

Interview: Jeanne Oliver, author of the first edition of Lonely Planet's Croatia guidebook

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for Lonely Planet in 1996, they asked me where I would like to go. I chose . . . Greece, remarking that I liked sea and islands and coastline. They told me that Greece was already assigned but suggested Croatia. At the time, everything I heard about Croatia was war, war, war and then peace but I was game. It seemed like a grand adventure and I was eager to see for myself the country I had heard so much about. Also my friends were so impressed with my "bravery"! "No, no. The war ended in 1995", I kept reassuring everyone. I updated the Croatia chapter of Mediterranean Europe on a Shoestring in 1996 and returned in 1998 to research and write the first edition of Lonely Planet's Croatia guidebook followed by the three succeeding editions. When I decided to launch a website in 2005, it seemed natural to choose Croatia as I already had so much experience covering the country.

Q: What were your first impressions of the country?

Good and bad. On the one hand, there were still visible reminders of the war. The Esplanade Hotel in Zagreb had peacekeepers and officials coming and going. Zadar still had sandbags around the buildings and Dubrovnik had yet to repair all its roofs. Worse, from Istria all down the coast, people were morose and demoralized. The disruptions provoked by the war were still fresh in people's minds. On the other hand, the sheer physical beauty of the country was staggering. And there were no other visitors! Well, one. In Zadar, the chess player Gary Kasparov showed his support by organizing and playing in a local chess tournament. It was clear that a lot of work needed to be done to repair the tourism infrastructure, especially the hotels, but it was equally clear that once it was repaired, Croatia was going to be a massive destination.

Q: What did you find to be the most unique aspect of Croatian tourism?

The prevalence and quality of private accommodation is unparalleled in the Mediterranean. It offers the opportunity to interact with local life in a way that hotels can't. Most families who have constructed and rented out apartments seem highly invested materially and emotionally in making their guests comfortable and introducing them to Croatian culture. I've stayed in a lot of private accommodation over the years which has greatly enhanced my experience of the country.

Q: When and why did you decide to write about Croatia?

It wasn't me that decided! When I was hired to write

Q: What do you think can further improve in the tourist industry in Croatia?

In top-end four and five-star hotels I've found the staff invariably friendly and enthusiastic but lacking in a certain polish that you would find in more mature destinations. Of course the prices aren't the same either! As prices creep up however, high end visitors who are used to being coddled in other destinations will demand the same in Croatia.

Q: How do you rate internet promotion of tourism in Croatia?

The national, regional and local tourist boards have highly developed websites that are particularly good at keeping visitors informed of local events and festivals which is important as this information is not generally available elsewhere. History, important sights, culinary specialties and activities are also well-covered. I think it would be useful for tourist boards at all levels to be more proactive in reaching out to those who, like me, are covering Croatia on the internet full-time. I scour my news sources daily to stay up-to-date but I can only write about what I find. If I knew more I could cover more. I'd like to be on the receiving end of more announcements, press releases and news feeds. Local tourist boards could also be more active on social media, opening Twitter accounts and Facebook pages I could follow.

Q: What are your favorite destinations in Croatia?

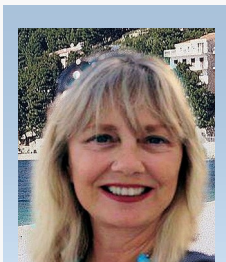
There are too many to count! One of the best trips I took though, was an island cruise that covered the northern Adriatic and the Kornati Islands. Even after a dozen previous trips to Croatia, the beauty and pleasure of sailing those islands was a revelation.

Q: How often do you travel to Croatia today?

Every year. Seeing Croatia struggle to its feet after independence, put together an infrastructure and a tourist industry then march confidently towards membership in the EU has been the most rewarding experience of my professional life.

Q: Do you speak Croatian?

I'm so sorry that I don't. I can mutter some niceties but to really speak the language I would have to immerse myself in it. Maybe I should move to Croatia?



Jeanne Oliver was born in New Jersey and moved to New York City where she worked as an attorney. Her love of travel prompted her to move to France in 1992 where she worked in the tourist business.

She began working as a travel writer in 1995, authoring guidebooks for Frommers and Lonely Planet. She covered Paris, the Cote d'Azur, Normandy, Greece, Germany, Slovenia and of course Croatia. She wrote the first guidebook in English to Croatia for Lonely Planet in 1999, followed by the next three editions. She's currently based in Nice, France where she operates www.croatiatraveller.com.

Croatia Traveller has been online since 2005. Constantly updated, Croatia Traveller contains 1600 pages of travel information including itineraries, sights, transport, ferry schedules, accommodation, and travel news.