

Unlocking the secrets

ZAGREB: Most tourists head to the Croatian coast, but the capital is also worth a look-in *By Yvonne Gordon*

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WE walk through the cobbled streets. It's dark but we have lanterns and the streets are lit by flickering gas lamps. We're following a young woman being led away by the nightwatchman – she has just been accused of witchcraft. Suddenly there's a sound of horses approaching. A man in a red cloak on a white horse gallops past and rescues the girl from her captors.

It sounds like a dream, but we are on the Secrets Of Gric tour in Zagreb, Croatia, learning the legends and mysteries of Gric, or Gradec, the medieval part of the city. The tour is based on the novel *Witch Of Gric*, with theatrical performances played out under the moonlight.

However, I feel like I have been on a 'secrets of Zagreb' tour for the last few days – unlocking the secrets of the Croatian capital itself. On the way from the airport, the taxi driver shares the first gem – that everybody goes to the city centre for coffee, every day. It's one of the rituals. 'Even during work,' he says. I decide to head to the main square to experience it, expecting a lot of touristy outdoor cafés, but when I get to Ban Jelacic Square, I only see two, so I park myself in one, order a coffee and watch the world go past. The square is busy, with bright blue trams coming and going.

Admiring the architecture, I realise that Zagreb itself has been nearly kept secret, as so much tourism in Croatia focuses



on the coast. With its grand boulevards, parks and 19th century architecture (Zagreb was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire until 1918) and its medieval city, there's plenty to see but it's not full of tourists. The city escaped major damage during the 1991-1995 Croatian War of Independence (although there was some loss of life) and now, like the rest of the country, it's getting ready to join the EU in 2013.

Looking around, most shop signs are in Croatian. On a side street, an old-fashioned-looking travel agent is next to a camera shop, a bank and then a designer handbag shop. It's a welcome respite from the H&M/Zara/Mango combination that dominates many European city centres, and there are lots of local designers.

I join a walking tour which starts in the Lower Town, strolling the seven parks and tree-lined boulevards of the

Green Horseshoe, passing the elegant Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the neo-baroque Croatian National Theatre.

Benches are full of people relaxing in the heat. Hela, our guide, says people live outdoors. 'Whenever we have free time, we are on the street, having a coffee. People don't plan, they just walk, meet friends and stay out,' she says.

As we near the city centre, I soon discover the coffee culture secret – that it's on the terraces in the pedestrianised side streets where the real café action is (rather than the main square), with rows and rows of outdoor cafés.

We walk to Dolac open-air food market, where fruit and vegetables are piled high under red parasols and noisy traders and shoppers haggle over prices. Here on Saturdays from noon, the ritual for the locals is špica – where they dress up to show off,

visit the market and, of course, have a coffee.

Nearby is the Upper Town, Zagreb's historical centre based on two separate towns from the 11th and 13th centuries – Gradec, and Kaptol, home of a huge neo-gothic cathedral. Although you can reach the Upper Town on a tiny funicular, there are also lots of secret entrances, with steps and paths up – go through the archway at 14 Ilica and a courtyard at the back leads to tree-lined steps.

We enter through the Stone Gate – built in the Middle Ages, it's the last remaining of the four city gates. Inside, there's a shrine to Our Lady of the Stone Gate, patron saint of the city.

In the Upper Town, the Zagreb City Museum has some interesting artefacts dating from 750BC, but one of the most fascinating features is the old city walls which lay hidden for hundreds of years and were discovered during renovations of the building in the 1990s.

In the evening, leaving the Upper Town, we pass the 'lantern lighter' and discover another secret of the city – the 267 gas lamps of the Upper Town are lit every evening at sunset by hand. It's a fitting end to a day unlocking some of the secrets of Zagreb.

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