

# CROATIA – Advice from Fulbright Alumni

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## Topics covered below include:

- Cultural notes
- Personal Interactions and Language
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## **Cultural notes**

I have nothing but good things to say about Croatia and Croatians. They are unfortunately experiencing difficult times, but my students all had a confident, outward-looking attitude.

I really enjoyed living in Zagreb, but I also very much enjoyed the opportunities I had to see the rest of the country--and not just the coast (which is beautiful). Croatians were very gracious and patient with my inability to speak the language, and I also found that nearly all Croatians are very willing to share advice and opinions on just about any aspect of Croatian life and culture.

We found that the Croats value their family time, family ties, and are proud of their religious ties. Unlike what I was told before going to Croatia, the people in Dubrovnik OFTEN talk about their war(s) and like getting your perspective on what happened. They will also "straighten you out" , too, but in an educational manner.

Croatian people are somewhat reserved - it really is hard to get to know people, even colleagues that you see every day. But people who do get to know you are your friends for life! Just don't expect chatting in line at the bank or grocery store!

Croatia is a wonderful place to bring families. I have two young children (ages 2 and 6) with me in Zadar, and they have had a fantastic experience. I have found that it is very easy to live here with children. Croatia itself is a very kid-friendly and family-friendly place. There are large supermarkets (Konzum being the most ubiquitous) that have all the supplies needed and there is not much need to bring extra things for kids. I was able to find suitable schooling/child care for them but it did take effort and the help of colleagues here.

In the end, I think the biggest lesson was just to breathe deeply and let things go - we heeded the advice of a previous Fulbrighter, which was "Don't fight the lack of structure." One of our colleagues at ACMT also used to shrug periodically and say, "yeah, that can happen" when we explained our troubles. People don't seem to mind and so we tried not to either.

## **Personal Interactions and Language**

Although it was said that communicating in English would not be an issue here. I believe that is incorrect. Some type of language training would have made the experience more useful for me. I

brought 3 language instruction CDs before I got here but still had problems communicating with most Croatians. Their English language skills are spotty.

Croatians are friendly and welcoming. Almost all younger Croatians speak English and on several occasions served as volunteer translators for me. Those Croatians who don't speak English are more than willing to help. If I had it to do over, I would have spent more time learning Croatian before I came and I would have found a teacher here, rather than trying to learn on the language websites. As it was, I ended up with "restaurant" Croatian but not much else.

There is little to say other than learn as much as you can as soon as you can. The language is a barrier, but it is hardly prohibitive. Learn some fundamental words as a matter of practice and etiquette, and use them! People here appreciate that, even when your pronunciation is poor. Learn as much as you can about the place! The resources in English are vast and are certainly sufficient. Try and get the basics of the puzzle: who have the cast of characters been for the last 500 years or more, and what have been the major events. Explore! Of course you don't confront people with questions, but many "even most" will eventually talk with some nuanced conversation. Read *Bridge on the River Drina*, works by Ugreajic, Drakulic, and Rebecca West's tome if you have time, know who Mestrovic is, learn the names of the important people, places and events. Even the basics will endear you to the people, who are absolutely wonderful.

Learn as much of the Croatian language as you can before you get there, and continue learning / using it while you are there. The locals really enjoyed our attempt at speaking Croatian. They would laugh when we said something incorrectly, and would offer friendly corrections. This also helped us start several close relationships.

English is widely spoken by young people in Zagreb. Older people, especially in places like the post office or the markets, may not speak much English, but in a pinch it's usually easy to find someone to translate.

### **Business Practices and Networking**

People seem to work on a different time table than in the US - when we needed work done on our internet router, it took weeks to get someone to come, and then it was somewhat vague about when they would show up. But it did eventually get fixed. Our landlord had some work done on their fence, and the workers seemed to just show up randomly - without warning, and without any indication of when they would return. We just learned to live with it because it seems to be how things are done there.

### **University Life**

I would encourage Fulbrighters to contact colleagues in their respective host departments as soon as they know what department they will be in. They should be in touch regarding what class and/or classes they will be teaching and to coordinate the use of the book stipend. The book stipend is generous, and I found that I did not need to use it all for my own work, and therefore was able to get some much needed books for the English department at the University of Zadar that my colleagues would not have otherwise been able to secure. This is much easier to coordinate with the pouch shipment before leaving the US.

### **Social Life**

One thing that bothered me the entire time was the smoking. Everyone seems to smoke, and it is impossible to get away from it - non-smoking areas do not exist. People told us we would get used to it, but I never did. It was awful and one of the things I missed the most about the US.

## **Housing**

Talk to Fulbrighters who have gone to Croatia about housing. Also, the Embassy is very helpful in assisting with housing. Learn as much of the local language as possible.

Getting residency is a drag (we had to go to the police department about 6 times), but the University of Rijeka's international office (Iva Tijan in particular) made the process as easy as possible.

I found housing within a week. I'm glad I waited but it can be done over the internet. There are a couple of apartments here that are passed on from year to year. If you go through an agency, remember that they typically charge one month's rent as commission. That can add quite a bit to the rent, especially if you are here only for 5 months. Also, plan to spend about 100 euros/month on utilities. Almost all apartments come with a washer. Few have dryers. Internet and t.v. with many English language stations are ubiquitous.

Our host institution kept a list of apartments that faculty typically rent, and there are even websites with pictures. In the off-season, housing is plentiful in Dubrovnik. We got a great, 2-bedroom apartment with all the modern amenities (washer, drier, dishwasher, gas & electric burners, full-sized oven, internet access, satellite TV etc.) for less than \$800/month, utilities included. Our landlords were from California, so we paid them by check, and it was easy.

Housing and utilities can be expensive, but again, deals can be found for housing. We stayed in a 2 bedroom apartment and paid 550 Euro / month (\$725). The utilities ran about 110 Euro / month (\$150).

## **Banking**

Money is no problem. ATM's are plentiful and U.S. cash cards work there. If you come in mid-February, as I did, you will not receive your stipend from the Croatian government until the beginning of April, so plan to have enough cash to pay rent, deposit and expenses until then.

The money is easy. Divide by 5 and you have the dollar amount. Do not even attempt to use Euros, let alone dollars. Kunas are the order of the day, and you get them with no service charge with your bank card. Use cash as often as possible.

Keep sufficient amounts of Kuna with you... we never used a check and never saw a Croat use one. Expect to pay cash for everything or use a credit/debit card.

Find a friendly bank teller - I was so happy to have good help with getting my account set up and finding out how to use the ATM card. Otherwise, we just withdrew money from our account at home - our paychecks are automatically deposited, and all our bills were automatic, so it worked fine. We never had issues with credit cards or getting access to money.

## **Street Life**

I would encourage future Fulbrighters to take advantage of the abundant cafe life. Zagreb is a very accessible city and cafes abound. The locals relax, talk and work there. This sort of thing just does not exist in the U.S. I think Zagreb gets short shrift as a destination for sightseeing. The center of the city is beautiful, especially in spring and summer, and the museums and other attractions are all well-done. Croatia is a meat and potatoes country. Good fish and Italian food, especially pizza, are also found most everywhere. The open air markets are great. Wonderful fruits and vegetables, fish, poultry, meats, cheeses, etc. are plentiful. If you have special dietary needs you will probably spend more time in the markets and eating at home.

## **Transportation**

Dubrovnik has an excellent local (in town) suburban bus system. The local bus costs 10kn (\$1.75) to ride. The suburban buses cost only a few Kuna more and open up significantly open up your exploration choices. After you get your temporary residency and OIB number, you can purchase 20 trip passes or monthly pass that makes taking the bus much more cost effective. We eventually got the Monthly pass.

I never once drove a car while we were in Croatia. A few times when I was outside Zagreb I hired drivers, who gave us lots of interesting information, too. In Zagreb we walked a lot.

The public transportation is first rate. The tram system is extensive and if one lives in the center (which I would strongly advise), it will take you anywhere you need to go, although this year they eliminated the free tram within 2 blocks of the main square. The tram is fairly expensive, about \$1.50 per trip. There are few discounts available for foreigners and whether it is worth it depends on how much you use the tram. I would advise living anywhere north of the train station within 4 blocks east or west of Trg Ban Jelacica, the main square. While the University of Zagreb is large and has locations throughout the city, I think it is worth being in the center even if you have to travel to get to your faculty. For traveling outside of Zagreb, I used train, plane and bus. They are all reliable and affordable. Depending upon the time of year, plane tickets can be quite reasonable. If you anticipate having family or friends visit, there can be great weather anytime after the beginning of April. By mid-June the tourists crowd popular destinations on the coast, like Split and Dubrovnik so you want to avoid that.

Transportation is excellent, and yes, as long as you stay on most basic roads, renting a car works very well, along with buses and trains, which run ON TIME. You do NOT need the international driver's license; your US license will work for all purposes.

We took advantage of the suburban buses to get out of Dubrovnik and to some of the closer villages. We rented cars (\$60/day) and drove all along the Dalmatian coast (from Dubrovnik to Zadar, Plitvicka Jesera [the most beautiful set of lakes & waterfalls I have EVER seen], Ston, Korčula, Bosnia (Mostar) and Montenegro (Kotor & Budva). Don't get uptight about the driving when someone "tailgates" ... this is the norm and the Croats pass at every chance. Just pull over and let a few cars pass and then continue to enjoy the scenic beauty. Cheap flights out of Dubrovnik can also be found. Use them to travel in both Western and Eastern Europe. Also, take advantage of the extensive shipping lines in and out of Dubrovnik. We really took advantage of the Ferries (Jardrolina) to visit the Elphite islands and other places... much less expensive than the tour boats.

If you are in Dubrovnik in the winter, beware of the bura wind! When the wind blows hard, the planes cannot take off or land in Dubrovnik, so they will fly you to Split instead and you'll end up on a bus for 4

hours. We did a fair amount of traveling in the region, and found the easiest thing is just to rent a car and go - it's easy to find your way around. We had a GPS unit we took with us, and we bought the European maps. There's not much info for BiH, but it was remarkably good for Croatia and Montenegro.

In Zadar, there is a good local bus system, but there is no tram or other public transportation system. I did rent a car for the four months that I was here, and found it to be very helpful. Travelling by car is the easiest way to travel within the country if you are not in Zagreb. While flights and trains are easily accessible from Zagreb, that is not the case for other places within Croatia, especially on the coast where train travel is not really possible. Buses are fine, but not really practical for a family. The car allowed me and my family to travel much more than if I did not have it.

Traveling was interesting - we had all kinds of issues with Croatia Airlines. They make changes to your ticket without telling you, so double-checking is recommended. Our return flight was canceled and we were rebooked a day earlier, with no notification (and without rebooking our flights out of Germany, so we suddenly had 28 hour layovers!). I just happened to notice when checking something else. So pay attention. It happened again when we booked with them to go to Turkey for Thanksgiving.

## **Health**

KNOW your medical (including prescription drugs) frames and rules, which are changing, especially because of the EU coming up (likely 2013).

## **Food**

The Croatian people love their coffee... they can stretch one cup of coffee into an hour conversation. This is particularly the case in Dubrovnik where the pace of life is slower than that found to the north. They also enjoy sipping their forms of "moonshine" (or rachia) at small get-togethers with close friends. We certainly enjoyed both of the above. In Dubrovnik, many small restaurants offer "marende" between 10:00 & 3:00. Marende is a lunch special and usually consists of several choices. The servings are usually substantial and cost about 30-40 Kuna (\$6-\$8). What a way to get introduced to Croatian (and local) foods! Check out the Gaffe in Old Town, Otto's and Tobaks in the Grug. The Sarma is delicious. While on the topic of eating, there are small bakeries (Pekaras) on every corner... excellent breads and buruks (pastry stuffed with cheese or sausage)... try one.

Food is reasonably priced... the cheeses and meats are excellent!

## **Travel**

We found all of Croatia to be stunningly beautiful, and especially along the Dalmatian coast. The Croatian people also view their country as beautiful. They really enjoy talking about the different opportunities their country offers to visitors and are very pleased when one can say that they have visited places within Croatia. So... travel within Croatia as much as possible. There is much beauty to see and unique places to visit. Share your travel experiences with your Croatian friends.

Dubrovnik offers many walking / hiking trails that are so very scenic: the promenade leading to Lapad bay, the walk around Babin Kuk, the hike up Petka Mountain, the hike up the Srd to the Imperial fort, and the walk from Old Town to the Belvedere Hotel. In fact, everywhere you walk is an experience. The people in Dubrovnik are somewhat reluctant to introduce themselves to you, so you need to take

the initiative. I expect that this is due to the fact that so many tourists come to Dubrovnik. But the Fulbrighter is different... we are there to spend a few months. Once that is known, the locals open up and you could not find a more convivial group of people. They love to talk about their country and want hear about the US.

Explore everywhere in your host city and country. I learned a lot travelling everywhere IN Croatia, instead of just rushing around in Europa because I happen to be over here. It was rewarding and also led to meeting more people (like on the bus or ferry) and to more cultural awareness.

The culture in Dubrovnik is probably different than in other parts of Croatia, and also changes throughout the year. In August, when the town was flooded with tourists, the locals seemed to be very different people than they were in December, when the local people seem to reclaim the city as their own. The tourist season in Dubrovnik does not feel particularly authentic, particularly around the Old Town - but it is fun. We enjoyed the Christmas season, in particular, when we saw people out with their families more. We really tried to embrace the season - do tourist activities when they were available in August/September, and then do more of the local holiday things in December. The city kind of shuts down in November, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. We were fortunate that the weather was good, so spent our November break traveling in BiH and Turkey.

Dubrovnik is a tourist town and many activities are tailored toward tourists. Take advantage of those events. There are many musical events, plays, dances, and etcetera. Many of the events reflect local history. Being on the Adriatic, many people fish (at night) and bring their catch to the Market down at the Grug. Fresh fish & vegetable can be found there each morning. We did a lot of walking in and around Dubrovnik.

When I traveled, I stayed most in sobes (rooms). They are plentiful in the tourist destinations and much cheaper and better located than hotels, e.g., inside the walled city in Dubrovnik. The guide books recommend them and it is sometimes possible to find them on the hotel booking websites. Don't be afraid to use them. All the ones I stayed in were very clean and well-appointed.

### **Websites and other helpful resources**

Read "The Death of Yugoslavia" by Laura Silver and Allan Little - the basis for the BBC special.

Read about the homeland war as most Americans do not understand all of what has happened in this area over hundreds of years.

The city of Zagreb tourism site is great: <http://www.zagreb-touristinfo.hr/?l=e>

Read "Cafe Europa" by S. Drakulic. Or the novel, "Ministry of pain" by D. Ugreajic

BBC simple phrases in Croatian. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/other/quickfix/croatian.shtml>

There are MANY sites to help you. There is an English language newspaper, which is very limited in scope but is worth the effort: <http://www.croatiantimes.com/> Explore the web for everything from tourists sites to travel schedules (not always in English--work on it). Explore and ask and you will be fine.

I got several travel books about Croatia - all were helpful. Most of the websites I found were out of date or just wrong. There is an English-language online version of the Dubrovnik Times which had some good

information, but it was spotty. One of the best sources of info is just to go to the tourist information center in your town and get the guides for your area - it frequently is the most up-to-date source for info. We found out, as we were leaving, that there's also an English-language group in Dubrovnik who get together a few times a month for fun and conversation - Dubrovnik Foreign Circle. Check them out for informal language classes, nature walks, ballroom dancing, etc.