The villages of Lonjsko polje — Čigoć, Krapje, Lonja and others — stretch along the left bank of the Sava as it sweeps east towards its distant rendezvous with the Danube below the fortress of Kalemegdan in Belgrade. A narrow winding road separates the river from the neat rows of wooden houses, some of them over two hundred years old and representative of a style of architecture now lost in much of Croatia.

Occasionally an oxbow lake, long severed from the river’s course and now a place of motionless reed beds and chirping frogs, makes the road swing away from the river briefly, before inevitably drifting back to follow its course again. Livestock can be glimpsed in fields and among the wooden barns and other outbuildings, including the narrow, open-air feed stores, filled with multicoloured cobs of corn. Tall crops of corn stand yellowing in the alluvial rich soil of the surrounding fields, and sunflowers, blackened at the end of the season, hang their charred heads. Passing through Kratečko, a slash in the riverbank leads down to a traditional ferry, which drifts over to the opposite shore, providing the only crossing point along this stretch of the Sava between Sisak, to the northwest, and Jasenovac, far away to the south-east on Croatia’s border with Bosnia.

Above: Lonjsko polje nature park in early October, after the floods of September 2010 (photo by Rudolf Abraham)
Lonjsko polje constitutes the largest wetland area in Croatia, and is protected as a nature park (park prirode) as well as being inscribed on the Ramsar list of wetlands of international importance. Covering an area of more than fifty thousand hectares, this vast flood plain is home to numerous species of plants, birds and animals, and is the site of Croatia’s first ornithological reserve, created at Krapje Đol in 1963.

The wooden houses in the villages along this stretch of the Sava are built at right angles to the river, stretching back much further than their narrow facades would initially suggest. The corners clearly show the distinctive traditional joinery, the horizontal planks meeting in something which looks rather like a large dovetail — or a vuglec, to give it its proper name. The earlier houses actually originally had square joints — and if the houses’ regular plank construction looks rather like they could all just be packed down and reassembled, that’s because they actually were. Families would simply disassemble their home and move it according to the whims of the river Sava, which like all rivers had a habit of flooding dramatically or gradually changing its course.

The houses were made by locals rather than trained builders or craftsmen (though they are nevertheless beautifully made), and the more simple joinery also reflects this. The roofs were originally thatched, but this was later replaced by tiles, and the more simple joins (Hrvatski vuglec) superseded by the more complex (and more permanent) dovetail variety (Njemski vuglec) — the latter through the influence of more highly skilled German craftsmen.

It’s all a rather far cry from the more familiar Romanesque, Venetian and Gothic architecture of the coast, or the Habsburg and Secessionist buildings of Zagreb and the Croatian interior — yet it is as much a part of Croatia’s architectural heritage as...
as the massive walls of Dubrovnik or the elegant bell towers of Rab, and the village of Krapje has been declared a national architectural monument.

“Have you noticed,” asks Davor Anzil as we drive along the road between Čigoć and Sisak, “that the houses have no chimneys?” I realise that I hadn’t noticed, though having been told so it now seems blindingly obvious. Chimneys imply an abundance of timber to burn, and timber implied wealth to the region’s former Austro-Hungarian overlords — and thus carried a higher tax. Villagers found a way around this extra tax by simply building chimneyless houses, and letting the smoke from their fires up into the upper story of the house. Now the Posavina oak used to build these houses is legendary for its density and hardness, and it held the smoke within the well-joined dwellings remarkably efficiently — such that the upper storeys of these houses thus became the obvious place to smoke the ham from the local Turopolje pigs.

“And you cannot imagine,” continues Davor, his fingers pinching the air in front of him in a gesture of utmost satisfaction, “how sweet the ham is from our Turopolje pigs.” Actually the chances of trying this particular ham are these days fairly slim, as the Turopolje pig is one of the scarcest breeds of pig in the world.

Lonjsko polje is best known these days however for its storks, which arrive in droves and nest on rooftops and on specially constructed wooden platforms — there being, of course, no chimneys — in great tangled masses of twigs. The storks are present in the area from April to August, during which time there are around 200 or more of them in Čigoć alone, earning the village the title of first European Stork Village in 1994. Outside this period they can be found making their way some several thousand kilometres to sub-Saharan Africa. It is thought they started nesting in the area in the mid-nineteenth century, at the time when the position of

![Map of northern and eastern Croatia showing the Turopolje and Posavina regions. The three wetlands mentioned in the text are all denominated in blue. Selected other places, most of them mentioned in the text, are shown for reference.](image)

![Traditional joinery: on the left the older square variety (Hrvatski vuglec) at the large wooden Modić-Bedeković manor at Donja Lomnica (built in 1806), near Velika Gorica, Turopolje; on the right, the younger variety (Njemški vuglec) at a traditional wooden house in Krapje, Lonjsko Polje (photos by Rudolf Abraham)'](image)
the houses became more permanent. The white stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) is the most prominent visitor, but there are black storks too (*Ciconia nigra*), a far more reclusive species, and spoonbills (*Platalea leucorodia*). The storks had all left at the time of my most recent visit (in October 2010), and I found the area had a strangely empty feeling, despite the presence of its human inhabitants.

The human population of Čigoć, along with other villages in Lonjsko polje, is an ageing one, and it is falling steadily — from several hundred in the early part of the nineteenth century, to fewer than 100 today. This means fewer people are keeping livestock and maintaining pastures, which in turn means fewer areas suitable for storks and other wading birds. This is something the local conservation agencies are trying to redress by clearing unused and overgrown pastures.

The whole region along this part of the Sava is called Posavina — a ill-defined area which stretches across southern Slavonia and into northern Bosnia. Along with its wooden architecture and storks, the area is also home to several distinctive breeds of local livestock. Herds of slightly stocky, well-built Posavina horses wander freely across communal grazing land fringed by forest and marshland. Then there are those distinctive Turopolje pigs, and long-horned Posavina cattle — an almost primeval-looking animal, and a far cry from the now ubiquitous Holstein or Jersey. There’s even a local breed of dog, the Posavski gonič or Posavina hound. This is an agile, brown- and-white hunting dog, bred in the area since the sixteenth century (and mentioned in a document in Đakovo as early as the fourteenth century).

Beyond the boundaries of Posavina to the north-east lies another great area of wetland, Kopački rit, in the delta of the river Drava where it meets the Danube, while to the west near Jastrebarsko lie the marshes of Crna Mlaka. Both are Ramsar sites, and like Lonjsko polje, Kopački rit also has the status of a nature park. Yet despite their importance, these areas receive infinitely less attention than the sweeping, tumbling cascades and travertine beds of Plitvice Lakes and Krka national parks.

**Turopolje**

As you fly inland from Pula or Rijeka towards Zagreb, the River Kupa unravels across the landscape below in a series of tightly bunched coils, like a silver snake. Scattered among the towns and villages, which dot the countryside north to the River Sava and the southern fringes of the Croatian capital, are a remarkable series of wooden churches, some of them dating back to the seventeenth century.

The Chapel of the Wounded Jesus (Kapela Ranjenog Isusa) sits rather incongruously by the main road as it sweeps past Zagreb’s international airport at Pleso, in the shade of a couple of trees and surrounded by an old picket fence. Trucks and buses rumble past the dark wooden facade with its carved decoration, the slender spire poking up into the sky as crows and magpies flap past, and
the occasional aircraft cruises in to land on the nearby runway.

The road in front of the chapel was only built in the last couple of years — and there was once corn growing in the fields on either side of the church, says Vanja Hinić, remembering her childhood here. Then she adds, laughing, “We used to call it čokoladica (the diminutive of ‘chocolate’), because of the dark brown wooden boards.” Naša čokoladica. Our little chocolate church.

The chapel looks strangely out of place in its twenty-first century, suburban environment. It is as if it had accidentally fallen out of the sky, or had been mysteriously transported from the dust-whipped streets of an old Western. There is an information board, with an English translation, yet visitors remain conspicuously few and far between, despite the fact that many of them actually arrive in Croatia at the airport just around the corner.

South-west of Velika Gorica, a narrow road winds up through the beautifully wooded hills of the Turopolje region. We pass through villages with traditional wooden houses, and at Donja Lomnica, a large wooden manor undergoing restoration. A grey cat stretches lazily by the doorway, and upstairs we find a hallway floored with smooth black and white pebbles, with a wooden beam embedded through the middle providing a ‘walkway’ which would be warmer on the feet in winter.

At Gustelnica we stop at the late nineteenth-century Chapel of St Anthony of Padova — a comparatively tall, narrow building, differing in style from most Turopolje churches since it was not built by local craftsmen, but with a beautifully paneled interior. Ironically we also pass a house being methodically disassembled, as it might have been two hundred years earlier, its boards numbered carefully as it’s taken apart. I am told that the house, and the land it stands on, have most probably been sold.

Finally we come to the village of Lijevi Štefanki, scattered about across hillsides fringed by forest, above the River Kupa. It takes a while to find the tiny wooden chapel of St George, its slightly lopsided spire topped with a conical roof and a weather vane sporting a rooster. Amazingly it dates from 1677 (though it originally stood in a different location, having been moved here in 1714) and is still in use. The interior is a breathtaking mass of painted decoration across walls and ceiling, with a surprisingly lavish altar. Stepping outside again I notice a shrapnel scar from a mortar shell across some of the wooden planks, inflicted during the 1991–95 war.

**TRAVEL FACTS**

Trains and buses leave from Zagreb’s Glavni kolodvor and Autobusni kolodvor respectively for Sisak almost every hour (taking 1 hr), from where there are four buses daily on weekdays and one on Saturdays to the villages of Lonjsko polje, including Čigoć, Krapje and Lonja. Bus 268 from Zagreb’s Glavni kolodvor goes to Velika Gorica several times an hour (taking 25 mins), stopping near the Chapel of the Wounded Jesus at Pleso and the turn-off to Velika Mlaka, where there is another wooden church, the beautifully restored St Barbara.

Getting to some of the other churches in Turopolje can be a little more complicated and is difficult — or at least much more time-consuming — without your own wheels. They would however make an excellent cycle tour.

Lonjsko polje nature park ([www.pp-lonjsko-polje.hr](http://www.pp-lonjsko-polje.hr)) has offices in the villages of Čigoć and Krapje. Usti Lonja guesthouse ([www.ustilonja.hr](http://www.ustilonja.hr)) offers bed and breakfast, half or full board in Lonja; Iža na Trem ([www.iza-na-trem.hr](http://www.iza-na-trem.hr)) offers bed and breakfast in Čigoć.

The Turopolje Museum is open 9am–6pm Tuesday to Friday (until 8pm on Thursday), 10am–1pm Saturday and Sunday, and is closed on Monday ([www.muzej-turopolja.hr](http://www.muzej-turopolja.hr)). During the winter it closes at 4pm on weekdays.

The website of the Zagreb County Tourist Office ([www.tzzz.hr](http://www.tzzz.hr)) has information on the wooden churches of Turopolje, including contacts for opening them, and the very helpful Velika Gorica Tourist Office ([www.tzvg.hr](http://www.tzvg.hr)) has plenty of information as well as an excellent map.
After the flood

At the time of returning to Lonjsko polje and Turopolje to research this article in early October 2010, the area had just been subjected to devastating floods, with large areas under water, and the Sava sweeping through southern Zagreb at an alarming height against its flood banks. Along with these flood banks, the Sava’s flood defence system includes a large channel or kanal enclosed between high earth barriers (the Odra, near Velika Gorica), and another channel running north from the Sava from near Lonja and into the flood plains of Lonjsko polje — which together carry flood waters away from the Sava and the capital.

I walk north from Čigoć, between fields of yellowing corn, as buzzards circle slowly overhead, and with the calls of a dozen different wading birds audible in the distance. Frogs scatter at every step, landing with a series of audible plops, and pairs of dragonflies float past, copulating in the lazy autumn sun. Then the track climbs up to the top of the flood bank — and my jaw drops. Beyond the flood bank, water stretches in every direction, punctuated only by occasional reed beds and half-submerged trees. A pair of swans glides past, and grey herons flap from one reed bed to another. The road ahead — littered with the pale bodies of drowned earthworms — drops into this astonishing landscape, re-emerges briefly then simply vanishes into the blue. Water levels such as these, I am told, have not been seen for the past quarter of a century or more.

Back on the ‘dry’ side of the flood bank — dry being a highly relative term here, and equating in this case to deep mud — I find Joso walking through a herd of Posavina horses to check the water level on the other side. It’s falling slowly, he says of the flood water, gently stroking a dappled mare — but more rain will be on its way soon. Then he adds, smiling wryly and waving his cigarette in the direction of the waterworld beyond the levee, Posavsko more. Posavina sea.

Then I turned back towards Čigoć, with its ragged, empty storks’ nests. It was getting late, and the mosquitoes — of which, let it be known, Lonjsko polje has no fewer than eight different varieties — had discerned new blood in their midst, and were starting to bite.

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Writer and photographer Rudolf Abraham first visited Croatia in 1998, lived in Zagreb from 1999–2001, and continues to make several trips a year to his favourite country in Europe. He recently updated the Bradt guide to Croatia, and is the author of ‘National Geographic Traveler Croatia’ and ‘Walking in Croatia’, as well as hiking guides to Montenegro and Patagonian Chile. Rudolf is a regular contributor to hidden europe. More about his work at www.rudolfabraham.co.uk.