

## Christmas in Zagreb

**T**HE GENERAL BRITISH VIEW is that with the exception of Slovenia the former Yugoslavia is infested with bandits and Bolsheviks and not safe to visit; a brief visit to Eastern Slovenia in early November had lent credence to this, so when I boarded a minibus on a dark December night at Ljubljana airport with a bunch of tough looking men in leather jackets I kept a wary eye on my luggage.

Some way into the journey to Zagreb one of these desperados tapped me on the knee and asked in excellent English 'Do you mind if I smoke?' Since the vehicle was so thick with fumes and the windows so iced up that you could not see anything anyway, I thought this a very nice courtesy. He was one of a group of Croatian oil men going home for Christmas from Albania where they had been carrying out exploratory drilling and though I had heard that Croats were wary of outsiders. When the 'bus stopped briefly for a break we all sat at the same table and they offered us drinks and wryly described the conditions they had just left.

This stop incidentally wasted all our driver's furious efforts to overtake everything on the hilly single carriageway road which comes after the still intact stretch of motorway south of Ljubljana. The last hour of this drive was marked by severe and unremitting corrugations in the road so that one went on shaking even after arrival.

Zagreb is a fine city bearing no sign of the conflict which broke up Yugoslavia; the road from the north comes in over the river Sava through a scatter of undistinguished suburbs into an imposing quarter of fine stone

buildings of the last century, some looking distinctly art nouveau until one reaches the colonnades of the central square beneath the ramparts of the old town. In the centre of this now snow covered place stands a great equestrian statue of Jelacic, the Croat hero who led the rising against the Hungarians in 1848.

One cannot escape history in this part of the world; the statue is a statement of Croatian nationalism, but there has never before been a properly independent Croatia, if you discount the puppet state set up by the Nazis in 1941, or come to that, an independent Slovenia, but both have now their own strange banknotes, the former in Tolars (the origin of the word Dollar) the latter in Kunas, flags, armies police, immigration, airlines etc. etc. It must seem strange starting from scratch like that.

So Zagreb presents itself as a picturesque, rather germanic looking capital, a little out of Hans Anderson except that numerous trams glide through its icy streets. We stayed in the outskirts on a road leading to a monastery, which the taxi could not negotiate on Christmas Eve so the next morning we were surprised to find a bus coming down the already crowded road which took us to our tram, Jelacic Square and mass in the baroque cathedral above it.

Here again perhaps we saw the enthusiasm for nationalism in the size and dedication of the congregation at what must have been one of many services on this day, the intensity of the singing to a newly restored organ and the immaculately maintained fabric of the building, new gold leaf everywhere.

One can not forget that the Croats are Catholic and the Serbs Orthodox.

We descended into the city for Christmas lunch at an hotel and that afternoon climbed back into the old city up steep slippery steps leading to a gateway in the walls lit with hundreds of candles guttering in the breeze before a shrine to the virgin surrounded by plaques recording mercies granted her supplicants. Here are fine streets from the 17th and 18th centuries and a tree lined terrace with stone benches commanding a view of the snowy city below as dusk falls. There is hardly a soul about.

On Boxing Day we drove gingerly to the resort town of Samobor to the north west, an even more picturesque place at the end of a wooded valley by a river. Here there is a church with a typical onion shaped spire, a castle on a rocky bluff and a lovely walk up the valley, the low winter sun casting a halo of translucent ice on the tops of the forest trees around us.

We had already discovered a restaurant in the town famous for its fish and named mysteriously Gabreku 1929. Here we had an excellent lunch and encountered more history in two large photographs of Nazi troops in coalscuttle helmets goose stepping down the main street. The inscription around them was in Croat (you are no longer allowed to say Serbo Croat though that is what it still is) which we could not read, though the dates we could: they were 1941 - 1991.

We knew that 1941 was the year of the founding of the short lived puppet state of Croatia by the Germans and we guessed that this had been celebrated by the

restaurant owner and his friends in 1991 at the beginning of the break up of Yugoslavia.

We preferred to ignore these memorials to the wrong side but my son brazenly enquired what they were all about. Yes they were the Ustasa who had 'liberated' Croatia in the war; would he like a hat worn by their current supporters? "Yes please". So with mixed feelings we departed with this thing which if worn elsewhere would probably cause a riot.

Talking of which we later persuaded a member of our party to stop wearing a large black astrakan hat on the grounds that he might be mistaken for a Montenegrin and also get us into trouble. However animal rights campaigners here will be horrified to learn that Zagreb is full of real fur coats.

Zagreb railway station was thronged with passengers, beggars and people who should have been in care, however the train was on time and our Christmas festivities were more or less concluded on the journey back to Ljubljana. The second class being full, we decided to pay the difference, (very little from our recent Hungarian experience) and so filled up a first class carriage, that is, except for one affable Italian and as the enchanting scenery of castles, villages, hills streams and forests rolled by, spread out our Shropshire ham, game pies from Chipping Norton, wine and ale which we of course shared with our new friend.

"It is a funny thing" he said "I thought it was only Italian families that had lunch parties in railway carriages" Then the ticket collector came along and charged us no extra.

Anthony Wood.