

Croatia 1991 – Yugoslavia before the Civil War

In January of 1991 I was invited by the UN to conduct a GIS training class for staff of the “Mediterranean Action Plan” (MAP) at their office in the old city of Split, Croatia. (*at that time, Croatia was an autonomous territory within the country of Yugoslavia*) As I boarded the Delta Airlines flight to Paris at LAX, the captain announced the bombing of Baghdad, Iraq had begun – the start of the Iraq war! On the stopover in Cincinnati, virtually everyone in the Delta Airlines Crown Room lounge was crowded around every available TV, watching as correspondents broadcast the bombing of Baghdad live! An hour later, I boarded the plane to Paris and settled into my comfortable business class seat for a very pleasant flight. The next morning, after an overnight stay in the Novotel Hotel at Charles de Gaulle Airport, I boarded a short Air France flight to Geneva, Switzerland to meet with staff at the UN office to discuss the schedule and training program for the MAP staff in Split. It was decided that one of the UN staff, Ms. Nasserine Azimi, a beautiful lady from Iran, would accompany me to Croatia and introduce me to the MAP staff. That evening, I joined the UN Geneva staff, Jean Pierre, Marcel, and Nasserine for a fantastic dinner of classic Swiss fondue at “Café Romano”. After the fondue, we all shared a traditional Swiss dish of wild rabbit roasted in fragrant corn meal – really delicious!

The next day I had some free time, so rather than taking the plane, I took the train to Zurich, passing through a gorgeous landscape of traditional Swiss farms, each with a huge single wooden structure having a steeply pitched roof that incorporated both the family house above and the barn below. (*very distinctive Swiss alpine style architecture*) After arriving in Zurich, I checked into the 5 star “Schweizerhof Hotel” across the street from the Hauptbahnhof. (*Zurich main railway station*) Light snow began to fall as I sat down to dinner at the “Hackenstube” restaurant in the hotel. While I chose a traditional Wiener Schnitzel, one of my favorite dishes, a very large man seated at a nearby table ordered a huge, fat joint of meat called “Schweinshaxe” (*knuckle of pork*) and proceeded to devour every bit of it!

The next morning, I had a few hours to explore Zurich before the departure of my flight to Croatia. So, I decided to walk around the old town in the cold wind and light snow. Suddenly, as I approached the shore of Lake Zurich, church bells began to ring out - first from one church, then another, and another, each with their own distinctive sound. It was a lovely way to begin a Sunday morning. On the shoreline was a bronze plaque with a display of the mountains in the distance that I would have seen, had it been a clear day – maybe next time! Back at the hotel, I checked out and took the train to the airport where I boarded a very nice SwissAir flight to Zagreb, Croatia. Once the plane was above the thick clouds hanging over Zurich, the view of the snow-covered Alps was spectacular! We could see rugged snowcapped peaks for over 100 miles – fabulous view!



Zurich, Switzerland



Swiss Alps

Two hours later, we arrived in Zagreb, only to be greeted by a thick, cold, icy haze and -5 degrees C (23 degrees F). But after all, it was the winter season. I had over 5 hours to wait for the flight to Split, so I bought a beer in the airport restaurant/bar where I encountered the problem of “old” currency vs

“new” currency! My “old” 10,000 Dinar note was now equal to one “new” Dinar! (*this situation would eventually require the use of my calculator to make sense of the “real” cost of everything!*) Later, I found out that the rate of inflation in Croatia/Yugoslavia had decreased from more than 2,000% before currency reform to only 120% afterwards! However, there were enormous amounts of old currency still in circulation, so one had to be very vigilant when paying with “old” money and “new” money at the same time – it was weird to say the least!



Old Currency

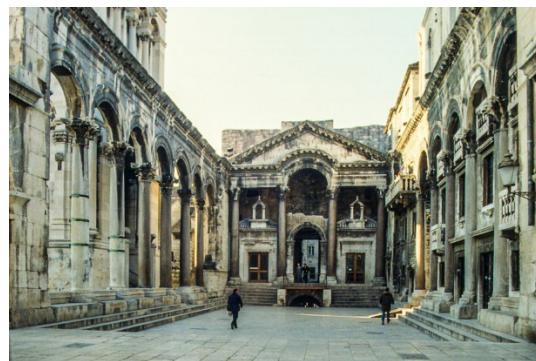


New Currency

The short 45-minute flight to Split on Yugoslav Airlines (JAT) was nothing like the service on SwissAir, but the view of the Adriatic Sea as we approached Split was awesome! Two men from MAP met me at the airport and took me to “Hotel Bellevue”, a nice small hotel located on the waterfront near the old city and the ancient Roman Fortress/Palace that was built in the 2nd century. It was a very impressive stone fortification alive with many layers of civilization, from Roman to Byzantine, Greek, Ottoman, and finally Croatian. At lunchtime, Mr. Pavasovitch invited me to join him at one of his favorite restaurants on the waterfront. He ordered some fresh fish and scampi grilled simply in olive oil, and it was superb! The glass of chilled white wine from Slovenia went very well with the fresh seafood. After the delicious lunch, I walked along the narrow cobble stone streets of the old city that was built “inside” the ancient Roman Fortress/Palace. The many small squares and gardens made it a delightful walk. At one point I stopped for a drink at a small café/bar and a man from Zagreb University joined me. We had a very interesting conversation while lots of young people around us were drinking and smoking heavily. Apparently, there was no minimum age for either consuming alcohol or smoking. (*I came to the conclusion that most everyone in Croatia smoked!*)



Hotel Bellevue



Inside the Old Roman Fortress/Palace

My GIS training class was held in the MAP “computer room”, a small room with bare stone walls at least 2 meters (6.5 feet) thick that were originally built by the Romans centuries ago! Indeed, it was the most unusual and unique “classroom” I had ever experienced! The next day, I had lunch in the Hotel Bellevue

restaurant – a dining room with very dark old wood paneling and heavy deep red drapes, but with crisp white tablecloths! I was seated at a table directly below a massive portrait of Marshal Tito! I was only one of three people in the restaurant, and we were all seated facing Marshal Tito! My order of fresh grilled fish with boiled potatoes, carrots, and spinach was simply prepared in olive oil and parsley – very Mediterranean and delicious! I finished lunch with a lovely Cream Caramel dessert and a cup of Espresso. (*note: great food, lousy atmosphere!*) On another note, my hotel room was quite small, with just two single beds and a desk. Two tall windows overlooked a beautiful courtyard and a view of the Adriatic Sea. Despite the double-paned windows they didn't keep out the noise from the busy street below, mostly from stupid drunk teenagers racing their car engines in the evening! There was no TV in my room, so I wasn't able to keep up with the world news which made me feel very isolated.

The next day, the man who I had met the previous day from Zagreb University, invited me to join him for a beer at the "Luxor Bar", which was literally built into the massive wall of the old Roman Fortress/Palace – a very unique atmosphere! Later in the afternoon, I walked along the waterfront to a point of land where an old, crumbling church stood among a small forest of cedar and pine trees. From that point, there were gorgeous views of the old city, the Roman Fortress/Palace, and the spectacular "Dinaric Mountains" in the background.



Views of Split and the Adriatic Sea

There were also many beautiful small islands shining in the Adriatic Sea – certainly a lovely spot. For dinner that evening, I walked along the waterfront to "Hotel Marjan", a monstrosity of a building, but with a fabulous restaurant. Upon the recommendation of my server, I ordered the signature dish on the menu, "Dalmatian Smoked Ham", which was absolutely delicious! As I enjoyed the fabulous dinner, I kept overhearing disturbing conversations from the tables around me. A lot of people were very worried and expressed the fear of the possibility there would be a civil war! Apparently, at midnight the night before, there had been a deadline when people were supposed to turn over their weapons to the police. The deadline had come and gone without incident; however, I couldn't help noticing a lot of army personnel on the streets that night. (*unfortunately, before the end of the year, Croatia declared independence and broke away from Yugoslavia, and it wasn't long before the tragic civil war began!*) The next morning, following several meetings with the UN staff, I found an English language newspaper, only two days old, and I sat in one of the many outdoor cafes along the waterfront with a cold pint of beer literally "devouring" the news of the Iraq war! (*since there was no TV in my room, the only TV was in the "TV room" downstairs which was always tuned to Russian TV – obviously a holdover from the old Soviet era*) As I sat outside in the warm sunshine, an old lady nearby began softly singing a traditional folk song – very lovely! Elsewhere, people were gathered in small groups, walking along the wide promenade talking amongst themselves - a very "Mediterranean" custom I was told. It was a beautiful scene of "life" with people laughing, shouting, and just being "sociable"! But at the same time, a radio was blaring some loud rock music into the street – however, it didn't seem to bother the people strolling along the promenade. Later in the evening, I watched a lot of young people gathered in small groups

near a bus stop to talk, and perhaps “flirt”! It was fascinating to watch the life on the street as the sun was slowly setting across the Adriatic Sea. Before walking back to the hotel, I stopped at a very nice shop to buy some local Croatian chocolates. As I entered the small shop, a bright, clean place, I was overwhelmed by a mix of very fragrant smells, ranging all the way from smoked meat to fresh flowers! It was a wonderful experience for the senses!



The Promenade



Waterfront

Later, I joined my UN and MAP colleagues for our usual evening GIS training session, after which I walked back to my hotel for dinner again in the “dreary” restaurant. But despite the drab atmosphere and lack of fellow diners, I had a superb Wiener Schnitzel and cold beer! As I was finishing my dinner, the server informed me there would be a very important basketball game broadcast tonight on national TV in the TV room between Split and the national team from Israel. And well, who would want to miss that, despite not understanding a word of the commentary! But the spirit and excitement of the small group of fans in the TV room made it a memorable event, none-the-less! Later that night, after the game, which went in favor of Israel, I tried to make a phone call to Esri which had to be “booked” with the hotel operator. When he rang me back, I found myself talking to a lady at Southern California Edison Company! Needless to say, she was pretty surprised to learn that I was calling from Yugoslavia! The next time the hotel operator tried to make the connection, all he could say was “there must be something wrong with the machine, and I should try again later”. I wasn’t sure if that meant it was the hotel switchboard or perhaps the automated answering machine at Esri. However, I had no choice but to try again the next day. On another note, although I was conducting the same regular “Introduction to ArcGIS” class I had done countless times in the past, this class was different in that 90% of the lectures and computer exercises had to come from my “memory”, since the training materials had still not arrived! *(the training class was judged to be a success, though it wasn’t without a great deal of stress and anxiety on my part, but none of the students were aware of it, thankfully!)*

The next morning, I joined Nasserine for breakfast in the hotel and we discussed the status of the UN training mission in Croatia, as well as future missions. After the conclusion of the training class that morning, we went as a class to a small Turkish restaurant for a traditional dish of “Burec” – a heavy quiche served with fresh yogurt and berries, a delicious combination! After lunch, Nasserine and I went for coffee at a lovely outdoor café on the waterfront and watched people strolling in the late afternoon sun. That evening we joined the UN staff for a meeting and drinks at Hotel Marjan. The discussion around the table was focused on the continuing problems with the deteriorating relationship between Croatia and the Yugoslavian government, which was also the headline of every local newspaper. We enjoyed each other’s company that evening in spite of the growing political crisis in Yugoslavia. *(I found my UN colleagues to be very well informed and very generous, while feeling a sense of helplessness amid the unfolding world events)* Meanwhile, we all had essentially the same “observation” about the Slavic people we had met – a very “sour” exterior upon initially meeting them, but once one got to know them, they would open up and were quite warm and friendly! *(very similar to my experiences in Russia)*



The Harbor in Split



In the old Roman Fortress/Palace

After leaving the Hotel Marjan and my UN friends, I walked along the waterfront promenade to my hotel for dinner, which seemed to be one of the few “reliable” places to eat. My choice of “Chicken Kiev” was excellent, along with a local Croatian beer, though I found the beer from Slovenia to be better.

The following morning, I checked out of the Hotel Bellevue and joined my new friends from MAP, Tonci and Solbadan, along with Nasserine for coffee in the airport café as we waited for the departure of our flights to Zagreb. Both Nasserine’s flight and mine were delayed due to heavy fog in Zagreb. When boarding was finally announced, I was very surprised when Tonci said goodbye and kissed me on both cheeks! It was a Slavic tradition among close friends, and I was touched by his gesture, especially after having known him for less than a week! As it turned out, Nasserine’s flight to Zagreb on Adria Airways departed 20 minutes before my flight on JAT Airlines, even though her flight was “scheduled” to leave 30 minutes after my flight! Then as I boarded the JAT plane, I could see mechanics working on one of the engines – not a very comfortable feeling for sure! As I reached my seat, I became aware of a strong odor of “mothballs”- strange! Later, after arriving in Zagreb, I met up with Nasserine and we took a taxi to the Hotel Dubrovnik in the old town.

The next morning, we shared a delicious breakfast in the hotel’s “Grand Dining Room”, and this time it was a “full” buffet instead of the usual bread, butter, jam and coffee served at the hotel in Split. After breakfast, Boran, the director of Esri-Croatia, picked me up and took me to a busy street market in the old town where lots of people were selling fruit, vegetables, flowers, and local arts and crafts. Then we stopped at an outdoor fish market – a large area of several white marble tables and white tile floors – exceptionally clean, although there was still a strong smell of fish, as one might expect. Boran found another part of the outdoor market where some old ladies were selling beautiful handicrafts. He bought a small hand carved wooden toy set of tea table and chairs for his young daughter. The set was painted in traditional Croatian colors and design - beautiful! I couldn’t help but notice that most of the older women wore traditional long black dresses, black stockings, black scarves, and heavy black shoes! Apparently, it was typical of small rural villages in the surrounding countryside, and I had to wonder if it was a holdover from the time when the Turkish Ottoman empire ruled the region.



Street Market in Zagreb

Before leaving the market, Boran discovered a small stall where a young girl was selling some gorgeous old traditional costumes from northern Croatia – lots of bangles, beads, and beautiful, intricate embroidery. I took a photo of one of the dresses while Boran videotaped us with his brand-new Sony Camcorder! Finally, as we were leaving the market, I bought a lovely, embroidered blouse for Leslie, after a bit of “bargaining”. Having purchased a piece of traditional Croatia folk art, Boran led me to the central cathedral, a very prominent building with two tall spires in the classic Gothic style. As we entered the ancient cathedral, a solemn mass was in progress. The Cardinal was conducting an intense prayer for peace in the Gulf War!



From the cathedral, we walked down to “Republic of Croatia Square”, the largest in the city and surrounded by several historic museums. Then we drove north out of the city toward the Medvednica Mountain, also known as “Bear Mountain”. The route took us up a long winding road through thick forests of pine trees and we began to see much more snow alongside the road as the heavy clouds started to close in on us. Finally, we arrived at the summit of the mountain, which was completely shrouded in thick fog! The trees were covered in pure white “hoarfrost” from the very cold air that was well below zero degrees! And when the wind began to blow, a flurry of soft ice crystals drifted down from the trees, looking much like a snowfall – it was a beautiful and timeless moment! From the summit, we walked to a ski area where we saw no skiers – while a brutal, fierce wind struck us down to the bone! By the time we had walked back down to the hotel café, we were more than ready for a hot cup of espresso, which tasted fantastic along with a warm slice of apple strudel! After having warmed up and recovered from our encounter with the ferocious bitter cold wind, we drove back to Zagreb, passing through a small village that had a tiny church whose roof was covered with a lovely roof of dark blue tile and bright yellow stripes – very striking and unusual!

Once back in Zagreb, we spent 3 hours working in Boran’s office before going to a local pizza parlor for dinner, where Boran ordered 3 pizzas for us. Both Boran and his brother Andrej finished their pizzas, but it was too much for me! Meanwhile, we found ourselves sitting virtually on top of a huge loudspeaker. So, all through dinner, we were “vibrated” to the beat of heavy metal music! After dinner, I walked back to my hotel on the cold, foggy night.

The next day, Boran and I visited a few Esri user sites, including the Geography Department at Zagreb University where they had just one PC! The staff also showed us a crawl space where old electrical calculators were being stored. Then the head of the department offered us coffee in the university “Kantina”, a small room for “professors only”. Later, we visited two men at the national television company where the older man, Mr. Kovac, had spent an entire year entering over 12,000 points of elevation data by hand into a computer program that calculated the area visible from each TV tower. The output was a “printout” which Mr. Kovac then used to mark the locations on a series of 250 map sheets by hand! (*this was the type of work I could only imagine being done by Soviet prisoners in*

Siberia!) I would not have believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes! While we were visiting Zagreb University, I found out the Yugoslavian government was planning to “devalue” the Dinar by 50% at the end of the week! So, I began wondering if I would be able to exchange my leftover Dinars (\$60) for foreign currency. As it turned out, there was no problem, as long as I showed the required paperwork that I had “legally” exchanged my American dollars into Dinars upon arriving in the country – fair enough I suppose.

By this time, it was a big rush to the airport to check-in for the 2:40pm flight to Zurich on SwissAir. Meanwhile, light snow began falling in Zagreb. I had but a brief moment to say goodbye to Boran and thank him for his generous hospitality before I boarded the flight. Once I was seated in my business class seat, the inflight service was impeccable, in strong contrast to the service I had experienced aboard Yugoslav JAT Airlines! As the plane climbed above the thick, dark clouds, the view of the snow-covered Austrian Alps became a dominant feature on the horizon, shining brightly under the afternoon sun – spectacular! As we landed in Zurich, once again we encountered heavy, low clouds and light snow falling on the city – a rather depressing scene! At this point, I decided to proceed on to Frankfurt rather than stay overnight in Zurich, even though Bob Dylan was doing a concert that night in Zurich. (*Bob had turned 50 that year, which made many of us “feel” a bit older!*) The Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt was definitely not crowded – I was only 1 of 2 passengers in coach since most of the plane had been configured for business class, which were basically the same seats, just separated by a curtain that could be moved to designate the classes of service. However, the inflight service was great in coach! Upon arrival in Frankfurt, immigration and customs procedures were very expedient. (*one must remember this was well before the European Union*) From the arrivals hall, I headed to the Sheraton Frankfurt Airport Hotel, one of my favorite hotels in the world! Hotel security was very tight, a major concern given the ongoing war in Iraq.

As I was checking in, the front desk noticed my Sheraton Platinum status and quickly upgraded me to an executive suite on the top floor at no charge. (*one of the amenities of frequent travel*) The porter brought my bags to the room, and at the same time, another one arrived with a bottle of champagne and a large plate of cheese, fruit, and sweets compliments of the hotel general manager! That evening, I called the Esri office and found out my GIS seminar in Tunisia had been postponed until April next year. Then I called my dear friend Jiggy in London to confirm the plans for our “annual” canal boat trip in June – a vacation I always look forward to after the Esri International User Conference. Then I spent the rest of the evening in the hotel’s “Maxwell’s Bar” with a cold liter of Warsteiner beer as I watched the “clientele” seated at the bar, many of whom were very attractive women “nursing” their drinks and clearly waiting to meet men. (*I couldn’t help noticing that they were “well acquainted” with the bartenders!*) As I watched the bar scene unfold, it seemed clear the “ladies of the night” had their eye on prospective “clients”, of which I was pretty sure didn’t include me judging by the large number of “suits” seated at the bar! It wasn’t long before “liaisons” were established, bar tabs settled, and “pairs” left the bar, headed toward the elevators! As the activity in the bar slowed down, I headed to my room to pack my bags and retire for the night.

The next morning, I checked out of the hotel and checked in for the Delta Airlines flight to Cincinnati and on to Los Angeles. After a half hour in the airport business class lounge where I had an espresso coffee and a Danish pastry, I boarded the flight and settled into my comfortable business class seat. During the 9-hour flight to Cincinnati, the inflight service was exceptional. Lunch began with a chilled glass of champagne and an assortment of warm nuts, followed by a fresh green salad topped with marinated prawns. For the main dish I chose the “Veal Orlov” – medallions of pan-fried veal in a creamy onion sauce accompanied by buttered spaetzle and sauteed zucchini – really outstanding! The glass of “Ladoucette Pouilly-Fume” complimented the meal very well. Lunch finished with a selection of French pastries, along with a plate of fruit and cheese as well as a glass of Courvoisier. Upon arrival in Cincinnati, I spent an hour in the Delta Airlines Crown Room sampling a couple of local craft beers and a

small bowl of the famous “Cincinnati Chili”, which is unique in that it’s served on top of spaghetti! And though it may sound a bit strange, it was delicious! Finally, I boarded the Delta flight to Los Angeles to conclude the trip, with plenty of time to prepare for my next trip to London, India, Singapore, and Tokyo!

Photos of Split, Croatia



