

(clockwise from this image) Ban Jelačić Square; the dining room at Studio Kairos Bed & Breakfast; street markets.



CENTRE COURT

Croatia's capital city Zagreb is best explored on foot. Visit its leafy squares, buzzing markets and quaint courtyard restaurants, and let it reveal its centuries-old legacy at a leisurely pace.

WORDS ANJA MUTIC



Sitting on my plate in the grand dining room is a deliciously creamy risotto. Next up arrives Ibérico pork fillet with mashed pumpkin and port sauce. The menu is a mix of cuisines and flavours that could place me anywhere in the world.

But there are two giveaways to our location: the fresh *malvazija* (a light white from Croatia's heart-shaped Istrian peninsula) and the *štrukli* dessert (cottage cheese-filled dumplings covered with in breadcrumbs) — a signature dish of

northern Croatia. Given these specialties, it's no surprise that I'm in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, one of the European Union's youngest members.

I'm dining at the grande dame of Zagreb hotels, Esplanade Zagreb (Mihanovićeveva 1; +385 1 4566 666; www.esplanade.hr). This luxury historical landmark was built in 1925 to accommodate passengers of the illustrious Orient Express train, en route from Paris to Istanbul. Since then, it has hosted a string of celebrities and luminaries. Nearly 90 years later, it stands as a stalwart of Zagreb's way of life.

You'll need just a little stamina to head 'uptown', which in Zagreb terms means the Upper Town, where the city originated in the Middle Ages. These two hills hide a clutch of attractions, including the Zagreb Cathedral, a Gothic beauty with a pair of spires overlooking the city.

In spring or summer, exploring Zagreb on foot is particularly fun, as the place comes alive. Catch Cest is d'Best from 5–12 June, a street art festival with live music, performances and other colourful events.

MARKET WATCH

Right up from the main square bustles Dolac. This central market is a delight to discover. Roam the stalls laden with fresh fruits and vegetables, meat delicacies, such as Slavonian *kulen* (flavoured sausage) and goat and sheep cheese. While most items hawked at Dolac are of an edible nature, you can find take-home souvenirs, such as handmade wooden toys and bright-red *licitarsko srce* — heart-shaped gingerbread biscuits used as ornamental gifts.

A short walk from the square, rising gently uphill, is Tkalčićeva, the city's cafe-lined artery. Its pathway of tables fronting pastel-coloured townhouses are always packed, regardless of the season. Arrive late Saturday morning and you'll catch *špica*, the peak of Zagreb's weekly social calendar, when everyone dresses up nicely and 'parades' down the main strips of town, stopping for coffee breaks.

You'll find another Saturday activity a 10-minute meander away from Tkalčićeva in the unadorned attic of food blogger and stylist Jelena Iva Nikolić. The farmers market-like Mali plac na Tavanu (Little Market in the Attic; Sinkovićeveva 8) is a weekly gathering of small producers, attracting a rising community of people in Zagreb who care a great deal about where their food comes from. Here, you can sample and buy anything from organic citrus fruits and vegetables to honey, milk and pastries, as well as handmade natural cosmetics.

"Over the years, I've found so many interesting people who make their own food without treating it. We created Mali plac so these people can share their products, and visitors get a chance to taste and buy them, plus they can meet the producers. Our market has become a hit among hipsters and hedonists, vegans and vegetarians, and foodies who come to see the source of food," says Nikolić. ▶

(clockwise from left) Croatian risotto; the Museum of Broken Relationships; Cest is d'Best street festival.



STEPPING OUTSIDE

Zagreb is a city that lends itself to walking — and plenty of it. Leisurely strolls are among the greatest pleasures of exploring Croatia's mini-metropolis. Outside, the hotel extends to Nikola Šubić Zrinski Square, known to locals as Zrinjevac. This leafy space, part of Zagreb's so-called 'green horseshoe' (an urban feature that consists of a number of squares in Donji Grad or Lower Town), leads to the central Ban Jelačić Square nearby. It all begins and ends here at the city's heart, which is lined with immaculate Habsburg-era buildings. This is where all the emblematic bright-blue trams pass and locals meet, either below the stilted Lebarović clock or the equestrian sculpture of a Croatian count who once fought for independence from Hungary.



EXPLORING ZAGREB ON FOOT IS PARTICULARLY FUN DURING THE CEST IS D'BEST FESTIVAL.



Zinfandel's Restaurant at the Esplanade Zagreb hotel; (above) Cest is d'Best festivities at Zrinjevac park.

HEAL A BROKEN HEART

Up on the next hill is one of the city's most unique attractions: the Museum of Broken Relationships (Cirilometodska 2; www.brokenships.com). Founded by a former couple as a way to preserve their relationship, this moving and sometimes funny collection of items has been donated by people with broken hearts around the world. From an ashtray and stuffed animals to photo albums, each contribution is paired with a unique story. The exhibit travelled the world for a few years before it found a permanent home in Upper Town.

Afterwards, walk along the nearby leafy Strossmayer Promenade and take in views of the city below. On summer nights, it hosts a makeshift bar featuring concerts and a sundry crowd. From here, hop on Zagreb's emblematic funicular, which has been whisking people up and down the hill since 1890. The short but steep ride takes you back to Lower Town.

SECRET COURTYARDS

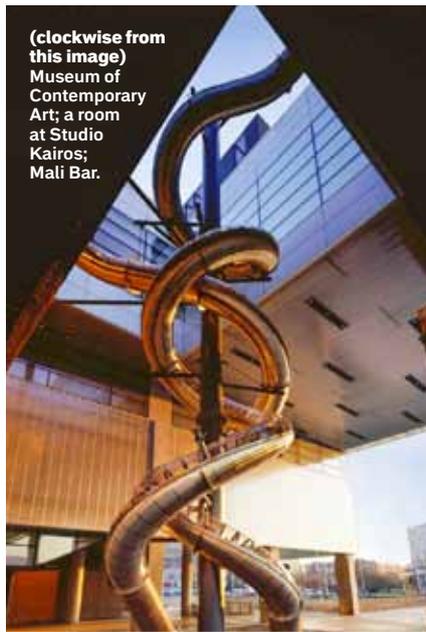
While hanging in outdoor cafes is natural to locals, especially on sun-splashed days, Zagreb is also a city of secret courtyards. In fact, much happens away from the well-trampled routes. Dotted around the city are plenty of courtyards, the perfect places to hide away, whether it's with a delicious plate of food or a shot of espresso.

For our pick of the bunch, take a short stroll from the main square towards the city's east and you'll find a little slice of foodie heaven. The tiny Mali Bar (Vlaška 63) serves up global fusion fare under the creative watch of Ana Ugarković, well-known TV chef and cookbook author.

Your palate can travel the world in this tiny space — sample bread with *labneh* (drained yoghurt) and garlic spread, followed by crisp tiger prawns in kataifi pastry, Japanese fried chicken and bruschetta with chicken livers *alla Veneziana*. Pair the world-inspired plates with national favourite *malvazija*, a grappa made with indigenous Istrian white grapes.

For something more homely, take the few steps up (in the same building) to Karijola (Vlaška 63; www.pizzeria-karijola.com), a cosy but chic pizza joint. Featuring an outdoor terrace, it serves up pizzas with toppings such as fennel, smoked beef and buffalo mozzarella.

In a courtyard of a main city street is Jutro (Teslina 9), a tiny cafe filled with



(clockwise from this image) Museum of Contemporary Art; a room at Studio Kairos; Mali Bar.



colour. This sweet, artsy hideaway is decked out with crafty objects (most are on sale). Sip on a nettle tea or elderberry juice, and grab a slice of cream-topped carrot ginger cake.

Vegetarians are catered for at Zrno (Medulićeva 20; www.zrnobiobistro.hr), a sophisticated but simple 'bio-bistro' with a covered terrace, an airy colourful interior and friendly staff. Order a serve of brown rice *gomoku* (Japanese rice stew), then make sure you ask for the tofu lemon cake for dessert. 🍷

GETTING THERE Virgin Australia operates direct flights to Abu Dhabi, with connections to Europe with its partner, Etihad Airways. To book, visit www.virginaustralia.com or simply call 13 67 89 (in Australia).



CREATIVE CORNER

Three art hotspots you shouldn't miss.

Check into the crafts or writers room at Zagreb's first B&B, Studio Kairos (Vlaška 92; +385 1 4640 680; www.studio-kairos.com). This is a creative little hideaway with only four rooms. The Museum of Contemporary Art (Avenija Dubrovnik 17; +385 1 605 2700; www.msu.hr), in Novi Zagreb across the

Sava River, shows Croatian avant-garde, with about 600 artworks on display. At Lauba (Prilaz Baruna Filipovića 23a; www.lauba.hr), self-dubbed the People and Art House, see a huge collection of Croatian art from the past 60 years inside a former Austro-Hungarian military riding arena.