

THE LONG WAY HOME

Misadventures in Croatian public transit

By Allison Savage Bates

I was strutting down the sidewalk next to a city street choked with vehicles inching along at a pace that would frustrate a snail. It was a dank August night — peak tourist season on the Dalmatian Riviera. The fact that it was a Tuesday meant nothing, come to find out, because business as usual doesn't exist in Croatia during the summer. Every car was from out of town, and every bus was overflowing with a mix of tourists and weary hospitality workers heading home after long shifts.

But that didn't occur to me when I hopped on the bus in Omiš around 7 pm. Logic told me that if I lingered for dinner and waited for rush hour traffic to clear, it would be smooth sailing back to my hostel in Kaštel Štafilović, 40 kilometers up the coast.

Just outside of Split, that plan turned to shit.

The bus slowed to a crawl and then a complete standstill roughly a kilometer from the next designated stop. Ten minutes passed. Then 20. A British family seated a few rows in front of me convinced the driver to let them off right there on the side of the road, as their hotel was visible just ahead on the left.

The doors swung open and the family ambled off, followed by a few other passengers. I surveyed my situation with the insight and clarity of someone whose head and bladder were full of wine. The transit map showed only four more stops until Split city center. I reasoned I could walk there faster than the bus could drive in that lethargic traffic. Out I leapt.

The boulevard was alive with the energy of a Miami Beach Saturday night. Muffled conversations and upbeat music poured from the hotel bars and konobas flanking the harbour. Fishing charter captains hosed down their boats and fended off meddling gulls as young people played volleyball on large sand courts lining the seawall. When I reached the next bus stop a few minutes later, my former ride was still nowhere to be seen. The Brits were likely already showered and dressed for dinner. I marched merrily along, confident in my genius decision.

An hour passed and my surroundings became more residential. Beach resorts gave way to apartment blocks and grocery stores, and parents collected their children from soccer fields illuminated by moth-crowded floodlights. Thinking I must be very close, I pulled out my phone to check the map.

The battery was dead.

Nature's call was getting harder to ignore. I crossed the road and popped into a gas station convenience store hoping for a bathroom and a set of directions. The clerk on duty was the first and only Croatian I encountered who spoke no English, and he didn't seem interested in trying with me. Crestfallen, I sank down onto the curb outside and contemplated my options. I could admit defeat and backtrack to the resort area in search of a toilet and perhaps a phone charger, or I could soldier onward in my Quixotic quest and pray that Split wasn't too much farther up the road.

I chose the latter and resumed walking, against the grain of traffic and common sense.

The vibe soon devolved from “idyllic seaside family fun” to “industrial deserted highway Dateline episode.” The landscape now consisted of abandoned warehouses, shuttered car dealerships, and junkyards crammed with rusting farm vehicles. Eventually the sidewalk ended and forced me to forge a narrow trail between the highway guardrail and an overgrown field of weeds strewn with litter.

Although the sun had long ago set, the heat and humidity still raged against my perimenopausal body. With every step I took, my inner thighs conspired to create what I’m certain was the worst case of chub rub in human history. And the need to urinate had become catastrophic.

Then, like a mirage, a bus shelter emerged in the distance — the first I’d seen since the one down by the harbor. It was on the northbound side and I was not. I briefly considered making a run for it across six lanes of highway but decided that’s not how I wanted to die. I reversed course, back past the creepy junkyard and spooky weed field, and traveled under the road through a dimly lit pedestrian underpass. I emerged on the other side just in time to see a bus pulling away. Given how this night was going, I wouldn’t have been surprised if it’d been the same bus I smugly disembarked two hours prior.

I collapsed onto the bench, slick with salty sweat and trying desperately to forget about my aching bladder. Vehicle traffic petered out and the road became quieter. Darker. Lonelier.

A pensive mood took hold and flooded my mind with the choices that led me to this moment, in this place. Not just the dubious decision to get off the bus — it was far bigger than that.

It started months ago, when I finally gathered the courage to take action toward shaping a life I love. When I quit my secure, sensible corporate job with great pay and full benefits to pursue my passion for travel. When I sold my house and moved into my parents’ basement so I could afford to freelance and work part-time jobs with no constricting vacation limits. When I booked a flight to Greece, the long-time holder of the number-one spot on my list of places to see before I die, and blissfully watched the Santorini sunset alone after years of waiting in vain for someone “special” to take me. When I decided to wander solo through Croatia with a curious mind and an open heart.

A content smile spread across my face. Yes, I was by myself, in the dark, on the side of a highway in a foreign country with no map or cell service.

But I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

At last another bus pulled up, and before long I was racing through the central depot in Split in a manic beeline for the closest pub. Inside, half a dozen elderly off-duty taxi drivers shot me curious glances through a shroud of cigarette smoke as I nearly beat down the door to the tiny bathroom.

Sweet relief flooded my body and mind as I settled in at the bar. I sipped an ice-cold Ožujsko and chuckled at the thought of my mom’s horrified face if she knew how this night had unfolded. She would find it reckless and scary, but I never lost confidence in my ability to navigate uncertainty. These days, that’s the only thing I’m sure of.

While I hadn’t outsmarted the transit system and my journey was far from over — it was another 22-kilometer bus ride followed by a 20 minute walk to reach my hostel — I felt victorious.