



Heron

THE PLACE

Blue Danube

BEYOND THE POLITE boating party often pegged to central Europe's Danube River (think Strauss waltzes and sips of brandy) lies an Amazon-like wilderness, a labyrinth of oxbow lakes, secret sandbars, and flooded willow forests at the intersection of Croatia, Hungary, and Serbia where the Mura and the Drava join and then meet the Danube.

Last July UNESCO pronounced this riverscape a biosphere reserve—a boon for its rare indigenous species and for adventure lovers, too. In this area still healing from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, ecotourism is rising from the abyss. A hike, bike ride, or—best of all—canoe paddle through the sprawling floodplain of **Kopački Rit Nature Park**, part of the reserve near the eastern Croatian city of Osijek (“ebb tide”), reveals a dazzling diversity that includes 293 bird species.

Reeds and ryegrass flourish among water lilies; purple herons and white-tailed eagles soar overhead; and, in spring, the tips of poplars poke out of the high waters. “After a serene glide through the maze of waterways,” says Jasmin Sadiković of Zlatna Greda, an eco-outfitter that leads day trips through the park, “wrap it up at a nearby tavern over *fiš paprikaš*, a spicy fish stew.” —*Anja Mutić*