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Zadar, Croatia: music, chocolate and a joy for life

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Suzanne Morphet/Special Contributor

Krka National Park, about an hour's drive south of Zadar, Croatia, is a naturalist's paradise, with more than 200 species of birds and more than 800 species and sub-species of plants. Even wild boars live here. But it's the series of spectacular waterfalls - seven altogether - that attracts most visitors.

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ZADAR, Croatia — "My goal is to export," says Dubravko Vitlov as he watches over a pot of bubbling cream. "I want to make more people happy."

Vitlov is a master chocolatier in Zadar. He is demonstrating his technique for a Toronto television crew that's filming a show about high-end travel experiences.

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He has flavored the cream with cinnamon, vanilla, star anise, cardamom and — oddly enough for chocolate — extract of green pepper. Vitlov seems to be the perfect ambassador for Croatia, which joined the European Union on July 1. He personifies all that's good about the country: its sophisticated culture, its fabulous food, its easygoing *joie de vivre*.

"You always do this by taste," he says, lifting a spoonful of the rich ganache to his mouth.

"I think it needs more green pepper," he says after a couple of seconds.

Croatia's membership in the EU might come as a surprise to some, with the 1990-91 war of independence still a recent memory. Since then, corruption has scarred the country. The damage might be less visible than the bullet holes that still pock many buildings, but it's still exacting a huge price.

According to Global Financial Integrity, a Washington-based research and advocacy organization, the illicit flow of money — be it fraud, money laundering, tax evasion or other crimes — cost Croatia more than \$15 billion between 2001 and 2010. The country's former prime minister, Ivo Sanader, was found guilty last November of accepting millions of dollars in bribes and was sentenced to 10 years in jail.

It's easy to feel sorry for the locals, who feel cheated and complain openly about the corruption. "It's a monster, it's a cancer," one of my guides told me.

But for visitors, Croatia, which lies east of Italy across the Adriatic Sea, is endlessly appealing as well as safe. The biggest danger might be stepping on a black sea urchin at a beach near Dubrovnik, or getting dehydrated under the hot Mediterranean sun.

In April in Zadar, on the northern Dalmatian coast, I don't even have to contend with those. My plan is to spend a couple of days in the historically rich city, visit an offshore island or two, and eat as much seafood as possible.

Once part of the Roman Empire, Zadar's ancient forum is still the center of action, even though much of it was destroyed during World War II. It's fun to mingle with the locals at the large outdoor cafe, sip a latte and watch kids play on the ruins, jumping from one beautifully carved stone to another as if they're nothing more than giant Lego blocks.

The remains of the Roman temple, half a dozen historic churches, the archbishop's palace and a Benedictine nunnery are all included in a section of the city nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Of these, the convent of St. Mary is particularly fascinating. It houses a remarkable collection of gold and silver reliquaries from the eighth to the 18th centuries, often in the shapes of arms and hands that contain the remains of saints.

At the end of our tour, our guide, a nun dressed in a traditional black habit, suddenly burst into song, belting out a tune with words we didn't understand. But it didn't matter — to her or to us. It was another beautiful display of that passion for life that Croatians seem to have in ample supply.

Over at the city's Museum of Ancient Glass, we examine a beautiful collection of Roman glassware, considered the best outside Italy.

The music of the sea

For me, the best part of Zadar is something much newer. A few years ago, a local architect had the brilliant idea of installing organ-style pipes under the concrete steps leading down to the water's edge at the city quay. When waves hit the pipes, they push air through them, creating music. The 35 pipes are tuned to create pleasing notes.

Nikola Basic's Sea Organ won the European Prize for Urban Public Space in 2006. Basic also suggested installing solar panels on the quay. The glass plates absorb the sun's energy all day; at night they light up under your feet, changing in time to music from the Sea Organ.

On the road

Needing some nature, I head south the next day to Krka National Park, about an hour from Zadar. In late April, wild purple irises blossom along the banks of the emerald green Krka River. A boardwalk leads visitors along cliffs high above the river and past a series of seven spectacular waterfalls.

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Farther along, where the Krka River widens considerably, is the tiny island of Visovac. Home to Franciscan monks since the 16th century, the monastery is surrounded by poplar trees and almost entirely hidden as you approach by boat.

The monks welcome visitors. Their museum contains an eclectic assortment of artifacts, including a rare original copy of *Aesop's Fables* from 1487.

Photos from the war grab my attention: bombed churches, broken bell towers, burned parish houses. "With extreme hate they destroyed and burned Catholic religious objects," reads a sign, referring to the Serbs of that era.

"This was not a good place to be in '90-'91," says park guide Stjepan Gundic, explaining that Serbs were on one side of the Krka River and Croats on the other.

Somehow the Visovac Island monastery was spared. Its biggest challenge these days is attracting new monks.

The secular life has decidedly more pleasures, especially in a country with a long coastline and a rich fishery. That evening I watch two diners devour the largest prawns that I've seen outside Thailand.

My own favorite meal was served from a small kitchen on a dock on the island of Ugljan.

There were several courses, but it was the calamari that I'll remember. It was fresh, light, crisp and chewy at the same time. I dipped it in olive oil from the island.

I have never tasted its equal — and don't expect to until I return.

Suzanne Morphet is a freelance writer in Victoria, British Columbia.

When you go

Where to stay: The Hotel Bastion is a 28-room luxury hotel in the historic core of Zadar, close to the Sea Organ. hotel-bastion.hr

Where to eat: In Zadar, Fosa is known for its fresh seafood and its lovely setting on the water beside the walls of the old city. Eat on the patio or inside. The restaurant's interior is a combination of traditional Dalmatian and modern architecture. fosa.hr

Restaurant Kornat offers a wide variety of meat and seafood as well as a good selection of Croatian wines. It's also just steps away from the quay and Zadar's famous Sea Organ.

Vitlov Chocolates are sold at airports in Croatia and in various shops in Zadar. The maraschino chocolates, made with local marasca cherries, are very popular. See Zadar Tourism for more information: tzzadar.hr/en.

Ferry schedules to the islands can be found at find-croatia.com/ferries-croatia.

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