

### Introduction

**K**nown as the country of a thousand islands, Croatia is one of the most beautiful countries in Europe. Its warm seas, exotic coastline and mild climate make it a popular tourist destination. However, it is a land recovering from the festering wounds of bitter rivalries and war.



### History

During the sixth century, Slavic tribes migrated to Croatia, formerly the Roman province of Pannonia. They converted to Roman Catholicism between the seventh and ninth centuries. By the end of the ninth century the tribes had organised themselves into larger units to form the first independent Croatian kingdom. The kingdom prospered despite Bulgarian and Venetian attack but was soon split by civil war leaving it open to attack first by the Hungarians at the end of the 11th century, then in the 15th century by the Turks.

During the Ottoman control many Croats migrated northwards and, with Turkish encouragement, the ethnic composition of the area changed. Concerns over Ottoman expansion led to Croatia inviting the Austrian Habsburgs to assume control over the country. By the 18th century Austria had ended Turkish control in Croatia but then tried to limit Croatia and Hungary's state rights and make them provinces in the Austrian empire. This was met with resistance, uniting Croatia and Hungary. However, relations between these two nations deteriorated in 1848 when the Hungarian Parliament voted on measures to limit Croatian autonomy. The Croatian Parliament declared its separation from Hungary and was initially successful, but, with both countries' troops weakened by the conflict, the Habsburgs were able to regain power.

Following the demise of Austria-Hungary in World War I, Croatia joined the Yugoslav kingdom, made up of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Yugoslavia was invaded by Germany in World War II weakening and dividing the kingdom. Croatia became a fascist

state. When the Axis powers were defeated at the end of the war, Yugoslavia, of which Croatia was a part, became a federal socialist state under the leadership of Marshal Tito.

In 1991 Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia resulting in four years of war between the Serbian-led Yugoslavian army and Croats. During this time violent fighting and ethnic cleansing took place between Croats and Serbs, devastating the region. The world watched helplessly as the countries tore each other apart and agreements were signed and broken. The refugee situation worsened. Eventually in 1996 the Croatian leader, Franjo Tudjman, agreed to the return of refugees and a fragile peace followed. War crimes from this conflict are still being investigated in The Hague. Croatian forces were also involved in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. By 1998, under UN supervision, peaceful integration of all separatist territories was completed.

The war left Croatia economically devastated. Elections were held in 1997 and Tudjman was re-elected but two years later he died suddenly, changing the political face of the country. The newly-elected centre-left alliance led by the new President, Stipe Mesic, brought a commitment to Croatia's integration into Europe and a shift of power from the president to parliament. Mesic was re-elected for a second five-year term as president in January 2005.

### Current challenges

- ▶ The War of Independence (1991-1995) brought with it huge economic suffering from which Croatia is still recovering and unemployment remains high.
- ▶ Accession to the European Union (EU) is high on Croatia's agenda, and Croatia officially became a candidate for EU membership in December 2005. EU membership, it is hoped, will be achieved by 2010 and improve trade, industry, agriculture and tourism, thereby boosting the economy.

## BMS involvement in Croatia

BMS World Mission works with the Baptist Union of Croatia and has helped through finance and the provision of personnel. The Union's first full-time General Secretary, Zeljko Mraz, and three other couples involved in church planting and theological education are at present being supported financially.

## Background information

### The land

A crescent-shaped country between the Danube and Adriatic Sea, Croatia is made up of three regions – the rolling hills in the north around Zagreb; the rocky mountains along the Adriatic coast; and the inland valleys of the Pannonian Basin. The country has 1,778 km of coastline and 1,185 islands, of which 67 are inhabited. Croatia's beaches have always been very popular with tourists.

Croatia has a mixture of climates – continental in the north, Mediterranean along the coast and semi-highland and highland climate in the central region.

### Religion

Christianity has a long history in Croatia, going as far back as before the fifth century AD. Today, 94 per cent of the population claim to be Christian. While the majority of Christians are from the Roman Catholic community, Orthodox Christians, Lutherans and other Protestant churches are also present. During the past decades the Church, in all its parts, has been in decline, but there are now signs of growth in all the communities.

The Baptist Union of what was then Yugoslavia was founded in Zagreb in 1923 but was only recognised by the state, along with the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches, before the Second World War. Now, with the Baptist Union of Croatia there are 52 Baptist congregations with a membership of around 2,000.

During Croatia's War of Independence, the churches, together with expatriate agencies, worked to alleviate suffering and give spiritual help. It is estimated that a total of £16 million worth of aid was distributed through agencies associated with the Protestant evangelical churches in Croatia.

## Prayer points

- ▶ Ten years after the war, there is little reconciliation between the Croats and Serbs; memories of horror, hate and pain live long. Pray for God to heal relationships, restore peace and bring reconciliation between the two ethnic groups and divided communities.
- ▶ Pray for the Baptist Union in Croatia; that they will continue to bring the peace and reconciliation of Christ to the lives of the broken and hurting, and be a voice of love in a land torn apart by rivalries.
- ▶ Pray for the government to be innovative and wise in implementing economic reform that will benefit the many Croatians unemployed and living in economic difficulty.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

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