

Travel

In Croatia, retreating into her past

By Anja Mutic July 13, 2012

“From this point on, we walk single file, in silence,” said Bozidar in low tones. “See if you can be attentive and refrain from commenting. If you really must share something, whisper it into the ear of the person next to you.”

The six of us stood in a circle. Bozidar, known as Bruce back in the United States, where he lived for more than a decade before returning to his native Croatia, towered over us at 6-foot-7, a gentle giant. A few moments earlier, we’d entered a dense, dark forest through an opening that seemed like a doorway in the foliage. We were going to walk along old logging trails to a cave, a sacred place for the villagers of Velika Plan, a hamlet of 25 people in Croatia’s Velebit Nature Park. Here in these enchanted woods dwell the *velebitske vile*, the forest fairies of Velebit.

Where to go and what to know in Velebit, Croatia .

Growing up in Zagreb, I’d heard about these mountain elves, ethereal forest creatures that are said to inhabit the thick woodlands of Velebit Mountain and its foothills. The *vile* are etched into the minds of Croatian children. Now, a lifetime in the United States and elsewhere later, I was about to enter their playpen.

Finding forest fairies wasn’t the intent of my visit to Linden Tree Retreat & Ranch, a dude ranch-cum-nature retreat in the mountains of southwestern Croatia. I’d come to this hideaway to play cowgirl for a couple of days. Linden Tree Retreat is said to have some of the prettiest horses in Croatia, 12 striking creatures lovingly tended by Bozidar. In the States, where he studied and worked as a scientist, he also spent time as a wrangler and a therapeutic riding instructor.

I’d been on horseback a dozen times in various places, including the plains of Patagonia and the old-growth forests of British Columbia, places where not saddling up would be like going to Paris and missing the Eiffel Tower. Still, I’m no horse whisperer. Mounting the massive animals makes me tense every time. I’ve never quite eased into the saddle.

My husband, on the other hand, is a born cowboy, even though he’s a novice rider who first climbed onto a horse in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park about two years ago. Any chance he gets, he’ll leap onto a steed and gallop away without a glimmer of fear. On our five-day getaway at Linden Tree Retreat, we were supposed to bond on horseback.

But life is full of surprises.

Family history

We drove down from Zagreb, just over two hours to the north, on the eve of the summer solstice. It was a sticky June day and a long weekend in Croatia, with nearly everyone seeking respite at the seashore. After all, the Adriatic, with its islands and gorgeous coastline, is Croatia's claim to fame. But we veered off the southbound highway and into the rugged mountain region called Lika.

Here, in this land where brown bears and wolves roam and the winters are bitterly cold, I'd lost my maternal grandmother to war 68 years ago. Strangely enough, even though my mother, in Zagreb, kept asking questions about our retreat in Lika, I didn't think much about the connection. I was going to play cowgirl, relax, do a little hiking and write a story about it all.

Yet the moment we turned off the A1 and into the land of my ancestors, my thoughts went back in time. My mother's family had lived a simple subsistence life in a small Serbian village in these woods. When World War II broke out, the villages were often raided by the Ustase, the local puppets of the German Nazis and the Italian Fascists. On one of these raids, my grandmother sent her children into the wild to hide. She herself hid behind some barrels in the basement, holding my 2-year-old mother, the youngest of her seven children. The Ustase found what looked like an empty house but nevertheless fired off a series of rounds. One bullet grazed my mother's left ear — and killed my grandmother.

Now here I was, revisiting these woods decades later, looking for forest fairies. It was the first day of summer in Velebit Nature Park, which covers more than 2 million acres of pristine wilderness, including Linden Tree Retreat & Ranch's 50 acres. We were in a gorgeous, lush valley at the base of mighty Velebit Mountain, where deer, bobcats, eagles, falcons, owls and other wildlife roam and no fewer than 4,000 plant species, some endemic, grow in abundance.

On the edge of the enchanted forest, Bozidar read a poem by David Wagoner. The last verse echoed in my mind: "Stand still. The forest knows where you are. You must let it find you."

We walked slowly, in single file. Nobody spoke. Shapes began to appear. Nature had created beautiful, moss-covered sculptures of wood. Some had protruding arms, outstretched as if in despair. Others looked like dark faces staring at us from the woods. Figures stood all around, unmoving, as we walked. A cuckoo sang a carefully timed welcome, nature's metronome.

Bozidar pointed out a large moss-encased stone lodged high up inside a tree trunk. He pulled on it gently. It didn't budge. An unlikely symbiosis, it was proof of the vile's presence.

The cave appeared up ahead, and the temperature started to drop as we approached. At the mouth of the grotto, Bozidar stopped us for another moment of guidance: "This is where my people have come to pray and to seek shelter during wartime. For them, this cave is a sacred place." He explained that the large pipes inside conduct water to the village and to the nearby Velebitsko Pivo brewery, which produces the beer of choice for Croatia's connoisseurs.

During the communist era of Yugoslavia, any semblance of religion or occult beliefs was discouraged. So in the 1980s, to prevent the villagers from seeking spiritual retreat in the cave, the authorities put up a cagelike door to block the entrance. Local legend has it that the hefty steel was ripped out that same night, as if by an invisible force. It still lies at the entrance to the cave, a rusty testament to the forest fairies' work.

We entered the cave, tiptoeing on slippery rocks and finding dry stone summits to balance on as we tried to discern the next solid peak in the dark. It was like meditating: Getting from one stone to the next was all that mattered. At the end of a walkway covered in a carpet of velvety moss was an overhead opening with a pool beneath it and steep rocks rising to the forest floor above our heads. Up there, tall trees surrounded the edge of the opening, like figures looking down at us. We stayed there a while, in silence.

A subtle shift

Back at the ranch, the silence continued. Normally, I love to talk. It's a challenge for me to relax. But the visit to the cave had caused a slight shift. At the compound, I found my hideout: the Studio, a wooden cottage, insulated with sheep's wool, that's used for yoga classes and workshops. It felt like the womb. For the next couple of days, I spent many hours there, napping, thinking, meditating, being.

My sojourns at the Studio were punctuated by hearty meals served in Buffalo Lodge, the restored 1924 log house at the center of Linden Tree Retreat. Home-cooked by Kata, a woman from the village with a kindly face and small words of wisdom, the meals were simple and soulful. She cooked up both wild edibles, such as pie made from nettles and local cheese, and such mainstays as polenta with kiselo mlijeko, a kefir-like drink.

Kata's bread, freshly baked each day using home-milled flour from a 400-year-old mill owned by a friend of Bozidar's, was a throwback to happy times. Just a slice of its warm deliciousness was comfort food like no other. One morning, I had a small cup of highly prized mare's milk that I'd watched Brooke, a wrangler from Washington state who was at Linden for the summer, painstakingly draw into small glass bottles.

Awareness of nature's resources is taken to a whole new level at Linden Tree Retreat. Bozidar teaches sustainable living at the university in Zadar, the coastal city an hour to the south. His partner, Medzida, told me about the zero-carbon plum jam served at breakfast. The organic plums are plucked from the nearby trees when they're ripe, transported in a cotton sheet to the kitchen and cooked with no added sugars or preservatives in the wood-burning stove. "We make as much as nature gives us each year," Medzida said.

When we weren't sleeping in our teepee — there are three on the property — eating at Buffalo Lodge or socializing in the Wild West-like saloon, I'd head back to the Studio. Bird songs floated in through the open windows, the wood creaked, a fly buzzed.

A day of not doing

Then came the big day, Sunday. Two horseback rides were going out. It was the reason we were here in the first place. But when Brooke and Bozidar asked whether they should prepare a horse for me, I heard myself say, as if someone else were speaking: "Actually, I'll skip it."

My husband was surprised. He always calls me his "little ant." Normally, I have to do everything that's available, sign up for every activity that I can possibly squeeze in. Doing is my usual operating mode. But something had happened in that forest on our first morning; a subtle spell had taken hold. Instead of doing, I decided not to.

So I watched them saddle up the horses and listened as Bozidar prepped the riders — including my husband, on a beautiful horse named Atila — for their trip into the forest. I waved them off, signaling a good-luck thumbs up.

Then I went back to the Studio. Thoughts of my grandmother came and went. I sat, and listened to the flies.

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 **2 Comments**