WONDERS OF THE WORLD

PLITVICE LAKES

A dazzling, Technicolor water wonderland

In Croatia, turquoise waterfalls spill from one lake to the next

ADAM HODGE

Throughout the former Yugoslavia's boom years, the country's touristic pride and joy was not its bleached Dalmatian coastline or its historic centres such as Sarajevo and Belgrade. Rather it was a small park in Croatia called Plitvice Lakes, made a national park in 1949, which drew hundreds of thousands of visitors each year to the hinterland of the Dinaric Alps.

During the halcyon days of Balkan tourism in the 1960s and 1970s, the silver screen played a big part in the park's popularity. The vibrant, shifting colours of the lakes and the park's dramatic waterfalls provided a dazzling backdrop to numerous spaghetti westerns of the time. European tourists flocked to what must have looked like a trick of the camera: 16 Technicolor blue terraced lakes connected by tumbling waterfalls.

Approaching the park on State Highway 1, the blue lakes twinkle through the slim apertures of a dense beech forest, which is home to bears, wolves and wildcats. From this distance, the colour of the lakes seems unnatural. At ground level, it's apparent there's no illusion.

Depending on the season and the time of day, the water comes in vivid, cartoonish colours of turquoise, teal, azure and cobalt.

Countless rivers, streams and waterfalls in more than 300 square kilometres feed the 16-lake centrepiece. Underground, in massive chasms, caves and channels, billions of gallons of water churn through the subterranean karst landscape. The water leaches lime from the rock, gushes into the lakes laden with suspended chalk, and then deposits it on abundant mosses. Over hundreds of years, the mosses become encrusted with a layer of travertine, a form of limestone. This travertine forms natural dams in the lakes, which result in thundering waterfalls and burbling cascades.

Plitvice Lakes' water wonderland was recognized by UNESCO, which added it to the list of world heritage sites in 1979. But it wasn't long before disaster struck. The bottom dropped out of the Balkans and the region went economically and politically downhill. Tourism dried up.

In the depth of winter in 1991, the park was again the backdrop for drama, only much grimmer. The Plitvice Lakes Incident, an armed confrontation between Croatian Serbs and the Croatian police over control of the national park, kicked off the Croatian War of Independence. The Lakes became a key strategic location, as they straddled the main road midway from the coast to the Croatian capital of Zagreb.

As the late summer mists rolled back over the lakes in 1995, the Croatian army retook the park as part of Operation Storm, and the fog of war was lifted. Croatia's crown jewel was dusted off and polished. Plitvice Lakes was one of the first areas to be cleared of landmines and restored to the status quo in the aftermath of the conflict.

Plitvice is again the most popular park in the country. However, escaping from the queued, gawking tour groups is as simple as taking a side path or walking a trail in reverse.

Almost anywhere in the park provides for picturesque vistas, idyllic woodland and otherworldly colours. Once alone, you can gaze to your heart's content.

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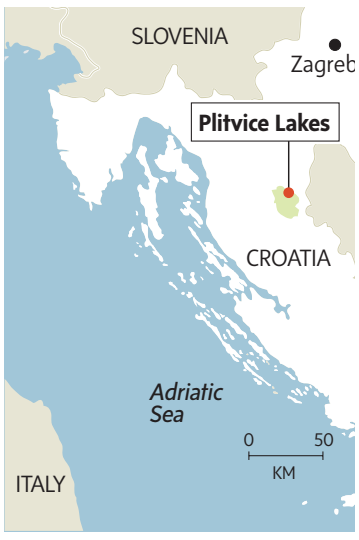

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

IF YOU GO

What is it: A series of 16 sparkling turquoise lakes linked by moss-covered cascades and waterfalls.

Where it is: Central Croatia.

How to get there: Flights to Zagreb leave daily from Toronto, usually with one stopover at a European hub. From Zagreb's main bus terminal, there are at least a half-dozen buses making the roughly two-hour journey every day to the national park. However, renting a car is a more reliable method of getting around.

Where to stay: The family-run Plitvice Miric Inn is within walking distance of one of the national park's entrances ($90-$210 a night). *plitvice-croatia.com.*

Adam Hodge

Depending on the season and the time of day, the water in Plitvice Lakes comes in vivid and cobalt. The site has been recognized by UNESCO. DAMIR FABIJANIC/CROATIAN TOURIST BOARD

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SILFRA RIFT

Clear waters run deep

Iceland gives scuba divers a chance to swim between two continents

CHRIS JOHNS

I can't stop staring into the abyss. So beautiful and unique is Iceland's Silfra rift that it almost seems like a special effect. I can't fathom how water can be this clear: green, blue and as flawless as a polished lens. Although I'm standing on solid ground I feel a sense of vertigo looking down to the bottom of the cavern where individual stones stand out in high relief some 50 metres away. A brown trout, speckles rippled by sunlight, swims lazily through the deep.

There is no shortage of spectacular landscapes in Iceland: oil black beaches racked by shattering waves, percolating geysers spewing boiling jets, thundering cataracts splitting mountains. But for all of their drama, none compares to Silfra's tranquil beauty.

About an hour's drive from Iceland's capital of Reykjavik, the rift is situated in Thingvellir National Park, a world heritage site and a destination in its own right. From 930 to the late 18th century, the park was the meeting place for the country's annual general assembly, known as the Althing, where laws were set and disputes settled. Great cracks in the earth create veritable canyons that act as natural amphitheaters.

To get to Silfra itself, I walk across a small bridge that crosses a river full of Arctic char, perfectly visible in the clear water. This is the exact location where the American and Eurasian tectonic plates split apart.

At some points under the water, scuba divers, who consider this as one of the top dive sites in the world, can literally reach out and touch both continents at once.

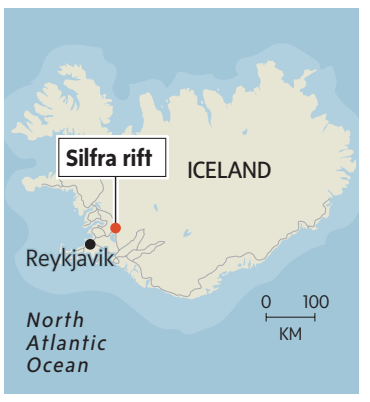
Like so much of Iceland's landscape, the water in Silfra owes its near perfect clarity (some put it at 300 metres) to volcanic activity. The water that fills the rift melts off the Langjokull glacier where it's been frozen for a millennium. It spends between 30 and 100 years flowing and being filtered through volcanic rock, at depths up to six kilometres, covering 50 kilometres before it emerges briefly, flows through the rift and then disappears again beneath the earth into nearby Thingvellir Lake, Iceland's largest.

Kneeling down, I reach for the water and disturb the calm surface, pulling a handful of the cold, clean water to my mouth. The 1,000-year-old liquid tastes as clean and pure as it looks and at last I'm convinced that Silfra is no mirage.

The writer travelled with assistance from Visit Iceland. It did not review or approve the article.

Special to The Globe and Mail

The freshwater in Silfra rift is so clear that it's reputedly possible to see 300 metres down, making it a haven for scuba divers. DIVE.IS



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

IF YOU GO

What it is: Silfra is a freshwater rift in Iceland, formed at the divergent tectonic boundary that separates the Eurasian and North American plates.

Where it is: At the edge of Lake Thingvallavatn in Thingvellir National Park.

How to get there: Iceland Air offers daily flights to Reykjavik from Toronto.

How to see it: One of Iceland's first adventure tour companies, Mountain Taxi (mountaintaxi.is/) offers tours to Silfra and a host of other destinations in customized off-road vehicles.

Where to stay: Dating to the 1930s, Hotel Borg is an art deco gem in the heart of Reykjavik. Rooms start at $225 a night.

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This is the fourth instalment of a five-week look at lesser-known wonders of the world.

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