



Istria, Croatia: Luxury Travel Guide to a Great Destination

"The new Tuscany" offers village charm, luxury villas, good food & wine

By Karen Tina Harrison

Free Luxury Travel Newsletter!

Enter email address

Sign Up

Ads: [Travel Destinations](#) [Luxury Vacation Deals](#) [Find Luxury Hotels](#) [Visit Croatia](#) [Luxury Travel](#)

Istria in Croatia: Unspoiled Village Europe

Do you know Istria...yet? This arrowhead-shaped peninsula is the the westernmost part of Croatia, the Mediterranean country that has become a luxury travel must. The eastern coast, crowned by the medieval town of [Dubrovnik](#), gets a lot of attention. But Istria is more relaxed, with intense local flavor and church-spired countryside begging for photos.

- For **history** buffs, Istria embodies Croatia's dazzling past: Roman conquerors, powerful bishops, Venetian princes, Hapsburg emperors, and proud, modern self-rule
- For **nature** lovers, Istria is green, with a mild Mediterranean climate and a passion for hiking, biking, and diving
- For **beach** lovers, Istria's aquamarine Adriatic waters beckon
- For **gourmets**, Istria is blessed with intense black truffles, excellent red and white wines, abundant fresh seafood, and cooks with generations of family recipes
- And there are luxury travel experiences to be had in Istria! Read on.

GROZNJAN



Groznan ©Croatian National Tourist Board

Everyone says that a visit is essential, and everyone is right. Expect to fall for **Groznan** (pronounced GROWS-knee-ahn.) This perfectly preserved medieval village on a hilltop escarpment is in many ways the essence of **village Europe**.

- Groznan has been reborn as an arts village of international renown. It boasts galleries and painting studios; cutting-edge shops, with
- Its cultural season heats up in May through September, when festivals, and artistic workshops of all kinds are in full swing. To be in Groznan in summer makes you super-cool
- Hotel accommodations are hard to get in summer; most visitors rent villas such as [Casa Margherita](#) and [Villa Poropati](#)
- It is also called Grisignano, its Italian name
- Groznan [visitors' site](#)

ROVINJ



Rovinj ©Croatian National Tourist Board

If you have time for only one village stay, this seaside jewelbox village on Istria's western coast is a good choice. **Rovinj** (Ro-VEEN) is a storybook fishing village with **cultural life** and beautiful (but typically rocky) Mediterranean beaches with crystal-clear waters.

Keep your ears open: Istriot, an old Romance language unrelated to Croatia's Serbo-Croatian, is sometimes spoken here.

What to see and do in Rovinj:

- Church of St. Euphemia, on a hilltop with panoramic views; if church is open, go in and **climb the tower**
- Carrera Street, lined with galleries, and Grisia Street, filled with shops and photo ops
- If you like to linger at cafes and take in the scene, this is the place
- You can rent a bike or hike through Rovinj's protected forest, Zlatni Rt
- Or visit [Monkodonja](#), a Bronze Age settlement a couple of miles away

Where to stay in Rovinj:

- Rovinj's top hotel, [Hotel Lone](#), wins major awards for its design. Its 248 accommodations all feature a balcony. Three restaurants -- L, ON, and E -- are chic and social. Also: a gym, spa, big indoor pool, and jazz club

Where to eat in Rovinj:

- Upscale, pricey [Monte](#) serves multi-course tasting menus; recipes are complex and contemporary. This is not rustic food
 - [Wine Vault](#), a luxury restaurant and wine bar in Hotel Monte Mulini; the chef's table is ultra-special
 - Lanterna Rovinj, in a castle on an island a quick boat ride from the old town, spotlights seafood with Italian and Istrian touches
 - To drink: Istria's beloved white wine, **Malvasia**, or a bubbly from the local Persuric winery
- Rovinj [visitors' site](#)

MOTOVUN



Moody Motovun ©Karen Tina Harrison

This storybook hilltop village has only a few hundred residents – but many thousands of ardent visitors from the world over, especially during the midsummer [Motovun Film Festival](#).

Motovun is a crash course in **Istrian history**. It was a Roman settlement in what was then called *Istra*. First-century gravestones can be seen here, their Latin engraving erased by time.

A thousand years on, Motovun was owned by a feudal bishop. Later, the powerful city-state of Venice, just to Istria's northwest, conquered the town and built fortress walls you can still walk on. Many of the Venetian's Baroque churches and palaces are still intact. More recently, Motovun was the setting of a beloved novel about a giant, *Veli Jože*.

Where to stay in Motovun:

Your best bet is a villa, all with a pool, arranged through Istra Domus Bonus, an Istria-wide villa rental service.

- **Villa Maslina** (where my photo was taken) is a little sparsely furnished, but with vast lounging space, a big pool, and (obviously) incredible views

- It is equidistant to Motovun and Buzet, a good-sized town for these rural parts
- Its owners, the Karlics, are a food-obsessed family with a truffle business and a restaurant across the road. Expect great breakfasts and an invitation to truffle-hunt with dogs
- Domus Bonus [site](#); Villa Maslina [site](#)

Where to eat in Motovun:

- [Toklarija](#), is famed in foodie circles. Set in an onetime olive mill in the nearby wine-growing village of Sovinjsko Polje, is the essence of “**slow food**”. This unique meal, cooked and served by chef-owner Nevio Sirotic, takes hours. Anticipate many truffle and mushroom dishes, very good wine, and fond memories
- Right in Motovun village: the popular *Barbacan* updates Istrian classics, and quieter *Mondo Konoba* serves homestyle recipes
- Motovun [visitors' site](#)

NOVIGRAD



Novigrad ©Wikimedia Commons

This seaside town, once an outpost of [Charlemagne's](#) Frankish Empire, is a working port, with strong “**real place**” character.

Late morning is a good time to visit **Novigrad**: you can watch the fisherman unload their catch, then linger over a local Favorit beer, and then head off for a fresh seafood lunch.

What to see in Novigrad:

- St. Pelagius, a well-preserved **medieval church** built atop one from the 700s, with its burial crypt still there
- **Lapidarium Museum**, in a dazzling modern building, houses ancient stone monuments and tablets and Bishop Mauritius's 1300-year-old drinking chalice
- Novigrad's winding streets, tracing the waterfront and its medieval fortifications

Where to eat in Novigrad:

- In Novigrad, ask for *kapisante*, or pilgrim scallop, unique to Novigrad, and the star of the annual **scallop festival** (“Gnam-Gnam Fest”), held the first Friday in June
- A fine place to sample Novigrad scallops and other catches of the day: [Konoba Cok](#), an indoor-outdoor seafood eatery whose owner, Sergio, is its creative chef
- Novigrad [tourism site](#)

POREC



Porec ©Croatian National Tourist Board

Porec, a little ways south of Novigrad on Istria's western coast, is a **treasure city**. Its jewel, the opulent Euphrasian Basilica, is one of Croatia's eight UNESCO World Heritage sites, and the only one in Istria.

Like much of Istria, Porec was a Roman settlement later ruled by the Byzantine Empire, then Charlemagne, then Venice. Later, Porec was colonized by the Austro-Hungarian Empire's Hapsburgs, then the Italians. Many Porec citizens are Italian-speaking.

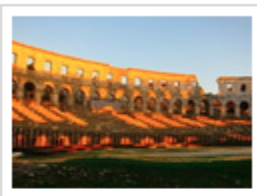
What to see in Porec:

- The massive, elaborate [Euphrasian Basilica](#), dating from early Christianity (around 350 A.D.); parts were restored after a 1440 earthquake. Many visitors are astounded by the mosaic portraits
- Marafor, a Roman plaza with twin temples
- Cave of Baredine, rich in stalactites and stalagmites; visitors try to see people's faces in the stone

Where to dine in Porec:

- Porec is a center of organic farming; produce is exceptionally fresh and flavorful
- **Marina Kukci**, a few minutes out of town, is a family-owned spot where the accent is on seafood
- **Taverna Konoba Daniela's** renowned specialty is steak tartare
- Porec [tourism site](#)

PULA



Pula Arena, seen in "Gladiator" ©Karen Tina Harrison

Pula, Istria's biggest town and capital, enjoys a strategic port setting on the very southern tip of the Istrian peninsula. It was settled by Neolithics as long as 8,000 years ago, and later ancient Greeks, then imperial Romans. Julius Caesar liked Pula and made it a colony.

Pula's **oft-conquered past** has left it with intense international flavor. Most residents speak Italian, and many speak English or German. Irish novelist [James Joyce](#) spent time in Pula and is memorialized here and there.

Immerse yourself in Europe's past in Pula:

- Pula's breathtaking site is **Pula Arena**, a Roman amphitheater in great condition, with bathrooms and lion's den intact. Yes, you've seen it before, in the film [Gladiator](#). Try to visit at magic hour in late afternoon (see my pic).
- Other Roman constructions dot the city: the Twin Gates; a first-century triumphal arch; and the Temple of Roma and Augustus on the town square, **the Forum**
- 6th-century mosaics adorn The Byzantine chapel of St. Mary Formosa
- Many more treasures are in Pula's Archeological Museum of Istria

Revel in Pula's natural gifts:

- Brijuni National Park is a unique coastal forest ecosystem laden with hiking and biking paths
- Beaches are sandy, not rocky, and many are set in hidden coves
- Scuba divers, Pula wreck dives take you to sunken **Roman galleys**
- Aquarium Pula, set in an old fort with a view of the region, is Croatia's biggest

Where to eat in Pula:

- [Konoba Batelina](#): No less than Anthony Bourdain raved about this simple chef-owned spot a few minutes north of Pula., where chef-owner David Skoko is your walking menu. Trust him
 - [Kantina Pula](#): Traditional cuisine served in a vaulted stone cellar. Simple is best: steak with truffles, ravioli with goat cheese; several versions of risotto
-
- Our Eastern Europe Travel expert's [Pula photos](#)
 - Pula [tourism site](#)

OPATIJA



Opatija ©ChrisV/
Wikimedia Commons

Opatija, a resort town in the Kvarner region of Istria's eastern coast of Istria, feels like a walk into another era and country.

Blessed with a refreshing breeze from forested mountains above, Opatija (Oh-PAH-tee-uh) blossomed in the late 1800s with ornate hotels and sanatoriums, the wellness retreats of the day.

Its clientele: luxury travelers from Austria and Germany. Opatija's Austro-Hungarian, not Mediterranean, look and feeling make it a far different experience from western Istria's Italian-oriented Italian regions.

Opatija is a **time capsule** boasting turn-of-the-20th-century buildings, parks, promenades, manicured beaches. Visitors still do what visitors did a century ago: stroll, read newspapers (and iPad Minis) at cafés, lounge on the beach, indulge in a massage.

Things to do and see in Opatija:

- Saunter down the **Lungomare**, a long seaside promenade; you'll see the *Maiden with Seagull* sculpture that symbolizes Opatija
- Sample many flavors of chocolates at **Hotel Milenij**'s elegant, nostalgic Belle Epoque café and terrace
- Admire the flower gardens in the Park of St. Jakob
- Check out the "wall of fame" in Park Angiolina, featuring Opatija natives and **famous visitors** (including Albert Einstein, James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov)
- Visit **Villa Angiolina**, now the Museum of Croatian Tourism, for an engrossing look at the way Europeans vacationed in generations past, from the times of the Hapsburgs to the disco era

Modern wellness retreats in Opatija:

- Hotel Ambassador's [Five Elements Wellness & Spa](#) is a modern spa that resembles a fashion nightclub
- About [Opatija's health tourism, and more spas](#)

Where to dine in Opatija:

- Hotel Bevanda's [restaurant](#), seemingly cantilevered over the sea, features classic and creative seafood dishes and a cocktail menu

Where to stay in Opatija:

- [Hotel Bevanda](#) is a super-chic, 10-room [boutique hotel](#) with terraces on the Adriatic and modern design with glamorous bronze metallic accents
 - Luxury for less: [Hotel Ambassador](#)'s rooms are uncluttered and comfortable, and many have sea views
-
- Our Eastern Europe Travel expert has [more on Opatija](#)
 - Opatija [visitors' site](#)

FOR LUXURY VILLAS: DOMUS BONUS



Domus Bonus's ©Villa Poropati

Istria Domus Bonus is a region-wide tourism initiative to accommodate the many visitors who seek private villas -- and who are calling Istria "the new Tuscany."

Domus Bonus provides hundreds of villa rentals for short or long stays.

- Some villas are set within Istrian villages, others in the countryside
 - Villas are sometimes exactly **renovated old stone homes**, and sometimes new constructions built with native stone
 - All have a pool and deck, big kitchen, and plenty of lounging and entertainment areas, and multiple bathrooms
-
- Domus Bonus [website](#)
 - Why a [villa rental often beats a hotel stay](#)

FOR A RESORT: KEMPINSKI HOTEL ADRIATIC



Lobby ©Kempinski Hotel Adriatic

For Istria visitors who prefer a luxury resort over a villa or boutique hotel, there's a very satisfying choice: **Kempinski Hotel Adriatic**.

- It is well-situated on Istria's northwestern coast, near the popular historic town of [Umag](#) and numerous wineries
- This well-managed, stylish resort offers a fine beach, a pool complex, golf, and other leisure activities
- The Middle Eastern-style [hammam](#) spa is an oasis of relaxation
- Its 186 sunny rooms have fashionable contemporary furnishings
- Kempinski Hotel Adriatic [website](#)

FOR A RELAIS & CHATEAUX INN: VILLA MENEGHETTI



©Villa Meneghetti

Luxury travelers looking for a secluded, stylish [boutique hotel](#): this is it. **Villa Meneghetti** is a refined inn that is **pindrop-quiet** save for the chirping of birds. The setting: a private, bucolic wooded estate planted with grapevines and olive trees.

Guests reconnect with their partner, stroll the grounds, relax by indoor and outdoor pools, and indulge in **cuisine** befitting the property's [Relais & Chateaux](#) status.

Rooms are modern and lovely and the service completely five-star.

- The inn has only four rooms two suites and two suites,
- They are beautifully designed for the discerning luxury traveler: rustic yet modern, with fine furnishings and art

Villa Meneghetti's sophisticated food & wine

- Tasting and a la carte menus from married chefs Danijela and Bojan spotlight Istrian ingredients
 - "Blue Istria" means seafood on the menu, "Green Istria," from the land
 - One house specialty: *boskarin* -- roasted Istrian beef -- served with *fuzi* pasta or tastily marinated in the estate's olive oil
 - Another specialty: truffles: with pasta risotto or local *orzoto* barley
 - Or just-caught Adriatic fish in a crust of aromatic herbs
 - Villa Meneghetti's own red wine, a Bordeaux-style Cabernet-Merlot blend, was the best that I tasted in Istria
-
- Villa Meneghetti [website](#)
 - Its *Relais & Chateaux* [page](#)

ISTRIA'S INSPIRING FOOD AND WINE



Stari Podrum restaurant,
4 stars! ©Karen Tina
Harrison

[Istrian cuisine](#) resembles Italian food – superficially. You'll find pasta, gnocchi, *salumeria*, olive oil, and other classics from the Boot. Yet Istrian cooking is earthier, with unique seasoning and flavor combinations – and a tradition of fresh seafood cooking unequalled anywhere.

Istria's classic dishes to try:

- *Brodet*: Istria's take on Provençale *soupe de poissons* and *bouillabaisse*
- *Manestra*, Istrian *minestone*, with its local sweet corn and dried pork
- *Fuzi*: egg-yellow pasta, served with an intense tomato sauce and, often, shredded game meat
- *Crudo*: raw fish, splashed with local olive oil
- *Prsut*: salt-cured Istrian prosciutto, served in paper-thin slices

The trouble with Istrian truffles: you can't bring them home

Croatia has presented a serious challenge to Northern Italy when it comes to the most luxurious flavoring of them all: **rich, aromatic, addictive [truffles](#)** that grow underground. Istria is literally a hotbed of black and white truffles.

Naturally, truffles are an intrinsic element of Istrian cuisine. You'll most often encounter them in pasta dishes; with scrambled eggs; and in meat sauces.

- If there's one dish you must eat in Istria, it's pasta with truffles
- You can't bring raw truffles home, but jars of **truffle honey** and truffle jam beckon
- The truffle shop [Zigante Tartufi](#) has boutiques throughout Istria

Istria's ongoing affair with olive oil:

The **Roman Empire's** go-to for top-quality olive oil was nearby Istria. Not much has changed!

- No Istrian table setting is complete without a dish of oil
- It's used in place of butter and drizzled over many dishes
- Specialty shops sell nothing but olive oil
- Artisanal olive oil factories offer tastings
- Babic is a top producer, but there are many

- Istria [culinary site](#)
- Istrian food [food slideshow](#)

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT ISTRIA & PLAN A VISIT

- Istria [visitor site](#)
- Northwest [Istria visitor site](#)
- Opatija [visitor site](#)
- Istria on [Facebook](#)
- Istria on [Twitter](#) (@VisitIstra)
- Where you'll fly into: Croatia's capital, [Zagreb](#)

About.com Luxury Travel

[About.com](#) > [Travel](#) > [Luxury Travel](#) > [Top Travel Destinations](#) > [Istria Croatia Luxury Travel - Great European Vacation Istria Croatia](#)