

Travel

Purple haze and the scent of summer



The heady aroma of lavender fills the air on Croatia's many islands, making them the perfect destination for a stress-free escape, writes *Yvonne Gordon*

One of the trips that many of us dreamt of during lockdown was to an exotic island, with beaches, clear waters and palm trees. And while Irish islands can be paradise on a sunny day, it's the islands of Croatia in the Adriatic Sea that I look forward to getting back to, for a few quiet days of walking, biking and swimming in sun and warm water, away from crowds and traffic.

Some of Croatia's best known islands are in the Dalmatia region, and Hvar is one of the largest. I've visited on various boats over the years – sailing boat, motor

boat and even once on a traditional Dalmatian fishing boat I was exploring the islands on. You can also take the ferry there from the city of Split, the 105-minute crossing leaving plenty of time to let the stress fall away as you head out to sea, breathe in the fresh air and watch the line of green on the distant horizon become larger as you approach.

Last time I visited, it was on a warm spring day and when I stepped ashore at the port of Hvar, I was struck by the lovely smell of lavender. A row of small huts around the harbour had it displayed in all forms – in bunches, dried, in soap and bottles of oil – and as I wandered around the waterfront, the aroma hit every remaining spot that was not relaxed by the boat trip.

St Stephens's Square is the town's focal point, where locals chat over coffee, children play, and tourists wander. There are restaurants for people-watching or quieter spots tucked between the walls of the town's tiny streets, which come alive with bars at night.

In the Benedictine convent, the tradition of lacemaking using the threads from agave leaves goes back hundreds of years. The knots in the lace are so tiny they are invisible and the process is so intricate it takes three to six months to make a piece of a few inches. Behind the town, the walk up the steps to the 16th-century fortress Fortica (or Spanjola, as it known locally), takes about



Clockwise from top left: lavender on Hvar; the harbour at Mljet island; café life off St Stephen's Square in Hvar; Velo Grablje; kayaking on one of Mljet's saltwater lakes

15 minutes and the reward is the views down over the harbour and the stone houses with their red roofs.

Hvar island has about 11,000 residents and is popular for hiking and cycling. I joined Secret Hvar for a day tour, to explore the olive gardens, vineyards and lavender fields, and see the ancient roads and network of dry stone walls. The oldest trails on the island are more than 3,000 years old – historians have aged them from nearby graves. The trails were used by the islanders to go to the fields and many paths have been restored in recent years.

We took an old dirt road out of town towards Fort Napoljun. As the road narrowed to the width of a single track, we passed olive trees, heather and flowering rosemary, which gave off a

strong aroma. There was wild asparagus growing along the road, which twists and curves into a series of switchbacks on the way up to the fortress. The fort dates from Napoleon's time – the French ruled Croatia from 1806 to 1813 – and there are beautiful views over Hvar town, to distant islands and over the Pakleni Islands in front of the town; a row of little circles and ovals covered in green trees and dolloped along the grey blue sea.

We left the fortress and continued east. Hvar is greener and lushier than you would expect. There are lots of trees and the air is often filled with the scent of lavender or rosemary. Every so often we came over a hill to a view down a valley or canyon that was criss-crossed by a network of old dry stone walls dating back hundreds of years.

Lavender had its peak in the 1960s when sunny Hvar produced about 10 per cent of the world's supply. In the past, the herb, along with rosemary, olive oil, wine and fishing, was central to the island's economy; now it relies on tourism.

We stopped at the tiny village of Velo Grablje, which sits on green hills with views down to the sea below. As we walked along overgrown paths, admiring the old stone houses, almond and fig trees, I noticed how quiet it was. There are fewer than 20 residents now, but the village was once central to lavender production. Locals are reviving some traditions with an annual lavender festival in summer that includes workshops, harvesting, traditional music and dance.

Further inland, the tiny village of Malo Grablje was abandoned years ago when



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residents moved to Milna on the coast and the stone houses now sit empty. You can still see part of an ancient Roman stone road, and a stone building that once had a communal olive mill and a village school in it. There's also an old distillery, once used for lavender and rosemary. Nobody lives there but restaurant Stori Komin keeps life in the place during summer, serving traditional dishes such as lamb slow-cooked with vegetables under a dome. The tour gave an interesting picture of how island life was in the past, before we returned to the buzz of Hvar.

Further south in the Adriatic, island life is relaxed too on Kolocep, one of the Elaphiti islands near Dubrovnik. We sailed to a small quiet bay surrounded by whitewashed houses with red roofs, sitting among tall evergreen trees. The car-free island is just 2.44 sq km and has beautiful walks and swim spots. The water was so clear I could see the fish darting back and forth under a row of tiny blue wooden fishing boats tied up to the pier, while an old man tidied up his fishing nets.

We wandered paths behind the town – passing tiny chapels, each spotless and with flowers on the altar, but we only saw one other person. At Skerac restaurant, which overlooks the water, menus aren't needed – it's always catch of the day and you select your fish before it's grilled over the fire while you soak up the sea views. The other customers had pulled their kayaks up on a small beach below the restaurant to drop in for lunch.

At another island, Sipan, we spent the morning cycling around, stopping at more tiny churches, listening to insects and birdsong and soaking up nature before a swim in the clear waters. On a quiet road we came across a table set up with local produce for sale: jars of preserves, oils, soaps and lavender, with an honesty box.

These islands are perfect for relaxed outdoor adventures such as nature walks and cycling, kayaking, paddleboarding and boating on the water, plus snorkelling and swimming. Most beaches are rocky rather than sandy but waters are warm and clear. In the evening, you can try local wine while locally grown or caught food is slow-cooked over the fire.

The island of Mljet has a national park, where saltwater lakes are surrounded by quiet paths through forest and there are boat trips to an old island monastery. At the harbour there are rows of bikes to rent and menus on blackboards.

As we sat in at a harbourfront restaurant in the evening, we heard singing coming across the water – a group of local men singing the traditional klapa, the local form of a cappella. Boats were creaking and birds were tweeting in the trees as if in harmony. In the background, there was a clink of plates and glasses and laughter. It was all the sounds of chat and joy. I can still almost hear it and I look forward to feeling that relaxed island vibe soon again.

THE BRIEF
There are regular day cruises or ferries from Dubrovnik to the Elaphiti islands, and for Hvar, you can take a ferry from the city of Split. See tzdubrovnik.hr and secrethvar.com. Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) flies from Dublin and Cork to Dubrovnik; Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies from Dublin to Dubrovnik and Split. For information on visiting Croatia, see croatia.hr