

A Fractured Country

As the birthplace of World War I, the Balkans has traditionally been an area of conflict. An unintended result of the Communist Era in Yugoslavia was the suppression of these conflicts through the dictator, Tito. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia fractured into numerous countries along nationalist, ethnic and religious lines. The independent countries that were able to resist conflict prospered, while those who didn't struggled. The former Yugoslavia includes the F.Y.R.O.M., Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia and Slovenia.

The Former Yugoslavia Republic of Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M.), now called North Macedonia, is the smallest of the independent states. Originally called Macedonia, the name was changed to F.Y.R.O.M. after a dispute with Greece, who claimed Macedonia was historically a Greek name. Greece cut off trade routes until Macedonia changed her name and flag which she did. The relationship has normalized somewhat and the F.Y.R.O.M. has moved on, but is still a poor nation.

Bosnia-Herzegovina has any even more convoluted past. After the fall of Communism, Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic sought to create a state under Serbian control. Much of the Bosnian population refused and what followed was a nearly four-year siege of Sarajevo by the army and Serb militias. Ethnic cleansing by Serb and Croats took place as illustrated in Srebrenica, which was the first documented European genocide since World War II.

Currently, there are two governing bodies, the Muslim/Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Serbian Republika Srpska (RS), with the country being ruled by a three-person rotating presidency. The Croats are Catholic, the Serbs are Eastern Orthodox Christian and the "Bosniaks" are Muslim, but don't have the strict cultural standards that many other Muslim countries have. Travel conditions have improved outside the RS and travel to Sarajevo is now a possibility.

Serbia and Montenegro are all that remains of the former Yugoslavia, which was the country's name until 2003. The southern part is Montenegro and a planned 2006 vote may transform this area into an independent country. Also in the vicinity is Kosovo, the Albanian-majority here has also pressed to become an autonomous state. More inviting is the north and Serbia, with the capital of Belgrade, the university town of Novi Sad and the border town of Subotica. There still is a bit of tension here as police randomly stop drivers and look through their papers as a security measure.



Subotica has a pleasant pedestrian walkway leading to the city center, which is highlighted by an attractive town hall, war memorial and a cultural museum. There are several Serbian Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches to visit as well as a synagogue. Along with numerous small cars like the Yugo are shops, kiosks and an extensive central market that is an especially good place to visit on Saturdays.

I, along with many Hungarians, took the short trip over the border to Subotica to purchase goods at cheap prices. Upon entering Serbian territory, I was asked by a forty-something woman if she could sit where I was. As the train departed, she pulled out a ratchet wrench and screwdriver and took apart the back cushion of the seat. Then she stashed some cigarettes behind the cushion and returned the seat to its original position.

On the train ride back to Hungary, a man indicated that he wanted me to take one of his boxes. I asked him if it was cigarettes and he indicated it was a box of chocolates. Passengers can only bring back a limited quantity of cigarettes, alcohol, chocolate, etc. So everyone exchanges with each other if they have an excessive amount of one item to get under the limit.

After we left the train station, three men pulled out screwdrivers. Instead of taking apart the back of the seat, they took apart the roof of the train and stashed the cigarettes. At the Hungarian border, a young man in a green uniform checked us for illegal goods. It was a bit of a show as he asked if we had anything illegal; it was a very unconvincing display.

I talked to one of the men smuggling and he said that cigarette smuggling isn't the best job, but he had worked legitimate jobs and wasn't paid until three months later. He said he made one Euro a carton. Upon crossing into Hungary, he told me he had to go back to work. He got his screwdriver out and removed the cigarettes from the roof. I noticed that everyone on the train was looking out the window and when the customs officer was out of sight, they exchanged the excess items they were carrying for each other.

Croatia is moving quickly to recover from its past and has many inviting destinations. The east and south still have bullet-ridden houses but the capital of Zagreb is a fine place to visit. Zagreb has a lower city and an elevated upper city where many of the historical sights are located in a section called Gornji Grad. St. Mark's has an



unmistakable brightly-colored roof, which depicts the coat of arms of Croatia, Dalmatia and Slavonia. Heading down the cobblestone streets towards the lower town, is the open-air Dolac Marketplace, which includes a large flower market. At the bottom of the hill is the central city square where many shops and the central tram divides the upper and lower town. The lower town has several museums, restaurants, and a botanical garden.

Croatia's main tourist attraction is their beaches located on the Dalmatian Coast, which are the cleanest and clearest of the Mediterranean beaches. Split is a popular destination due to its night-life but there are several options on the coast. Croatia has been able to profit from its extended coastline, which can not be said for her neighbor to the north, Slovenia.

Despite being beach-handicapped, Slovenia has been able to prosper because of few internal conflicts and the advantage of the Communists heavily developing this area. Slovenia is the only part of the former Yugoslavia that has been accepted into the European Union, which occurred May 1, 2004.

The capital of Ljubljana is a welcoming, university town. The Ljubljana Castle overlooks the city and gives a view of the old town and new town, which is split by the Ljubljana River. Many bridges connect the two including the Dragon Bridge and Triple Bridge, which as the name implies is a series of three bridges. Next to the Triple Bridge is the main square, Preseren Square, which is dominated by the pink Franciscan Church. Walking along the river on the dark streets of the old city is very enjoyable. So is the night-life as there are several places with a young, vibrant atmosphere due to the university.



Although many areas are still off-limits for travel, the former Yugoslavia is opening up. Slovenia is relatively affluent and seems to have more in common with its neighbor Italy than with the Balkans. Croatia has some beautiful areas to visit and appears to be on the right track. More parts of the Balkans will become alluring as they recover from the conflicts that nearly destroyed them.