

Go Slow ... in Istria in Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Trieste; transfer San Stefano.
- Day 2/7** Excursions around Istria from San Stefano.
- Day 8** Fly London.

Departs

September / October

Focus

General natural history, culture and a little gastronomy

Grading

A. Easy walks at a gentle pace

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code HRV03)

Highlights:

- Single-centre tour based in the attractive valley of the River Mirna, Croatia
- Eat at local 'konoba' (or 'trattoria') each evening in an area famed for its gastronomy
- Enjoy the first of the wintering wildfowl arriving from the north
- Autumn butterflies may include False Grayling, plus late broods of Heath and Spotted Fritillaries
- Cultural excursions to the tiny "city" of Hum, the Roman arena in Pula, and the church of Hrastovlje, amongst others
- Led by expert naturalist guides



Images from top: Blue Rock Thrush, the city of Hum, Heath Fritillary (David Morris)



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Introduction

Istria represents an extraordinary compendium of natural beauty, history and civilization at the crossroads of Europe stretching back beyond the Romans and into prehistory. Lying just to the south of Trieste in Italy, the triangular peninsula of Istria projects into the warm waters of the Adriatic Sea. Split between Croatia and Slovenia, this delightfully unspoilt region of the Mediterranean brims with historical charm and boasts a rich natural history as well as an acclaimed



Nearby medieval city of Buzet

cuisine. This Go Slow holiday incorporates nature and culture, history and cuisine in a relaxing schedule of local guided walks in breathtaking Karst scenery in the mornings, visits to nearby cultural sites after lunch and delicious Istrian dinners each evening. Large numbers of birds pass through the Northern Adriatic in September and October, abandoning Central Europe for the warmth of the Mediterranean including visible passage of flocks of Chaffinches, Siskins and Skylarks while Robins and Song Thrushes seek to escape the cold in the woods and scrubland. On the coast the first wintering waterfowl will be appearing from further north including good numbers of Black-necked Grebes and Black-throated Divers. Depending on the season, there should still be good numbers of butterflies about, and whilst the flora of the Karst is largely a spring affair, the woods and meadows will be enlivened by the Alpine Cyclamen *Cyclamen purpurascens*, as well as displays of purple Autumn Crocus. Based in the modern San Stefano complex at the thermal baths at Istarska Toplice, you can opt out from the itinerary whenever you wish to go swimming or enjoy a therapeutic massage.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Trieste, transfer San Stefano

We begin our holiday with a direct flight from London Stansted to the historic city of Trieste in Italy. Next, we continue by road, first across the border into Slovenia and then into Croatia. Our base for the week is San Stefano, a comfortable and modern hotel forming part of an older thermal spa, tucked away in the attractive valley of the River Mirna in northern Istria. The nearby medieval city of Buzet is widely known as the 'City of Truffles', as the surrounding woodlands are rich in this

sought-after delicacy! During our stay at San Stefano we will dine out each evening at a local 'konoba' (other than the first evening), where the acclaimed truffles are sure to feature on the menu!

Days 2 – 7

Excursions from San Stefano

We will keep the itinerary for our week flexible, taking into account the weather each day. The grounds of the hotel include a stunning set of limestone cliffs, and we will likely spend our first morning examining the rich habitats close by, including the limestone grassland, rock faces, scrub and riparian oak forest which will be enlivened by the Alpine Cyclamen *Cyclamen purpurascens*. We will be looking for the likes of Alpine Swift, Blue Rock Thrush and Black Redstart, and if the autumn has not been too cold there should still be some butterflies about including the second and third broods of Heath and Spotted Fritillaries and a variety of blues and skippers, as well as scarce autumn butterflies such as the False Grayling, Nettle-tree Butterfly and Reverdin's Blue.



Queen of Spain Fritillary

During our week we will make a couple of visits to the River Mirna-Quieto near Novigrad-Cittanova, where the turnover of migrants is high and there are too many interesting sites to visit in just one morning! The mouth of the river is a European Important Bird Area and, depending upon the tide levels, we can expect to see migrant wildfowl and waders, and perhaps an Osprey. Moving up the river we expect to encounter the first of the autumn's Great Grey Shrikes that winter in

the area, while Cranes and late Hobbies often frequent the open lucerne fields on migration. We will check for Queen of Spain Fritillary, as well as other late summer migrant butterflies which favour the damp, rough ground including Clouded Yellow, as well as Provençal and Lang's Short-tailed Blue, though their numbers vary from year to year.

On another day will visit inner Istria, taking a lovely walk through the countryside where the hay meadows will be re-growing after the summer heat, and we hope that there will already be good numbers of Autumn Lady's-tresses orchids and late broods of butterflies including Mallow Skipper, Eastern Bath White and Berger's Clouded Yellow.

We will also visit a low peak, Mala (or "Little") Učka, which is accessible by road. Here our walk will allow us to take in the late summer flowers in the mountains including the spectacular Amethyst Eryngo (*Eryngium amethystinum*), late broods of autumn butterflies and the chance of rare birds including Golden Eagle and Griffon Vulture, and perhaps some migrating raptors passing through on their way south with smaller birds such as finches, buntings and pipits.

After lunch each day our excursions take on a more cultural air. Being situated so close to the Empire's 3rd city of Aquileia (just north of Venice and destroyed by Attila the Hun in 452 A.D.), Istria represented a rich and important area for the Romans for many centuries. Evidence of Roman occupation abounds, and the most obvious sign of their presence is the vast Roman Arena in Pula-Pola, among the six largest surviving Roman arenas in the world. The hilltop town of Motovun-Montona with its splendid views from the ramparts is also



Pula Roman amphitheatre

well worth a visit, as is the Romanesque church of Hrastovlje with its fabulous frescoes. The tiny walled "city" of Hum will be our destination for another afternoon, said to be the smallest walled city in the world, with its own "loggia" (a Venetian town council building) that comfortably seats about 6! Istria is locally famed for its gastronomy, and October sees the start of the olive harvest in Istria. We plan to visit a producer close to our base to get a first-hand experience of the process, taste the oils and some of the other local specialities and get a feel for one of the pillars that has supported the people of Istria down the ages. Here we will also sample some local native wines including *Malvasia Istriana* and the part that vine played in the appearance of the *Glera* variety used in making Prosecco that has come to dominate world sparkling wine production this century.

Our evenings will be spent in a popular local restaurant where we will enjoy wonderful meals that reflect the long period of Venetian and Italian domination in this area with fresh pasta, gnocchi, truffles and wild boar, with a nod to the best of Balkan cuisine in the form of *čevapčići* sausages and mixed grills...and a glass of delicious local wine!

Day 8

Transfer Trieste, fly London

Our flight from Trieste back to London Stansted usually departs in the late afternoon, giving us



Glossy Ibis

plenty of time to enjoy a little Italian birding on the Adriatic coastline to conclude our holiday. Isola della Cona, at the mouth of the river Isonzo, lies around 12km to the south of Trieste airport. This nature reserve covers a huge area of wetlands, mudflats and shallow seas, and boasts a bird list of 325 species, the longest of any single European reserve! We will spend our final morning "mopping up" some bird species including Glossy Ibis, Great White, Cattle and Little Egret, Avocet, Black-winged

Stilt and a range of waders including Wood Sandpipers and Spotted Redshank. At this time of year wildfowl and waders should be starting to coming through the area in large numbers, and we

should also be seeing the first arrivals of ducks and geese from Siberia including Wigeon, White-fronted Goose and Pintails which winter in increasing numbers around the northern Adriatic. Then, we complete our journey back to the airport in Trieste in time to check-in for our flight home.

Tour grading

Grade A – Easy day walks. We travel by minibus most days. Although the area is hilly, the routes have been carefully chosen by the guides to avoid walking uphill where possible! Throughout each day we expect to walk no further than 3.5 miles in total, all at a gentle pace.

Focus

This is an all-round natural history holiday, focusing on the birds, butterflies (depending on the autumn weather), the limited autumn flora and fantastic scenery of the area. We will also enjoy the rich local history and culture and acclaimed cuisine.

Food & Accommodation Included in the Price

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this tour (lunches on travel days depend on the flight times). We will be staying at San Stefano, a modern addition to the older Istarske Toplice thermal resort, close to Buzet in Istria. All the rooms have en-suite bathrooms, hairdryers and Wi-Fi. The hotel, catering for thermal springs visitors, also has a gym along with several swimming pools and saunas.

We usually enjoy picnic lunches in the field each day, with the odd *konoba* (trattoria) lunch, and in the evenings we will dine in a local *konoba* close to our hotel in order to make the most of the region's acclaimed cuisine. Should you wish to opt out of the itinerary at any point to enjoy a swim, massage (payable locally) or relax in the grounds of the hotel, you are very welcome to do so.

Weather

At this time of year it is beginning to cool down, though temperatures should still feel pleasant reaching the high teens °C during the day. We will hope for dry weather but be prepared for a few shows, though the weather in Istria can vary enormously from place to place and a rain-shadow means heavy rain inland in the mountains often corresponds with bright sunshine on the west coast. We will take advantage of this should it prove necessary!

Flights

For this tour we fly to Trieste from London's Stansted Airport with Ryanair. Whilst we appreciate that Ryanair is not everyone's first choice of carrier, they do have an excellent punctuality and baggage delivery record, and offer the only direct flight to Trieste from the UK which are usually

scheduled for a civilised time of day! All Ryanair flights booked for this holiday include both hand and hold luggage (please mention at the time of booking if you would like, for an additional cost, priority boarding and / or any particular seat which can only be done at the time we purchase the flights for you).

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Croatia. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website.

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