



PLITVICE

Land of the Falling Lakes

Robert Thompson



Land of the Falling Lakes

Croatia has long been renowned for its outstanding natural beauty. Plitvice is the most famous of Croatia's eight national parks. Robert Thompson visited the area and has some very fond memories to share with us

The rich azure waters of Croatia's famed Adriatic coastline are peppered with picturesque islands, pine-fringed beaches and rocky coves that stretch over 1700km in length. The allure and serenity of steeply wooded hillsides and valleys makes it an idyllic location for the landscape photographer. From an environmental perspective, Croatia is one of the finest examples of pristine natural habitat in Europe and no longer the hidden gem it once was; nevertheless, its beauty and charisma have not diminished in any way.

Plitvice is the most famous of Croatia's eight national parks and is the country's largest, some 300 square kilometres in size. It was designated in 1949 and received UNESCO's world

heritage status in 1979. The park is located in the mountainous karst region of central Croatia near the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is a truly captivating place with a collection of sixteen turquoise-coloured lakes, which are connected to each other by an elaborate series of streams and waterfalls.

The formation of the lakes is the result of the amalgamation of various river systems; all are interconnected, producing a continuous water flow that runs from the highest lake cascading down through the others, creating an impressive series of waterfalls which have an amazing array of colours, ranging from turquoise through to green. This variation in colour depends largely

on the depth of the pools, mineral content and the intensity of sunlight.

The lakes are divided into upper and lower systems. Protection from pollution of the whole ecosystem in the park is paramount and taken very seriously by the authorities. All of the boats on the lakes are electric, and no vehicular traffic is permitted in the park. When you stand and gaze into their crystal clear waters you can appreciate why a place such as this needs protecting.

Flora and Fauna

The park naturally is a haven for wildlife; brown bears, wolves and lynx, are the most notable mammals. It also has a considerable list of plants; twelve species of amphibians; a similar

number of reptiles; seventy species of butterfly and fifty-five species of orchid, including the eye-catching Lady's Slipper: more than enough to keep even the most dedicated photographer busy.

Fish abound in the lakes and sheltered pools and the clarity of the water is amazing, especially when sunlight strikes the surface. Brown trout and European chub are among the most frequently seen species along the lake margins, but there are many others as well.

My first encounter with Croatia and Plitvice was back in 1990 shooting stock images on medium format for agencies and travel guides. I returned in 1991 for a very brief visit, which was

the year that civil unrest broke out in what was then, Yugoslavia. I did not have the time to explore the whole park, but hoped to return and give it the time it truly deserved. For anyone who has a passion for photographing water, this is the "holy grail" of waterfall systems in Europe.

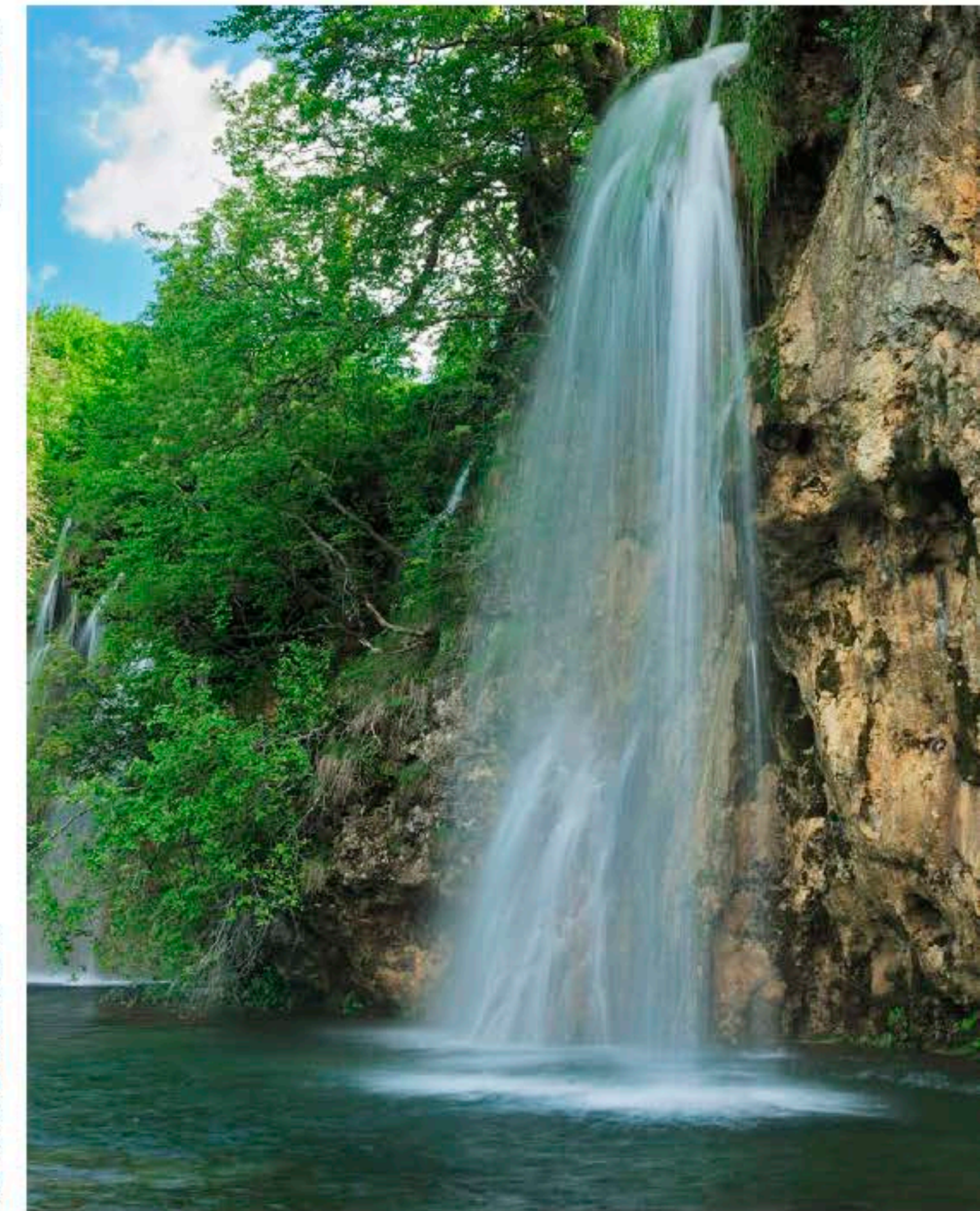
Late May is an ideal time to visit Plitvice; the foliage on the trees is fresh and the number of tourists at this time is less than the large crowds that generally frequent the park during the summer months. However, expect it to be busy when the weather is good.

The climate of Plitvice is mainly continental and changeable; each has its advantages and disadvantages from a photographic point of view.

A five-day trip is ideal; this allows time to explore both the upper and lower lake systems and scout suitable locations for photography. It can, at a push, be done in three, but this leaves you without days in hand should the weather prove difficult and little time to target suitable locations at the appropriate time of the day. The meadows and woodlands have their own interesting flora and fauna and are well worth exploring.

My trip to Croatia on this occasion was mainly to photograph the country's native wild orchid population. I had a number of sites to visit in the Dubrovnik area and in several other localities near Split as well as on the Istria peninsula, »

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Opposite
Milanovacki Slapovi waterfalls
Nikon D3X
105mm macro lens
f/16, 1.20sec. ISO 100

Right
Waterfall at Galovac Lake
Nikon D3X
24-70mm lens
f/16, 0.3sec. ISO 100

All pictures © Robert Thompson

» but had agreed to take a group of photographers to Plitvice for four days. Prior to our arrival, the weather had been poor with persistent rain for several days. Nevertheless, I was hopeful that it would pick up and stay dry, at least for some of the time.

The following morning we had breakfast early. I was eager to investigate the lower lakes first and re-acquaint myself with some of the locations I had explored on a previous trip. The weather had improved vastly from the previous evening and the sun was intense, making photography challenging; glaring light on water is not an ideal mix, even for cameras that boast a high dynamic range. I found myself faced with situations frequently where the upper sections of some waterfalls were partially lit with intense sunlight (stripping any remaining detail from the plunging water) while the lower third was in deep shadow. I decided to target locations in more open positions and return to the others later in the day when the light was more favourable.

Photographers can be a contrary breed: we crave the light when there is none and complain when we do not

want it. As someone who has spent a considerable part of my photographic career specialising in close-up and macro photography, battling with bright sunlight is an issue for me frequently, especially when working abroad.

The remaining three days in Plitvice were, for the most part, extremely bright and sunny; I found myself retreating into the woodland in search of orchids and insects during the middle part of the day and re-emerging in the late afternoon when the lighting conditions were more favourable, and the tourists were thinning out. We found the evening to be a more productive time with less contrasting lighting conditions, resulting in a more pleasing and balanced effect.

Photographic Approach

It is easy to be overwhelmed when you experience the park and its crystal clear waters for the first time, but, be under no illusion, despite its great beauty it can be challenging photographically when the light is strong and directional. A number of the cascades are north facing

and shooting into the light requires graduated ND filtration to cope with the exposure differential.

If you are staying in any of the three hotels situated in the park, then an early start is advisable if you want peace to absorb the tranquil serenity of the place before the mob of sightseers descend. The mayhem usually starts around 11 a.m., when most of the coaches start arriving; this continues until 2 p.m., after which most people start to filter away. By 4 p.m. it becomes relatively quiet again. One other option is to start the opposite way round and work against

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the flow, which will buy you some extra time. Dealing with the frequent procession of tourists can try the patience of even the most disciplined photographer; this is especially the case when photographing on the boardwalks. The vibration from the herds of approaching feet can make even the heaviest tripod bounce in step.

Photographic Hardware

If you like the freedom to photograph without the burden of a tripod, then, in my opinion, you might want to reconsider your option before visiting

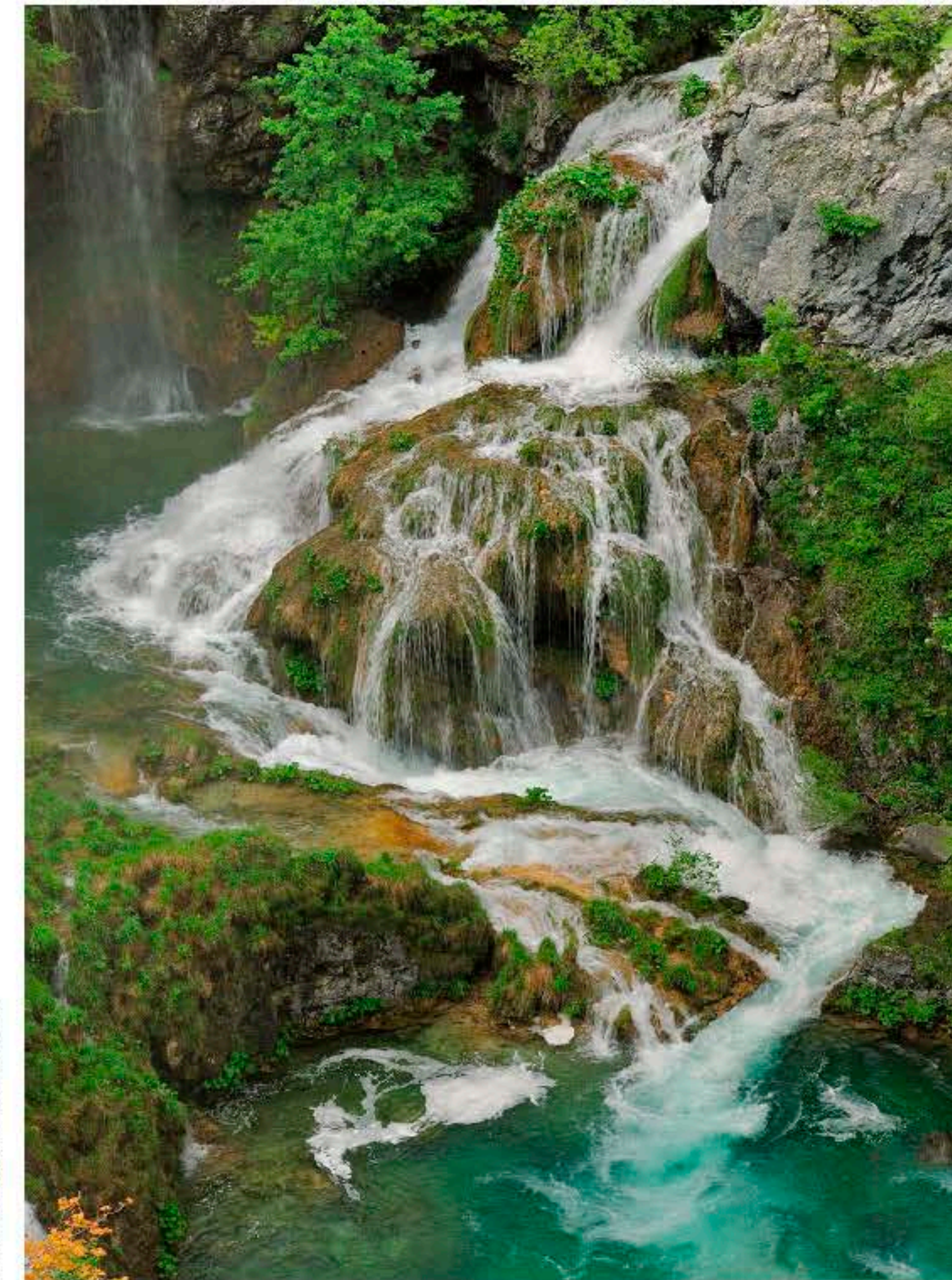
Plitvice. I carry a large tri-legged piece of metal everywhere I go, shooting every image I can from a tripod (a discipline deeply engrained in me from my medium format days), and only resort to a monopod when the terrain prevents me from doing so. The need to have a sound methodical approach to your work is paramount when working with high resolution cameras, and where you need complete control over the entire range of aperture/shutter speeds, precise point of focus, and framing at the camera's optimum ISO. The varied topography of the

landscape and woodland habitats means a variety of lenses will be needed. On the wide-angle front, a focal range from 17mm to 35mm will cover most situations; this includes working from the boardwalks when you are often very close to some of the larger waterfalls. Having a wider focal length here is a real advantage as 24mm is tight on some of the larger cascades. Another issue is exposure variation; you will often find yourself shooting into the light and this brings its own problems whether the sun is shining or not. If you are one of the old school and use graduated neutral »



Opposite
Veliki Slap & Sastavci waterfalls
Nikon D3X
Nikon 24-70mm
f/16, 1.13sec. ISO 100

Right
Sastavci waterfall
Nikon D3X
Nikon 105mm macro
f/16, 0.6sec. ISO 100



» density filters (GND) then do not leave home without them. I shot virtually every cascade with at least one and frequently two in some cases, and a polariser to deal with reflections on the water and foliage.

I had a 200mm macro lens with me, which was the ideal choice for flower portraits, especially the orchids, making it easier to control the background clutter. It also doubled up as an excellent telephoto lens when I needed to refine the composition of some of the distant cascades.

Opposite • *Orchis tridentata*

Nikon D3X
Nikon 200mm macro
f/11, 0.8sec, Fill-flash, ISO 100

Below • *Leuciscus cephalus*

Nikon D3X
Nikon 24-70mm
f/7.1, 1/250sec, ISO 400, CP filter

Planning Your Trip

The park is open all year round, and each season has its own particular beauty, but the spring and autumn colours are quite memorable. There are two entrances to the park entitled simply, Entrance 1 and Entrance 2; the latter closes during winter. Access to certain areas throughout the winter months can be restricted due to heavy snowfalls. The lakes and waterfalls generally freeze over during December and January producing wonderful ice formations. In my opinion, spring and autumn are the best times to visit.

It is a good idea to contact the park's information centre to check on water levels in the lakes before you go. This is especially the case in the autumn as warm dry conditions in late summer with little rain have a direct bearing on the flow of water and subsequently the grandeur of the cascades.

Getting Around the Park

There is a network of clearly marked paths and much longer trails, which involve several hours of walking for those who are more adventurous. The upper lakes (the larger group) are situated among dense forests comprised mainly of beech and fir and connected by numerous waterfall systems. There are also paths that connect between the lakes allowing you to get up close to most of the waterfalls. Access to others is via boardwalks, most of which are not "vibration free". Pollution-free electric boats also ferry you between the larger lakes to access other paths and trails throughout the park. A shuttle bus operates in the park, and you can walk part of the way and then get the bus back to one of the entrance points. The upper lakes are further away from the central hub of the park and, therefore, generally less crowded. The lower lakes are smaller, shallower »



» and more popular with coach tours that frequent the park on a daily basis. However, they do contain some of the larger waterfalls, including Veliki Slap at 256 ft., which is the highest in the national park. This area tends to be more popular with day-trippers who do not have the time to explore the whole area, but it is well worth exploring locations in-between the trees, especially on the high paths where there are some nice views.

How to Get There

Plitvice can be reached easily from a number of places. From Zagreb, the journey time by car is around 2½ hours along the A1, the main north-south arterial route to Split. There is also a bus service from the airport to the national park, but it runs less frequently in the off-season. The journey from Split is about 3 hours by car and there is also a bus service. Other direct bus routes include Zadar and Opatija. From Dubrovnik, the 457km journey is considerably longer by car, around 6 hours.

Accommodation

There are three hotels situated in the national park, Hotels Jezero, Plitvice and Bellevue, which are beside each other near Entrance 2. There is also a good range of private accommodation in the form of apartments, guesthouses in the surrounding towns and villages, and a large campsite several kilometres from the park near Entrance 1. ✦



Robert Thompson

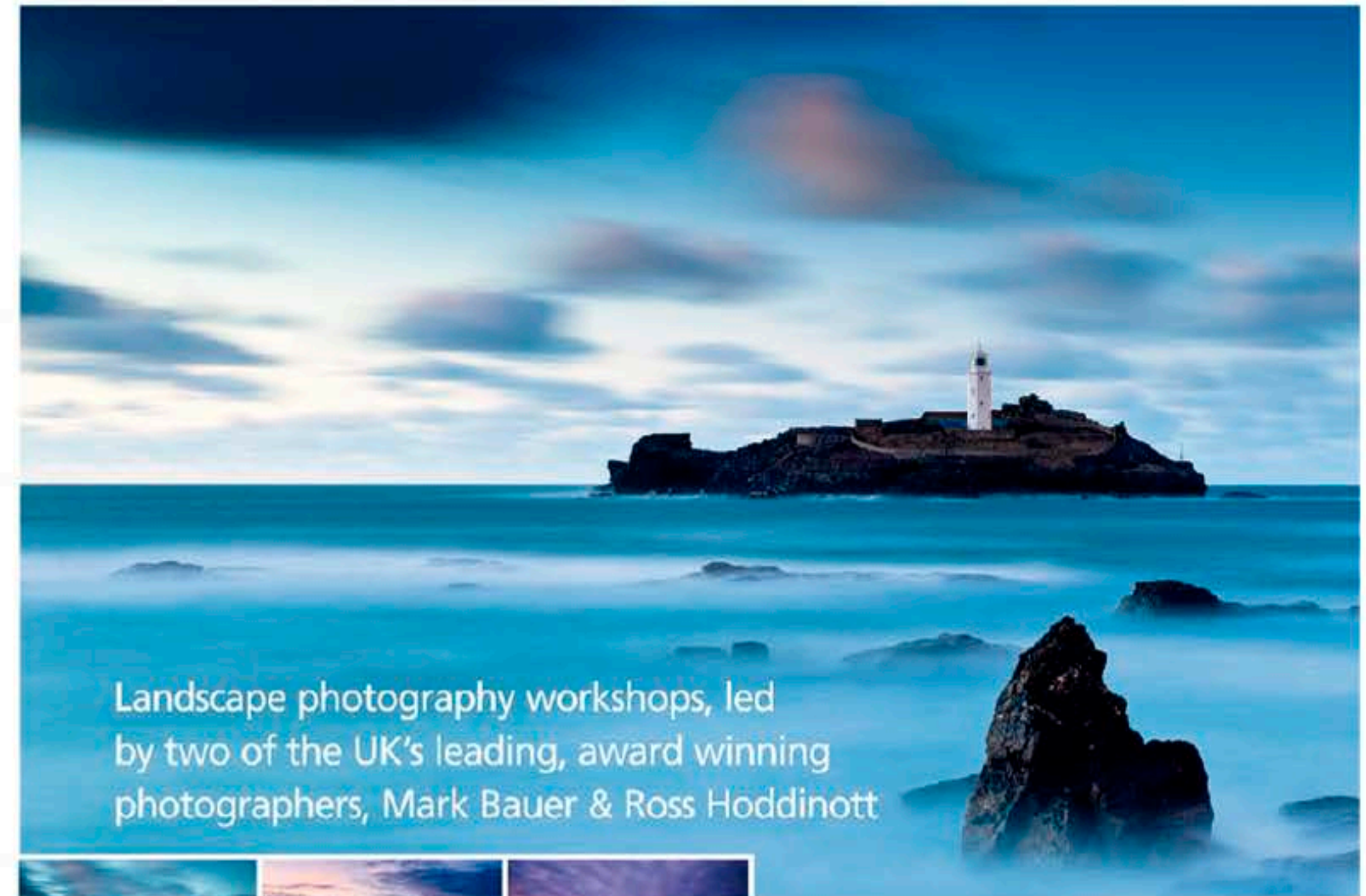
Robert Thompson is an accomplished natural history photographer, writer, and naturalist living in Ireland. He is an

acclaimed macro specialist and author of a number of books on natural history and photography. His work is widely published in the UK, Ireland and internationally. To view more of his work visit

www.robertthompsonphotography.com

Longhorn Beetle *Morimus funereus*

Nikon D3X
Nikon 105mm macro
f/16, 0.8sec, flash, ISO 100



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