

THE BIG MATCH



PHOTOGRAPHY Filip Horvat  
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# HRVATSKI KRIKET KUP!

From Zagreb to Split, Croatia resounds to the sound of leather on willow, as cricket takes root in another unlikely territory. But how are the local rivalries? **SPIN** finds out







PICTURE: BEN HATWOOD

**A** three-team tournament is taking place in 36-degree heat on a rough-hewn oval that has taken the best-part of four days to mow to an acceptable standard. The sticky outfield is still littered with molehills and the artificial wicket bears the distinct signs of campfire burns on a good length. "Bloody students," grins club president Jasen Butković with a wry shake of his head as he surveys Zagreb Cricket Club's ground near the city's University Sports Complex.

Croatia might not seem an obvious place for cricket to flourish – local rivalries round these parts have traditionally been more like the Lancastrians' battle with Yorkists at the battle of Bosworth Field than a genteel four-day encounter at Old Trafford. But that's before you take into account second-

Main pic: players from Zagreb and Vis take to the field in the first National Cup. Above, right: Youngsters play on Vis. Cricket has recently returned to the island after a gap of nearly 200 years

generation Australian-Croatians returning to the land where their parents were born. It's two such returnees, Robert Dumančić and Ivan Bilić, who set up the first Croatian cricket team in Zagreb in 1998.

For several years the team played in the Austrian league against teams of mostly British ex-pats. Then, in 2001 – once they had recruited a few more players – Ivan branched off from Zagreb to form a rival club in Split, 200 miles to the south, and the Croatian cricket league was born. Meanwhile, over on the idyllic island of Vis, another cricket lover was upping the ante.

Lying around 30 miles off the Dalmatian Coast, Vis is not only one of the most beautiful and unspoilt islands in the Adriatic – it also has a secret cricket history

of its own. Captain Sir William Hoste, the scourge of Napoleon's fleet, established a club there in 1809. Nearly 200 years later, Perth-born cricket enthusiast and local winemaker Oliver Roki revived it, much to the amusement of the current generation of islanders. In the first cricket match to be played on Vis since King George III was around, they were bowled out for 15 by a touring ex-pat side.

"I had no idea what I was doing!" Roki chuckles at the memory. "I'd watched cricket on TV, but I'd never played before. We had 200 people watching the game, more out of curiosity than anything else. I wanted to set an example, so I went out to bat and first ball this guy sends it down and knocks my stumps over!" →

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Getting a diamond duck is something he has never fully been able to live down; after all, he was one of only two people on the island at the time who understood the rules.

In terms of facilities, Zagreb's oval might be modest by UK standards, but it is still the country's best cricket venue; Split currently play on a gravelly football pitch by the airport with drainage ditches around the boundary (a comely obstacle for lack-peddalling fielders) and Vis's ground also doubles – for now – as the island's helicopter landing pad. This isn't through choice, but make-do necessity, as the game in Croatia is driven by passion alone.

With little finance to speak of and near total reliance on European Cricket Council equipment donations, it's a tribute to the players' enthusiasm that not only has the league survived, but two more teams have sprung up in Ivarčić Grad and Komiza (also on Vis island) meaning that this year Croatia has been able to host its own internal cup competition for the first time.

With Ivarčić Grad and Komiza falling at the pre-qualifying stage, the battle between the country's top three sides to claim the inaugural Hrvatski Kriker Kup takes place over a long weekend, with one 30-over match to be played each day.

A new cherry is selected, a coin is tossed, and to a backdrop of slightly bemused dog-walkers in Zagreb, the tournament kicks off

## TO A BACKDROP OF SLIGHTLY BEMUSED DOG WALKERS, THE TOURNAMENT STARTS

go, umpire?). It's the pre-series favourites, Zagreb, who strike first; accurate bowling removes danger men Antonio Lipanović and Lenko Marinković cheaply to reduce Vis to a mere 23 for 8. A splendid rearguard action by Vis' under-13 captain Kiki Stepanović, playing in only his second first-team game, restricts them to a vaguely more respectable 47 all out, but it never looks like being enough. After lunch, Zagreb's vastly older and more experienced side triumph. By 10 wickets, although it has to be said that the islanders looked a little groggy after a 5am start; travelling up from the coast



"We'll have to relegate you to the second division," jokes Zagreb's Miro Bilić, younger brother of Ivan. "You know when we get a second division..."

The younger Vis players retort that it'll be a different story in three years' time, "when you guys are all retired". Vis hope to benefit from

their superb youth set-up, which boasts 50 dedicated members from an island population of just 2,000. These juniors boast skills that match their English counterparts. The young Stepanović bats like a mini Michael Vaughan, with some classic high-elbow off-drives and weathering pull shots.

"The vis side isn't like the other clubs," Dumančić explains. "Zagreb and Split tend to get the pick of the older, more experienced guys because that's where people work. Vis is a more of a local club; they field a 90 per cent Croatian team and always include some of the kids."

It speaks volumes for Vis that they still manage to compete with such advantaged opposition. In their next match, against Split in the Dalmatian derby, only Ivan Bilić reaches double figures in Split's innings, but his extra class makes the difference; he eventually falls 4 runs short of what would have been the first century since the league's formation. Wickets tumble regularly at the other end, Antonio Nad and Lipanović claiming three scalps apiece, but a total of 161/9 presents a daunting target.



Soon the air is filled with shouts of "ketch!", "dobro, dobro, odlično fielding!" (good, good, excellent fielding) and the odd query of "Koliko balls još, umpire?" ("How many to



When Vis' usually reliable top order misfire again the game looks up until a swashbuckling cameo from Oliver Rokl. Unfortunately the end is swift and Vis head



PHOTO: BEN HEYWOOD



back to the pavilion (okay, to sit on the grass under the pine trees) having posted a mere 84, condemning them to the bottom of the table. The Split players celebrate raucously.

"The two most important things to take Croatian cricket forwards are facilities and a proper infrastructure," Miro Bilic tells me. "We really need to get some good all-year wickets for Split and Vis, because now we're playing regularly against visiting touring teams – and each other – we can get the youngsters continually involved – before they get distracted by girls, or football! We have to do it because even one year of stagnation, and that could be it."

The national side is due to contest the European Championships in Belgium

Croatia can't rival Lord's yet (the 'Home of Cricket' doesn't double as a football pitch or a helicopter pad) but there are high hopes for a new site on the site of a vineyard on the island of Vis

this summer, having graduated from the lower Representative Championship tier in 2004 after beating sides from Slovenia, Finland and Luxembourg.

In 2005, Croatia finished seventh from nine in a tournament won by a Norway side made up entirely of Pakistani players. The reliance on ex-pats is an approach that Zagreb's Dumančić is keen to avoid.

"Because we're just starting out, we need to build the game into the national psyche," he tells me the next day as Split and Zagreb take to the field for the tournament decider. "We try to ensure that the best home-grown

players always get a taste of the action so we're not just represented by returnees with a Croatian passport. At the same time, though, we do need guys like John Vujnović – who's played Grade cricket in New Zealand – if we're to stay in our current division. They're invaluable as coaches, too and domestically, we just need more matches, more equipment and more exposure."

Keen to see their Dalmatian rivals crushed, the Vis supporters become Zagreb fans for the day. In a tight game, the bragging rights head to the capital after a match-winning turn from Zagreb's Zdenko Leko, who takes 4/4 and hits 14 not out in a four-wicket victory.

I return to Vis with the islanders just as the sun is sinking back into the Adriatic behind the Jadrolinija ferry. Back in the village of Plisko Polje, Oliver Rokl points out across his vineyards to a large clearing of turned-over earth, conspicuously shaped into an oval. "By next year, this will be a proper pitch," he confirms proudly. "We're going to flatten it, then roll it, maybe even make a small pavilion. What do you think our chances are of hosting the European under-19s tournament?" he asks.

I tell him that cricket among the vineyards and olive groves sounds fantastic. If they build it, I can't help thinking, people will most definitely come.

### WHICH TEST PLAYER COULD TURN OUT FOR CROATIA ONE DAY...?

Ask any of the Vis under-19s who their cricketing hero is, and most – never having seen Test cricket – will name a Vis first-XI player. Ask any older Croatian cricketer, though, and the reply is unanimous; Simon Katich.

"I'm flattered," chuckles the Derbyshire captain, fresh from scoring a solid 80 against Middlesex at Southgate and used to rather less idolatry. "But I've definitely got a bit of that fiery Croatian blood in me!"

His performances in 23 Tests for Australia would

definitely attest to that.

Simon's paternal grandfather was born in Kozica in central Dalmatia and emigrated to Australia in the 1920s, eventually settling in Perth, where Simon played club cricket with Chris Piva, the Croatian side's current batting star. Katich seems genuinely impressed at the progress of the Croatian league and promises to

donate some equipment at the end of the season.

"I'd love to go over, we'll have to see if we can arrange something," he confirms, adding that he still has family near Dubrovnik.

So how does he feel about an invitation to attend try-outs for the Croatian national side?

"That'd be great," he laughs, "but I am still hopeful of a Test recall! As long as I keep in the runs I'm in with a shout!"



Cricket Croatia – and Vis CC in particular – are looking for fresh opponents for 2008. Contact: Ben Heywood on viscricket@thisisvis.com

Hvala Ben Heywoodu



MEDIJSKA ARHIVA