The Former Yugoslavia Welcomes Visitors to Zagreb, Belgrade, and Dubrovnik
A world traveler could not help but feel anguish when a well-known and appreciated region, such as Yugoslavia, tore itself apart with harsh violence. The suffering of people and the partial destruction of world-heritage sites, such as Dubrovnik, involved travelers in the conflict. Fortunately, that era is now behind us and the land once known as Yugoslavia prospers again with tourism.

Prior to the recent period of turmoil, Yugoslavia was an affordable European destination, where a prospective North American traveler could find what many visitors to Europe long for — an immersion in European arts, a luxurious perspective on the vast scope of European history, and unusual natural beauty, especially on the
Adriatic coast.

Zagreb for the arts, Belgrade for history, and Dubrovnik for coastal beauty amounted to a satisfying itinerary. Fortunately, that itinerary is now viable once again.

Yugoslavia was and is a relatively good buy because it has competent facilities for foreign travelers and a hospitable people. The economic stress throughout eastern Europe made the Yugoslavs hungry for hard currency. Tourism was also the first industry to die when the shooting began. All that has changed back to a welcoming invitation today.

As of 2003, Yugoslavia has been divided up into seven countries, including Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo (disputed), Macedonia, Slovenia, Serbia and Montenegro.

**Zagreb for Art**

This second largest city in the former country, after Belgrade, ranks as a cultural capital and as a capital for the new republic of Croatia.

One special native art to see is the primitive peasant painting school of Hlebine. You can visit the Gallery of Naive Art for its moving, intense portraits by Ivan Generalic and his son, Josip, plus the evocative wintescapes by Ivan Lackovic.

Another major local art figure was Ivan Mestrovic, the sculptor of powerful bronzes. His “Fountain of Life” figures adorn the plaza by the Croatian National Theater. Visit his Studio Mestrovic to see where the great sculptor lived and worked.

Looking beyond the national art efforts, the Mimara Museum boasts impressive world-class collections, especially of Chinese ceramics, Dutch Renaissance paintings, and medieval icons.

Regional Croatian folk arts, with emphasis on costumes, are gathered in the Ethnographic Museum, a poignant statement about man’s universal effort to adorn himself.

The annual Zagreb International Folk Festival, in July, is one of the major annual
festivals in Europe. A blossoming of folk arts can be expected in a region with numerous borders, six republics, five nationalities, four religions, three languages, and even two alphabets, Cyrillic and Latin. In retrospect, it is a marvel that such diverse impulses ever came together, even briefly, as the single country of Yugoslavia.

Zagreb is devoted to the arts, especially in its old town area, called Upper Town. See the aluminum statue of the poet A. G. Matos, posed sitting on a park bench. He stares out, as if listening to the voices of the city.

If Matos attuned himself to the cultural richness of earlier eras, he might have selected the magnificent baroque church frescoes of the Jesuit St. Catherine Church a few steps away.

Zagreb has 12 theaters and an all-year musical season. Opera, ballet, plus music and comedy revues, flourish, most notably in the 19th century Croatian National Theater.

The Cathedral St. Stevens boasts one of the world’s best organs, appreciated by the Bach enthusiast.

Considering the culinary arts, be sure to try the grilled meats of the country, such as cevapcici, skewered ground meat made into sausages, and the many excellent local wines, both white and red. A fiery plum brandy aperitif, sljivovica, is ubiquitous. Grilled sweet peppers, numerous fruit juices, tangy soft cheeses, and white bean dishes are some other local favorites.

**Belgrade for History**

Yugoslavia, this “land of the southern Slavs,” was a puzzle for many North Americans. Part western and part eastern, part capitalist and part communist, the area was amorphous, and the operative national motto, “worker self-management,” was difficult to comprehend. Although most of the agriculture was private, most of the industry was public. Small business was encouraged. Major new projects were funded by foreign investors intent on profit. The country was a mosaic or a weave, as some metaphorists suggested, but the design was constantly changing. And, finally,
the weave fell apart entirely.

Belgrade, the new capital of Serbia, rests at the confluence of rivers and of many historical dramas. The rivers are the Sava and Danube. Much of the defining experience of visiting the city is affected by the pleasure of the rivers. The city has also been on the route of more pillaging armies than most other sites in Europe. Sacked time and again, the resilient survivors emerged and continued to use the name that they favored as early as the 9th century, Beograd, the “white city,” meaning the clean city. The people are independent and lively, animated and industrious.

Croatia, Former Yugoslavia, Dubrovnik

Historians have determined that Belgrade was invaded 60 times and destroyed 20 times. The mood of the city is liberal rather than orthodox. Even as recently as World War II, the then-combined country of Yugoslavia lost 1.7 million citizens, fully 13 percent of its population, to the ravages of the conflict. Much of the 1990s fighting in the provinces continued to settle old scores from World War II. Given the repetitive and devastating story of military atrocities, it is fitting that one of the moving monuments in Belgrade is the “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier,” an evocative creation by Ivan Mestrovic. Eight granite women, with the facial features and
costumes of the various republics and territories of the former country, bear the coffin of the soldier. The unity of their common sorrow, despite their ethnic differences, shines in their eyes.

The favorite son in modern times, who managed to steer the country on a non-aligned course, was Josip Broz Tito, whose death in 1980 inspired a lavish monument that is a major pilgrimage site. See Tito’s floriferous tomb. In the current reflective period following the political disintegration, it is instructive to meditate on how Tito managed to keep this southern Slavic nation together and just beyond the firm embrace of the Russians. Be sure to see the Tito Memorial, including his house and offices, celebrating a leader who knew how to govern rather than rule. Tito created national unity without suppressing ethnic pride, a delicate balance. Only in the 1990s did the full force of ethnicity reassert itself. The somewhat artificial boundaries of Yugoslavia, created only after World War I, are now history. The republic of Slovenia was the first to become restless.

In and around Belgrade, you can see the complexity of Yugoslavian life and history. You can peel back 9,000 years of history, layer by layer, and see a dozen major cultures, starting with stone age remnants, long before the Greeks and Romans left their imprint.

The Lepenski Vir archaeological site, a drive east from Belgrade along the Danube, celebrates life along this critical river 7,000 years before Christ. God-figures carved in stone, part man and part fish, were uncovered in the ruins in the 1960s. These remarkable people also had a definite sense of mathematics and laid out their houses as a sector of a circle. Lepenski Vir is one of the first cultures in Europe with substantial artifacts and art objects.

Along the route to Lepenski Vir, you pass two impressive ruins that trace the ebb and flow of Turkish-Serbian conflict along the Danube. The mighty fortress at Smederevo fell to the Turks in the 15th century. The so-called Iron Gates gorge of the Danube, with the commanding garrison at Golubac, was another battlement that warring factions traded back and forth over the centuries until the Turkish grip was finally repulsed in the 19th century. The Danube is particularly scenic in the narrow gorge as the river penetrates the Carpathian Mountains.
The best place within Belgrade to see this story, including some of the early fish/man carved heads from Lepenski Vir, is the National Museum of Serbia, one of the great museums of Europe. The National Museum depicts the many chapters of western culture here. Greek gold masks, Roman glass, and medieval icons are some of the stronger collections.

Another popular outing is a walk in the Kalemegdan Fortress, a complex of parks and gardens built on foundations from the Roman period, but showing also later Turkish elements of design. This is the place at which to savor the Danube at sunset. The Military Museum at Kalemegdan tells the stories of conquests. A Victory sculpture by noted sculptor Ivan Mestrovic stands on a column looking over the river, recalling the heroic sacrifice of lives in World War I.

Belgrade has other outstanding museums. An Ethnographic Museum is full of costumes and ornaments, farm implements and folklore, from the various regions within Serbia.

Among churches, see the Orthodox Cathedral and the last mosque, Bajrakli Dzamija. The new cathedral, consecrated in 1989 to St. Sava, ranks as one of the largest Orthodox churches in existence.

An evening respite from historical immersion is the Skadarlija, a Bohemian district of narrow streets with sophisticated restaurants and outdoor cafes.

Belgrade provides a distinct contrast with Zagreb. The alphabet used in Belgrade is Cyrillic, while Zagreb prefers Latin. Zagreb is more reserved and artistic, while Belgrade is more open and metropolitan, with long shopping-mall streets and a splashy Sava Center conference complex across the river from the old city. Zagreb shows the influence of Austria and Hungary, while Belgrade displays a Byzantine and Turkish legacy. Belgrade is the wealthier, more cosmopolitan, and more outward-looking of the two cities.

**Dubrovnik for Coastal Beauty**

Televised footage of modern gunships blasting away at the artistic treasure, Dubrovnik, now a Croatian city, saddened the hearts of art lovers around the world.
When the conflict of those years was done, the repair work began.

Dubrovnik is the choice location on an unusually salubrious coast, the Adriatic Coast, 1200 miles of sunny, mild-weathered, dry, and rugged terrain. Observers tend to get ecstatic about this coast and begin to talk about it as one of the great coasts of the world, which it is.

The beauty of the coast results from several factors. First, the sea is an unusually deep blue and is rather pure and unpolluted, compared to other Mediterranean locations. Second, indentations along the coast are numerous and inviting. Third, a mountain backdrop gives this sea and coast an etched perspective that lends visual drama.

Dubrovnik has been gifted, historically. In the last thousand years her walls were seldom penetrated by a hostile power, until Napoleon’s troops arrived in 1808. This tale of independence is unlike the story of the rest of the former Yugoslavia. Often referred to as a poem in stone, Dubrovnik was one of the best preserved medieval, walled towns in Europe. This fiercely independent city state, known as Ragusa, had as its motto, “Liberty is worth more than gold.” If one had liberty here, surrounded by the beauty of the blue Adriatic, especially at sunset, what more adornment from mere precious metal would one need?

To get an overview of the city, take the cable car up Srdj Mountain for an elevated perspective. Then walk along the top of the city walls, all around the city. The red tile roofs, church spires, marble-paved main street, and many small streets strain the word picturesque. Cars are banned from the inner city, so human voices and the tread of human feet are the only sounds. Several museums emphasize the heritage, especially the Maritime Museum for the sea power story, the Dominican Monastery for medieval church art, and the Rector’s Palace for stately rooms where the rotating mayors of the town served one-month terms.

Almost every sea or ocean in the world has a city whose partisans consider it “the pearl of,” as Mazatlan is often called “the pearl of the Pacific.” Dubrovnik, as you may have guessed, is the Pearl of the Adriatic.

This pearl glistens most brightly during the annual Dubrovnik Summer Festival,
each July-August, and is a major arts affair. Under the ramparts of this 15th century town, a museum in itself, a visitor might watch Hamlet acted or hear the strains of Beethoven performed.

Much emphasis is made in the former Yugoslavia about all the parks and historical sites that UNESCO has valued as “world heritage sites.” Dubrovnik is one of the sites so designated, and few visitors would contest the decision of the judges in this case.

North and south from Dubrovnik, by road, you can explore this lush coastline and its thousand islands and islets. The “naturist” sunbather gets much attention here, with major resorts and beaches drawing patrons of the total tan.

So relatively affordable is this coast that in the dry, sunny, and warm climate thousands of tourists can vacation in handsome campgrounds, living and cooking in the open air, so as to spend their time, perhaps amidst the pine trees just in back of the beach, fully in communion with the blue Adriatic.

The new cluster of countries descending from the former Yugoslavia will delight a visitor with an interest in European art, history, and natural beauty, all at an affordable price.