 1900s influenced other landscapers of the genre.

To dine well in historic surroundings, Palatin (palatin.hr) on the edge of the historic centre is a fair bet, its veal sublime. Behind the castle, its illuminated outline atmospheric from your terrace table, Bedem (bedem-varazdin.com) is a collaboration between two contemporary chefs, Anđelko Levanić and Zlatko Novak, who know what to do with locally sourced Zagorje specialities, particularly game.

To stay over, the Park Boutique (park-boutique-hotel.eu) is the best place in town, a four-star with a modest sauna, decent restaurant and terrace café.

Frequent buses take 1hr 45mins to reach Varaždin from Zagreb, single tickets around 65kn-90kn. The bus station is near the city centre. Trains are not worth the bother.