



Locals stroll down café-lined Tkalčićeva Street in the heart of Zagreb's Upper Town.

Zagreb's New Zing

THE CREATIVE CLASS RISES IN CROATIA'S CAPITAL CITY

By ANJA MUTIĆ

CROATIA'S SUN-KISSED Adriatic coast, with 1,185 islands, steals the spotlight from its urban center. But the capital of the European Union's youngest member state (as of July) is on the upswing with a creative art boom and a culinary awakening. Those who visit find a fresh mix of old and new Europe. "Zagreb is a traditional Mitteleuropa city packed with well-worn charm," says Lana Cavar, one of Croatia's prominent graphic designers, who splits her time between Zagreb and the United States. "Locals won't compromise their ease of life by giving up a long espresso break on a sunny sidewalk." Dig a little deeper, and alongside Zagreb's traditional delights you'll find a clutch of enthusiasts restoring the city's unsung streetscapes with new projects. It's these people who give Zagreb a palpable zing.

DAY ONE

MORNING *Hilltop highlights*

Zagreb's heart and soul is **Trg Bana Jelačića** in the Lower Town, an expansive square lined with Habsburg-era buildings and a bronze statue of the 19th-century ruler who symbolizes Croatia's struggle for independence. The square is the major streetcar intersection and the city's social center, where locals meet up and lounge in sidewalk cafés. Wind through its flower stands and climb the stairs to **Dolac** in Upper Town, the daily market where farmers have hawked their homegrown wares—from fresh produce to artisanal honey—since 1930. Meander the stalls and sample local dishes such as *sir i vrhnje* (cottage cheese with cream). From there, head up more stairs to the adjoining hilltop, home to **Lotrščak Tower**. Climb the spiral staircase to the wooden deck of this 13th-century tower

built as protection from the Turks; today it offers a 360-degree view of the red-tiled rooftops below. At noon, brace yourself for a cannon blast, by which locals have set their watches since 1877. Steps away, the **Museum of Broken Relationships**, founded by a former romantic couple, pays homage to failed relationships with a poignant collection of quirky mementos—from handcuffs to rubber shoes—donated from around the globe. Pick up the best-selling *Bad Memories Eraser* at the museum shop. Dine at nearby **Didov San**, a rustic tavern with hearty fare (like prosciutto-wrapped grilled frogs) prepared in the style of the Neretva River delta in Dalmatia's hinterland.

AFTERNOON *Fashion dos*

Back in the Lower Town, stroll west along one of Zagreb's longest streets, **Ilica**, lined with unique shops, bakeries, and

restaurants. Have a peek at **Prostor** in a courtyard off Mesnička, with handcrafted designs—from 3-D-printed jewelry to lampshades made of colorful, eco-friendly cardboard—by upcoming Croatian artists. Venture into Dežmanov Prolaz to ogle the **I-gle boutique**, with cool couture, including sculptural dresses and asymmetrical skirts by local designers Nataša Mihaljčičin and Martina Vrdoljak-Ranilović. Fuel up with a shot of coffee at **Eliscaffè**, where 100 percent arabica beans are roasted and brewed by Zagreb's award-winning barista Nik Orosi.

EVENING *Barbecue and blues*

Pay respects to Croatia's central European roots at **Vinodol**, an old-time eatery abuzz with locals and drop-ins. Sit outdoors on the ivy-covered patio to see lamb, veal, and golden potatoes baked in a *peka* (domed oven), or have a seat inside the cozy, vaulted dining room. The meat-focused menu features traditional dishes that span the region; vegetarian options include house-made noodles, cheese croquettes, and creamy broccoli soup. Save room for the strudel, a flaky, layered pastry filled with plums, apricots, or strawberries. Mingle with a convivial crowd at **VIP Club**, a night-life newcomer with a jazz club ambience and live beats ranging from blues to Balkan.

DAY TWO

MORNING *Art attack*

Check out **Galerija Nova**, a city-owned gallery run by What, How & for Whom, a collective renowned for addressing delicate sociopolitical issues; from September through mid-November, it's home to Meeting Points, a multidisciplinary festival focused on presenting art from the Arab world. Hop on the streetcar or take a short walk toward the main bus station to see the graffiti-lined wall that sparked **Museum Street Art**, which "has no operating hours, dedicated curators, or pompous openings," says founder Ivana Vukšić. The collective gathered 80 artists who turned a nondescript wall lining busy Branimirova into one of Zagreb's most photographed sights; look for colorful graffiti signed by local artists Puma 34 and OKO. Catch a cab across the Sava River to the **Museum of Contemporary Art**, the largest art museum in Croatia, in a serpentine building by architect Igor Franić. With its collection of 12,000 works, it revived Novi Zagreb, a formerly dormant area of socialist-style apartments. Its showpiece is the "Double Slide" by Belgian artist Carsten Höller, a thrilling ride in a pair of metal tubes that



Friends greet each other in Trg Bana Jelačića, Zagreb's vast central square (above). Lari & Penati bistro offers roast chicken (below) on a menu that changes daily.

twist down from the top floor. "In this moment at Croatia's crossroads, wonderful artists are emerging, ready to burst on the global art circuit," says Vanja Žanko, curator of **Lauba**, a private space displaying Croatian contemporary art in a former Austro-Hungarian military riding arena. This black monolith in an industrial area of western Zagreb lies at the forefront of the city's urban renewal. The historic building stays fresh with rotating exhibitions, such as Ivana Franke's "Latency," an ephemeral light installation inside a pitch-black nook.

AFTERNOON *Gardens and spirits*

Wander Zagreb's **Botanical Garden**, created in 1889, with some 10,000 plant species arranged in several sections, including an



English-style arboretum, a French-style flower parterre, and a rock garden with indigenous flora. For lunch, hit the city's famed sidewalk cafés along Tkalčićeva Street. Grab a terrace seat at **Cica**, a miniscule bar in a storefront, known for its 25 varieties of rakija (similar to brandy), from honey to fig. Next, go on a solar system hunt, one of Zagreb's most peculiar attractions—an installation called "Nine Views" by artist Davor Preis, who in 2004 placed models of nine planets (including Pluto) around the city. Spot Mars on Tkalčićeva and Venus in Trg Bana Jelačića.

EVENING *Calling it a night*

Amble east of the square to Zagreb's foodie hot spot, tucked away in an alleyway off Vlaška. Culinary cognoscenti flock to **Mali Bar** owned by noted chef and food writer Ana Ugarković, with warm earth-toned interiors and fusion tapas: Smoked tuna with saffron sauce is a favorite. Next door is **Karijola**, Zagreb's beloved pizza joint, popular for thin crusts topped with market-fresh ingredients such as mushrooms and mozzarella. Stroll back to the center for a drink at **Kino Europa** inside a 1920s cinema, which houses a café/bar and hosts regular screenings of art house flicks. Wrap up the evening with a walk around **Stross**, an alfresco hangout with a makeshift bar (during summer) on leafy Strossmayer promenade, live music (from jazz to hip-hop), and the twinkle of city lights below. ■