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Meet the man behind London's hip new hangout

White heat

Easy glamour – the must-have pieces in the season's coolest colour



A large white sailboat with a dark hull is shown from a low angle, sailing on the ocean. The sail is fully deployed and billowing. The boat is moving towards the right, leaving a white wake. The sky is a clear, deep blue. In the background, a low, green shoreline is visible on the horizon.

Harbour lights

The buzzing Dalmatian islands, off the coast of Croatia, are perfect for moonlit sailing adventures. At every port, hip nightspots, romantic old towns and wonderful places to eat and drink lie waiting to be discovered, says CATHERINE FAIRWEATHER

A VIEW OF HVAR TOWN.
OPPOSITE: YACHTING
OFF THE HVAR COAST



'The new Ibiza', 'the closest thing to Saint-Tropez' – a decade on, and the historic town of Hvar in Croatia has made the transition from Communism and civil war to hip hedonist hangout with verve and style. With its grand baroque mansions, illuminated Venetian-style castle and sun-blasted marble streets slithering down to the waterfront, it is as photogenic as the haughty, wide-cheekboned blondes who come here from Zagreb on weekends. All are an intrinsic part of the allure, and draw the yachting and partygoing hordes in July and August.

There are no cars to pollute the secret alleyways and graceful squares, but instead, anything that floats, from toy-sized wooden fishing tubs to gargantuan gin palaces and sleek sail-boats, jostles for space in the port in summer. You have to book well in advance to guarantee seating space and a cocktail pitcher at the Carpe Diem bar, where Bill Gates, Tom Cruise and Gwyneth Paltrow have been known to hang out. It gets going well after midnight, when bikinied beauties gyrate to thumping bass

notes beneath the arches, overlooking the promenade.

October is the tail end of the season, and the streets once again belong to the locals, stray cats and moustached elders. Nonetheless, I bump into familiar faces from the Kensington school run in the time it takes me to order and drink a pot of coffee on the waterside terrace of Riva Hotel. This newest establishment in town exemplifies cutting-edge design, with features such as transparent bathroom walls and scarlet sinks. Never mind that you can't find the bedside light switches; it is still several notches above the kind of purpose-built, package-tourist resorts left over from the 1970s and the tired B&Bs that have been standard fare ever since. Unsurprisingly, the new temple of cool is peopled by stunning, albeit chilly staff – they are the main attraction, apart from the Riva's waterfront setting.

As another acquaintance strides across to ask me what on earth I am doing here in Hvar, I am happy to escape back to the sanctuary of my boat. *Blue Star* is a spanking-new 80-foot schooner with several generous wooden



BELOW: DALMATIA-INSPIRED NECKLACE, £89, DJURDJA WATSON. SWIMSUIT, £69, SAMANTHA WATSON. DRESS, £351, GHARANI STROK

decks draped with day-beds and cushions, and kitted out with various toys, including dinghies, canoes, and diving and snorkelling equipment. The wooden and canvas furnishings are comfortable but not flash – this is no chav boat. But with three attentive, burly (not surly) crewmen always ready with the oyster canapés and chilled local wine as you step off the tender, you have the perfect house-party charter.

This is the best way to explore some of the thousand-odd isles strung like necklace beads between Split and Dubrovnik on this 100-mile stretch of Croatia's Adriatic Coast. You will be plying the same trade route as Greek, Roman, Venetian, French and British seafarers who went before you. This archipelago was made for island hopping; only a few hours' brisk sailing separates the historic towns of Hvar, Vis, Brač, Korčula – each exuding its own very different vibe, but all sharing the very best attributes of the Mediterranean: deep, clear water ('the cleanest seas on Earth,' said Jacques Cousteau) and a cooking culture based on grapes, olives, wine and the freshest seafood.

So, leaving the starry attractions of Hvar behind, with our legs dangling off the stern, we head out for waters new. At a distance, the illuminated Venetian-style castle above Hvar town looks like a golden halo over the harbour.

We moor at the nearby Pakleni isles, the nudists' favourite, for a last swim as the sun dips and disappears like a communion wafer into the port-wine sea. The scent of pine and wild thyme intensifies as night falls and the rocks reflect the fading heat of the sun. As the moon rises to the mesmeric tap-tapping of the rigging and the lap of wavelets on the hull, we feast on scorpion-fish soup and mussels picked by the captain the very same day. This is the definition of luxury – the freedom and power to move, motor and anchor exactly where and when you will.

Six nights aboard a 27-metre schooner, from £1,090 a person full board, including transfers. Return flights to Split cost about £160 a person. Book with Dalmatian Destinations (020 7730 8007; www.dalmatiandestinations.com).



FROM FAR LEFT: THE BLUE STAR SAILING OFF THE DALMATIAN COAST. CATHERINE ZETA-JONES IN DUBROVNIK. THE RIVA HOTEL, HVAR

SECRET ADDRESS BOOK

HVAR

WHO GOES Italians, partygoers, fashionistas. DON'T MISS... swinging bar Carpe Diem, for post-beach cocktails and dancing, or to bag a late-night invite to a swanky yacht party. BRING BACK... fabulous coral jewellery from local boutique Tanja Curin, and the lavender for which the island is famous. EAT AND DRINK... at Veneranda, a nightclub in an old fortress that gets going at 4am and churns out pizza from its wood-fired oven. STAY... at the glamorous new Hotel Riva on the Venetian-style waterfront promenade. BEST BEACH Petrascica is a secret gem. Otherwise, take a water taxi from Hvar town to any of the tiny islands in the archipelago.

BRAC

WHO GOES Windsurfers, jet-setters, families. DON'T MISS... the 'end of the wine harvest' fiesta, in the last week of August. EAT AND DRINK... at the very popular Amfora in Milna, or the family-run Dupin tavern for a more local flavour. STAY... at Palaca Deskovic, an old palace in the village of Pucisca. BEST BEACH The iconic Zlatni Rat in Bol – the beach that launched a thousand tourist brochures – to watch the kite-surfers and beach parties at sundown. BEST BY BOAT Lucica, where you can moor stern-to-restaurant and have a swim while you wait for your lunch to be cooked.

VIS

WHO GOES Vis is an exclusive hangout for publicity-shy celebrities and the most extravagant yacht owners. DON'T MISS... the magnificent Vis-to-Split

regatta, in the second week of October.

EAT AND DRINK... at Restaurant Val, on the waterfront in the Kut district, legendary for its fish soup, squid risotto and colony of stray cats.

STAY... in a 16th-century Venetian-style palazzo by the water in Vis town. BEST BEACH Vis isn't known for its beaches, so make like a local and find a long, flat rock to bake on. BEST BY BOAT Swim in the famous Blue Cave, which is like being inside an emerald when it is hit by the noontime rays.

KORČULA

WHO GOES Holidaymakers who refer to Korčula as 'Little Dubrovnik', because of its ancient old town overlooking clear waters. DON'T MISS... Dalmatian red wines such as Postup. EAT AND DRINK... at the atmospheric, vaulted Adio Mare, next to Marco Polo's house, where the jovial chef grills your food at the table. STAY... on your boat, as the hotels aren't up to much. BEST BEACH Lumbarda's small, charming sands. □

