



The clock is ticking

UK citizens can spend '90 days within any 180-day period without a visa' inside the Schengen Area, which includes most European countries. I spent a lot of time researching options and eventually learned that there was no visa available to extend those 90 days – if I completed the application truthfully. Some people flout the rules but risk detention, a fine and a five-year ban from Europe.

That means, for example, that if you want to travel for 120 days, you must spend no more than 90 in the Schengen countries and at least 30 in non-Schengen countries. Most of the Balkan countries are currently outside the Schengen Area but three of them are in the process of joining. So, if you are planning a trip like this, now is the time to do it. Croatia will join in March 2023, with Romania and Bulgaria likely to follow. After that, non-Schengen options will be limited to: Serbia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania – and Belarus and Ukraine, if normality ever returns to those countries.

Several things were different here, compared to Austria and Germany: for example, a more flexible attitude towards laws. I was surprised to read that Croatia has similar smoking laws to the rest of Europe. No one pays any attention to them. Cycling on (undesignated) pavements is illegal in towns and cities but most cyclists do it and no one seems to object.

There are many cycle routes across Croatia, although it is difficult to relate the GPX routes on the official websites to the haphazard signage on the road. Most of the minor roads are wide with long sight lines, which can encourage high speeds, although it is possible to find quieter, twisty lanes in the hillier or mountainous areas; I would do a lot more climbing here.

I was due to meet my wife in Pula and had time to cross the country slowly. I took several days to ride between the historic capital of Varazdin and the modern one, Zagreb. You can see the Austrian influence on Zagreb's older buildings, though they have not been so well maintained. At the top of a short funicular I stumbled across Strossmayer Promenade, 'Zagreb's Montmartre', which had artists' stalls and two amazing guitarists playing to a handful of passers-by.

The road towards the coast climbed to over 800m, through the memorably named Fučkovac, before the Adriatic came into sight, with tourist resorts nestling in the bays between two large oil terminals. Rijeka, ►

Although it has some good cycle paths, I was glad to get away from Vienna's traffic and aggressive drivers. The suburbs and industrial sprawl spread a long way south, but as I rode towards the Slovenian border the terrain became hillier, quieter and more wooded.

OUT OF THE SCHENGEN AREA

Slovenia is a country I would like to see more of but, as I was trying to leave the Schengen Area, I crossed it along the River Mura, where Slovenia is only 40km wide and not particularly impressive. At the Croatian border a guard took my passport, did something with it and handed it back. A few hundred yards later, I stopped to check it: no date stamp. Recalling horror stories of Brits being arrested and fined for this, I headed back to the same official. He spoke a few words of English but clearly understood very little. Fortunately, he understood "Brexiti", which got me the stamp I needed.

