



## The Imperial Riviera

Trieste, Croatia and the Istrian Peninsula

**7–13 September 2026 (MM 167)**

7 days

Lecturer: Dr Mark Thompson

Follow in the footsteps of the Habsburgs, Europe's leading imperial dynasty.

Explore three countries from one hotel, crossing between Italy, Slovenia and Croatia.

All six nights are spent in Trieste.

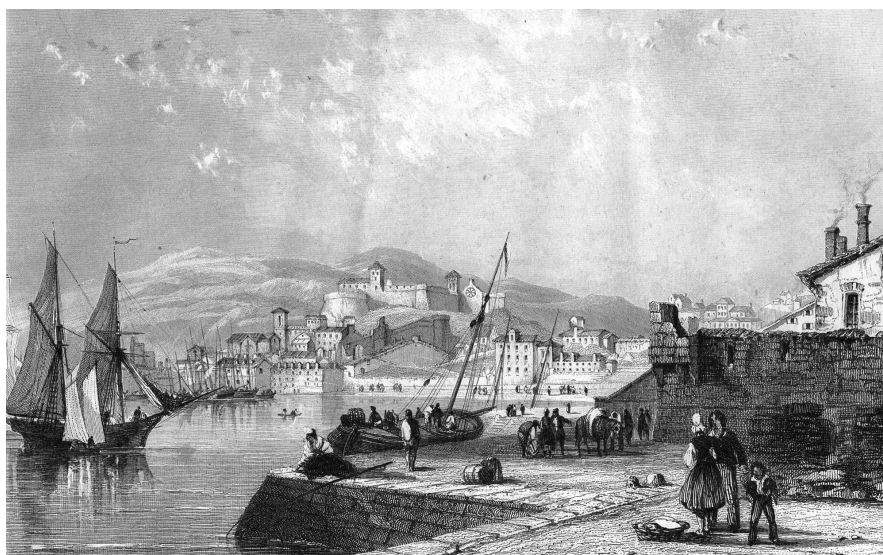
Led by Dr Mark Thompson, historian of 20th-century Italian and Balkan history.

The Habsburg Empire vanished barely a hundred years ago but its legacy is still apparent in the seaport of Trieste, its hinterland and the adjoining coastline. The region was once a progressive and prosperous international melting pot, but in the 20th century it was riven by borders, often contested. The result was that the territory became peripheral and dropped from mainstream tourist itineraries – despite the hoard of extraordinarily handsome cities and settlements, sensationally interesting history and outstanding natural beauty.

This tour evokes the memory of a multi-national and multi-confessional empire. Under Vienna's tutelage, Trieste became not only the third-largest city of the Austrian Empire but also one of the greatest ports of the world. Through it came most of central Europe's coffee, fruit and colonial wares. A multinational plutocracy took advantage of light regulation and low taxation to establish fortunes in Trieste which have survived well into our times.

To the south-east of Trieste, the Adriatic coast was developed to accommodate the wishes of a newly prosperous imperial middle class who sought refuge from metropolitan life; the coastline rejoiced in the name Imperial and Royal Riviera. The thermal springs and bathing facilities of Opatija (Abbazia) along the Kvarner (Quarnero) peninsula were one such attraction. With its turn-of-the-century villas and hotels the town still exudes an atmosphere of Edwardian elegance.

Across the Quarnero bay lies the city of Rijeka (Fiume). While Trieste flourished on Austrian investment, Rijeka was developed by the Kingdom of Hungary, making it the Empire's second port. Both cities had their heyday in the decades before 1914. Along with commerce, industry and shipbuilding, Rijeka gained magnificent streets and palaces, a



*Trieste, steel engraving c. 1840.*

theatre to rival those in Vienna or Budapest, and railways to the interior.

Away from these thriving cities, the old coastal settlements of western Istria appeared little changed by the Empire. Their Venetian tenements and bell towers, stone harbours and painted fishing boats dated from earlier times. Yet the modernising hand of Vienna was active here, too: building roads and hospitals, canneries and glassworks, barracks, schools and hotels. Linked to Italian culture over the sea and with the immense Slavonic world at their backs, these towns evolved a precarious frontier identity that survived – just barely – the wars and displacements which ended, perhaps, within living memory.

### Itinerary

**Day 1: Trieste.** Fly at c. 9.00am from London Heathrow to Venice (British Airways). Drive to Trieste, where all six nights are spent. Afternoon walk through the quarters of the Borgo Teresiano where the Empress Maria Theresa established the foundations of Austria's greatest seaport, ending on the Molo Audace from where in the 19th and 20th centuries several Habsburgs sailed to violent deaths in faraway lands.

**Day 2: Trieste.** The morning is spent climbing the cathedral hill through the old Venetian town and visiting the grave of the 19th-century scholar of Neoclassicism, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who is buried in a picturesque

lapidarium beyond the former English church. In the afternoon visit the Miramar castle, the dream of the ill-fated Emperor Maximilian of Mexico, whose last moments alive were devoted to planning the atmospheric gardens of the castle's park.

**Day 3: Aquileia, Grado.** Aquileia was a major Roman city and seat of the patriarchate. See the Basilica, rebuilt in the 11th century but retaining a 4th-century mosaic floor. Continue on to Grado, a late imperial resort. Built in a lagoon, it is a miniature Venice before Venice. The Church of S. Eufemia contains mosaics, pulpit and silver altar frontal.

**Day 4: Opatija, Rijeka.** A trip across the limestone *carso* of Istria to Opatija (Abbazia) reveals the jewel of the old Austrian Riviera with its fin-de-siècle hotels, rocky promenade and views across the Quarnero. Nearby Rijeka (Fiume) offers a glimpse of more Habsburg architecture as well as the site of the fanatical poet-aviator D'Annunzio's last adventure.

**Day 5: Trieste.** In the Museo Revoltella the importance of the city's trade with the orient is underlined by a special section devoted to the opening of the Suez Canal, an event with profound consequences for the development of Trieste. Free afternoon.

**Day 6: Piran, Koper.** Journey across the picturesque Istrian peninsula to Piran, a formerly Venetian coastal town, with a fine campanile and view across the gulf of Trieste

### The Imperial Riviera continued

to Grado. Work back along the coast to Koper, once the chief town of northern Istria, where five centuries in the Venetian Republic defined the town's appearance.

**Day 7: Duino.** Visit the Castello di Duino, a 14th-century fortification and later residence of the Princes Von Thurn und Taxis. Fly from Venice to London Heathrow, arriving c. 5.45pm.

### Lecturer

**Dr Mark Thompson.** Reader in Modern History, University of East Anglia. He spent most of the 1990s in Croatia as a journalist, a policy analyst for the United Nations, and then head of media affairs for the mission in Croatia of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). His book, *A Paper House*, was an early account of the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Since he researched Trieste for the original *Rough Guide to Italy*, Mark Thompson has returned many times. Other books include the prize-winning *The White War. Life and Death on the Italian Front 1915-1919* and *Birth Certificate. The Story of Danilo Kiš*, which has been translated into Serbian, Bosnian, German and French. A new history of Italy in the mid-1940s, *Like a Dragon's Back*, will appear in October 2025.

### Practicalities

**Included:** travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 1 lunch and 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

**Accommodation.** Savoia Excelsior Palace, Trieste ([starhotels.com/en/our-hotels/savoia-excelsior-palace-trieste](http://starhotels.com/en/our-hotels/savoia-excelsior-palace-trieste)): a majestic 4-star hotel overlooking the Bay of Trieste, set in a historic building with 19th-century architecture. *Single rooms throughout are doubles for sole use.*

**How strenuous?** The tour involves quite a lot of walking, some of which is uphill and some of which is in the town centres, where vehicular access is restricted. Streets are often cobbled, and a good level of fitness is necessary. The tour should not be attempted by anyone who has difficulty with everyday walking and stair-climbing. Some days involve a lot of driving. Average distance by coach per day: 67 miles.

**Group size:** between 10 and 22 participants.