Despite its proximity to Zagreb, the bucolic region of Hrvatsko Zagorje in the country’s north receives few tourists even at the height of the summer season. This is especially surprising given that it is blissfully crowd-free (slightly less so on weekends, when day-tripping families from Zagreb storm the area), and delightful villages, medieval castles and thermal springs speckle its green rolling hills. These leafy landscapes with Austrian-influenced food and architecture (and the same prices year-round) present a nice alternative to the busy Mediterranean south and offer a good escape from the summer heat.

The Zagorje region (as it’s commonly known) begins north of Mt Medvednica, near Zagreb, and extends west to the Slovenian border, and as far north as Varaždin, the area’s largest city. With its surface largely covered with forests – mostly beech, oak, chestnut and fir – this agricultural zone also features endless vineyards, gardens, orchards, and corn and wheat fields.

Whether you want to feast on hearty Zagorje cuisine at rustic restaurants, dip into the hot springs at Varaždinske or Krapinske Toplice, get a taster of village life at Staro Selo Museum in Kumrovec or tour ancient castles, you’re in for an offbeat treat.

Many of the region’s inhabitants speak a local dialect called Kajkavski, named after their word for ‘what?’ (*kaj?*) After Croatian or Kajkavski, the second language is likely to be German; few speak English and those who do will mostly be from younger generations. Although the cities and attractions are linked to Zagreb by bus and train, the connections are sporadic so it helps to have your own wheels to fully appreciate the area. Renting a car for a day or two and setting off along its twisting country roads is the best way to take in Zagorje’s rustic charms.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Admiring the immaculately preserved baroque architecture of *Varaždin* (opposite)
- Experiencing the life of Croatian nobility at *Trakošćan Castle* (p102)
- Getting an insight into traditional village life at *Staro Selo Museum* (p104) in Kumrovec
- Sampling Croatian culinary specialities at *Vuglec Breg* (p103) near Krapinske Toplice
- Learning about our Neanderthal ancestors at the *Museum of Evolution* (p103) in Krapina
- Catching the international *Tabor Film Festival* (p104) in Veliki Tabor

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VARAŽDIN
042 / pop 49,000

Varaždin, 81km north of Zagreb, is a largely overlooked destination that’s often used as a mere transit point on the way to or from Hungary. However, the town is worth a visit in its own right as its centre is a showcase of scrupulously restored baroque architecture and well-tended gardens and parks. It was once Croatia’s capital and most prosperous city, which explains the extraordinary refinement of its buildings. Topping off the symphony is the gleaming white, turreted Stari Grad (Old City), which contains a city museum.

History
The town of Garestin (now Varaždin) played an important role in Croatia’s history. It first became a local administrative centre in 1181 under King Bela III, and in 1209 it was raised to the status of a free royal borough by King Andrew II, receiving its own seal and coat of arms. The 800-year anniversary of this event will be celebrated in 2009.

When Croatia was under siege by the Turks, Varaždin was the most powerful stronghold and the residence of choice for generals. Once the Ottoman threat receded, Varaždin prospered as the cultural, political and commercial centre of Croatia. Its proximity to northern Europe facilitated the boom of baroque architecture, which flourished in Europe during this period. Top artisans and builders flocked to Varaždin, designing mansions, churches and public buildings.

The town was made the capital of Croatia in 1756, a position it held until a disastrous fire in 1776, when the Croatian ban (viceroy) packed up and moved his administration to Zagreb. The still-thriving town was quickly rebuilt in the baroque style, which is still visible today.

The pleasant town is a centre for textiles, shoes, furniture and agricultural products. It’s also an increasingly popular day-trip destination – its historic core is currently being spruced up, with plans to complete the renovations by 2010.

Orientation
The bus station lies just to the southwest of the town centre, while the train station is to the east, at the opposite end of town. About 1km apart,