CROATIA

Whether you are planning a short trip, an arty and cultured adventure or a romantic holiday in your next loved one, the Dalmatian coastline has got it all: crystal clear seas, deserted beaches, wild nightlife, historic cities, mountain scenery, shady bays, fantastic shopping, and the most reasonably priced wine in Europe!

BY CHARLOTTE TOTTENHAM

Why island hopping in Croatia is the best way to spend your summer...

SPLIT

Split is a great place to begin when it comes to exploring the Dalmatian coastline.

With our feet firmly on dry land, we got accustomed to the Kuna and soaked up the sunshine, before we embarked on our Adriatic seafaring adventure.

Split's 'I to Museum', which comically directs to Roman Emperor Diocletian's Villa, is truly a must do. Diocletian's Palace is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and very informative and hilariously funny; think Monty Python meets Horrible Histories and you will know what to expect. For those who prefer to keep their culture valuing to people-watching from cafés, it is a great way to get a glimpse of the history of the city without too much traipsing.

The Croats are responsible for the creation of that dapper accessory, the cravat. With its spattering of glamorous boutiques and copious opportunities to peruse silk ties, cravats and well-tailored suits, Split is certainly the top destination for chic shoppers in Croatia.

One evening in Split, we chanced across some unexpectedly good live music resonating around the town's sixteen hundred year old Roman square.

Armed with vast glasses of delicious, domestic Galić Rosé, we dragged unwilling locals onto the dance-floor, kicking off an uproarious scene that spanned an impressive range of ages and nationalities. The talented band covered Pharrell Williams' 'Happy' with an adorably funny Croatian lilt and rounds of homemade aniseed Grappa shots were had by all. I'd like to think we helped start a party that Diocletian himself would have been proud of.

VIS ISLAND

Our first stop was a small island called Vis, which is an aesthetically dreamy port where aquamarine waters and rugged mountains collide with a backdrop of fishing boats and sailing yachts. We had ferocious personality on boasting an sea cable to ensure that the following week would be accompanied with a suitably holiday-worthy soundtrack. I broke away from mission sea cable and strolled down the gangway past the narrow streets, which are lined with a vast array of galleries. Vis, it turns out, has a burgeoning art scene.

Summer 2014 saw the inauguration of Fort George, a stunning and exceptionally hip fine dining and clubbing extravaganza. The island of Vis is a former naval port, accessible by ferry of Mondulf Fido and reputedly has over thirteen kilometres of submarine tunnels. Fort George befits the island's military theme; a decommissioned British base atop the highest peak on the island, it possesses the most magical of views over the Adriatic, hosts international DJs and has a dangerously well-stocked wine cellar.

MLJET ISLAND

Our captain anchored the boat off the island, in the middle of nowhere, and while the energetic holiday-makers among us made the most of the perfect wakeboarding and water-skiing conditions, I sipped on Plavac Mali and gazed out at a seemingly endless sea of blue. Plavac Mali is the Dalmatian coast's own red wine, and while most Croatians will water down white or rosé with sparkling water, this stuff is strong, lightly spiced and always served undiluted.

The following morning, slightly regretting our former love affair with Croatian wine, we went ashore, and despite our wobbly sea-legs, casted bicycles and explored the National Park. Mljet is the most southerly of the islands that we visited. Stunning and extremely unspoilt, with pathways laid as around the circumference of expansive saltwater lakes.

On turning a corner, we were greeted with the sight of the Church and Monastery of St Mary, floating isolated in the middle of the lake. Apparently one of the oldest churches in the Adriatic Sea, the little islet now has a restaurant next to the recently renovated church and can be reached by water taxi.

HVAR ISLAND

Hvar has been prised as the new St Tropez and if the assortment of ludicrously beautiful somewhats, equally beautiful people and phenomenal restaurants and bars are anything to go by, then it must be true. This the place where we were fittingly offered 'Sexy Rosé' by a very tall and elegant waitress. We opted for cocktails and sipped on our sundowners as the sun disappeared over the horizon.

We joined the circumnavigators of Hvar's well heeled types; head to Kosoba Lavija, a cosy yet bustling tavern with a panoramic view of Hvar town. This family-run restaurant bakes freshly caught seafood in a wood oven and the menu changes daily. Like any party town, Hvar has a strip of bars: we opted for Carpe Diem, which is the only bar that competes with one another for the price of cheapest booze, deepest bass and noisiest house music.

The real fun begins when these watering holes close and the party-goers flood to Carpé Diem, an island nightclub across the water from the town. We made friends with strangers, lounged about on giant four-poster day beds, jumped in and out of the sea, lolled around in hot tubs, bought hot for strangers, overdid it on the shots and danced until dawn.

SIPAN ISLAND

One morning I woke up and on peering out of our microscopic porthole found that we had moored on the quayside. Sipan is a remote island that has a resident population of eighty people. A stroll along the waterfront led me to a charming and diddy open-air cinema that consisted of six seats, a grubby projector and a screen that was the size of a postage stamp. Sipan is also home to a small fishing village on the bay we heard Café No Name, home to disarmingly friendly waitresses and good coffee. The island was once the summer retreat for Dubrovnik's royalty so is littered with grand, abandoned mansions that tell of a Romantic bygone era.

DUBROVNIK

We approached Dubrovnik from the water, casting the battlements into intimidatingly impressive relief. The stone turrets, towers and walls must have seemed pretty indomitable to Navies attacking from the water.

When we finally came ashore, we discovered the old city of Dubrovnik to be intricate and interesting, with labyrinthine passageways radiating off the main avenue, the Stradun. We marched away on finale, a delicious Croatian pastry flavoured with brandy and citrus zest, and greedily devoured ice-cream from Dolce Vita available in a multitude of flavours.

When you take the cable car up above the town, you can truly digest Dubrovnik's troubled history. The damage done in the Siege of 1991, when the city was heavily shelled, has not stopped the people of Dubrovnik. They have expertly reconstructed vast swathes of the city, and done so impeccably well.

Watering hole-wise, there is something for everyone, with everything from sophisticated bars complete with handmade wine, to fun, traditional taverns. We wended our way up to the top of the city wall to Nautika, Dubrovnik's finest seafood restaurant. With unparalleled views out over the Adriatic and impeccable service, our dining experience truly lives up to its reputation. Try their bruzeta but delicious pureed fish tar-tar.

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