

Welcome to

the

Hum, World's Smallest Town

By Jelena Madir

Only a few kilometers from the Adriatic Coast, the northernmost Croatian peninsula of Istria spreads out its lush welcome mat: vast forests of emerald green and pastures through which winding roads cut. As soon as you have adjusted to all the brilliant green, hilltop jewels of central Istria unfold before your eyes. Sea blue is transformed into green in the flicker of a moment, a different landscape from the seashore, but just as beautiful. Here are vineyards and olive groves, brooks and village houses with flowers hanging from the window boxes—tranquility that has not been touched by contemporary rhythms or the proximity to a busy coast.

Istria still moves to the rhythm of the past. In this turbulent time, her mill wheels, silent churches, cricket songs, and hooting owls make up the primordial setting for a time we so often forget. No, that is not a clock tower ticking; it's your heart, beating a bit too loud for Istria's silence. You haven't heard it for a long time, perhaps too long. And listen to that organ playing, its miraculous sounds bringing back those old times when even the most ordinary day was festive and solemn.

Here museums do not have doors; entrance tickets need not be presented. Everything is in the open, all things narrating history. Bells from the ancient city walls greet you. Inhabitants of Hum do, too. Welcome is everywhere you go.

Great masters are not to be found here. Still, works of perennial value have been created by local artisans, reflecting the life and customs and struggles to survive and preserve the name, language, and freedom in these lands that have always been swept by the winds of different cultures. Here we find a unique

monument of Glagolitic culture and literature. If you follow the instructions from one of the stations of the Alley of Glagolitic Priests, your postcard will be written in Glagolitic script. An ideal opportunity to send someone a very important message.

In this great mosaic of small towns that have put themselves on hilltops, not only to defend better but also to be seen better, there is Hum, the smallest town in the world. A town? For all those surprised that an area of fifteen houses and an equal number of inhabitants may be a town, I have a ready answer: A town is determined not only by its size but by its institutions.

Each summer, on the special Day of Hum, the gates of the smallest town in the world swing open, and the prefect is elected. According to medieval custom, the Council of the Elderly or Wise is elected, along with a prefect from among its eleven members.

**Hum is a place tailored to human needs.
Come, or at least give us a call!
For in Hum, the ringing of the telephone
is still an unusual sound.**

The ritual starts with the old prefect accounting for his one-year term. Then follows the most important part, the election of a new prefect. On a square stick, called *rabos*, each of the council members cuts a notch, either on the top or bottom end, depending on their choice of two candidates. And so the new prefect of Hum is elected. His predecessor will then, at his own cost, treat the inhabitants of Hum and surrounding villages to wine, bread, and cheese . . . and what an unforgettable feast that will be!

Although not characteristic of Hum



but of a nearby town, it is worthwhile recalling another election ritual. All those whose virtues make them eligible for candidacy for the honorable station of prefect sit in stone chairs around a large prefect's table which has a gash in the center. A fly is then placed in the gash, and, attracted by whiteness, it will supposedly choose the whitest of the beards to land on. And the whitest beard—as we have been taught by time—belongs to the wisest man, the new prefect.

The revitalization of Hum, a town of some fifteen houses and two churches, commenced in 1972. Until that time the town had been deserted, but a few families decided to move in, thus bringing back life and daily activities. Most of the Hum dwellers earn their living in Buzet or some other nearby town.

Despite rich vegetation, the land is not generous, and farming is not an easy living. From the early years of the fifteenth century, on the border between Venice and Austria County, this area was exposed to many influences and clashes of interest. Conflicts broke out frequently, and erection of town fortifications quickly followed. Aside from that, the human hand has interfered in Hum very rarely; its fortifications haven't undergone major changes since the early fifteenth century, which is why many tourists on the Adriatic Coast are attracted to this pretty town and come to enjoy its uniqueness.

Fortifications and town gates, which instead of knobs have horns of Istrian oxen, are not a divide between inhabitants of Hum and its visitors, but a bridge. Hum's town gates are open to all people of goodwill, and tourists have been coming in great numbers.

With all its beauty and uniqueness, this monument to human survival certainly deserves our attention. After all, if visiting the world's biggest cities is so important, isn't it just as important to visit the smallest? While in big cities you are always a stranger, unnoticed among its people and buildings; here, in the flicker of a moment, you become acquainted with both. In contrast to the alienation of a European metropolis, Hum is a place tailored to human needs.

Come, or at least give us a call! For in Hum, the ringing of the telephone is still an unusual sound. And since Hum happens to have only fifteen houses and twenty inhabitants, you will soon understand why each conversation—and each visitor—becomes an extremely important one.

Welcome to Hum, smallest town in the world! ★

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