

The 13th-century St Mark's Church is one of many sites where performers re-enact days of yore as part of the tourism board's Zagreb Time Machine, staged yearly from April to October



ZAGREB, WHERE EVERY DAY IS CHRISTMAS



City streets are often transformed into open-air stages



Ban Jelacic Square

PHOTOS ZAGREB TOURIST BOARD & (LEFT) KRISTIJAN UNSPASH

A city that rewards those who explore it on foot. Zagreb is a cultural hub that truly enchants.

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI



Zagreb Cathedral is also Croatia's tallest building



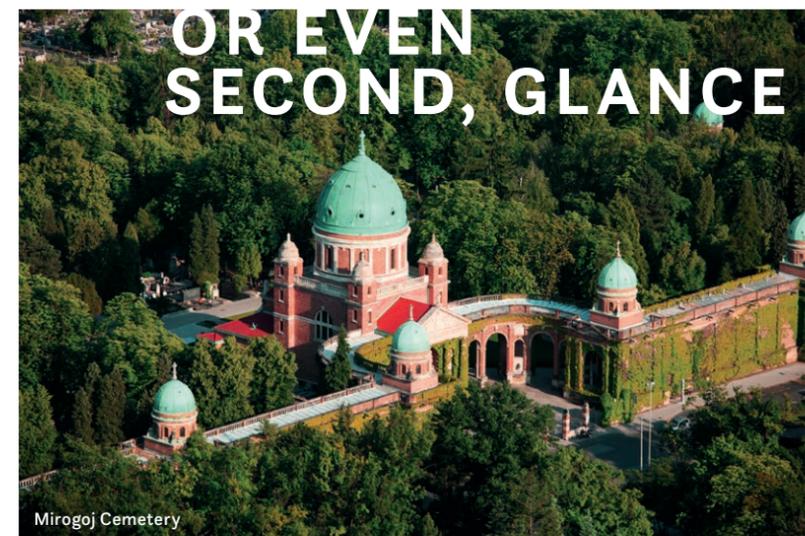
(clockwise, from left) Zagreb's city streets have a way of dialling up the charm; The Music Pavilion at Zrinjevac Park, which hosts numerous festivals



The capital is distinguished by its 18th- and 19th-century Austro-Hungarian architecture

ZAGREB IS ONE OF THOSE COMPACT EUROPEAN CAPITALS THAT IS CRAMMED WITH MORE CULTURE AND GREENERY THAN IS VISIBLE AT FIRST.

OR EVEN SECOND, GLANCE



Mirogoj Cemetery

TRAVEL

It is the end of a long day exploring the old town in Zagreb. I am standing in Ban Jelacic Square, watching the sun begin its descent in the distance, painting the skies a palette of soft pinks and purples. The scene is one of serenity, without any of the drama that usually accompanies colourful sunsets. But then, Zagreb does chill and charm much better than it does shock and awe. It is one of those compact European capitals that is crammed with more culture and greenery than is visible at first, or even second, glance.

The street market in the square, the city's bustling commercial centre since 1641, is slowly winding down. Sleek blue trams rule the road in this part of town where cars are barred, even as pedestrians deftly weave their way in between them. Earlier in the afternoon, I had spent time around this area — sampling the local soparnik pastry of Swiss chard and onion; shopping for fragrant soaps made of lavender from the fields dotting the surrounding countryside; sipping coffee and watching the world go by at a roadside cafe on one of the narrow lanes branching out in all directions.

I start walking aimlessly from Ban Jelacic Square, admiring the mishmash of architectural styles of the buildings in this area — Biedermeier, art nouveau, postmodern and then some. Within a few minutes, I arrive at a large park where something exciting is going on; locals have gathered in large numbers, including families with children in tow. It is the Zagreb Food Film Festival, where movies about food are shown on a large screen in the evenings, and dozens of local restaurants, cafes and wine bars have set up stalls, turning Zrinjevac Park into a merry fairground for a few days.

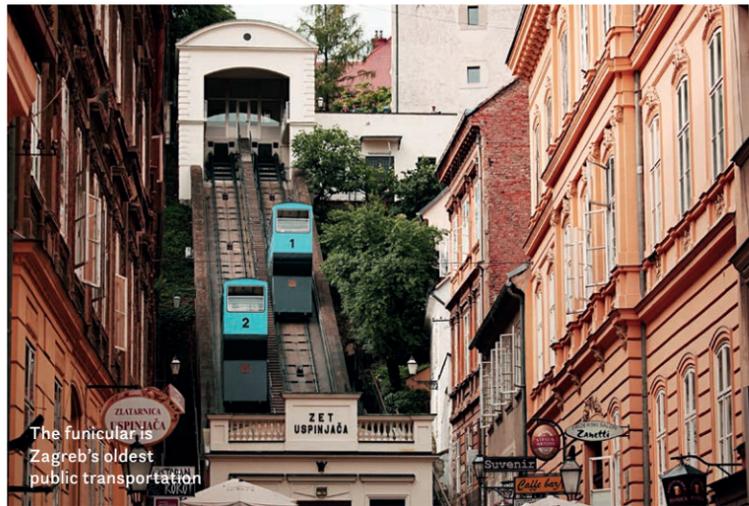
Multicoloured umbrellas hang upside down from an awning somewhere, while

hundreds of people are sprawled out on lounge chairs scattered throughout the lawns. In the middle of it all, in the beautifully lit gazebo, an angel is crooning her heart out. Wait, did I just see an angel? In this 150-year-old gazebo, known as the Music Pavilion, the young musician is standing at just the right angle to the light that makes her seem cherubic on this magical evening. Clearly, every day is Christmas in Zagreb — cakes and carols included.

Zrinjevac Park is just one in a row of eight green spaces on this main road lined with art galleries and museums. After all, in the 19th century, urban planner Milan Lenuci's original design for Zagreb's Lower Town was meant to resemble a horseshoe of parks and promenades. But as enticing as they all are, my favourite open space in Zagreb turned out to be an unexpected discovery — Mirogoj Cemetery. It is telling that the Zagreb Tourist Board website lists this important monument under "Parks". I have read about Mirogoj in guidebooks, but given that it is located away from the centre of town, I was ready to give it a miss. It was only on the insistence of a friend who drove me there one evening that I had a chance to explore this magnificent graveyard.

PHOTOS: ZAGREB TOURIST BOARD & (PAVILION) CHARUKESI RAMADURAI





Of course, not everything I do in Zagreb is as reflective and restful. One morning, I walk the other way from the main square, take the stairs on Splanvica Street to the open-air Dolac Market. At the large piazza close to Zagreb Cathedral, vendors from in and around town have set up stalls under sprawling red umbrellas since early morning, and are doing brisk business. Looking on at the locals, this seems like an enjoyable everyday experience for them to catch up over the

daily news and gossip, even as they bargain and banter, taste and sniff the fresh fruit and vegetables, cheeses and olives on display. The traders can clearly tell that I'm a tourist, but still they offer me juicy apricots from their farm and some homemade cornbread.

From here, I trudge up to Gornji Grad (Upper Town) through Porta di Pietra, or the old Stone Gate that serves as a 13th-century reminder of Zagreb's time as a fortified city. Further up is St Mark's Church, with its sloping roof of coloured tiles that bears the medieval coat of arms and emblems of Croatia and Zagreb respectively. In the Upper Town, located between the hills of Kaptol and Gradec, a maze of cobblestone lanes holds more interesting surprises. Among them is the Museum of Broken Relationships. This quirky spot, which opened in 2010, is an ode to all that was loved and lost — people, places, even possessions — and manages to be funny, sad and poignant all at once.



The city from above



Advent Ice Park in King Tomislav Square

TRAVEL

TO MARKET, TO MARKET

Winter is a great time to visit Zagreb, particularly for its excellent Advent and Christmas Markets — from 30 November to 7 January 2020. The festive market is spread around the city centre, particularly Ban Jelacic Square, European Square and Zrinjevac Park, and filled with ornamental lights, ice skating rinks, music shows, food stalls and artisanal handcraft shops for visitors. Zagreb's Christmas Market was voted the best Christmas Market in Europe for three straight years (2016-2018) in a poll by travel portal European Best Destinations.



Europe's best Christmas Market



(from top) The city from above; Zagreb has a fantastic street art scene, apparent even at Dolac Market

PHOTOS ZAGREB TOURIST BOARD

From a “Bad Memories Eraser” in the gift shop to a collage of refugee stories from Syria, there are myriad expressions of broken hearts. With the galleries showcased with a light hand, however, I come out with a spring in my step and even a smile on my lips. And I am not alone in feeling this way.

Another day, another sunset. This time, it is from the edge of Upper Town, looking down at the expanse of Zagreb's orange roofs and green lungs. From where I am, I can see people on the viewing gallery up in Lotrscak watchtower, also a remnant of the city's fortifications. At noon every day, the city cannon fires from this very tower, making newcomers like me jump out of their skin. But never mind the cannons and watchtowers, I am happy to sit back on one of the benches on the promenade and watch the show in the sky. This time, it is an orange-and-red bouquet, the fading sunlight falling on the tall spires of the cathedral up ahead, casting the whole scene in a burnished golden glow. Perhaps I might have been too hasty in declaring that Zagreb has no flair for drama. **A**