

Zagreb Showcases Croatia's Charms

By Julie Ross

As one of Central Europe's great capital cities, Zagreb--site of the Second Annual CEE Partnership Conference May 15-17--offers something for everyone. Medieval churches, museums, theater, shopping and even professional basketball can all be found in this metropolis of one million residents, which is considered Croatia's political, cultural and scientific center.

Lying at the base of Mount Medvednica, at the southernmost end of the Alps, and along the Sava River, Zagreb is a city rich in history. It was founded over 900 years ago when the religious settlement of Kaptol became a Roman Catholic diocese and joined with its neighbor, Gradac, a town of artisans and traders. Today, the city is divided into three very different sections: Kaptol and Gradac (now called Gornji grad, or "Upper Town") comprise Zagreb's historical core; Donji Grad, the Lower Town, is known for its parks, museums and striking 19th century architecture; and Novi Zagreb or "New Zagreb," south of the Sava, is primarily a residential area built after World War II.

At the heart of Zagreb is Ban Josip Jela i Square, which pays tribute to the mid-19th century governor of the Kingdom of Dalmatia, Croatia and Slavonia. The square sits on Ilica, the city's main shopping street, and divides the upper and lower towns. Just west on Ilica, tourists can take a funicular railway up to Gornji Grad and Kaptol, where a sprinkling of medieval churches and palaces are located. The 13th-century St. Mark's Church, with its multicolored tile roof bearing coats of arms, is a well-known landmark in this part of Zagreb--inside are several works by former Yugoslavia's famous sculptor, Ivan Meštrovi . Nearby Lotrčak Tower provides a panoramic view of the city below.

The twin spires of St. Stephen's Cathedral also stand out as one of Zagreb's familiar sights. Finished in 1899, this cathedral was built on the site of another medieval cathedral destroyed by an earthquake in 1880. Inside, one can find 13th century frescoes, Renaissance pews and marble altars, while 16th century battlements surround the cathedral's exterior. In 1994, the cathedral was the site of a holy mass led by Pope John Paul II in celebration of the 900th anniversary of the Zagreb Archbishopric.

In the Lower Town, the Croatian National Theatre, the Mimara Museum and the 300-year-old University of Zagreb create a vibrant cultural environment, surrounded by the city's many markets and parks. The Mimara is a special source of pride for Zagreb--it is considered one of Europe's finest art galleries, with an extensive collection of Italian, Spanish and Dutch paintings. The university, founded in 1662 as the first academy for arts and sciences in the south Slavic region, is home to 50,000 students and is known for its art and film schools.

Visitors interested in tasting the local fare can stop by Dolac marketplace, open daily on the terrace behind Jela i Square, or one of the many restaurants on Vlaška Street, a few blocks east. Preradovi Square is another popular destination--hundreds of flowers are sold here every day.

At once a modern political center and medieval village, Zagreb encompasses the best of Croatia's past and future.