



Croatia

Travels in
Undiscovered
Country

TONY FABIJANČIĆ



PREFACE

I WANTED TO WRITE A TRAVEL BOOK AFTER READING Patrick Leigh Fermor's record of his journey on foot from Holland to Hungary in the 1930s, *A Time of Gifts*. So, in 1996, I headed off on my own arduous walk, through the coastal regions of my father's homeland, Croatia.

I almost didn't go. Jobless, convinced I should act responsibly and find work in Vancouver where my father lived, I was set to make another epic journey across Canada by car. It would be my fifth such journey—the first with my family when we emigrated from Alberta to the Maritimes, then four others in my eleven-year chase of three degrees. The night before leaving my mother's house in Nova Scotia, I turned sleeplessly like one of those roasting chickens in a grocery store. Thousands of kilometres and months of responsibility stretched ahead. True, I'd been inured to responsibility and discipline as long as I could remember, but now the qualities that partly made me who I was seemed antagonistic. Besides, I hadn't taken an extended holiday for years; right after finishing my PhD, when I should have sunk into a period of hedonism, I got my first teaching contract in western

Newfoundland. The following spring, I wanted to relax, feel the sun on my face, and enjoy some of the little money I'd eked out. I wanted to explore my own roots after feeling displaced for so long. A week after that sleepless night, I was tramping down the Adriatic.

Looking back, I suppose the sun and sea drew me to the coast as much as any legitimate claim about my roots there. After all, my father was born in the northern region of Prigorje, and although my family and I took holidays in various resorts over the years, we never stayed longer than a week at a time. But in my mind, Croatia's Adriatic was also part of me—and seemed a richer subject for travel writing than the rest of the country. How wrong I turned out to be.

Driven to return home like a horse to its stable (as my mother put it), my father kept my links to Croatia alive. Growing up in Edmonton, I remember him dragging us to Croatian picnics, playing soccer with the senior teams he coached, and roasting pigs in our suburban backyard. Still, I didn't think of myself as a Croat; Yugoslavia was the "old country" for me, if not for my father. I had no real understanding of the country's history, nor feelings of nationalism. All that changed with the demise of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, when Croatia as an entity became a reality for me. I learned more, watched a dozen news broadcasts a day at the height of the war, and wrote articles defending Croatia's position. I became a Croatian Canadian.

So while my book began as a writing holiday, it also began with cultural undertones. Then during a momentous trip down the Adriatic highway and to the island of Pag, everything began to change. Not only did I confront the material reality of distances and Croatia's summer sun (it was hot! and I knew it would beat me), but when I got to the town of Pag itself and saw what there was to see, I had my first and only epiphany of its kind, intensified by the ancient world around me: the pressing reality about this "bower of bone" that Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called the body. In the very moment when I basked in my freedom, strength and youth, I understood intimately, viscerally, that it would all be taken away.

Instead of being defeated, I found more energy. I wanted to see and do more—to act, not contemplate. A book about the Adriatic coast alone would be incomplete, I realized, because it wouldn't represent Croatia's extraordinary regionality. What's more, I didn't know much

about Prigorje itself, not even about the valley next to the one where my father was born. I wanted to find out more. Thus, I obviated my frailty on the road by aspiring to the whole country's truth, which meant travelling further faster (than my legs would allow).

And so the book grew. My journey eventually took me (by foot, bicycle, tram, bus, car, ferry, and plane) from the nine-hundred-year-old capital, Zagreb, through the peasant regions of Prigorje, Zagorje, and Slavonia, to the Adriatic coast, the frontier territories of Krajina and Herzegovina, and the Istrian peninsula. Although these journeys took place from 1996 to 1999, I've gone further back into Croatia's past, and into my own. I've spent years all told in some parts of the country and only hours (or less) in others. The essays in this book reflect those experiences: on the one hand, unhurried travel ruminations in which I talk about a way of life I know well and from the inside, and on the other, sketches more aptly reflecting a foreigner's perspective. Indeed, I see myself as part native and part outsider simultaneously, which allows me a particular perspective on the country.

Generally, the chapters parallel my travels from north to south, but occasionally I've veered from this format for thematic reasons. For instance, I began with Pag in order to emphasize its symbolic weight in my imagination and to index Croatia's identity as my own "undiscovered country," from which I returned changed forever. Hamlet's contemplation of death as a domain from "whose bourn no traveller returns" is also applicable to Croatia—literally—since over the centuries it was often a site of war and death, a place from where many people, including travellers, never returned. Croatia is also an undiscovered country in a different sense. It's at a propitious moment when the world of peasants, shepherds, and fishermen is dying, irrevocably giving way to the new reality of a modern European state—when its former fabric is unravelling forever. Croatia is more and more undiscovered, in this sense, since its old ways are increasingly disappearing within the rising tableau of the new. It was my purpose, therefore, to document this change by discovering hidden corners of the country about which even Croats seemed uninterested.

I haven't written a nostalgic ethnography, a history book, or a journalistic travel book in which the landscape becomes the occasion for a mainly political and historical documentation, although there is

some of that here. I haven't written about modern Croatia, or about every single region, cultural monument, historical personality, or issue deemed important by the experts. I've emphasized facts of a different order: the evanescent moment on the road that captured, nevertheless, the spirit of the old world still in evidence; the hidden or forgotten "crevices"; the personal instead of the public; and the present still permeated by a vital past.

**There is, in old Croatia,
an undiscovered country
that is passing away,
a world of peasants,
shepherds and fishermen
irrevocably surrendering
before the reality of a
modern European state.**



When Tony Fabijančić travelled to Croatia he was returning to his own undiscovered country. With the tongue of a native but the eyes of an outsider, he journeyed the old country of his father. He sought out the hidden corners where he could hear the earthy stories of country people. With thoughtful portraits, he throws open a personal window into a labyrinthine world of character and identity.

Outside a church in Pag, the author experienced a flash of eternity, an epiphany into his own mortality. Tapping into a new-found strength, he travelled the expanse of Croatia, conducting a personal investigation into its extraordinary regionality while commenting on the complex history of a deeply layered landscape. In fine style, he transports the reader to the Adriatic in the summer: the blast of heat, the smell of dust, the bountiful kitchen gardens, and the impromptu ritual of šljivovica at outdoor tables. Most of all, we are introduced to rural men and women who, along with their hospitality, openly share their views on their lot in the new Croatia.

Written with sensitivity and balance, *Croatia: Travels in Undiscovered Country* is smart, literate travel writing that takes us to the heart of a fascinating land.

Tony Fabijančić was born and raised in Edmonton, Alberta. From an early age he accompanied his father to Croatia where he experienced the lives of its peasants firsthand. He is Associate Professor of Contemporary Literature at the Sir Wilfred Grenfell College campus of Memorial University in Newfoundland. He lives in Corner Brook with his wife and two children.

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