

By Mark Stevens with photography by Sharon Mathews-Stevens

Cruising in the company of history



A flotilla charter cruise through Croatia's beautiful Adriatic Sea offers a peek at days gone by.

The memories became indelibly imprinted on me after our cruise of Croatia's Adriatic Sea. Heaving-to for the antics of dolphins, docking on a 1,500-year-old stone quay, the sound of a carillon from a medieval church, the remembrance of a beer sipped in a centuries old seaside bar, swimming in crystal clear waters where Roman emperors once bathed, and setting course for far islands uninhabited since the Middle Ages have stayed with me, along with fond memories of friendships made with fellow flotilla sailors. There is something really special about cruising Croatia.

Having first explored the Dalmatian coast by land for a week we had already adjusted to the rhythm of the Adriatic country by slowing our pace so it was synchronous with a place like Split. By the time we arrived at the Sunsail Base in the Kremik Marina in Primosten, we were ready to sail. We had decided to sail as part of a flotilla, and during the briefing we met the other crews, the Sunsail staff who would guide us through the week, including lead skipper Mr. T. (his name was Tvrtko but I reverted to the accepted nickname after several mangled attempts at pronunciation), Ana, our flotilla host, and the mechanic, a quiet young man named Zoran. Finally, after the chart briefing, we cast off and raised sails.

A necklace of islands is scattered across Adriatic, and were well marked on the charts, just impossible to say or remember. By week's end we explored landfalls named Zlarin and Smokvica, Komorica and Zirje, Dugo and Maslinovik. Primosten fell away off our stern, and mist shrouded the more distant islands in mystery, making me want to completely unfurl the foresail, but we were heeling quite a bit so we kept it half in. Even so we were doing 5 knots and there was a timeless, placeless quality to this leg of the journey.



Two rustic restaurants on Kornat Island are among the only dwellings in the deserted chain of more than 150 islands, above. The port on the Krka River, on the other hand, top, is a full service marina. The village of Prvic, previous page, boasts medieval buildings and a gorgeous harbor.



My wife Sharon, our friend Elizabeth Kerr and I dined under-way then bore off for more open waters, making for the first destination, a fishing village called Prvic. We pulled up to a seawall sprouting massive iron bollards in front of the Hotel Maestral, a stone building with blue shutters. It was my first try at the docking process of stern-to Mediterranean mooring. The experience convinced me that my decision to choose a flotilla for this charter was the right one. The lead boat, crewed by Sunsail staff, was the first boat into every port so we had both firsthand advice and extra hands on shore to assist with our less-than-elegant docking attempts.

Having made port at Prvic before sundown, skippers and crews were treated to a dockside meet-and-greet featuring hors d'ouvres



and a very sneaky punch prepared by Ana. Bonding with the fleet turned out to be a trip highlight. Each morning Mr. T. met us over coffee in a seaside bistro or at picnic tables shaded by cypress trees or in the lee of a slope boasting olive groves and vineyards. He provided docking directions for the night, suggested perfect passages and excellent lunchtime stops.

The passage to Krka Falls twisted and turned through a long serpentine canyon, and we motored most of the way. Just before the river met the Adriatic, sheer cliffs rose up from the water, creating a narrow passage. The town of Sibenik reclined on the far side of a huge bay, buildings climbing the mountains like alpine goats, dominated by three more fortresses. The river turned hard to port and

we passed beneath a towering bridge. The vegetation was sparse, the landscape spectacular if barren. We sailed when we could, motored when we had to. The canyon grew ever more dramatic, until it opened onto a small lake where we shut off the engine and sailed to another channel on the far side. An hour later we made landfall at the village of Skradin. It boasted a brand-new marina, a medieval church and the ruins of a fortress once garrisoned by Turkish warlords. It was one of the most beautiful marina settings I'd ever seen.

That afternoon we boarded a tour boat and went upriver to the Krka waterfalls, carved out of limestone cliffs. Eight or nine roaring cascades plummeted into the river valley, and we cooled off from the 90-degree temperature in cool of the pools.

Early on we began an evening ritual with Debbie and Roger West and their grown sons Nick and Chris, in a shared affection for the local beer. Once in port it was drinks and finger foods on either *Neve* or *Guadamus*, their Jeanneau 37. I'd always pictured a flotilla as a bunch of newly converted landlubbers following their leader like a flock of sheep, but this was nothing like that. It was surprising to me how few constraints there actually were. After two nights together the fleet split up. Some made for other villages on various islands or the mainland. We, along with two other boats, made the long passage to the Kornati Islands, a national park made up of 150 islands that are almost completely uninhabited.

We got 10 miles out under perfect conditions before we had to motorsail, and that for only an hour or so before the wind filled in. The islands to our south were cloaked in mystery yet again, but they didn't even come close to the devilish allure of the Kornati Islands dead ahead.

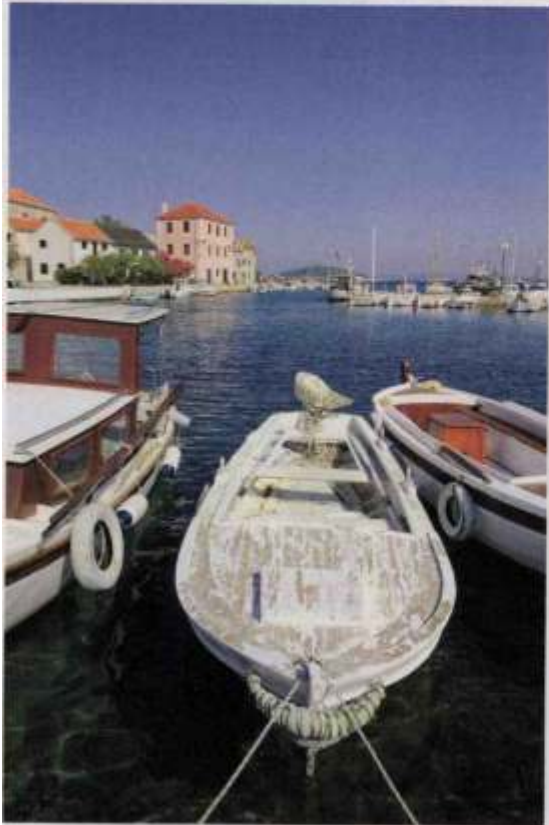
They could have filmed "Planet of the Apes" on this archipelago where ancient Roman olive groves dotted the slopes, where stone fences still marked the boundaries of Middle Ages serfdoms. To this day it's nearly impossible to describe them, they were so



The flotilla lines up along the seawall at Prvic, one of a chain of islands lying just off the mainland of the Dalmatian coast, above. A benefit to cruising in company is making new friends, right, and sailing to Zrje Islands, left.

overwhelmingly stark and beautiful at the same time. When night fell it was jet black, decorated by stars but so dark I felt like I had fallen off the face of the Earth. We had the anchorage at the south end of Kornat Island to ourselves. When we left these barren leviathans off our stern next morning we were universally affected by a strange disembodied feeling. But that changed to sheer delight, roughly an hour out.





Traditional fishing boats share the docks with charter boats and local pleasure craft on the island of Zlarin, above. The crew relaxes at anchor in the Kornati Islands following one of the week's longest passages, top.

Winds were steady but not aggressive when a sudden splash jerked me into alertness. I scanned the water. A dolphin, sleek purple pelt broke the surface. Another appeared, and then another. We came about, we hove-to, and drifted. They circled the boat, soaring and arcing, diving and surfacing. On any other day, in any other place, the experience would have seemed remarkable. On that day, for some reason, it was just one more life-changing moment.

On our last day we had a regatta with the fleet, and while I was hoping we would win, we missed the start. Sharon and Elizabeth worked the sheets like Fastnet veterans but we couldn't make it up. We came in half a boat-length behind the leader in spite of our 8 knots of boat speed. It was quite a venue for a race, with the start line located just outside a large object sprouting from the water beside an isolated danger marker. It was the wreck of a World War II German U-boat.

Back at home port that night the Sunsail staff hosted an informal awards ceremony and dinner. We made friends with two English families. Though part of me resented Londoners Mike, Kate, Richard and Sue Armfield for their exhilaration at beating us in that last-day race, they were gracious in victory, letting me hold the trophy, a carved wooden sailing dinghy.

Later that evening I sipped on a frosty Karlovacko beer in a tavern with Mr. T. "I speak Croatian," I exclaimed, raising my glass in triumph. "Karlovacko!"

Sharon and Elizabeth strolled along the seaside promenade to a west-facing promontory, where they explored the ruins of World War II bunkers and machine gun emplacements. That morning in the churchyard beside a Gothic church at Zlarin we saw three headstones memorializing untimely deaths as a result of the war that scarred this land in the 1990s. Earlier in the week we'd seen the pockmarks of artillery shells on the walls of a Dubrovnik monastery.

Marco Polo's contemporaries plied these waters, Roman triremes made landfall here. Invading Turks destroyed the settlements on Zirje Island, our lunch stop, in the sixteenth century.

It was the end of an amazing week of sailing, and I solemnly addressed my crew. I raised the glass of my last Karlovacko beer of the trip in a toast.

"Ladies," I said, "this week we've been sailing history." ☺

