

History enhances Croatian coast's beauty

By Christine H. O'Toole

SPLIT, Croatia — Palm trees, radiant sunlight and a wine-dark sea: This is where Odysseus might have taken Penelope for a getaway weekend and simply ... stayed.

The spectacular stretch of the Adriatic coast facing Venice has drawn visitors since it was founded as Illyria in 350 B.C. Signing the guestbook: Roman emperors, Byzantine pirates, Venetian merchants and Napoleon.

These days, it's Speedo-clad Russian oligarchs, Turkish tycoons and a few intrepid Americans who cruise the island shorelines, but the appeal can be summed up in five words: the sunniest spot in Europe.

"Dalmatian history is different from Croatian," explains Dino Ivanoc, a young professor from Split. "We are more exposed to leisure and easy living."

On my last visit in 2006, the coast had a rougher vibe. Pockmarked buildings showed the scars of the Yugoslavian civil war of the 1990s, and refugees had just recently vacated some rundown hotels.

After two decades of peace, on this recent trip in May, Croatia's red white and blue flew proudly everywhere, alongside the blue pennant of the European Union. Sails filled the old stone harbors, cafes hoisted umbrellas, and the island ferries drew foamy wakes as they chugged out of Split, the nation's second-largest city.

For American visitors, the Dalmatian landscape evokes the seaside mountains and western sunsets of California. It may also look familiar to viewers of HBO's "Game of Thrones," which is filmed on location here. (Spoiler alert: no dragons, and most of the real natives are fully clothed.) But it's the accretion of history, from the Greeks to the Renaissance, that makes the ancient coast a richer experience than the standard beach vacation.

Dino's description of the resulting local architecture is apt: "put it all together, and shake."

Although European sun lovers have gathered there since Yugoslavian days, it retains a cool, unstudied vibe. The coastal highway is a classic scenic route, opening to vistas of terra cotta towns and marinas between the big city and Sibenik (SHIB-en-ik), roughly 38 miles north.

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I arrive in the small town's square as the bells toll noon at St. James Cathedral, adorned with the carved profiles of local townspeople. From the white heat of the shining marble plaza, I step into the gloom of the Venetian Gothic landmark. Lighting a candle inside is Vanya Dacic, who proudly tells me that her family has lived here since the 15th century.

Leading me through a labyrinth of medieval passageways, she stopped to embrace and joke with nearly everyone she encountered, from tiny black-clad grannies to women hanging laundry from their upper windows.

Sibenik is a launch point for two national parks, Kornati and Krka (the latter famous for the waterfalls that surge toward the sea.) Like most of the coast, the local towns depend on tourism; with a national unemployment rate of 20 percent, even seasonal jobs are prized. Driving a half hour north to the outpost of Murter, I meet Sime Jezina, who hands me aboard a motorboat and casts off the lines. Within 45 minutes, we enter Kornati National Park, an archipelago of 200 islands scattered like pebbles through the turquoise water.

"In Europe, only Norway has more islands than Croatia," Sime tells me as we thread through the channel. Few people live in Kornati, where water and electricity are scarce.

Sime explains the ads for "Robinson turizam" arranged by Murter agencies: visitors dreaming of Crusoe-style desert island living can arrange stays at remote stone cottages, stocked with a week's worth of provisions.

Snorkeling and scuba excursions are popular, too. But like most folks, I've opted for a day cruise, hopping off at tiny settlements and dining at waterfront konobas, or trattorias, that serve fish and wine along the shore. Back in Murter, Sime leads the way to Konoba Boba for more seafood: a ceviche of orada topped with shaved truffles and served with crackling fresh bread. Served alongside is a puddle of bright green olive oil. Sime and other Murter families own olive groves in the national park, and harvest and press their crop each November.

For fans of Mediterranean cuisine, the Croatian coast offers the best. "When we say 'fresh,' we mean, this morning," explains one chef. Orada, octopus, tuna, squid-ink risotto, grilled vegetables, goat cheese and gelato: I could get used to this.

The next day I arrive in Trogir, where the cafes offer a similar menu. "Mussels in *whine* sauce," proclaims an English placard along the waterfront, but I'm not complaining. This mini-Venice, jammed with palaces and a cathedral dating to the 13th century, bustles well into the evening. As the sun sets, a quartet of red-sashed men serenades the crowd. The a capella harmonies are klappa, sentimental tributes to the past. "What are they saying?" I ask. "Is like Springsteen — my home town," a listener explains.

I wander into a small chapel guarded by a marble statue of St. Sebastian to find other contemporary martyrs. Ranged along the wall are the somber photos of 31 young townspeople

killed while serving in the Croatian army during the 1990s. The beauty of the coast today can't obscure its past; Croatia's history has been one of occupation and strife.

Dino Ivanoc ruefully sums up its story. "Croatian history is a long series of oopses," he says. The pride its citizens take in their new independence is hard won.

One more day, one more ferry: the trip to Hvar from Split is a two-hour breeze, and the island deserves its reputation. Each summer, the town's population triples, luring a continental party scene that begins on the riva — Europe's oldest waterfront promenade — and sprawls onto nearby beaches when the bars close. As I watch, a businessman on a Segway rolls past the 15th century Venetian armory. On the sunset ferry I return to Split and its 2,000-year old waterfront landmark.

The Roman emperor Diocletian returned to Split at the end of his reign, building his retirement palace here in 305. The massive fortress and living quarters is still the center of town. Over two millennia of continuous use have created a maze of passageways; I pass huge Egyptian sphinxes, Roman temples, a Catholic basilica, cafes, shops and apartments bristling with satellite dishes.

Finally I emerge onto the riva, where Diocletian's barge would have docked. It wouldn't seem out of place now among the yachts and schooners moored nearby, and the view of the misty islands on the horizon is unchanged. The only difference are the Croatian flags, flying proudly where the imperial standard once waved.

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If you go

From Pittsburgh, a smart strategy for the Croatian coast is to fly to London Gatwick or London Stansted. From there, Croatia Airlines (croatiaairlines.com), EasyJet (easyjet.com) and other discount airlines offer direct two-hour roundtrip flights to Split at fares beginning at \$390. Rates outside the high season (June 1-Sept. 30) may be cheaper.

Getting around: Croatia drives on the familiar right side of the highway, so driving vacations along the coast are convenient. But most of the medieval city centers are pedestrian, forcing cars to park at a distance. English is spoken everywhere. Euros are not yet accepted; the local currency trades at about 5 kuna to the dollar. Motorbike and motorboat rentals (from about \$35 a day) are available on every town waterfront. The Jadrolinija ferry line (<http://www.jadrolinija.hr/en>) serves the central Dal-

matian coast and islands, with increased service during the summer. A hydrofoil from Split to popular Hvar Town takes only 60 minutes in high season.

Staying there: Few large hotels are available in central Split. About 6 miles south of the city, a string of beachfront resorts overlooks the harbor. Starwood Resort's Le Meridien Split (www.lemeridien-lavsplit.com) is a top choice: five star accommodations and a private beach from \$204/night. Four miles from Sibenik is the vast Solaris Resort, a bland complex favored by holiday-package Europeans (www.solarishotelsresort.com). Doubles from \$347/night. Many private homes in small towns offer bed and breakfast accommodations; look for signs that say "Apartman."

For more information: Croatia National Tourism Board: <http://croatia.hr>.



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Hvar, an island harbor since the 15th century, is one of the Croatian coast's scenic highlights.



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Split, Croatia's second largest city, gateway to the Dalmatian islands, was the retirement home of Roman emperor Diocletian.



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The citadel crowning the island of Hvar was built by the Venetians in 1550.