A brief history of Zagreb

Zagreb’s history dates back to the Roman times when the urban settlement of Andautonia, inhabited the location of modern Ščitarjevo. The name Zagreb first came into existence in 1904 with the founding of the Zagreb bishopric of Kaptol. In 1242, it became a free royal town and in 1851 it had its own Mayor, Janko Kamauf. In 1945, Zagreb was declared the capital of Croatia. Today’s Zagreb has grown out of two medieval settlements that for centuries developed on neighbouring hills. The first written mention of the city dates from 1094, when a diocese was founded on Kaptol, while in 1242, neighbouring Gradec was proclaimed a free and royal city. Both the settlements were surrounded by high walls and towers, remains of which are still preserved. During the Turkish onslaughts on Europe, between the 14th and 18th centuries, Zagreb was an important border fortress. The Baroque reconstruction of the city in the 17th and 18th centuries changed the appearance of the city. The old wooden houses were demolished, opulent palaces, monasteries and churches were built. The many trade fairs, the revenues from landed estates and the offerings of the many craft workshops greatly contributed to the wealth of the city. Affluent aristocratic families, royal officials, church dignitaries and rich traders from the whole of Europe moved into the city. Schools and hospitals were opened, and the manners of European capitals were adopted. The city outgrew its medieval borders and spread to the lowlands. The first parks and country houses were built. Zagreb confirmed its position as the administrative, cultural and economic centre of Croatia.

When Kaptol, Gradec and the surrounding settlements were administratively combined into the integrated city of Zagreb in 1850, the development accelerated still more. The disastrous earthquake of 1880 sparked off the
reconstruction and modernization of many shabby neighbourhoods and buildings. Prestigious public buildings were erected, parks and fountains were made, and transportation and other infrastructures were organized.

In the 19th century the population increased tenfold. The twentieth century brought the Secession style to Zagreb. The city lived in the plenty of a civil society, with firm links with all the central European centres. With an increase in wealth and industry from the 1960s on, the city spread out over the wide plains alongside the Sava River, where a new, contemporary business city has developed, ready for the challenges of the third millennium. Today Zagreb is the highest populated and the biggest city in Croatia.

10 surprising things you didn’t know about Zagreb

Here are ten things you didn’t know about Zagreb – and why you might want to add it to your itinerary.

1. Špica

The Zagrebians adopted the German word "spitze" (tip) to dub their social phenomenon “špica”. In other words, Saturday mornings are not for sleeping in. They’re for getting glam and strutting yourself at the markets and getting a coffee downtown. And everyone does it at the exact same time, between 10:00 and 14:00, just on a couple of streets in the city centre. It’s the hub of Zagreb culture. Forget Friday night – Saturday morning is the time to dress it up, grab your shades, and hit the catwalk of Croatia.

2. The home of dragons

The city is full of reptiles and medieval statues of snakes and dragons abound. Visitors can take walking tours which give the Brothers Grimm a run for their money - rumour has it a cursed snake queen is buried deep down in the tunnels of Zagreb’s medieval mountain fortress, Medvedgrad. Could this be the true Medusa?
3. Open arms

The flag and emblem of Zagreb shows a white-walled town with three towers, and the golden gates wide open. Supposedly this is to symbolize that the city is open to visitors and welcomes outsiders – quite the difference from other European capitals, which sometimes refer to the annual influx of tourists as a ‘German invasion’.

4. Homage to failed relationships

Zagreb has a complicated history – and it doesn’t hide it. In fact, Zagreb has more museums per capita than anywhere else in the world, giving it the nickname of 'the city of museums'.

The city boasts a museum of Croatian architecture, history, ‘Croatian Naive Art’, ethnography, and art – but there’s one museum in particular which steals the spotlight.

The city hosts a truly unique Museum of Broken Relationships, devoted to mementos from relationships of all kinds. It's quirky, it's personal, nostalgic, and somewhat melancholy - but it's one of the hottest attractions in Zagreb.

5. Eat, pepper, love

Croatian cuisine is diverse and exciting – and the Dolac market, affectionately called “the Belly of Zagreb”, is a gastronomical experience to be reckoned with.

In particular, visitors are drawn to a traditional aromatic biscuit known as the paprenjak. Hard name; amazing taste. The cookie, once made by the
women of old Zagreb, is an unusual combination of honey, walnuts, and pepper – a reminder of Zagreb’s unique contrasts.

The licitar is another popular biscuit of days gone by, colourfully adorned and shaped like a heart. Tradition dictates that the biscuit be given as a symbol of love and affection on special occasions. That’s Romance, Zagreb style.

6. Cats and classical music

Croatia has a thing about cats. The cute creatures are everywhere, dozing in sunbeams and begging for scraps from cooing tourists. Gorščica is no exception. But instead of a busy restaurant, this mountain house retreat offers a place to cuddle with cats in peace and quiet.

Gorščica is a cottage on a hiking path up in the mountains of Medvednica above Zagreb, and the food and drinks are another attraction to the area - but it’s definitely off the beaten track. The staff also plays only classical music. So whether you’re a nature lover or just want a place to relax, Zagreb has got it. It's zen, Zagreb style.

7. Wonderful Wi-Fi

Many tourists are dependent on GPS - and thus Wi-Fi. But this ancient city, steeped in history, is way ahead of the game when it comes to modern amenities. The city centre has free Wi-Fi, along with many other streets, hotels and cafes throughout the city. In fact, there’s a whole Facebook page offering the passwords for free Wi-Fi in the city. So in Zagreb you’ll never be lost – and you’ll never be without Instagram.
8. Safest public transportation

That's right, Zagreb hosts the world's safest public transportation system, with no passenger injuries in over a century. But there is a catch. We are referring exclusively to Zagreb's old-fashioned funicular. It's the world's shortest street car funicular system, measuring just 66 metres long, and connects Upper Town and Lower Town. And a one-way trip will cost you less than €1. Bargain!

9. Cheap thrills

It can’t be denied, one of the best things about Zagreb - is the prices. The city is bursting with restaurants where prices are nearly 50 percent lower than in Berlin for example - and a beer is 63 percent cheaper in Zagreb.

10. There's a secret tunnel network under the city...

And no-one knows what's down there. Grič, the tunnel that runs through the central part of the city, is now opened to the public, as is the tunnel network under medieval mountain fortress Medvedgrad. The latter is said to be home to a cursed Medusa-like snake queen.
10 places you have to see in Zagreb

1. Croatian National Theatre

In 1895, when the Emperor Franz Joseph I opened Zagreb’s baroque temple of the dramatic art with the sound of a silver hammer, that moment truly proved to be an exceptional event not only for the Croatian actors of the time, but also for the city’s inhabitants. More than one century later, the classy feel that locals and city guests sense when standing in front of this neo-baroque building and its gorgeous interior is wonderfully preserved.

2. Ban Jelačić Square

Central focus of modern Zagreb is Ban Jelačić Square. It has served as the city’s commercial heart ever since 1641, when it was designated as a place where fairs could be held. Most of the buildings around the square date from 19th century, and display a variety of architectural styles, from Biedermaier to Art Nouveau and Post-modernism.

3. The Cathedral

Characterized by its soaring twin towers, the Cathedral of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is one of Zagreb’s defining symbols. Although it is a largely Neo-Gothic structure dating from the late 19th century, its origins are much older. The Zagreb bishopric was established in 1094, and construction of the cathedral started soon afterwards. An early Gothic sanctuary with polygonal apse was added at the end of the 13th century, while the nave was modified and heightened during the 14th and 15th centuries. The cathedral dominating the Zagreb skyline with 105-metre-high towers.
4. King Tomislav Square

A monument dedicated to Tomislav, Croatia's first king, dominates the square carrying his name. This courageous warrior defended the continental part of Croatia from Hungarian attacks and for the first time united all Croatian lands into one country. Tomislav successfully sought papal recognition of his realm, and was crowned as king in the year 925. The Main Railway Station is positioned on this Square and travellers coming out of the railway station are confronted with one the most beautiful views in Zagreb, which takes in the statue of King Tomislav, the Art Pavilion, the cathedral’s spires and the green slopes of Mount Medvednica in the distance. Marking the northern end of King Tomislav Square is the Art Pavilion, originally built to serve as the Croatian Pavilion at the Budapest Millennial Exhibition of 1896.

On this square is also Hotel Esplanade which is close to the main railway station and was built in very short time in 1925. The original purpose of the hotel was to provide top-notch accommodation for passengers on the Orient Express, the luxurious service linking Paris and Istanbul and which used Zagreb as one of the stops.

5. Maksimir Park

Main attraction in the eastern part of the city is Maksimir Park, a leafy oasis of greenery first opened as a public promenade by Bishop Maksimilijan Vrhovac in 1794. It was Vrhovac who arranged for the existing oak woods and meadows to be transformed into gardens in the French style. The resulting park was named Maksimir
(„mir“ being Croatian for peace) in honour of its founder. Occupying one corner of the park, Zagreb Zoo has grown considerably since the early 20th century, when it opened to the public with a modest collection of three foxes and three owls. Today it is home to 275 animal species, and occupies a 7 – hectare area of beautifully laid – out flowerbeds and shrubs.

6. Tkalčićeva Street

Only a few steps away from the main city square, the downtown bustle disappears as if by magic. If you want to experience Zagreb at its most relaxed, you should head to Tkalčićeva Street, lined with cafés, bars and restaurants a beloved meeting place of the citizens of Zagreb and any visitor just passing through. Here it is as if time has stood still. What used to be a stream called Medveščak was converted into a street; and these days a different kind of change is taking place in this locality. Glimpses of ramshackle old houses unchanged for decades peek through the colourful parasols of the many café terraces, brash new businesses and galleries stand beside age – old establishments. One thing hasn’t changed, though: the statue of Marija Jurić Zagorka, the popular writer and faithful chronicler of Zagreb, who stands halfway down, still observing the constant to-and-fro of her fellow citizens. Whether it’s a run-of-the-mill modern-day business, or a specialist boutique displaying old customs and crafts, galleries ad little shops gives Tkalčićeva a nostalgic atmosphere – it feels as if it has been here forever.

7. St. Mark’s Square

St. Mark’s Square is where the present is intertwined with the future. Although relatively small, St. Mark’s accommodates important landmarks and is the most commonly mentioned address for at least two reasons. The symbol of the square, and the building it is named after, is the 13th-century Church of St. Mark’s. The multicoloured tiles on the left side of its roof from the coast of arms of Croatia, Dalmatia and Slavonia. The oldest preserved coat of arms, that of Zagreb, is carved into the stone of the outer north-western church wall, and specifies the year of 1499. Legend has it that this was where the leader of the Croatian peasants’
revolution, Matija Gubec, was tortured and forced to wear a burning crown. St. Mark’s Square is another place in the city where legends and reality merge. The Banski Dvori on the western side used to be the residence of the Croatian viceroys. The parliament building on the eastern side is still the seat of the Croatian Parliament. More than anywhere else in the Zagreb, St Mark’s is where historical venues serve modern purposes. But this is not all that you will find around ST Mark’s Square. You will be hard pressed to find a single local family album without a picture of a newly-wed couple standing in this square after taking their marital vows at the nearby City Hall.

8. Mirogoj Cemetery

Mirogoj is not just a final resting place and an architectural treasure – it is also a chronicle of the history of this country. Many who have made their mark over the centuries – artists, politicians and sportsmen – reside here: writer Tin Ujević, political leaders Stjepan Radić and Franjo Tuđman, the first president of Croatia as an independent nation, and basketball legend Dražen Petrović, who died in a car accident at 28, whose grave is one of the most visited. When it opened in 1876, Mirogoj was set in four main sections reflecting the city’s religious mix: Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Jewish. Mirogoj is a veritable museum of architecture and sculpture, with pieces by Ivan Meštrović and Ivan Rendić, two of the most renowned sculptors of the 20th century. Architect Herman Bollé, also responsible for the Cathedral, gave Mirogoj its distinct appearance by designing its monumental arcades, pavilions and domes which offer the ideal exhibition space. Mirogoj may therefore rank among the most beautiful cemeteries in Europe.

9. Jarun Lake

On weekends and even on workdays, after the office, school or college, Jarun is the place to go for rest and recreation. It was built and opened in 1987, when Zagreb hosted the World Student Games. Walking paths, lakes with boating facilities, numerous restaurants and beach cafés, are comprise the many attractions which
bring people to the Jarun Centre for all kinds of reasons. Among the lush greenery, close to the clear water of the lakes and beaches which fill on hot summer days, there are also cycling paths, jogging tracks, a mini – golf course. The lake itself contains one of the best rowing lane sin Europe and has been used for international competitions.

10. The Croatian State Archives

Marulić Square is dominated by the former National and University Library, today home to the Croatian State Archives. Designed by architect Rudolf Lubynski in 1913, the building is by far the most beautiful example of Croatian Art Nouveau. Every detail, from the decorative elements on the facade to the reading lamps on the desk, was meticulously designed by the leading artists of the day. The building is rich in symbolism, with rooftop groups of globe-bearing owls pointing to the library's educational purpose. Similarly, allegories of science and the book trade adorn the facade.
Zagreb á table

In Zagreb the hungry visitor is about to be spoiled when ambience or menus are concerned – you can find a place for every occasion, craving, mood and time of day. In town and just outside it, you can also find many restaurants where you’ll hear the pleasant local sounds of the tamburiza or a tinkling piano in the background. Cottage cheese and cream, štruklji, turkey with pasta, Dalmatian paštica stew of marinated beef, kulen spicy sausage from Slavonia or Mediterranean specialities created with fresh seafood straight from the Adriatic – these are only a few of the many options available from across Croatia.

Forget genetically modified products and indulge your taste buds with the taste of home-cooked food, something you may have forgotten back home. On one occasion it might be a quaint rustic restaurant with a casual atmosphere, carved wooden tables, decorative hearts and wild flowers. Another time, your choice might be the lavish atmosphere of an international restaurant worthy of any global metropolis. Or perhaps you will fancy an exotic menu from overseas. If you are still undecided, one tip might be to go for fresh and healthy fish from the Adriatic, prepared in the simple but delicious Mediterranean way. At a reception, a business lunch or one of those rare occasions when you find time to yourself, you will taste the rich gastronomic choice Zagreb has to offer and discover many pleasant surprises.
Zagreb after dark

For a city of its size, Zagreb has always offered more for bar hoppers, party people and concertgoers than should otherwise be expected. Starting at the main square, Ban Josip Jelačić is lined with grand terrace café s best suited to a mid–morning coffee – or early–evening aperitif. Nearby, is the pedestrianised zone around the flower – market square of Preradovićeva, and adjoining Gajeva and Bogovićeva. Here also are terrace café s ideal for a post – shop drink but in between have sprung up buzzing little lounge bars one after the other, some with a regular DJ programme and two live jazz bars of excellent standard. Walk back across the main square to Tkalčićeva, and you’re in the city’s main bar hub for the last 25 years. Lounge bars, cocktail bars, bars specialising in fruit brandies, bars purveying beer brewed on site, bars of every stripe are dotted along this wonderfully tumbledown street.