

Awed by Croatia

Richard and Bev are Team Eat.Run.See, two former South Africans now living in Vancouver. Follow their insights, experiences, and culinary quirks issue by issue from the countries and trails they visit on their three-year vegan globe-running adventure.

Jaw-dropping natural splendour is your backdrop when running in Plitvice National Park.

Our Croatian adventure was surprising in many ways. We discovered a country with amazing natural beauty, friendly people, many ancient treasures, and boundless opportunities for running.

Over a month, we visited the southern region with the Dalmatian coast and islands, the walled city of Dubrovnik, the town of Split, the central region with the town of Zadar and Plitvice National Park, and the northwestern Istrian Peninsula. Our three favourite trail running experiences were:

MLJET ISLAND

Our running highlight in Croatia was our time on Mljet Island, with its gem, the Mljet National Park. We based ourselves in the village of Polace for eight days of solitude and running bliss. Set against the ruins of an ancient Roman palace, the village is situated within the national park, which makes up almost a third of the island. There are amazing trails, two saltwater lakes, ocean views, a restored monastery on an island within a lake, and historic villages to explore.

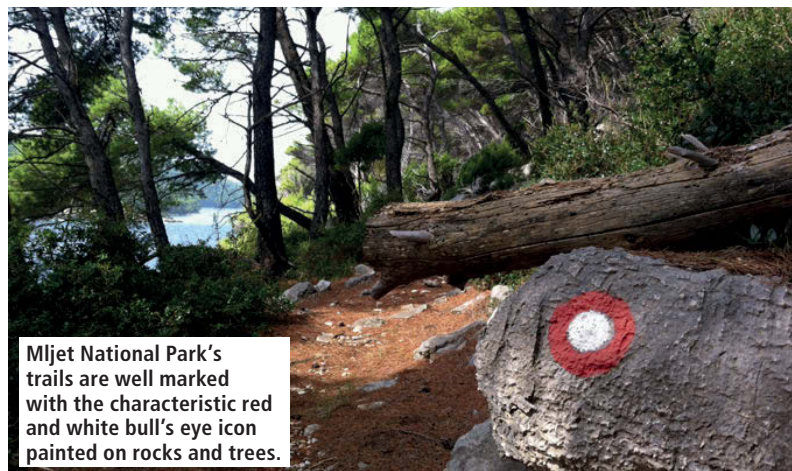
We spent most days running in the

morning to see different parts of the park, and then relaxing around one of the two lakes in the afternoons. Aside from one day of rain, the weather was sunny, warm and humid - still cool enough for running but hot enough for lazing on rocks and swimming in our birthday suits!

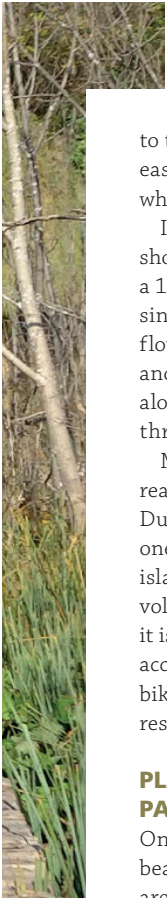
What made the park especially well suited to running is that in addition to the many forest and coastal trails, including some quite technical and steep, there are also lots of paved tracks

with ample views of stunning emerald lakes. These provided some of the best road running we've experienced. The trail and paved road network is readily accessible from Polace.

Exploring the trails in the park was easy and rewarding. Trails were well marked and maintained. There are maps available for purchase at the park entrance, and maps on large signposts around the park. The fact that the park's geography is dominated by the two large lakes, one of which connects



Mljet National Park's trails are well marked with the characteristic red and white bull's eye icon painted on rocks and trees.



to the ocean, makes it fairly easy to remain oriented while on the trails.

In addition to a few shorter runs, we tackled a 17km, gnarly, technical singletrack one, as well as flowing, wide singletrack, and awe-inspiring views along the coastline and through the forest.

Mljet Island is easily reached by ferry from Dubrovnik. Although it is one of the smaller Dalmatian islands, with less tourist volume than its neighbours, it is well serviced with accommodation, car and bike rentals, food stores, and restaurants.

PLITVICE NATIONAL PARK

One of Croatia's most beautiful protected nature areas, and one of the most visited places in the country. The key attraction here is the extensive network of lakes and cascading waterfalls set amidst 300 square kilometres of protected land. We spent a few hours running along the boardwalks and trails in the park, admiring the amazing sights along the way.

We started our run at the main entrance and crossed the first lake by ferry to access the raised boardwalks that allow visitors to walk above and around the waterfalls. These boardwalks are either wooden or metal slats and although a bit

slippery in places, were easy to run on. It was incredible to run with a constant backdrop of waterfalls and stunning greenery. This part was on quite flat and non-technical managed tracks.

There are also a number of hiking trails in the park. We chose to follow the 9km Plitvica Trail, which offered us beautiful singletrack winding up into the hills through the forest, with spectacular brightly-coloured autumn foliage.

After reaching the plateau with a lovely view across the forest, the trail becomes mostly undulating singletrack with soft pine needles underfoot. We took a spur off the track and found ourselves at a terrific viewpoint high above one of the largest waterfalls, with a system of turquoise pools joining to create a magnificent scene from above.

We ended our run by following the footpath around Lake Kozjak from the ferry dock at the far side of the lake. This led us back to our departure point. We ran roughly 25km during this outing, and were self-supported for the day.

Plitvice National Park is easily accessible by rental car or bus from most major centres such as Split and Zagreb. There are accommodation options within and outside the park, but there are limited services in this region, with few restaurants, and one grocery store.

ISTRIA

The Istrian Peninsula is a triangular-shaped land mass in the northwest of Croatia,

with close land connections to Italy and Slovenia. It is quite developed along most of the coastline, thanks to holidaymakers flocking from around Europe, but has much more to offer the trail runner than just great beaches and sunshine! We participated in an organised trail race here in October 2014. The Valamar Trail Race offered four race distances: 13, 21, 53, and 73 kilometres. We ran the 53km and were challenged by the diverse and hilly terrain, and awed by the region's beauty.

Starting and ending in the village of Rabac, the terrain on our race was incredibly varied and quite technical at times. From singletrack through dense (and prickly) forest, to coastal and beach tracks with awesome views over the Adriatic, to farmland pathways, there was always something different to experience. Aside from the heat, the trickiest part of the course

was the rocky limestone surface underfoot in the last third of the race.

We loved the camaraderie and friendliness of the trail running community who came out to support the race. There is a thriving trail running scene in this part of Croatia, with many nature trails traversing the peninsula for casual as well as organised exploration.

Visiting Istria gave us an opportunity to explore a part of Croatia that is totally different from the southern Dalmatian coast. There are gorgeous mountain villages with ancient buildings, rich in history and interesting people. There are also beautiful coastal towns with hidden beaches. Visitors come for the food and drink, with many of its culinary roots from Italy. It is very easy to get around Istria if you have a rental vehicle, and well worth the visit for running, relaxing, and recharging. 🏔️

▲ GOOD TO KNOW

- Croatia is located in Eastern Europe.
- No direct flights from South Africa, but many options to Zagreb, Split, and Dubrovnik, via European hubs.
- South African citizens need a visa to visit Croatia.
- Currency is the Kuna (currently HRK1 = R1.78)
- English is widely spoken but the official language is Croatian, of Slavic heritage.
- April to October is the most popular time to visit.
- Good transportation network by bus, ferry, and rental car.



▲ YOUR RESEARCH STARTS HERE

- trailrunningcroatia.org
- croatia.hr/en-GB/Homepage
- istria-trails.com/en/trails
- np-plitvicka-jezera.hr/en

▲ TRAIL RUNNING RACES

- April [100 Miles of Istria](http://istria100.com/en/) (100m/110km/65km) istria100.com/en/
- June [Hahlici Trail](http://en.hahlicitrail.com) (18km/45km) en.hahlicitrail.com
- June [Plitvice Marathon](http://plitvicki-maraton.com) (16km/42km) plitvicki-maraton.com
- June [Velebit Ultra Trail](http://ow.ly/PxpLb) (67km/27km/14km) ow.ly/PxpLb
- July [Risnjak Trail](http://en.risnjaktrail.com) (16km/29km) en.risnjaktrail.com
- September [Učka Trail](http://en.uckatrail.com) (16km/42km/73km) en.uckatrail.com
- October [Valamar Trail](http://ow.ly/Pxq3P) (13km/21km/42km/53km/73km) ow.ly/Pxq3P

BEV & RICHARD ATTFIELD

Their journey started in Belize, Central America, and has taken them through 27 countries, including South Africa. eatrunsee.com

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