



Home or abroad, our weekly travel page has all the best deals and ideas you need for getting away

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Go Kathryn Thomas is our celeb travel writer - don't miss her expert advice here every week

Dubrovnik in Croatia must be one of the most romantic cities in the world. Dating back to the 7th century, the former maritime republic is rich with culture, architecture, art and music.

It's set on the Adriatic Sea, has a warm Mediterranean climate and is positioned for beautiful sunsets — but the most romantic thing of all is that it's a medieval fortified city, with 2km of stone city walls, drawbridges, fortresses and a warren of tiny streets.

George Bernard Shaw wrote that it was "Paradise on Earth".

It's no surprise that Dubrovnik is becoming ever more popular for weddings — last year there were around 160 foreign weddings in the city and 60 of these were Irish.

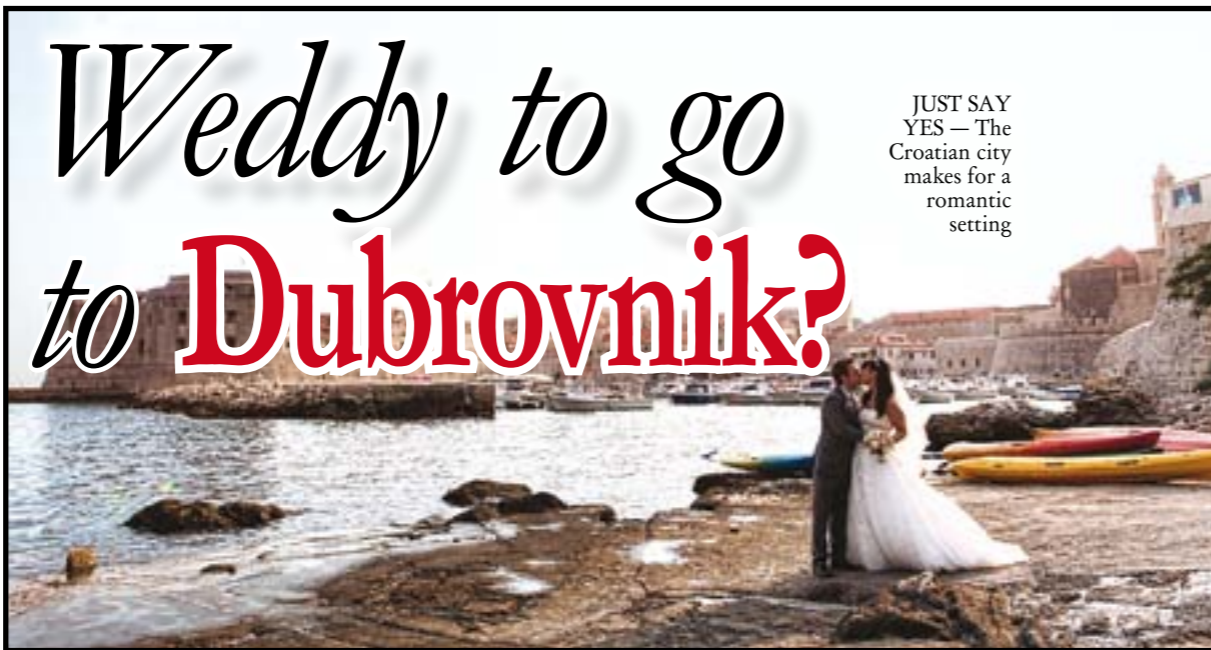
With this, hotels and venues have started to customise their offerings to provide something special to couples who choose the city for their big day.

There's a variety of wedding venues for the ceremony or reception, from beaches, castles, forts or gardens, depending on the type of wedding. If you chose a civil ceremony, you can get married at any outdoor location.

For a church wedding, the Old Town (within the walls) has lots of catholic churches, such as the small church of St Blaise on the main street Stradun, the less

Weddy to go to Dubrovnik?

JUST SAY YES — The Croatian city makes for a romantic setting



touristy St Ignatius or Dubrovnik Cathedral. You can also have a symbolic ceremony, which has all the elements of a wedding but is not legally binding.

Most of the reception venues are hotel-based, but they have lots of romantic outdoor locations, with stone terraces and beaches, or secluded lush gardens of pine and cedar trees, all overlooking the Adriatic and ideal for either ceremony or reception.

Because of their privacy, the hotel wedding venues don't feel like they are part of a hotel and the advantage is that they have indoor backups in case of inclement weather.

They also offer more privacy than venues in the Old Town, which can be crowded during high season.

Popular venue choices are five-star hotels such as the Hotel Excelsior, where the terraces have views over the Adriatic and the

Old Town, or Hotel Grand Villa Argentina, which has lush waterside gardens and terraces.

A few minutes outside the city, Hotel Dubrovnik Palace has a private beach club and even a small bastion for ceremonies.

More central is Restaurant Nautika which has a waterside location with views of the city walls and Fort Lovrijenac, an 11th century castle often used for performances of Hamlet. The small sandy beach just outside the city walls, Banje beach, is home to East West Beach Club which also has private terraces.

Compared to other popular wedding destinations in Europe, Dubrovnik may not be a cheap destination, but it does offer something special.

Local wedding planner Ines Nanic says that couples are getting something unique — "Dubrovnik is not a mass tourism destination yet. You have to see it," she says. "Dubrovnik is a lot about how you feel it."

Ines works closely with Dublin-based tour operator Concorde Travel, which specialises in overseas weddings.

Concorde's wedding planning package, which includes arranging the church, licence, witnesses (if needed) and services of a local wedding planner, with unlimited wedding planning assistance, costs €1,700. They can also help arrange the honeymoon, and give advice on excursions and sightseeing.

The traditional wedding season in Dubrovnik is April to October

WEST IS BEST FOR THE KIDS

HAVING A WHEELY GOOD TIME — The Greenway cycle tour is a great day out



● When you are holidaying in a hotel with young children, the attitude of the staff is vital. If they keep smiling when your kids are making their sixth trip to the breakfast buffet ("I just want to try one more thing, mum!") or running across the lobby at warp speed, or refusing point blank to get out of the swimming pool, then you know you've picked the right place.

● The Westport Plaza is the kind of hotel where families are made to feel genuinely welcome, starting at check-in when your little ones will receive a bumper-sized colouring book and crayons.

● We arrived around 7pm on a Friday night and our two boys (age six and eight) were delighted to hear that the swimming pool was open until 10.15pm!

● So we had time to unpack and enjoy a delicious meal in the hotel's Restaurant Merlot (we especially loved the pistachio crusted camembert and trio of salmon served with warm blinis) before heading to the pool for a quick swim before bedtime.

● And wow! What bliss to discover the water is kept at a temperature of 30.5 degrees, perfect for my two skinny lads

who tend to get a bit shivery in most pools but here the water was warm enough to allow them to float and splash about for an hour. Indeed, it was nearly impossible to try and get them out of the pool and they would have spent the whole weekend in there if I let them!

● Breakfast the next morning had the best of both worlds — a Continental style buffet plus the option of ordering a freshly-cooked full Irish as well.

And thus breakfast became a four (or even five!) course meal, by the time the kids (and us!) had wolfed down cereal, toast, sausages, hash browns, bacon, yoghurt and croissants.

● We waddled into the car for a scenic drive to Achill, our first time visiting this remote and wildly beautiful part of Mayo. Allow yourself a few hours to soak up the stunning scenery.

● The highlight of Achill for us was the steep descent into the white sandy Blue Flag beach at Keem, hidden amidst cliffs and surrounded by sheep who wander happily onto the road, so drive carefully.

● Later on we took the kids to Westport House which is a real

paradise for families (see below for more information) and well worth a visit.

● The Westport Plaza is located right in the heart of Westport town, next to its sister hotel the Castlecourt Resort. There is no need to worry about taxis as you can walk everywhere.

New for Summer 2013, the Westport Plaza and Castlecourt Resort is offering guests exclusive discounts with some of the most popular local activity providers.

● This includes a two-day family pass to Westport House & Pirate Adventure Park for two adults and two children for only €55 (full price is normally €118). Activities include: cannonball run slide, pirates swinging ship, bumper cars and pirates plunge log flume ride, swan pedaloe boats on the lake, bouncy castles, Westport House Express, pirates den. The two hotels also have a fully supervised Buzz Club running throughout July and August keeping children aged five right up to 16 years entertained throughout the day.

● Meanwhile, for teenagers Westport Plaza can organise: — Greenway cycle to include bike hire and packed lunch for €10-€15 per person, depending on age.

— Westport House, to include zip wire or high ropes activity (€12 per person) — Surf lessons to include wet suit and surf board hire (€12-€15pp, depending on age)

(direct flights from Ireland run from March to October) and weddings for a group of 10 range between €4,000 and €6,000.

The average menu starts from €55 per person, excluding drinks, in a hotel (or less if in a local restaurant). A wedding in Hotel Excelsior costs around €90 per person (food only) or around €70-€75 at Hotel Grand Villa Argentina. Prices for barbecues or lunch the next day cost around €20 or €25 per person, with no rental fee for the restaurant if you have more than 30 people.

Taking a panoramic boat cruise either from a hotel dock or the old port, and enjoying drinks and canapés is a popular activity between the ceremony and the reception — boat hire costs from €800. If the wedding is close to the old town, transport is not an issue as the city is pedestrianised, so most bridal parties walk.

So whether you have a small intimate outdoor reception or a large hotel banquet, whether you walk the city walls hand in hand, take the cable car up the hill or just enjoy waterside cocktails at sunset, the romance of Dubrovnik will leave you with many happy memories.

■ For information on weddings in Croatia, contact 01 775 9300, email weddings@concordetravel.ie or see www.concordetravel.ie. For information on Croatia see www.croatia.hr



WARM — The pool at Westport Plaza Hotel

● The swimming pool stays open until 10.15pm on Fridays and 6.30pm the rest of the week.

A range of board games, Playstations and kids DVDs are also available for guests. And don't forget there is the luxurious Spa Sula on site, if you fancy treating yourself to a massage or beauty treatment.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

— All-in family package (two adults and two children under 12, three nights B&B plus two evening meals):

Castlecourt Hotel from €559 in total
Westport Plaza Hotel from €669 in total
— All-in teen family package (two adults and two children under 16, three nights B&B plus two evening meals):

Castlecourt Hotel from €589 in total
Westport Plaza Hotel from €699 in total

● For more information see www.westportplazahotel.ie or call 098 51166

QUESTION: We want to take a week in Co Donegal. As a Dublin couple neither of us, to our shame, have visited this part of the country. Can you suggest some ideas for a road trip?

KATHRYN REPLIES: One of my most memorable Irish road trips was in Co Donegal. We rented a Volkswagen camper van named Suzy and took off. For similar check out www.retrocamper.ie

Starting in Donegal town itself, head about 6km out to Lough Eske and stay at Harvey's Point for a night of luxury. The only Irish hotel to make the top 25 in Europe in the Tripadvisor Awards 2013, it's definitely worth a stop over for a night or two. See www.harveyspoint.com

From there head for the Inishowen Peninsula making your way to Buncrana.

Dunree Bay and Buncrana beach are stunning. Buncrana Castle where Wolfe Tone was incarcerated is also worth a stop.

Continue up the scenic coastline through Dunree, Clonmany and Ballyliffen stopping wherever the mood takes you.

The Doagh Famine Village gives a great insight into the plight of people in this remote part of Ireland during the blight of the 1840s and is absolutely fascinating.

From there head up to Malin Head, Ireland's most northerly point and on to Culdaff for an afternoon of spotting basking sharks. Lunch in McGrorys on your return is always a winner — see www.mcgrorys.ie.

If time allows, the ferry across Lough Foyle into Antrim to visit the Giants Causeway was a highlight for me.

The world famous Earagail Arts Festival is running in Donegal until July 21, travelling to various parts of the county. A packed programme of music, dance, theatre, literature, take a look at the schedule and see what works with your dates — log onto www.eaf.ie

Other useful websites are www.walkingdonegal.ie and www.discoverdonegal.ie

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