

Croatia's Crown

CROATIA'S DALMATIAN COAST IS BEING REDISCOVERED BY TRAVELLERS LOOKING FOR A RELAXING SUN HOLIDAY WITH ALL THE PERKS OF CITY CULTURE. YVONNE GORDON EXPERIENCES THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Croatians have a good sense of humour and our skipper Goran shares some life secrets. "If you want to live a few years longer, get a small property on an island and a boat. That's all you need for a happy life," Goran tells us, as he navigates his traditional wooden motor boat out of the marina near Dubrovnik. He suddenly gets excited when he sees some large motor cruisers – a row of lavish gin palaces tied up to the dock. "You can't be honest to have one of those," he says. "Nobody can be honest to make that much money." I look over to see if I can spot any bankers or politicians sunning themselves on deck.

Soon Goran's wife appears from below deck with some 'blonde brandy' and we all calm down as we head towards the Elaphiti islands. There are thirteen islands in the archipelago and we are to visit three of them on our day trip.

The first island we arrive at is Lopud. The small port is overlooked by a Franciscan monastery which dates back to 1483 and the bell is ringing as we pull alongside the pier, almost in welcome. It's a tranquil waterfront, fringed by a small beach with clear, blue water and lined with palm trees. Some of the waterside restaurants are set up for lunch, under white sunshades. Wandering around the little streets is a great way to soak up the atmosphere and it's possible to rent a bicycle (the island is car-free) to explore the island's citrus fruit plantations, olive groves, vineyards and beaches.

Back on board, we tuck into a tasty barbecue of red scorpion fish and grilled vegetables, with local wine, while we cruise past the other islands, admiring rows of pretty houses and their red tiled roofs. The island of Šipan is next; nicknamed the Golden Island because of its olive oil. A fisherman mends his net beside a row of tiny colourful fishing boats, and children line the sea wall, where shoals of fish dart around in the clear water. We also visit Koločep, with churches and ruins as well as beaches, cliffs and cycling tracks to discover. Exploring the islands at a gentle pace is a great way to get a sense of island life.

That night I arrive back to my hotel just in time to watch a fiery sun setting over the islands, while boats and yachts of all sizes dash up and down the coast to make landfall before darkness.

The next morning I head into Dubrovnik old town. Founded by the Croatians in the 7th century, Dubrovnik flourished during the 16th century, its golden age for art, culture and maritime trade.

Although the old city was damaged extensively in the 1991-1995 war, it is now fully restored. Some describe this World Heritage Site as a 'living museum', while George Bernard Shaw called it 'heaven on earth'. It is certainly full of atmosphere, its stone buildings containing museums, rector's palaces, churches and a cathedral. A Franciscan monastery is home to a pharmacy which has been trading since 1317. Locals stop and greet each other in outdoor cafés, while in the square the daily market bustles, with stalls set out with dried figs, cheeses, grappa, pomegranates, dried orange and lavender.

Divert off the main thoroughfare into any of the smaller streets and you'll come to hundreds of steps leading up to the city walls above. On a trip around the warren of backstreets, I am totally lost when I see a sign for 'cold drinks' beside a tiny opening in the city walls. I follow through the gap to find the Buza Bar, set on a rocky cliff edge. There are steps down to the water and people are swimming. It's a magical discovery.

One of the best ways to get a sense of the old city of Dubrovnik is to walk around the city walls, which stretch 2km around the city. There are also bird's eye views from the mountain behind the city, reached by cable-car. Beside me, I hear a man saying "it exceeded my expectations". I couldn't agree more.

On my final day, I visit Cavtat, a small medieval town and resort along the coast. With a tiny waterfront, it has a laid-back island feel to it, with souvenir shops and cafés. Although Croatia (and in the 1970s and 1980s when it was Yugoslavia) has long been favoured by Irish holidaymakers for value package holidays, Croatia knows how to do luxury. There are ten five-star hotels in Dubrovnik and the city regularly plays host to royalty, famous musicians and Hollywood stars, many of whom arrive on private yachts. The wall of fame in the Hotel Excelsior beside the old city is a who's who of famous actors and musicians.

For some reason, I had been expecting cheap and cheerful – and it is possible – but the glamour factor, big cars and expensive yachts made it feel more like Monte Carlo at times during my trip and they give the place a lovely mix. 

Clockwise from top left: The pretty resort of Cavtat; Dubrovnik old town; The Marina Mala boat docked at Šipan island; Tourists in the old town of Dubrovnik with church tower of the Franciscan monastery in the background.



PHOTOGRAPH YVONNE GORDON

travel file

Yvonne Gordon travelled to Croatia with Concorde Travel.

A seven-night package at the five-star Hotel Dubrovnik Palace starts from €910 pp inc tax, based on two sharing a classic sea-view room, including breakfast. Ex Dublin. dubrovnikpalace.hr

Seven nights at the 3-star Antuniska Apartments in Dubrovnik Old Town, starts from €444 pp inc tax, based on two sharing, self-catering. Ex Dublin.

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