hidden europe

the magazine exploring Europe’s special spaces

including

Germany: along the Moselle river
Velebit: a mountain in Croatia
Transdniestr
Eurostar connections
the home of the Moravian Brethren
checking airline routes on the web

www.hiddeneurope.co.uk
elebit, we are told in the words of an old Croatian folk song, is the haunt of fairies. It is a strangely beautiful place, its wind-scoured heights characterized by areas of bizarrely sculpted and weathered rock, studded with thickets of dwarf mountain pine, and pierced by some of the deepest sinkholes in the world. In winter, it is transformed into a snowbound landscape like something out of a painting by Caspar David Friedrich. Wild, eerie, fractured and disjointed.

This stark upland, just a stone’s throw from the Adriatic, includes two of Croatia’s eight national parks. Sjeverni Velebit, in the north, was created in 1999 and is the country’s newest national park. Further south is Paklenica, established in 1949. The entire region is also a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve, yet its southern slopes remain strewn with landmines from the 1991–1995 war.

Velebit forms part of that long, sinuous and loosely defined range of mountains known as the Dinaric Alps. Stretching from the Slovenian border in the north, these run down through Croatia parallel to the coast, on through Monte-
negro and into Albania, later to re-emerge as the Pindus Mountains in Greece. The familiar golden bumps of the Croatian archipelago — those dark bronze islands, on a sea at once green and hard as glass, to paraphrase Rebecca West — constitute merely the eroded tops of various outer ridges of this mountain range, now partially submerged beneath the waters of the Adriatic. Many visitors to Croatia pass beneath the ramparts of Velebit as they drive along the all-too-crowded coast road. But few are the travellers who venture up onto its heights.

Ages of chemical weathering have left their mark both above and beneath the surface, and Velebit displays all those features so distinctive of a karst landscape. This is limestone country, pitted with potholes and caves. These karst features are at their most impressive in the protected areas of Hajdučki kukovi and Rožanski kukovi in the north, which form a quite labyrinthine succession of shattered tops and rocky dells. The area has a complex underground drainage system, and is riddled with caves and some alarmingly deep sinkholes — most notably Lukina jama, which from its entrance in Hajdučki kukovi plunges well over a thousand metres into the depths of the mountain. Only discovered in 1992, it is named after a local caving enthusiast who joined a mountain division (gorski zdrug) in the 1991–1995 war as a volunteer, and was killed by a sniper. Another sinkhole, Patkov gušt, has a single vertical drop of over five hundred metres — the second largest in the world. Further south, the bizarre rock formations of Bačić kuk and Bojinac protrude from the landscape like so many stumpy, petrified fingers.

Velebit is also a mountain of winds. The most notorious of these is the bura, which blows over the mountains from the Lika basin, descending onto the Adriatic to wreak havoc among fishermen. Its gale-force blasts were described by the eighteenth-century Venetian traveller Abbé Alberto Fortis as having the force to pick up children and dash them against the walls of houses. It could even knock over horses laden with salt. The bura played havoc with the Venetian ships that used to ply the channels

---

**Oh fairy, fairy of Velebit,**
The pride of our nation,
Your glory is precious to us,
Croats delight in you.

from 'Vila Velebita', a Croatian folk song

---

**Oj ti vilo, vilo Velebita,**
Ti našeg roda diko,
Tvoja slava jeste nama sveta,
Tebi Hrvat kliko.

---

**RIGHT: Južni (Southern) Velebit and Paklenica, viewed across the Velebit Channel from the village of Vinjerac (photo by Rudolf Abraham)**
between the islands and the Croatian coast, an inshore water route known to the Venetians as the Canale della Morlacca.

“Puše bura” say the local fishermen across the Velebit Channel, looking knowingly over the waters at the wall of mountains on the other side, slashed by the twin gorges of Velika and Mala Paklenica: “the bura is blowing”. On such a day, wisdom dictates that small fishing boats should remain safe at their moorings. In defence against this wind, houses in villages such as Jovići across the Velebit Channel from Paklenica — which might otherwise boast some of the finest views in Croatia from their living rooms — are generally built with no windows or terraces facing east.

Running for some fifty kilometres through the very heart of northern and central Velebit is Premužićeva staza. This wonderfully engineered track was built during the early nineteen-thirties under the direction of Ante Premužić, a local forestry engineer, using local labour and thus ensuring a regular income for local workers during this period of economic hardship. Backbreaking work. Winding its way among the crags of Rožanski kukovi, the path forms part of the Velebitski planinarski put, Croatia’s longest hiking trail, which stretches one hundred kilo-
metres from the village of Oltare in the north to
the gorge of Velika Paklenica in the south.

Scattered through this landscape are a
number of well-preserved hamlets — small
clusters of low-roofed, stone cottages, such as
Marasović and Parići in Paklenica National Park;
others, such as Skorpovac, are little more than
ruined shells, long abandoned. There is a small
church at Veliko Rujno in southern Velebit, to
which the locals travel on 15 August, the Feast
of the Assumption (Velika Gospa). After Mass,
there is a picnic on the open grasslands outside.
An enormous metal cross was erected here a few
years ago, paid for
by the inhabitants
of a small village
on the coast. An-
other, older, cross
stands on the bleak,
rounded summit of
Sveto brdo (Holy
Mountain), at the
southern extrem-
ity of Paklenica Na-
tional Park. Moun-
tain peaks, it would
seem, have lost none of their associations with
the Gods.

In the north of the range, near the
beginning of the forestry trail, is Zavižan — a
meteorological station run by the ever-friendly
Ante Vukušić and his family. It also doubles as
a mountain hut. The Vukušić family hails from
the small village of Gornja Klada on the coast,
from where it is some four hours on foot, or
considerably less by car, up to the hut. My first
visit to this village was particularly memorable
for the sight of a pear tree bristling with glass
bottles. These bottles would later be ‘picked’,
along with the fruit which had grown inside
them, and filled with homemade rakija.

Toponyms, as always, are a rich source of
information on an area’s history and traditions.
According to local burial customs, when a body
was carried from the home of the deceased to a
distant cemetery, the bearers were permitted to
rest and lay the body on the ground at one point
only, before continuing. This point would later
be marked by a stone slab, called a mirilo, and it
was to this place that relatives would later come
to pay their respects. The tradition died out in
the nineteen fifties, but its memory survives in
place names such as Martinovo mirilo, above
Mala Paklenica.

Over the years, Velebit has provided an
ideal refuge for outlaws and rebels. It was after
all from the port of Senj, at the northern end
of Velebit, that the Uskoks launched their pirate
raids against the Ottoman (and Venetian) fleets
on the Adriatic; and it was from Velebit and
other mountainous areas of Croatia that the
Hajduks harassed and harangued the Ottomans,
in between times robbing a few locals for good
measure. Later, these hills were a refuge for the
Partisans during the Second World War. So there
is something of the Croatian soul in Velebit. All
Croatian schoolchildren know the words of Vila
Velebita (The Fairy of Velebit), a folk song full

"Puše bura" say the
local fishermen across
the Velebit Channel,
looking knowingly
over the waters at
the wall of mountains
on the other side:
"the bura is blowing".
of national sentiment that in one verse nicely alludes to the Hajduks:

Velebite, vilovito stijenje,  
Ja ljubim tvoje smilje.  
Ljubim tvoga u gorici vuka,  
I onoga — Ličkoga hajduka.

Velebit, the rocks of fairies,  
I cherish your immortelle.  
I cherish the mountain wolf,  
The Hajduk of Lika.

The immortelle referred to in the verse is a species of flower that grows profusely on Velebit.

The sixteenth-century Croatian writer Petar Zoranić imbued Velebit with additional layers of myth and legend in his Planine (The Mountains) making Paklenica the entrance to hell itself, and in true Renaissance fashion ascribing the moaning of the bura to the sighing of a beautiful woman, named Bura, imprisoned in its depths for her excessive vanity! Zoranić describes the bura as coming from Vražja vrata — ‘Hell’s Gate’, hell being pakao in modern Croatian, whence the toponym Paklenica.

Velebit is home to an array of plants and animals — including the brown bear, although seeing anything more than the occasional tracks in the snow is extremely rare, unless you visit the sanctuary for orphaned bear cubs near the village of Kuterevo. This great limestone upland also protects small numbers of other elusive species such as the grey wolf and lynx, and, in the depths of Lukina jama, a large population of endemic subterranean leeches. The rocky slopes of Velebit are also a common haunt of the nose-horned viper (Vipera ammodytes, known locally as poskok), Europe’s most venomous snake — a specimen of which lies coiled in a large jar in the mountain hut at Zavižan, pickled for posterity in formaldehyde.

Yet Velebit is not as idyllic and unspoilt as it might at first seem. During the Croatian War of Independence (from 1991 to 1995), some areas of southern Velebit, along with numerous other parts of Croatia, were strewn with landmines. The zones affected included that around the beautiful rock formations at Tulove grede. To complicate matters, there is in many cases little or no record of exactly where mines were laid. Over recent years there has been a concerted effort, orchestrated by the Croatian Mine Action Centre and organisations such as Adopt-a-Minefield and Norwegian People’s
Aid, to de-mine Velebit. However mine clearance is an expensive and dangerous process. Some areas such as Sveti Rok near Paklenica, where the tunnels of the new motorway have been bored through the mountain, have been cleared; however, many others still await clearance.

Old military bunkers from the war still dot the Velebit landscape — one above Paklenica is sometimes used as an impromptu shelter by local hikers — and old wires and communications cables, long since cut, still snake their way through the undergrowth.

Croatians feel great affection for their mountains — witness the swarms of planinari (walkers) on Sljeme, the mountain rising just north of Zagreb, at weekends. Even during the war years of the nineteen nineties, local hikers still headed for Velebit. I have friends who, as students in Zagreb in 1992, would travel to Rijeka by train, and hitch to Gornja Klada, to escape into the wilds of northern Velebit — only a matter of months after the siege of Dubrovnik was finally lifted.

The fact that Velebit still sees so few foreign visitors is something I always find surprising — it is certainly not particularly difficult to reach. When leafing through the summit registers on the rocky peaks of Northern Velebit last summer, I expected to see some increase in visitors over my previous trip there, a few years earlier; but the number of names and messages in languages other than Croatian are still remarkably few and far between. Velebit, so close to the coast, is a happy reminder that Croatia is more than just a string of sunny beaches.

Rudolf Abraham lived in Croatia from 1999 to 2001 and returns often. He is the author of walking guides to Croatia and Montenegro, both published by Cicerone Press. He lives in London, where he also writes on Islamic art and architecture. For more information, go to www.rudolfabraham.co.uk.

This article won an award from the Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild (OWPG) as the best outdoor feature published in 2008-2009.