



FINANCIAL TIMES

# travel unravelled

OCTOBER 24 2015



how to spend it  
special travel issue



The mystery islets hidden within the Adriatic's archipelagos are now ripe for discovery aboard new Croatia-based yachts, says Julian Allason

# THE DALMATIANS' NEW SPOTS



**S**cattered across the cobalt Adriatic Sea are islands, islets and skerries almost beyond number. Croatia alone lays claim to 1,246 of them, though only about 50 are permanently inhabited. A few, notably the party island of Hvar, have long been visited by flotilla sailors and the owners of superyachts cruising from Corfu to Venice. But others in this glittering archipelago remain unfamiliar even to Croatians. To them these are *otoci otajstva*, isles of mystery, truly known only by their inhabitants. A generation after the collapse of Tito's Yugoslav federation and the subsequent Croatian War of Independence, however, change is on the breeze. As the archipelagos' outer reaches begin to open up, and the quality and breadth of yachts available for charter on the Croatian-mainland coast improves, the isles of mystery are coming into the spotlight.

The key access point is the coastal city of Split, but new motorways are snaking down the seaboard to

connect fortified towns. In Unesco-protected Dubrovnik, city fathers have imposed strict limits on cruise-ship visits to protect the old ways of life. Meanwhile, marina facilities like D-Marin Mandalina (pictured overleaf) at Sibenik and the Riva in Split are luring yachts from overcrowded French and Italian ports. Their appeal? Expertise and value, for ancient boat-building skills survive here alongside a tradition of honest dealing with seafarers.

At Split's waterfront airport our speedboat docks opposite a gleaming new de Havilland Twin Otter seaplane. It is preparing to take off for remote Lastovo, a dreamy island of Renaissance houses and churches where folk costume is still worn for festivals. European Coastal Airlines has launched Europe's only scheduled seaplane service, with plans to open up three groupings of islands, each diverse in character.

To understand the full significance one must consider the geography. From its northern frontier with Slovenia, Croatia describes an arc of clear coastline. The waypoints are marked by Venetian garrison ports like Rovinj, where 15th-century palazzi line the piazzas. It is only south of

**A sailing gulet in the waters of Mljet National Park, Mljet Island, Dubrovnik-Neretva**



houses lie abandoned for want of agreement to sell or rebuild. A further consequence is that well-appointed rental villas are comparatively few on the islands (though The Luxury Travel Book offers several). This has limited property-price increases, thereby preserving the integrity of local communities. In Montenegro, to the south, rapid development has transformed the littoral, and not always for the better. The Croatian pace is more cautious, as the country adjusts to EU membership and ponders the direction of high-end tourism.

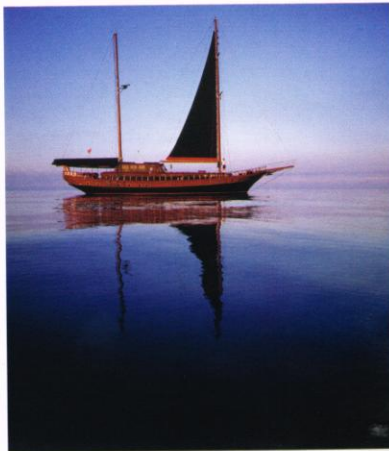
Seeds are beginning to sprout on the islands. Šolta boasts an elegant German-owned chateau hotel, Martinis Marchi Heritage Hotel (pictured left); guests are whisked from Split in 25 minutes aboard a steel-grey sea limo. The chateau is set in magnificent gardens sloping down to the island's little port. Originally an 18th-century castle, it has been reconfigured with a swimming pool and terrace to serve guests staying in the six rooms and suites. Seated beneath a pergola in the hotel's restaurant, we enjoy langoustine salad served with a crisp rosé from the owner's

*One of the prettiest bays conceals a bomb-proof submarine pen tunnelled deep into the rock. As my guide, Mario Bralic, notes, military usage preserved the islands from overdevelopment*

the Roman city of Pula that the cape shatters into slivers of longitudinal islands. Each bears a staccato name: Krk, Cres, Rab. Here, eight centuries of Venetian dominance succeeded by Habsburg rule have left an enduring legacy; Italian and German are still widely spoken, drawing visitors from Lombardy and Austria. Further south, along the dramatic Dalmatian coast, English is instead the increasingly ubiquitous language, as yachting billows out from familiar waters close to the mainland into the lesser-known westerly islands, deep in the Adriatic.

"For cruising, the most appealing islands lie offshore between Split – which has just acquired its first five-star boutique property, the handsome Hotel Park – and Dubrovnik in Dalmatia. They include Mljet [pictured on previous pages], Korčula, and Vis," notes the British charter broker Michael Bird, of Dalmatian Destinations. "These are less well known than the northern isles, mountainous and more authentic." Waters here are deep and clear, with a limited tidal fall and little flotsam; when the *Lonely Planet* guide's authors attempted to measure the Croatian coastline to include the islands, it uncoiled to 1,178km of hidden coves and jagged headlands. Little wonder wreck-diving to sunken vessels has become an obsession hereabouts.

Unlike the northern isles, some of which can be reached by causeway, the western-Dalmatian archipelago remains little developed. Among the olive groves and vineyards survive traditions of island life as hospitable as they are resistant to change. So unspoiled is Vis, 30 nautical miles off the mainland, that its two small towns still use different dialects. Strolling back from dinner in Kut we catch the strains of *klapa*: islanders are giving voice to harmonies rooted in medieval liturgy. Along the little port, 17th-century captains' houses watch over the fishing fleet. Sheltering the harbour is a promontory upon



which stands the monastery of St Jerome, where Franciscan friars still ring out the sacred hours.

Mystery has enveloped Vis since classical times. In 1944 the partisan leader Josip Tito hid here from occupying German troops: the fit and agile can still penetrate his mountain cave. Military tunnels dug by communist forces after the second world war riddle the green island. Only in 1991 did the troops finally withdraw, leaving hitherto forbidden zones open to exploration. One of the prettiest bays conceals a bomb-proof submarine pen tunnelled deep into the rock. As my guide, Mario Bralic, notes, military usage preserved the islands from overdevelopment. Fort George, a former British outpost from the Napoleonic Wars, has now been restored for use as a music venue and restaurant.

Not that construction is straightforward in Croatia. The survival of Napoleonic law has seen properties divided into multiple ownership. As a result, many old



From top: Martinis Marchi Heritage Hotel on the island of Šolta. The D-Marin Mandalina marina, Sibenik. Anoushka Hempel's yacht Beluga I

vineyard, watching guests sail in for a traditional Croatian wedding.

At the other, more familiar extreme is Hvar, the buzzing island it seems every Italian under 25 aspires to visit. In season, it is about with beach bars and music festivals; yet the alleys tumbling down from the 16th-century

fortress are quiet enough. Family restaurants serve unfamiliar fish barbecued over vine wood with local wine. Inland, fields of lavender scent the breeze. In the coves of the Pakleni islands sheltering the main bay, clothes are optional. The confluence of superyachts in the harbour suggests that celebration is not confined to the young, however. Sophistication and culture are certainly catered to with recitals and exhibitions in the richly ornamented Gothic palaces. The big island of Mljet, on the other hand, remains seductively tranquil. According to legend, Odysseus passed seven years here. Today, the forests and saltwater lakes are preserved as national parkland. In the middle of one lake is an islet with a ruined Benedictine monastery, remade as an atmospheric restaurant serving kid roasted in a domed charcoal oven called a *peka*.

One eats well on the islands, few places better than on hedonistic Palmizana. Iva Tomlinovic is the third generation of her family to cook at Restaurant Zori (pictured overleaf), admired for its reinterpretations of classic Dalmatian dishes. The restaurant and lagoon are busy in season and valet parking has been introduced for speedboats, though the rest of the island remains peaceful.

The coast and islands offer various options for exploration. Seabourn's small luxury cruise ships anchor in Triluke Bay and off Primosten, as well as Dubrovnik. Island-hopping is feasible by ferry and fast

# CASSANDRA GOAD



30 years  
TAGLIATELLE  
Silver, diamond and  
yellow gold rings

Cassandra Goad  
147 Sloane Street  
London SW1X 9BZ  
Tel: 020 7730 2202

[cassandrಾಗoad.com](http://cassandrಾಗoad.com)



Above: Restaurant Zori on the island of St Klement, Hvar.

catamaran service. But only private cruising offers true freedom and flexibility. Of the various classes of vessel sailing these waters, three are particularly well-suited to island-hopping. The first comprises the 27m Turkish-built gulets. The pick, such as *Andeo*, are immaculately maintained and skippered by the owner with a crew of young islanders. They offer sail and engine power, providing space and stability. In up to five air-conditioned cabins, a maximum of 10 guests can berth with en-suite shower facilities. Some are positively sumptuous, foremost being designer Anoushka Hempel's black-sailed *Beluga 1* (pictured on previous page), which sleeps seven in three cabins.

More lavish are the motor-sailing yachts – at around 44m, still of a size to anchor off the smaller islands. These craft usually have seven double cabins and a hold full of aquatic toys like jet skis. Yachts like *Navilux* are well-staffed and suited to big birthday celebrations. For those imbued with the need for speed, large British-built *Sunseekers* are the solution. The *Predator* class can zip across to Italy for lunch at up to 37 knots (though it's best not to enquire about fuel consumption), yet these boats still provide a surprising level of comfort and space. If one wanted to add the northern Kornati islands to an itinerary, this would be the way to do it in style.

Dalmatian Destinations' Bird, who has operated here for 12 years, offers one caveat: "The best boats get booked early, so it is really important to think ahead." At present the best-appointed vessels are based in Split or Dubrovnik, while some charters commence in Montenegro. Without *Sunseeker* speeds, cruising the northern islands or to Italy involves a day's repositioning – out of a typical seven-day charter, a significant consideration. Rates here often include all meals and wine, though first-growth clarets (and massage therapists) command a premium, and prices quoted for the larger vessels are subject to a 30 per cent provisioning allowance to cover food and fuel. "Unlike the south of France, no one is here to show off," observes one repeat charterer. So numerous are the sheltered bays that a good skipper will invariably find an empty one. Beaches tend to be of pebbles, rather than sand, with good snorkelling – and a degree of privacy and tranquillity almost unimaginable in most other parts of Europe.

For serious sailors like serial Cowes winner David Curling, the combination of fair winds and local charm has proved irresistible. And, as Curling notes, there are unexpected benefits and delights to island life. A few hundred metres from his house on Vis, a small museum occupies the ground floor of an old palazzo; on display are powerful works by the great Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović, who worked closely with Rodin. The collection is lovingly curated by his granddaughter, Ivana Stancomb.

With a cruising season that runs from April-October, the mystery islands offer no challenge to Caribbean

winter sun. But to the adventurous, they are every bit as intriguing. On the quay of Vis's second port, Komiža, I fall into conversation with a slender blonde captain. Petra and her husband Pino are joint owners of *Palagruza*, a wooden *gajeta falkusa* – the traditional lateen-sailed fishing boat unique to Komiža, the design of which has barely altered in a millennium – based here. At €30 per three hours' fishing, an exploration aboard *Palagruza* certainly represents the affordable end of the charter spectrum; and as an authentic opportunity to experience the unchanging reality of island life, it might be hard to improve upon. ✦

## DRAMATIC ADRIATIC

Julian Allason travelled as a guest of **Dalmatian Destinations** (0333-700 8007; [www.dalmatiandestinations.com](http://www.dalmatiandestinations.com)), which offers fully crewed yacht charters in Croatia and Montenegro from €27,000 per week, full board. **Hotel Park Split**, Hatzev Perivoj 3, 21000 Split (+385-2140 6400; [www.hotelpark-split.hr](http://www.hotelpark-split.hr)), from €375. **The Luxury Travel Book**, 020-7586 5342; [www.theluxurytravelbook.com](http://www.theluxurytravelbook.com). **Martinis Marchi Heritage Hotel**, Put Sv Nikole 51, 21430 Maslinica (+385-2157 2768; [www.martinis-marchi.com](http://www.martinis-marchi.com)), from €180. **Restaurant Zori**, Palmizana 19, 21450 Hvar (+385-2174 4904; [www.zori.hr](http://www.zori.hr)). **Seabourn**, 0843-373 2000; [www.seabourn.co.uk](http://www.seabourn.co.uk); cruises between Venice and Athens via Croatia from £3,299 per person. **British Airways** (0344-493 0787; [www.BA.com](http://www.BA.com)) flies twice weekly from London Heathrow to Split, from £116 return, and from Gatwick to Dubrovnik eight times weekly, from £204 return.

## JULIAN ALLASON

May 14 1948 - October 3 2015



Earlier this month, Julian Allason died from complications following surgery. Julian wrote erudite, witty and lyrical travel stories for *How To Spend It* for 16 years. He was both a true gentleman and a true talent who was beloved by all who worked with him. The world of travel will be a poorer and less elegant place for his absence.