



Zagorje

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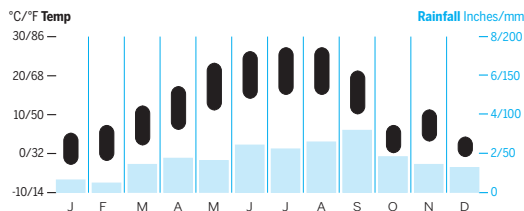
Why Go?

Despite its proximity to Zagreb, the bucolic region of Zagorje in the country's north receives few tourists, even at the height of summer. This is especially surprising given that delightful villages, medieval castles, endless vineyards and thermal springs speckle its 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, offering a good escape from the summer heat. It is blissfully crowd-free, although slightly less so on weekends, when day-tripping families from Zagreb storm the area.

The Zagorje region begins north of Mt Medvednica, near Zagreb, and extends west to the Slovenian border, and as far north as Varaždin, a showcase of baroque architecture. Whether you want to feast on hearty cuisine at rustic restaurants, dip into the hot springs, get a taster of village life or tour ancient castles, you're in for an offbeat treat.

When to Go

Varaždin



Jun Summer weather kicks in, perfect for touring the hills, castles and thermal spas.

Aug Špancirfest arrives in Varaždin with world music, theatre and other fun performances.

Sep Get a dose of folklore and traditional food at Krapina's Festival of Kajkavian Songs.

i Getting There & Around

Although the cities and attractions of Zagorje 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 Zagorje's twisting country roads is the best way to take in its rustic charms. Otherwise, you can book excursions with **Viatica Travel** (www.viatica-travel.hr), an online travel agency that specialises in cultural, spa and adventure tourism in Zagorje. Trips include romantic weekends as well as guided visits to castles, wineries, rural taverns and archaeological sites. Several agencies, such as Funky Zagreb (p51) and Zdenac Života (p63) in Zagreb, also organise day trips.

Language

Many of the region's inhabitants speak a local dialect called Kajkavski, named after *kaj*?, their word for 'what?' After Croatian or Kajkavski, the second language is likely to be German. Few people speak English and those who do will mostly be from younger generations.

Varaždin

 042 / POP 47,055

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. Yet the town is worth a visit in its own right – its centre is a showcase of scrupulously restored baroque architecture and well-tended gardens and parks. It was once Croatia's capital and its 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.

The pedestrian zone of attractive 18th-century buildings centres on Trg Kralja Tomislava, with old streets radiating from this square.

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.

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 1767, a position it held until a disastrous fire in 1776, when the Croatian *ban* (viceroys) 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 town is a centre for textiles, shoes, furniture and agricultural products. It's also an increasingly popular day-trip destination, with a recently spruced-up historic core.

Sights

Varaždin's town centre offers a fine ensemble of baroque buildings, a number of which have been turned into museums. Many of its aristocratic mansions and elegant churches are being restored as part of the town's bid to be included in Unesco's list of World Heritage Sites. Conveniently, most buildings have plaques with architectural and historical explanations in English, German and Croatian.

Town Museum

MUSEUM

(Gradski Muzej; www.gmv.hr; Strossmayerova Šetalište 7; adult/concession 25/15KN; ☉9am-5pm Tue-Fri, to 1pm Sat & Sun) This whitewashed fortress, a gem of medieval defensive architecture housed inside the Stari Grad, is surrounded by a lovingly manicured park. Construction began in the 14th century, with the present Gothic-Renaissance structure dating back to the 16th century, when it was the regional fortification against the Turks. The building was in private hands until 1925; today it's a museum that houses furniture, paintings, watches, ceramics, decorative objects, insignia and weapons amassed over centuries and now divided into 30 exhibition rooms. Far more interesting than the historic collections is the architecture: enter via a drawbridge and wander around to view the archways, courtyards and chapels of this sprawling castle-fortress.

Varaždin Cemetery

CEMETERY

(Hallerova Aleja; ☉7am-9pm May-Sep, to 8pm Mar-Apr, to 5pm Jan-Feb & Nov-Dec) A 10-minute stroll west of the old town takes you to the