



FORUM

## “Our Adriatic”: Comment on Forum on Adriatic Tourism

Pamela Ballinger

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA

Corresponding author: Pamela Ballinger, e-mail: [pballing@umich.edu](mailto:pballing@umich.edu)

### Abstract

This short piece comments on the articles presented in the forum on Adriatic tourism and their analyses of competing historical claims to “our Adriatic.” The comment focuses on questions raised about ownership of the sea and the Adriatic’s borders of belonging. While sovereignty over areas of the Adriatic has proven an enduring diplomatic issue in both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the forum authors instead consider claims by different types of actors: tourists (particularly Czech tourists who claimed a special relationship between Czechs and their South Slav “brothers”); investors in hotels and related infrastructure; socialist Yugoslav tourism planners; and environmentalists concerned with issues of pollution. In tracing out tensions in the agendas of hosts and visitors, as well as planners and scientists, the forum’s essays measure and map the socio-ecological metabolism of the modern eastern Adriatic.

**Keywords:** Adriatic; tourism; environmental protection; infrastructure; Yugoslavia

A pointed Croatian joke depicts a mixed group of (socialist) Yugoslavs sitting around praising their respective republics. When the mountain of Triglav in Slovenia is mentioned, for example, everyone nods to the Slovene and assents in the glories of “*your beautiful Slovenia*.” Likewise, reminiscences about Sarajevo’s Baščaršija or bazaar elicit praise for the Bosnian and “*your beautiful republic of Bosnia*.” This continues until the group reaches the Croat, at which everyone exclaims, “Oh! *Our beautiful Adriatic!*” In different ways, the three articles contained in this forum address such claims to “our Adriatic,” examining a nexus of issues around ownership of the sea and the Adriatic’s borders of belonging. While the contests over sovereignty that roiled the Adriatic at the end of both World Wars and again with Yugoslavia’s break up in the 1990s operate as an implicit backdrop to these analyses, the authors focus on other types of boundary mechanisms: affective ties, infrastructure, tourism, financial investments, and care/protection of the environment. The authors remind us that the nature of water itself (slippery, fluid, with shifting volumes) makes it particularly productive to think with. The Adriatic Sea, for example, complicates terrestrialized notions of the Habsburg Empire as a quintessential “continental” empire as readily as it challenges visions of the Yugoslav socialist federation as riven by tensions between Dinaric and Pannonian legacies.<sup>1</sup>

Literary critic Predrag Matvejević’s well-known reflections on the boundaries of the Mediterranean, together with its inner seas like the Adriatic, capture this fluidity. Matvejević deems such boundaries “like a chalk circle that is constantly traced and erased, that the winds and waves, that obligations and inspirations expand or reduce.”<sup>2</sup> Channeling Braudel, Matvejević muses about his own birthplace, Mostar, and the degree to which a city fifty kilometers inland from the Adriatic possesses Mediterranean elements or may even be considered a maritime space. Matvejević raises the question,

<sup>1</sup>On the latter, see the vigorous defense of the notion of a “Yugoslav Mediterranean” that rested “upon ideological work on the creation of a specific Yugoslav culture, the promotion of Yugoslavia as a tourist destination, and a collective imaginary of the Adriatic as a shared space among all Yugoslav people.” Anita Buhin, *Yugoslav Socialism: Flavoured with Sea, Flavoured with Salt* (Zagreb, 2022), 47.

<sup>2</sup>Predrag Matvejević, *Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (Berkeley, 1999), 10.

then, of the borders not only of the sea but of those individuals or collectivities who can lay some claim to it. The articles by Felix Jeschke (“A Shakespearean Prophecy Fulfilled? Slav Solidarity and the Colonial Gaze in Czech Tourism on the Eastern Adriatic, 1890s–1930s”) and Igor Tchoukarine (“Climate Therapy and the Making of a Slavic Riviera on the Interwar Dalmatian Coast”) in this forum focus on how Czech tourism during the late Habsburg and interwar periods both rested upon and reinforced claims to a “special relationship” between the Czechs and the Adriatic space, on the one hand, and Czechs and their South Slav “brothers,” on the other.

Within the context of the Habsburg Empire, the Adriatic represented “our sea” for a wide range of peoples with no immediate proximity to the coastline. As in the Yugoslav joke noted above, a sense of the sea’s commonality was not without tensions, particularly when viewed from the perspective of long-term communities along the littoral, some of whom possessed legal title and property rights to that coastline. Not surprisingly, then, the initiatives of Czech investors and tourist operators in places like Baška on the island of Krk and Kupari (near Dubrovnik) have often been read through a colonial (or demi-colonial) lens. Yet, as Jeschke points out, such histories complicate any simplistic account of an imperial center (whether that of Vienna or Budapest) consolidating the margins through tourism development. Rather, Jeschke recuperates these Czech encounters on the Adriatic in order to highlight the multiple and entangled “territorialization of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe.” This insight brings to mind sociologist Michael Mann’s concept of infrastructural power and the ways in which infrastructure, understood in both literal and figurative terms, can serve as a critical agent of territorialization.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as both Jeschke and Tchoukarine detail, the construction of an exclusive resort at Kupari catering to Czech tourists and tastes involved Czech investors in major infrastructural projects: “the Czechs sought to improve local roads, to reforest the rugged surrounding hills, and to mitigate mosquitoes” (Tchoukarine).

Kupari’s luxurious digs soon outpaced in popularity the more spartan tourist offer at Baška, which promoted a horizontal, egalitarian form of tourism. Despite claims to pan-Slavic affinity, tourists at Baška and Kupari alike made few efforts to get to know or live like locals. In this, they were not so different from those nineteenth-century Britons who pioneered mass tourism in the broader Mediterranean region and left the traces of “little Englands” wherever they gathered in large numbers.<sup>4</sup> Similar to the British on the French Riviera ensconced in their “anglais” hotels with tea rooms and English cuisine, Czech visitors to the Adriatic seaside enjoyed the delights of what Jeschke characterizes as “a pseudo-colonial enterprise in which Croatians featured as an exotic backdrop, if at all.” Ironically, the rhetoric of “feeling at home” intended to express the particularities of Slavic fellowship may thus have encoded more the recreation of Czech ways of being that made tourists comfortable than any broader cultural or political solidarity. The comparison to the British and other travelers further raises the issue of what distinguishes the experience at Baška and Kupari from other forms of tourism in the same time period in the wider Mediterranean region.

In his essay, Tchoukarine remarks that despite the relative paucity of scholarship on Czech health tourism at the seashore, the promoters and participants in such health tourism—including Czech balneologists Vojtěch Mrázek, Vladislav Mladějovský, and Ljubomir Letica—partook of broader movements in climate therapy that embraced seashores, mountain air, and mineral waters/spas as important sites for regenerating exhausted urbanites.<sup>5</sup> Here, too, wealthy Britons had created a template, as chronic invalids suffering tuberculosis and bronchitis crowded into resort towns like Nice that offered both the promise of better health and entertainment. By the 1880s, some visitors in search of solace would move on from resorts like Menton in order to escape the pleasure-seeking “Monte Carlo

<sup>3</sup>Michael Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results,” *European Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1984): 185–213.

<sup>4</sup>John Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford, 1987), 45–47.

<sup>5</sup>For a few key works in an expansive literature, turn to Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750–1840* (New York, 1995); David Clay Large, *The Grand Spas of Central Europe: A History of Intrigue, Politics, Art, and Healing* (Lanham, Md, 2015); Alison F. Frank, “The Air Cure Town: Commodifying Mountain Air in Alpine Central Europe,” *Central European History* 45, no. 2 (2012): 185–207.

contingent.”<sup>6</sup> On the Adriatic, too, as Tchoukarine notes, “any attempt to draw a clear distinction between health- and pleasure-seekers is bound to fail.” While some purists might have sought the more bracing experience of Baška, many others happily availed themselves of Kupari’s promise of wellness conjoined with comfort and fun.

The promotion of health tourism relied on medical and other data, sometimes leading to obsessive collection of statistics on things like rain, humidity, and hours of sunshine. Vlastimil Klima, one of the scientists discussed by Tchoukarine, promoted Dalmatia for its clear skies, whereas Julius Glax claimed that Opatija offered more favorable winter weather than the Riviera. (One wonders how the Kvarner’s infamous wind, the bura/bora, factored into such assessments.) The emphasis on sunshine and humidity drew upon neo-Hippocratic beliefs about the whole patient in their environment. But cautions against sunstroke, mentioned by Tchoukarine, also reflected a key seasonal shift, complete by the time of the Habsburg Empire’s dissolution, in Mediterranean seaside tourism. Visitors in search of health, as well as culture and pilgrimage, had once headed to Mediterranean shores for the winter and spring, departing at the onset of the hot summers and leaving the sands and waters to locals. If the outsiders engaged in sea bathing at all, it was of the “cold water” sort pioneered on British shores. With the advent of the twentieth century, however, beach tourism now embraced a new ethos of sunbathing and warm waters. Sun-kissed skin and supple bodies became new markers of health and wellness along the Adriatic.

In the case of the Czech settlements discussed here and many other nascent tourist locales along the Adriatic, local and grassroots initiatives often proved decisive in the establishment of resorts. Scientists like Ambroz Haračić, for instance, engaged in such meteorological data collecting on his native island of Lošinj, helping to found a tourist society in 1886 and undertaking a large scale project of planting both native and exotic species. As a result, in 1892, Mali Lošinj received a designation as a climate sanatorium.<sup>7</sup>

In light of how the co-constitutive development of health and seaside tourism along the eastern Adriatic took its cues from local initiatives that refracted Mediterranean-wide trends, it is not surprising that the branding of resorts like Habsburg Opatija made reference to important progenitors, e.g., “the Austrian Nice” on the “Slavic Riviera” (Tchoukarine). Although the French and Italian Rivas retain a long-standing status as the ur-Riviera, derivative Rivas appear to be in need of continual renewal and reinvention. These refashionings (Austrian Riviera, Yugoslav Riviera, or the 1990s christening of Croatia as a “New Riviera”) point to those continual boundary redefinitions of the sea and coast highlighted by Matvejević.

Both Jeschke and Tchoukarine track the transitions in Czech tourism along the eastern Adriatic from the late Habsburg period into the interwar era of Royal Yugoslavia. Drawing upon Deborah Coen’s investigations of climate science in the (former) Habsburg space, Tchoukarine considers tourism a parallel example in which scaling down occurs with the move from an imperial to post-imperial state. It would be intriguing to determine whether these changes in state borders (and presumably new and more stringent requirements for visas and passports) also entailed a scaling down of tourist trajectories. Did tourists, Czech and otherwise, who had once gone to multiple sites within the Habsburg or Ottoman entities on a modified version of the Grand Tour now restrict their travels to one country, for example, to Kupari or Baška in Yugoslavia? And what, in this scaled down world of Central and East European states, did being a Czech tourist—as opposed to a Slovak or Czechoslovak tourist—mean in theory and practice? How did “national tourism” by Czechs abroad differ (or did it) from that conducted under the auspices of empire?<sup>8</sup>

The Czech claims to a “homecoming” in Yugoslav Dalmatia did not resolve the complex question whether the Czechs, past and present, occupied a semi-colonial position or, perhaps more precisely,

<sup>6</sup>Pemle, *The Mediterranean Passion*, 46.

<sup>7</sup>Lidija Kosmos and Matea Vidulić, *Ambroz Haračić Pokretanje Turizma na Lošinju/Ambroz Haračić and Tourism in Lošinj*, trans. Julija Šuput (Mali Lošinj, 2010).

<sup>8</sup>See Pieter Judson, “Every German visitor has a völkisch obligation he must fulfill: Nationalist Tourism in the Austrian Empire, 1880–1918,” in *Histories of Leisure*, ed. Rudy Koshar (Oxford, 2002), 147–68.

demonstrated semi-colonial behaviors in their exoticization of fellow Slavs and creation of holiday colonies. As Jeschke points out, however, the increased two-way traffic between Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia in the 1920s and 1930s helped dim memories of the Czech role in the Habsburg occupation of Bosnia and reinforced self-congratulatory Czech visions of occupying a third space beyond the colonizer/colonized binary. Travels to Czech lands, in turn, contributed to pan-Yugoslav understandings and a version of “vernacular cosmopolitanism” that later bore fruit in socialist idioms of “Brotherhood and Unity.”<sup>9</sup> Writing of German collaboration in terms of engineering and investment in Ottoman railways, Peter Christensen’s description of a “coaxial thoroughfare, an indivisible conduit with interests and information moving in either direction at all times”<sup>10</sup> seems equally apt to characterize the two-way flows between the Czech and Yugoslav lands that contributed to flourishing tourist infrastructure. Christensen stresses the ambiguity inherent to the German-Ottoman relationship, which proved “far less lopsided and certainly more dynamic” than other Ottoman-European interactions.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps, this notion of coaxiality offers a way out of the reductive terms of colonizer/colonized, as well as those of Orientalism/Balkanism, that have characterized so much of the debate over the “colonial” nature of imperial rule in southeastern Europe.

Whereas the interwar period demonstrated considerable continuity with the early twentieth century in both the expansion of the tourist offer along the Yugoslav coast and the visitors to those resorts, the early socialist period witnessed a shift from elite tourism to so-called trade union tourism focused on domestic workers and fulfilling the promise of the socialist good life.<sup>12</sup> In his article, “‘Dedicated to Serving the Tourist’: Responding to the Environmental Pressures of Adriatic Mass Tourism in the 1980s,” Josef Djordjevski picks up the story at the point at which Yugoslav tourism had diverged from that of other socialist economies, becoming the tourism market in socialist Eastern Europe most dependent on foreign arrivals and their hard currency.<sup>13</sup> Critical to this transformation was the 1965 Basic Law on Catering Activity that permitted Yugoslav citizens to house paying guests and to establish private catering enterprises. The same year witnessed the abolition of tourist visas in Yugoslavia, throwing open the door to foreign tourists. During this decade, Republican governments also began to play central roles in developing regional tourism development policy.<sup>14</sup> The economic and political crises of the 1980s led to ever greater reliance on foreign tourists even as Yugoslav tourism risked killing the golden goose through increased environmental stress and damage, notably eutrophication and red tides from untreated waste.

Djordjevski underlines that Yugoslav tourism planners did not ignore these issues, contrary to a popular view of state socialism entailing a series of environmental catastrophes.<sup>15</sup> Rather, Yugoslavia embraced a language of sustainability, seeking partners in the United Nations Development Programme and later the United Nations Environment Programme. The role of the UN and its co-funding of the Adriatic III project add a new wrinkle to our understanding of the Yugoslav reliance upon international funding and agencies by the late 1980s. Susan Woodward, for example, has made clear how indebtedness to the IMF and the resulting austerity packages contributed

<sup>9</sup>Noah Sobe, “Slavic Emotion and Vernacular Cosmopolitanism: Yugoslav Travels to Czechoslovakia in the 1920s and 1930s,” in *Tourism: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, eds. Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (Ithaca, 2006), 82–96.

<sup>10</sup>Peter Christensen, *Germany and the Ottoman Railways: Art, Empire, and Infrastructure* (New Haven, 2017), 4.

<sup>11</sup>Christensen, *Germany and the Ottoman Railways*, 6.

<sup>12</sup>John B. Allcock, “Yugoslavia,” in *Tourism and Economic Development in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, ed. Derek R. Hall (London, 1991), 235–56, 238–39.

<sup>13</sup>Writing on the eve of the Yugoslav break-up, Hall observed, “while Yugoslavia’s arrivals figures are by no means the highest for the region, the fact that it is the one tourist economy which depends upon a predominantly Western and higher spending market, sees its receipts almost equal to those of the rest of the region combined.” Derek Hall, “Introduction,” in *Tourism and Economic Development in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, ed. Derek R. Hall (London, 1991), 26.

<sup>14</sup>Allcock, “Yugoslavia,” 243.

<sup>15</sup>At the close of the Cold War, Hall expressed a common view: “The region’s image of considerable environmental degradation ... embodies a half-century’s interplay of ideological dogma, economic mismanagement, inefficient technology and poor fuel resources.” Hall, “Introduction,” 10.

to Yugoslavia's unraveling.<sup>16</sup> According to Djordjevski, few of the planned Adriatic initiatives ever came to fruition. Here, we see played out the inherent tensions in the contemporary UN vision of the "right to development" as a human right (according to the Declaration of 1986) and rights to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment (given expression in the General Assembly Resolution of July 2022). One wonders what, if anything, the UN partnership and its demise meant in light of Yugoslavia's end.

Djordjevski leaves it to the reader to decide in the final instance whether or not Yugoslavia represents an early case of what today we would call greenwashing. On the one hand, he recognizes that "the greatest limitation to the coastal Yugoslav model was not a lack of will but rather a lack of the means by which the official approach could be implemented in the long term." In turn, he acknowledges that this dilemma proved common to developing states, regardless of which side of the capitalist/socialist border they fell. On the other hand, Yugoslav efforts focused on visible protection to the neglect of deeper and systemic environmental care. Thus, hidden sewage was not a "problem" until it manifested itself in stinking algal blooms that drove tourists from the beach.

The enormity of the problem in 1988 even led some observers to refer to the red tide as an "Adriatic Chernobyl" or a "hidden sickness," Djordjevski tells us. In fact, this *Death in Venice*-like scenario of trying to keep the bad news from tourists until it became painfully evident (recalling the denial in Mann's tale of the cholera epidemic sweeping the lagoon) has echoes in an earlier episode recounted by Tchoukarine. In the 1920s, rumors circulated about the dangers of malaria along the Yugoslav coast. Climatologist Ljubomir Letica denied the stories despite contrary evidence that malaria continued to plague travelers and locals alike. The deception at the heart of Mann's novella, one compounded by the protagonist Gustav von Aschenbach's own fatal self-deception in staying on in the city, thus gestures to deeper histories in the region of concealing inconvenient truths in the name of attracting visitors.

Despite disasters like red tide and the inadequacy of fresh, clean drinking water in places like the Istrian peninsula, Djordjevski demonstrates how the eastern Adriatic coast paradoxically maintained its image as a place of largely untainted nature—one, however, that could be enjoyed with all the comforts of modern infrastructure for the tourist. The Yugoslav wars and the establishment of the successor states would offer a reset for this image, allowing the narrative reinscription of Balkan "wildness" and beauty. A privatized, largely post-industrial landscape along the coast thus became posited as a preindustrial ("traditional") one—that is, "the Mediterranean as it once was."<sup>17</sup> Yet the historical patrimony of the region also figured into protection and conservation efforts, in this case of cultural heritage. Djordjevski locates this as part of the visual protection efforts that prevailed in late socialist Yugoslavia. Thus, eliminating the visible pollution on buildings in places like Dubrovnik in the 1980s assumed priority over invisible and more intractable pollution in places like the sea.<sup>18</sup>

Djordjevski does acknowledge socialist Yugoslavia's successes, albeit limited, in environmental protection, as with the creation of natural parks and protected areas. Recent work on Italian fascism and ecology, however, suggests that an overly narrow focus on the "greenness" of a particular regime may not be the most productive question to ask. Armiero, Basillo, and von Hardenberg declare, "we are not interested in understanding how many hectares of land were reserved for national parks or how many trees were planted during the fascist period." In the case of several parks established under fascism, for instance, the motives included desire to preserve a charismatic species or even to introduce alien ones or to provide structures for tourist development rather than conservation *per se*. Rather than evaluate the greenness of these initiatives, these scholars aim to "investigate how the regime produced socioecological formations"—what they call the "socioecological metabolism."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Susan Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington, DC, 1995).

<sup>17</sup>On this popular tourist promotion slogan in post-independence Croatia, see <https://www.croatiaweek.com/croatia-the-mediterranean-as-it-once-was-to-be-the-slogan-that-once-was/>; See Pamela Ballinger, "Mobile Natures: Tourism, Symbolic Geographies, and Environmental Protection on the Croatian Adriatic," *Journal of Tourism History* 6, no. 2–3 (2014): 194–209.

<sup>18</sup>Derek Hall, "Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: Overcoming Tourism Constraints," in *Tourism and Economic Development in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, ed. Derek R. Hall (London, 1991), 59.

<sup>19</sup>Marco Armiero, Roberta Biasillo, and Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, *Mussolini's Nature: An Environmental History of Italian Fascism*, trans. James Sievert (Cambridge, 2022), 4, 72.

The articles that make up this forum offer an invaluable guide to measuring and mapping the socio-ecological metabolism of the modern eastern Adriatic. Tourism and tourists have played significant roles in these formations in ways that go beyond conventional perspectives such as those of imperial center and periphery or host country and supply country. The activities of Czech visitors and investors in the first decades of the twentieth century responded to local claims to “our beautiful sea” (ljepo naše more) with competing assertions to “our” sea (naše krásné morě). In key moments, these claims became complementary and coaxial, though never without ambiguity and ambivalence. The expansion in the current moment of UNESCO protection over cultural and natural heritage along that Adriatic coast (with ten protected sites in Croatia alone and almost all of them on the littoral) increasingly stakes universal claims to “world” heritage. As those environments become ever more fragile, will a global sense of the Adriatic as “our sea” bring wider accountability and shared ethics of care and conservation?