

> CROATIA'S CAPTIVATING COASTLINE

On the road to see the ruins, vineyards

One driver gets behind the wheel of an Octavia and soaks up stunning landscape

CHRIS RYALL
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"If you want to see heaven on earth, come to Dubrovnik," praised Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw when he visited the city in 1929. The Old Town of Dubrovnik, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979, is the starting point of my Croatian road journey. The seventh-century Old Town and its ancient 25-metre-high walls have gone Hollywood. It's now the fictional setting of King's Landing in HBO's hit series *Game of Thrones*.

Due to budget and not wanting to draw attention as a tourist, I rented a typical 2014 Skoda Octavia 1.6 TDI four-door sedan through Oryx, a Croatian-based rental car company. I realized early on, however, that I screamed "tourist." The rental company's website was emblazoned on the car's rear window and Croatian men are tall and lean. I'm short and pudgy.

Dubrovnik has been dubbed "the pearl of the Adriatic" with its imposing limestone cliffs towering over the turquoise Adriatic Sea below. Damage and holes in the city's stone walls are reminders of the Croatian War of Independence from 1991-95.

I first made a diversion to Montenegro as it's a short 45-minute drive away. Crossing the border is simple, but make sure to have insurance and the Green Card documents border officials will request. My destination is Kotor, about an hour away. I cruise along twisting mountain roads until an unscheduled stop: a radar trap. Montenegro's finest stopped me for speeding, travelling 55 km/h in a 40 km/h zone. In Montenegro and Croatia, speed limits change constantly, making it a radar trap bonanza. The officer said I must pay €60 at the local bank and then return — he will hold

my driver's licence as ransom. Appearing contrite and stating I was Canadian, he reconsidered and let me go without a ticket. Now that's a tourism ambassador!

Driving Croatia's roads is both a delight and a fright. My eyes catch a glimpse of the enticing deep blue waters 500 metres below and picturesque islands. The constant hairpin and blind turns, narrow lane mountain roads and reckless drivers crossing over into the lane create some anxiety-filled driving. The plus side: Roads are in great shape and there's rarely any traffic — a welcome respite from the 40L.

The Adriatic Sea's crystal-clear blue waters that grace Croatia's almost 1,800-kilometre coastline seduce you into scenic utopia.

Driving along the E65/D8 coastal road to Split, first along the Peljesac Peninsula, wineries and fishing villages will lure you in for wine and mussels. Just 60 kilometres northwest of Dubrovnik on the way to Split, I encounter the most bizarre situation. I must leave Croatia and enter the country of Bosnia and Herzegovina and drive 11 kilometres to re-enter Croatia. It's a result of a treaty dating back to 1699.

Road signage in Croatia is excellent and rarely did I get lost, even though I had a defective GPS. No moose crossing signs, but they did have many wild boar road signs.

The A1 motorway is Croatia's major north-south route going from Ploče in the south to Zagreb almost 500 kilometres to the north. It was first conceived in the early 1970s, but only after the Croatian War did the motorway really take shape.

It's a modern, multi-lane highway (two lanes plus an emergency lane in both directions) with a top speed limit of 130 km/h, though many cars were cruising right by me. Even on the motorway, mountain ranges and lush valleys filled my peripheral vision. It is a toll highway though, so be prepared to

fork over kunas (the local currency), euros or a credit card. Rest areas, fruit stands and restaurants are along the motorway as well as petrol stations. My Octavia car required diesel that cost approximately \$2 per litre.

From Split to the Istria region you encounter towns and villages, castles, pebble-strewn beaches (many nudist) and Roman ruins galore, including the impressive Amphitheatre in Pula dating back 2,000 years, where gladiators fought. Inland, motorsports fans should visit the medieval town of Motovun perched high up on a hill. It's the birthplace of racing car legend Mario Andretti, who was born there in 1940. At the time it was called Montona and was part of Italy, but it was annexed to then-Yugoslavia in 1945 after the Second World War.

Istria's lush countryside will remind visitors of Tuscany with its vineyards, forest-green hills, olive trees, meandering roads and medieval towns. I stumble upon Hum, which proclaims to be the smallest town in the world. Two streets, churches and shops selling Hum T-shirts and more pricey truffles. There are 23 official residents, but one resident told me soon there will be a population explosion, with three women residents expected.

The final trek to Zagreb from Istria is less scenic, though challenging. Fog and high winds are common from Rijeka to Zagreb. I encountered the densest fog in my life about 45 minutes east of Zagreb. It was bare-knuckled driving as I couldn't even see four metres ahead. Stopping was not an option. I was hoping this predominantly Catholic country was praying for my safe passage!

Croatia captivated and surprised me with its charm, stunning scenery, quality wines and sumptuous cuisine while experiencing its rich history through the many Roman ruins and walled cities. California's Big Sur, South Africa's Garden Route, Australia's Great Ocean Road — move over. Croatia's Adriatic coastline is moving into the

world's best road trip lists.

Chris Ryall is a Toronto-based freelance travel writer who has visited more than 60 countries on six continents. [Croatia's](#) national tourist board and companies in the country's tourism industry provided his rental car, hotel accommodation and meals. For more Star automotive coverage, go to thestar.com/autos. To reach Wheels editor Norris McDonald: nmcdonald@thestar.ca.



CHRIS RYALL FOR THE TORONTO STAR

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Croatia surprises with its old-world charm, stunning scenery and rich history.