

Backpacking Croatia's Velebit Mountains & visit Plitvice Lakes

Velebit National Park & Plitvice National Park, Croatia

Sept 14-22, 2025



Features

- 5 nights of backcountry hut lodging in the Northern & Southern Velebit National Parks
- Visit the famous Plitvice Lakes National Park with a night in Starigrad
- Enjoy the largest mountain range on the Adriatic Coast, in one of the Mediterranean's most wild areas.
- Incredible hiking days in high limestone mountains
- 50-60 miles of hiking

Cost: \$3,195 (includes pre/post trip lodging)

Minimum Age: 18

Max group size: 12 Participants

1-2 NOLS Instructors

1 Croatian Partner

Trip Description

NOLS has been operating in Croatia for almost a decade now and loves the country! We have developed this extremely unique experience with a long-time partner in Croatia and are excited to offer it to our Alumni.

This trip starts in Zagreb, capital of Croatia and an excellent launching off point for any trip to the region. Zagreb is well worth a visit of its own. Croatia's rich and diverse history is most preserved in the boundaries of this storied city and we'll learn about them while seeing some of the top sites.

The first evening we will gather for an evening orientation at our hotel in Zagreb where we can start to get to know each other, run through the trip overview, answer any last minute questions, and chat a bit about gear. The following morning will be a casual breakfast and then the group will spend the day together on a Zagreb city tour and sightseeing. This day will allow for a bit more jetlag recovery, and historical perspective on Croatia. You will also have time to pick up last minute gear needs!

The morning of the third day we will be picked up by our private transportation and driven to our trailhead to start hiking in the Northern Velebit region. This first hike is a relatively short one to the hut. Once at the hut, we will have time to explore the area and do a short peak climb nearby. While hiking in this first section, we will only carry light day-packs with our food and water for the day, layers, and rain gear. The rest of our luggage will be shuttled for us to our next hut.

For the next 3 days we will hike 9-13 miles each day as we move between huts. We'll carry what we need for the day but nothing else. Likely, water will be our most scarce resource and we will need to carry extra water because it is not easily available in this environment.

On our 7th day we will slow down our hiking pace a bit, and visit the famous Plitvice Lake National Park! We will have a car transfer to the National Park, enjoying some time visiting the lakes and then

transfer to Starigrad for the night. It will be a busy day where we will drive down to the coast and shift from the Northern Velebit to the Southern Velebit for the next section of the trip.

The next day, we start hiking again and walk from the coast back into the mountains of the Southern Velebit. This outstanding hiking day will be a hard one, but we will be rewarded by reaching a small family run hut deep in the mountains. Unlike our previous huts, this one does not have road access and is supplied by mule trains. Because of this, we will have to carry a bit more for this section of the trip, adding toiletries, and a bit more clothing into our packs.

We will spend the night in the Southern Velebit, giving another night of stargazing amongst the mountains. This allows a leisurely walk back out and down to the coast. Spending 2 days hiking in this region will feel like a real treat as most visitors only see it for half a day!

After departing the park we will meet our shuttle and head back to Zagreb for a celebratory dinner together and a last night in town. Most folks will head onwards the next day or launch into other adventures in the area.

Participants should bring an extra measure of flexibility, good cheer and “Expedition Behavior” to help our expedition succeed. As with all expeditions, there may be minor logistical wrinkles or plan changes due to weather. All great travelers learn to adapt to the challenges that come their way and embrace adversity with a positive attitude!

Alumni trips are more relaxed than a typical course; however, it is not a vacation or a guided trip. Trips are self-reliant in remote areas where evacuation to medical facilities can take several days. During the trip, you will stay in rustic huts, help prepare occasional group meals, and care for yourself and others. The expedition emphasizes hands-on learning and application of new skills.

Environment

September in the Velebit is very different from the rest of Croatia. With elevations in the mountains 3-5,000 feet above the surrounding land it will be much cooler than most expect this time of year in Croatia. You should expect day time temps in the 60's and 70's and overnight lows in the 50's. While rain is light this time of year, it is certainly possible.

The Velebit flora is largely dominated by an extensive beech forest that has actually been identified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site because of their ecological relevance to historical forest dynamics in Europe. Additionally, we are hoping for early Fall colors as the mountains start their seasonal changes earlier than the rest of Croatia.

A Day in the Life

Most days we will wake up and eat a simple breakfast around 7:30 a.m. After breakfast, we will get packed up and load our shuttle vehicle before topping off our water and heading out for our hike. During the day we will snack at leisure but will also have a designated lunch stop to re-gather the group and share a picnic.

During the hiking day, NOLS staff will bookend the group and folks can spread out naturally to move at their own pace. We will want to keep a few folks together though because Croatia does have bears in the mountains! Pacing can be relaxed and it is unlikely that anyone will feel rushed.

After arriving at the hut we will build a plan for the evening. In some areas, we might ask for help with dinner and others we will be having dinner prepared for us by the hut wardens. After dinner, folks will likely hang out for a few hours before heading to bed around 9 or 10 p.m.

Difficulty Scale

This trip is rated 4 out of 5 on our difficulty scale.



We use a difficulty scale to help participants evaluate if a trip is right for them. It considers probable weather conditions, physicality of activities, and food and accommodations. You don't need to be a honed athlete, but pre-trip work to improve your strength, flexibility and endurance, is highly encouraged to improve your enjoyment of the place. If you have specific questions regarding physical preparation and your readiness please reach out to the Alumni Trips Department.

Food on the trip

There will be plenty of food provided on the trip for everyone. We are happy to ensure that folks who have reasonable dietary needs and/or preferences are well taken care of throughout the entire trip. Listing those needs on your registration paperwork is critical for our success here.

Croatian mountain huts have not seen the influx of international tourists like other areas and their food is still basic, hearty, mountain food. Bean stews, sausage, pasta and white bread are standard fare for dinners while eggs, bread, and cheese are normal breakfasts. While most dietary needs can be accommodated, these huts do not offer the variety and quality that you might find at the vegan focused cafes and gluten free bakeries in major cities like Zagreb.

If you would like to bring your own snacks along, that is highly encouraged. We all have treats that we enjoy and bringing something special is a great way to keep motivation high and not have to rely on the group's schedule for your munchies. We'll have coffee every morning, but if you have a specific brew that you love or a time that you need it at, bringing an instant version will be a key to your success.

Curriculum

This trip focuses on many traditional NOLS skills, competencies, and concepts. The instructors will provide information necessary for the group to comfortably travel, as well as optional topics as desired by participants. You will look at maps on a daily basis, but the on trail hiking does not require much complex navigation. Other topics could include natural history, local history, leadership, decision making, and team function, and more! Formal "classes" are few and mostly optional but informal discussions are plentiful. Anticipate a required base level of group management and cohesion— this is a mountain expedition.

About Croatia

The region of Croatia has a long human and political history tied to many of the world's largest empires. Over the past 100 years Croatia was a member of Yugoslavia in its different forms and has a strong socialist influence that can still be seen today.

After years of sporadic and bitter fighting, Croatia formally declared independence from the Communist state of Yugoslavia in 1991 and after a 4 year war was recognized as independent. The country joined the NATO alliance in 2009 and the EU in 2013. The Republic of Croatia has a population of 4.5 million people and the official language is Croatian. However, English is widely spoken, especially in the tourism industry. The country's utterly impressive transition from being war-torn to being primarily hospitality and tourism-focused has made it a truly worthwhile destination.

Croatian tourism tends to focus on the extensive coast of the country and its limitless islands while ignoring the inland treasures that the country has to offer. On this trip we will visit 3 different national parks within Croatia and also spends time in the Velebit Nature Park that comprises the entire Velebit range. The Velebit range is the largest range in Croatia and is part of the Dinaric Alps. The mountains are a large karst limestone formation which results in sharp rocks and exposed slopes in addition to many caves.

Expectations of Participants

The alumni trip atmosphere is more relaxed than a typical NOLS course; however, it is not a guided trip—we call it an educational, participatory vacation. Alumni trips are self-reliant adventures through remote areas where evacuation to modern medical facilities can take several days. Throughout the course, you will live outdoors, help to prepare meals and care for yourself. The expedition emphasizes hands-on learning and application of new skills in a variety of situations.

Unlike our standard expeditions, Alumni trips do allow electronics and alcohol for those that are of legal age in the country of the trip. We believe that these luxuries can add to a course experience and local flavor. Excessive alcohol consumption is not a part of the culture of Alumni trips.

Trip Itinerary (daily plan might change based on weather)

Sept 13	Depending on connections and pre-trip plans, many participants will depart the US on this day.	
Sept 14	We'll meet up for Orientation at 7pm in the hotel lobby.	Lodging provided in Zagreb
Sept 15	We will ease into the trip with a historical Zagreb city tour and time to organize your gear for the trip.	Lodging provided in Zagreb
Sept 16	Van transfer to Oltari Croatia to pick up the trail and have a short hike to our first hut entering into the Northern Velebit National Park along the way. Hike ~4.5 miles ↑2300 ft ↓2000 ft	Zavizan Hut
Sept 17	This hiking day has rolling hills until a steep descent to Alan hut. Hike ~9.5 miles ↑2000 ft ↓2800 ft	Alan Hut

Sept 18	This is a big hiking day! Individual climbs throughout the day are less than 1,000 feet but there are several of them to local peaks with outstanding views. Hike ~12.5 miles ↑3300 ft ↓4200 ft	Kugina Kuca hut
Sept 19	You will continue your southern progression along the coastal side of the high ridge. With luck, you will have outstanding views of the Adriatic throughout the day. Hike ~11.5 miles ↑2600 ft ↓3200 ft	Prpa hut
Sept 20	Today is going to be an exceptional day visiting the famous Plitvice Lakes National park before heading south along the coast to Starigrad, near the Southern Velebit National Park. In Starigrad, enjoy some evening downtime before hitting the trail tomorrow.	Overnight in Starigrad
Sept 21	We'll pack up our packs a bit fuller today as we lose our vehicle support for the next night and need to carry sleeping bags, toiletries and clothes as we venture into the roadless Southern Velebit National Park. Hike ~5-6 miles ↑3600 ft ↓1800 ft	Ramica dvori hut
Sept 22	We will hike back out of the park today to meet our vehicle pickup. While the hike today appears short, there will be an option to extend it with a visit to an incredible cave in the park. After arriving at our trailhead, we will shuttle back to Zagreb for a final dinner together Hike ~5 miles ↑1600 ft ↓3000 ft	Lodging provided in Zagreb
Sept 23	Return home or travel onward on your own.	Breakfast included

Travel Logistics

Arriving into Zagreb International Airport (Franjo Tudman Airport)

Many airlines provide service to Zagreb, Croatia (ZAG) connecting through several major European cities.

To get to the lodging you have a couple of options:

Option 1:

Take a taxi or an Uber from the airport to the hotel. It should take about 35-45 minutes for a taxi ride and cost around 35 Euros. The hotel can organize a pickup for you at this price if you would like; their contact info is listed below.

Option 2:

There are shuttle buses from the airport to the main bus station in Zagreb every 30 minutes for ~ 5 Euros. From the bus station, you can take tram #6 about 10 minutes to Trg bana Jelacica station that is very close to the hotel.

Lodging

NOLS provides single-gender paired lodging on the first and last night at a hotel in Zagreb. Reservations have already been made for these nights.

Our hotel for before and after the trip is [Hotel Dubrovnik](#) in downtown Zagreb. Please plan on gathering in the Lobby there for orientation on the first night.

On-course lodging:

Aside from the hotels designated, we will be staying in rustic backcountry huts. These huts have a variety of beds available that we will not always be able to select ahead of time. Typically, each person will have a twin size mattress to themselves but those mattresses might be laying side by side in a large row or could be on bunk beds. Rarely will we have private rooms available in the huts and most commonly the rooms will have multiple genders sharing space.

Storage of Personal Belongings

Luggage that you do not want to bring with you hiking can be left behind in secure storage at our hotel in Zagreb. Throughout the trip, we will have a luggage shuttle or luggage storage (in Starigrad) so you do not need to overly skimp on your gear, but we do find that lighter travel can be nice.

Currency

Croatia converted to the Euro as of January 1, 2023.

Some of the huts will have drinks available to purchase but otherwise cash on the trail is not needed. Plan on 3-5 Euros per drink when they are available. For the most part, you will not need cash for anything besides souvenirs and whatever beverage supplements you prefer.

ATMs will often offer you an exchange rate; this rate will be substantially worse than the current rate, do not accept it. Choose to "Deny the Rate." You will still be able to proceed with the transaction and your bank will define the rate at the current exchange.

Travel Insurance

We will confirm your trip is running approximately 60 days before the start date. It is best to purchase tickets that are refundable or changeable, as well as consider travel cancellation insurance in case of unforeseen events causing you to change your plans or if NOLS has to cancel a trip for any reason. Check your personal insurance carrier and credit card to understand what you might already have. Travel medical insurance is highly recommended should you need any kind of medical attention while out of your home country. Check out [cat70.com](https://www.cat70.com) or [worldnomads.com](https://www.worldnomads.com) for a wide variety of options.

Carbon Footprint and Offset

Current estimates are that the Travel Industry accounts for ~8% of global emissions. This percentage includes everything from transportation to accommodation and shopping. NOLS recognizes that our business contributes to this problem but we do not have a comprehensive strategy at this point.

If you would like to offset part or all of the carbon emissions related to your Alumni trip, we recommend [South Pole](#). [Their calculator](#) can help easily calculate your footprint and choose a project to contribute to. [Here is a link to their calculator.](#)

Tipping

Tipping is standard in Croatian culture. In restaurants, 10% is normal. Tipping local guides is standard practice. \$100-150 Euros per person would be a reasonable budget for this expense.

While tipping is common in the outdoor guiding culture, your NOLS Instructors are not driven to excellence by tips but rather a love for taking people outdoors. You are welcome to tip the Instructors if you choose, but many instructors are honored by [a donation in their name to the NOLS Annual Fund](#) which supports scholarships for future NOLS students.

Immunizations / Vaccinations / Travel medications

International travel poses special health considerations. NOLS strongly advises that all participants traveling to international locations carefully consider what vaccinations or inoculations are required, recommended, or suggested for their specific travel itinerary. Consulting with a physician, travel medicine specialist, or other healthcare professional is strongly advised.

Visa / Passport - Attention International European travelers - **Must read... Action Required**

If your travels have you **entering or transiting (passing through or laying over in) the UK**, you will need to apply for and have an approved Electronic Travel Authorization (ETA) to continue to your destination.

This [article](#) explains that starting Jan 8, 2025, US and Canadian citizens will need to apply for the ETA to enter the UK.

Here's [the link](#) for how to apply.

As well, for NOLS International Alumni trips, your **passport must be valid for a minimum of 6 months post trip**. For example, if your trip in Europe concludes on July 30, 2025, your passport must be valid through January 30, 2026.

At some point in the future (Fall 2026?) Europe (EU) will be requiring a travel authorization for most countries that are visa-exempt. This includes USA citizens. Once this system goes into effect, you will need to apply using this new system before traveling and pay a small fee for the authorization.

[You can read about this new program, check your requirements, and view the most up to date expected implementation date here.](#)

Electricity stuff

Some nights there will be electricity available at our lodging but this is not always consistent. Bringing a backup battery pack is smart if charging is important to you. You will need a Type F adapter in order

to plug your things into the plugs at the lodgings.

Trip Registration

The best way to register is through the trip information page on the nols.edu website. A non-refundable deposit secures your spot on the trip. If any issues arise, please call the NOLS Alumni Department at (800) 332-4280. Your enrollment is complete with receipt of your full tuition and your completed application forms; these are **due 60 days before the start of your trip**.

All participants are required to submit registration materials, including a medical form. These forms highlight the intersection of your trip's anticipated physical rigor and your current health and fitness status while also providing NOLS information about things like your dietary needs.

NOLS is not responsible for additional costs incurred by late arrivals or evacuations. Those expenses are the responsibility of trip participants and we recommend purchasing travel insurance to mitigate the impact of unforeseen circumstances.

Do not book travel greater than 60 days before the start of the trip unless you have confirmed with NOLS that the trip will run. On rare occasions, we do cancel trips due to low enrollment.

Cancellation and Transfer Policy

For your reference, here is the [Alumni Trips Cancellation and Transfer Policy](#). When enrolling on a trip, you will need to agree to this policy.

Recommended Zagreb Activities:

If you are able to arrive early for the trip, here are some recommended activities for the Zagreb area:

- Museum of Broken Hearts - definitely worth the visit!
- Nikola Tesla Museum
- Cathedral of the Assumption (Zagreb Cathedral)
- Dolac Market - mostly outdoor fruit and vegetable market, outstanding flowers in the spring.
- Museum of Hangovers - A comical experience that is very unique to Zagreb!

Packing System:

This trip will use a variety of different packing systems, please read carefully so that you are well prepared.

1. Luggage storage - Anything that isn't going "into the field" with us can be left in Zagreb.
2. Northern Velebit
 - a. Day pack - You will be carrying water, snacks, and layers for the day, nothing more.
 - b. Van Bag - This bag is transported for you in our support vehicle. Additional clothing, toiletries, sleeping bag, book, etc... (around the size of an airplane carry-on)
3. Southern Velebit - You will need to carry water, clothing, and toiletries for a night in a backcountry hut. The hut has clean blankets, sheets and pillows. Have a bit of extra capacity for group food can be helpful as well. (A 35-40L pack is great)

Equipment List

*This list does not include travel clothing or clothing for around town before and after the trip.

Upper Body Clothing	
Equipment	Notes
1-2 lightweight base layers	Wool or synthetic, long underwear style
Top layer (fleece jacket, or puffy)	Medium weight fleece or a mid-weight puffy layer
Long sleeve shirt	Nice for sun protection or cool mornings.
Wind shirt	A lightweight, breathable, durable nylon wind shell, in either pullover or parka style
Rain jacket	A sturdy, waterproof jacket with a hood. Both coated nylon and breathable fabrics such as Gore-Tex® are acceptable
T-shirt (2-3)	A lightweight synthetic or merino wool t-shirt
Sports Bra (2-3)	Synthetic or wool sports bra/top
Warm Hat	Synthetic or wool
Sun hat	Baseball cap or full brim
Lower Body Clothing	
Base layer (light or midweight)	Wool or synthetic long underwear (optional)
Hiking pants	Synthetic pants for hiking.
Rain Pants	It does commonly rain in this area (optional)
Hiking shorts	Nylon, quick dry shorts
Bathing Suit	Some people are happy to swim in their hiking clothes, but we will be visiting the beach.
Underwear (3-4 pairs)	Wear what's comfortable; cotton, silk, or synthetics are fine
Footwear	
Approach or Hiking Shoes	You will need a sturdy pair of shoes to hike in. Consider trail hiking shoes or approach shoes for something lighter than traditional boots.
Hut shoe	Something that you can wear around the hut after hiking. Crocs, Sanuks, sandals, are all fine.
Socks (3-4 pairs)	Something comfortable for you.
Miscellaneous Personal Gear	
Equipment	Notes
Hiking pack	~35-40 Liters is a great size
Water Bottles / bladder	Bottles or bladder with a total capacity of at least 3-4 Liters
Small day pack (optional)	Great for our layover day
1-2 Compactor bags	For waterproofing your gear bag and pack

Sleeping Bag with compression sack	45-50 degrees F is likely the coldest you would need
Pillow (optional) or pillow case	Something compact. Some huts might have pillows.
Sleeping Bag Liner	Sleeping bag liner– these are nice to use on the beds in addition to your sleeping bag
Lip Balm (1-2)	SPF 15 or greater
Sunscreen	SPF 30 or greater
Sunglasses	Good-quality sunglasses, polarized is nice.
Headlamp	Not heavily used, but might be handy
Toiletries	Toothbrush, toothpaste, tampons, etc. Travel or trial sizes are enough. Ear plugs and eye covers can be nice
Optional Items	
Book or e-reader	Bring something fun to read
Camera	We would love to see your photos post-trip!
Casual Clothes	Shirt/pants/skirt for around the huts, Starigrad, or Plitvice
Pack Towel / Sarong	Most places do not have showers, but for a sink wash or our beach day.
Umbrella	Favored by our instructors to keep the rain off
Trekking Poles	Most hikers prefer to have 2 poles. There are some long downhill days on this trip!