

cruising croatia the dalmatian experience

by Rumney Samson



Left: The stunning islands of Kornati.
 Above: Gradac is an attractive tourist resort littered with beautiful beaches. It is located on the southern end of the Makarska Riviera in between Dubrovnik and Split.

George Bernard Shaw wrote about the islands off the coast of Croatia, saying: "On the last day of creation God wanted to crown His work and thus created them out of tears, stars and breath." This labyrinth of 1,185 islands is dotted along the entire coastline of Croatia from the Istrian peninsula in the north, with its forested hills, Roman remains and fertile valleys, to southern Dalmatia and its multitude of hidden coves, vineyards and the UNESCO-protected cities of Trogir and Dubrovnik. It was in the magnificent city of Dubrovnik that we began a recent charter weaving our way northwards through this spectacular country. Dubrovnik is the pride of Croatia's monumental and independent past, and from the seventh to the nineteenth century was the only free town state on the Adriatic Coast; it is described as a rare pearl in the world's cultural and architectural heritage. It may be that a series of conflicts following

the demise of the former Yugoslavia has scared off some charter parties, but peace has held for seven plus years and both Croatia and nearby Serbia have changed governments and leaders since the wars. The number of visitors is increasing, as is the array of splendid charter yachts returning each summer, proof indeed that sunshine, spectacular scenery and clean seas will always retain their appeal. Croatia is often likened to the Côte d'Azur and is referred to as the new Med. Travel brochures describe it as the new destination for the chic clique and evidence suggests that celebrities are already abandoning St Tropez and heading for Hvar and Korcula. The country is truly beautiful, the Dalmatian coast is absolutely dazzling, but is short on luxury hotels, quality service, stunning foods and fine wines, so it makes sense to carry your own comforts with you until the country catches up on those commodities. We neatly packed ours into 62

metres of luxury yacht, with a crew of twelve to look after us. The package even came with its own chef and a cellar-full of fine French wine.

The old city of Dubrovnik still bears some of the scars of war, the scaffolding on many buildings a testament to the bombardments suffered, yet the speed with which repairs are being carried out is remarkable, despite the delicate restoration required by such a historic city. The majestic walls, marble streets and jumble of architectural styles make it one of the world's must-see places.

Our magnificent 200-foot-long motor yacht lay splendidly at anchor off this historic city, her white superstructure reflecting the sunshine. We watched mesmerised as she moved from there to a dock in nearby Gruz to facilitate our boarding. As any airline passenger travelling first class knows, the serving of champagne and the safety briefing are generally separate from the welcome-on-board greeting, but our captain was a wordsmith and very good at public speaking. He interspersed the speeches with witty one liners whilst his stewardesses served chilled champagne – which got the message across without alarming anyone. We immediately felt we were at home and in good, safe hands. In the weeks preceding the charter he had been in regular contact, proposing itineraries and asking after our preferences for both food and wine. We felt we already knew him and his casual air of confidence confirmed we had made the right choice. It is my firm belief that charter guests should choose a boat as much for her captain and the way he runs his ship as the amenities the vessel itself provides.



Top: Korcula is one of the largest islands off Croatia's coast.
Above: Monumental walls surround the fully restored Dubrovnik.



Top left: The island of Mljet is situated in the southern Dalmatian archipelago. There are a number of monuments and ruins to keep visitors to the island busy. Top right: The small and picturesque island of Rab.

So it was that we sailed from Gruz the next morning bound for the island of Mljet. It was on this narrow, twenty-mile-long island that local inhabitants claim Calypso held Odysseus for over seven years. The island is spectacularly beautiful and sparsely populated and its special qualities, including its two saltwater lakes, have been recognised by its designation in part as a national park. The larger of the two lakes contains an island on which sits a twelfth-century Benedictine monastery. Mljet is just about the only place where you might spot the extremely rare monk seal, now sadly almost extinct. Our destination was Luca Polace, a town with a spacious anchorage on the western end of the north-facing coast. This gem of a town lies protected by four wooded islands; its almost landlocked haven is accessed through narrow passages reminiscent of Canada's northwest coastline. Our captain calmly navigated between these high-sided islands in which the very sides of the yacht seemed almost to brush the vegetation. We left Luca Polace using a different channel and skirted round a menacing looking reef as we exited from the lagoon. Once clear we headed north towards Korcula, the main town on the island of the same name. Korcula is the largest of the Croatian islands. The town of Korcula is said to be

one of the country's most beautiful, and its claim to fame is that it was the birthplace, in 1254, of the traveller Marco Polo (who did not invent the peppermints with the less fattening centres). His house still stands and is preserved for all to visit. Approaching the ancient city has to be one of the visual highlights of any voyage in these waters. The town sits atop an oval promontory jutting out into the sea, and the sixteenth-century defensive towers rise majestically from within the cluster of tiny houses that cover the hillside. A berth had been arranged alongside this beautiful city dock to give us guests quick and easy access to the city. Korcula, with its narrow streets, old buildings, walled enclosure and towers, is the setting for a traditional play or dance each year on 27 July which commemorates the raids on the town by the Turks in the sixteenth century. The play is performed for the benefit of tourists almost every Thursday during the season. Some 4,000 people lived within the confines of these walls in the sixteenth century, although this number was reduced by a plague in 1592. Houses were burned to stop the spread of the plague and several roofless houses in the old part of town date from that period. We walked around the town on streets





Above, bottom left: A small town and port on the north coast of Hvar, Vrboska is home to a variety of architecture and survives on a mixture of tourism and fishing.

paved with polished marble slabs, taking in the pretty architecture of this medieval cathedral city. We drank coffee and learned of the Croatian love of sweet cakes at the café in the main square.

From here we sailed to the tip of the Pelješac peninsula, which accommodates a large bay with three arms called Uvela Luka – not to be confused with Vela Luka on the island of Hvar. This bay offers a large expanse of calm water well away from everyone and offered us a good opportunity to utilise the water-ski speed boat and the seadoo wave runners.

We spent the early part of the following day enjoying breakfast on deck whilst wending our way through the islands towards Hvar. Passing between the islands of Brač and Šolta, we dropped anchor off the island of Vis for our lunchtime stop. This pretty palm-tree-fringed island is becoming popular with tourists seeking solace in the sun and has become famous for the Blue Cave on the tiny satellite island of Biševo just off its coast. Simon, our intrepid chief officer, drove us in the ship's tender inside this cave, where the light becomes refracted and the walls of the interior of the cave appear blue and anything below the water becomes silver. If this reminds you of the caves on Capri, the sight here outweighs those tenfold.

At anchor off Vis under the midday sun, we admired the view of the nearby island of Hvar from afar (all puns intended!) Hvar, our destination that night, is said to be the St Tropez of Croatia, but it is more like Porto Cervo in Sardinia. The island is said to be the sunniest of all the Croatian islands, averaging 2,718 hours of sunshine per year. The stylish port of Hvar can only just accommodate a vessel of our size, so we spent the night shoehorned into the tiny port.

Hvar is a picturesque and historic town full of fashionable and atmospheric restaurants and taverns – the only place on our journey that our young described as cool or hip. Vehicles are banned from its streets, and its piazzas are reminiscent of Venice. The harbour bustles with ferries, hydrofoils and daytrip boats each jostling for trade to the nearby Pakleni islands, which are both sheltered and secluded. Locally there are vineyards and olive groves, and both lavender and rosemary are grown. Atop of the ancient town there is a former arsenal now converted into an art gallery and above that, built in 1612, is a theatre which is claimed to be the oldest public theatre in Europe. The town is dominated by its sixteenth-century cathedral and the bell tower which overlooks the piazza and is flanked either side by gothic and renaissance palaces. The oldest part of town is surrounded by defen-



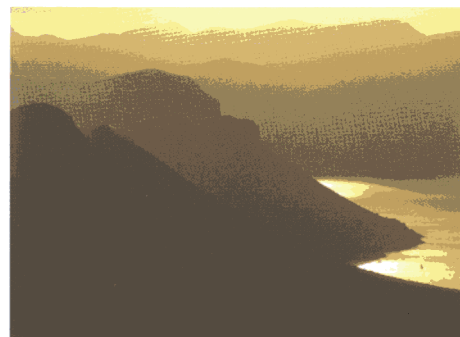
sive walls and one of the town's original gates still stands. Local ham and cheese were washed down with local wines – which made us grateful for the fact that Frances, our purser, had asked for our wine preferences before the yacht had sailed from France!

Perhaps the principal reason Croatia has lagged behind other holiday hotspot developments is its almost total lack of beaches; what few there are can often be small and hard to find. Instead the coastline abounds with rocky coves whose often secluded bays have, as a result, become a haven for those who believe we should practise the art of sun worship without the hindrance of clothing. The island of Brac, our lunchtime stop on the next day, has nevertheless become famous for its Zlatni Rat beach near Bol, a long spit of white sand jutting out from the bottom of the island into the clear blue Adriatic which surrounds it on three sides. The beach, however, is not sand but is made up of tiny white round pebbles. The area has become famous for windsurfers whose pretty sails dart in and out of those paddling in the cool, clear waters in kayaks.

Late in the afternoon we sailed for Sibinik, a coastal port at the mouth of the River Krka in the centre of the Adriatic. Sibinik is

approached through a narrow and rather spectacular canal hidden from view amidst a host of complicated channels, and arrangements had been made by the captain and his shoreside agents together with the harbour master for us to berth starboard side alongside the wharf of the old port which is close to many of the historic sites. Our arrival alongside attracted a lot of interest from local people who seemed to constantly throng the dockside watching the comings and goings of craft. This old Croatian fortress was founded in the eleventh century and owes its heritage to the emerging European Christian civilisation. The cathedral of St Jakov took over one hundred years to complete and stands as an eternal and indestructible symbol of the area.

The next day our yacht slowly sailed eight miles meandering up the frequently narrow river following a somewhat tortuous route that demanded all the seamanship and ship-handling skills of our captain into a large freshwater lake where we dropped anchored anchor and manoeuvred to place our stern directly on to the rickety dock at Skradin. The lake is at the navigable head of the river. From here, we had planned a trip to see spectacular waterfalls at Skradinski Buk including the opportunity of participating in a private viewing of a falconer at work





Above left: The Cathedral in Trogir, a small island north of Split.
 Above right: About 20 km south of Split lies Krilo Jesenice, Croatia's second largest town.
 Facing page, top: Bol, the oldest coastal town on the island of Brač is home to a series of beautiful beaches including the well-known Zlatni rat (The Golden Cape).
 Middle: The stunning Peljesac peninsula in south Dalmatia
 Bottom: The Skradinski Buk waterfalls in the Krka National Park are a must-see and can be found about 20 miles from the coast and the town of Šibenik.

with his birds. The organisation of this side trip needed the considerable skills of our purser, because the area is part of the Krka National park and an area of great beauty, and only accredited guides using approved boats may take guests into the area. Our yacht cleared the river by the same route and then headed back south, travelling 20 miles back on herself towards the town of Rogoznica, an island village connected to the mainland by a narrow causeway. Nearby, another island, this time created from landfill, houses a spectacular country-club-style marina which was be our destination for the night. Dining can be ashore in one of the several good restaurants at the club but more likely will be served aboard the yacht. As marina guests we were permitted the use of tennis courts and swimming pools which we made good use of before we set off towards the nearby town of Rogoznica, walking through the old part of town. The port Trogir is situated on an island within an island and is about an hour north of Split, Croatia's second largest city. It marked the end of our cruise and we stayed alongside the berth overnight. This gave us the opportunity to take in the full majesty of this ancient city in our own time, meandering in and out of the maze of main-

ly medieval streets contained inside the fifteenth-century city walls. The weather throughout our cruise during early September was sunny, with temperatures in the mid twenties, and it generally reached 29°C at noon. Seawater is a pleasant 23° or 24°C. September is not normally a wet month for Croatia, but the Adriatic does share the very same idiosyncrasies of weather as the Mediterranean, so you take a risk sailing out of season. Take time to appreciate the splendiq nature of this coastline and taste the full flavour of Croatia. Go before it follows the overcrowding that has befallen the Côte d'Azur. Visit quickly before the herd transforms its tranquillity to the madness of elsewhere in the Mediterranean, but take your hotel and wine cellar with you. It's the only way to travel.

Rumney Samson and her husband travelled to Croatia as guests of the charter yacht brokerage department at Cavendish White in London, where Nick Burleigh organised their voyage aboard the 62-metre Discovery yacht Senses.

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