

THE ISLANDS THAT TIME FORGOT

Glamorous yachts, pure waters, Venetian streets and quays—Vis and Split are the way the Mediterranean should be. VICTORIA MATHER discovers why the unspoiled Dalmatian coast knocks spots off the Riviera

The driver once had that Tom Cruise in the back of his cab. Ditto Bill Gates. This is not particularly surprising as Ivo is the only English-speaking taxi driver on Vis, the enchanting Croatian island in a part of the Adriatic Sea which time forgot. Actually, Ivo is one of the only taxi drivers on Vis. Everyone walks or bicycles or boats along the town quay, and the sound is of the gin-clear water going

slap-slap-slap against the white-grey stone that's been there since forever. Smooth slabs trodden by invaders from republics and empires—Greek, Venetian, Austro-Hungarian, French, English—then by Tito's partisans during the Second World War. The higgledy streets, with a crumbly 17th-century building here and an Italian arch there, are unpolled by the omnipresence of the automobile. In the mind's eye, dappled by nostalgia, one imagines that this is how Capri was, or Portofino, or Villefranche, before the Onassis-Callas effect, the cashmere shops, the chancers making designer flip-flops for film stars, and the swanky hotels.

Vis can do swanky yachts along with the best of them. When in 1995, following the grim conflict between the Croats and the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Dayton Accord recognised the traditional Croatian borders, Croatia was rapidly hyped as the new Riviera. Its Dalmatian Coast was spotted with unspoiled islands, as many as there as spots on a Dalmatian, although nearer 1,000 than 101. It's astonishing that the wash of the superyachts powering towards the last pristine waters in this forgotten finger of the Med didn't finally swamp Venice. In truth, Croatia wasn't ready for Rivas full of tycoons and supermodels landing on deserted beaches in hope that Club 55 would have cloned itself for their delight.

We are now in phase two. The Dalmatian Coast is indeed a wonderful place to sail, and the likes of Mr Cruise and Mr Gates have been there and done it on James Bondian yachts, hence their ghostly presence in my cab. They wanted perhaps, if they read Shakespeare, to be able to say "I too have been in Illyria" for it was the Illyrians who brought the Iron Age to Vis in the first millennium BC, and its charm is how change hasn't

run riot. There are few places about which one can say, with hand-on-heart confidence, that staying at Nico's Pizzeria is perfectly delightful, or "Why don't you ring Evo? (Evo the artist, not Ivo the taxi driver). He has a terrific B&B." Untainted by tourism, Vis has the allure of the forbidden. A base for the Yugoslav army, it was a secret island, no visitors allowed, until 1989. During the war, Tito established his headquarters in a cave in Hum Mountain, from where he co-ordinated operations with the Allies. There's a whiff of *The Guns of Navarone* about the rockface.

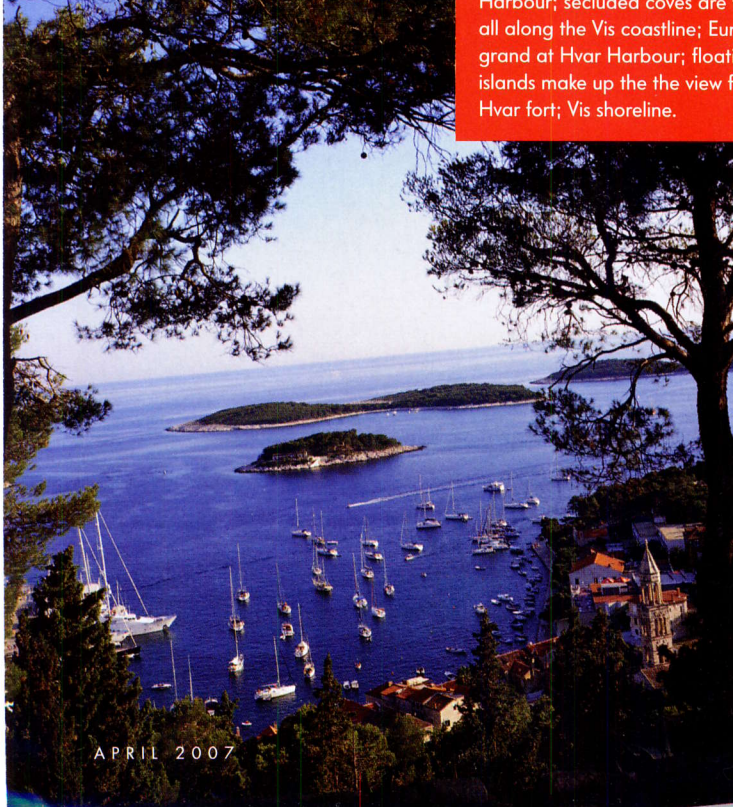
Winding up the road—there is just the one—from Vis to go to dinner at Darko's, one can see in the valley below, a wide, dark strip among the vines and olive groves. It was where the RAF landed their fighter planes. On the far arm of the bay of Vis, by Tito's villa (ramshackle now—it would be a marvellous boutique hotel), there is a graveyard of British dead in a foreign field that is forever England. There are freshly-written messages from the British Legion and inscriptions on the gravestones gallantly describing Vis as home for the young sons lying beneath the sod. The hand that reaches back into history also wrings the heart.

And so to Darko's. This is what I call a restaurant. Tom Aikens would love it. You ring up Darko the day before and he bestirs himself to slaughter a lamb. The following evening you go up the mountain and eat it in his kitchen, which is also the restaurant, and has an open oven of glowing embers as yet unperfected by Smeg even in the most aspirant Notting Hill lifestyle basements. The lamb (RIP) has been roasting all day amongst said embers in a Brobdingnagian pan stuffed with carrots, potatoes, courgettes, tomatoes and fresh herbs from Darko's garden. All the juices have flowed together. Jennifer Paterson, you should be living at this hour. Trust me, we are in the age of comfort-food, and this is an epicentre. Black squid-ink risotto? Come with me to Pojoda and eat under the trees in the garden. Fish, iridescent with freshness? Then it must be Val, below the palm trees in a square in Kut, the Belgravia of Vis town, with its tiny Venetian streets and rather grand ribs with throb-throb engines bobbing on the

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, (1 & 2) FRÉDÉRIC LAGRANGE, (3 & 4) JONATHAN GLYNN SMITH, (5) FRÉDÉRIC LAGRANGE



DREAM ON
Clockwise from left, gridlock at Hvar Harbour; secluded coves are found all along the Vis coastline; European grand at Hvar Harbour; floating islands make up the view from Hvar fort; Vis shoreline.



water, ready to purr to Tito's submarine base—clear blue water in a vast tunnel, it should be glassed over, underlit, and turned into a nightclub—for a post-priandial swim. When did you last eat fish with confidence on the French Riviera? Anything caught near St Tropez has an in-built condiment of toxic waste and I haven't been able to swim off Cap d'Antibes for years for risk of terminal impetigo. On the Dalmatian Coast there's a nifty current which swirls all the nasties up against the Italian coast, leaving Dalmatia brilliantly more azure than the Côte d'Azur. And the Croatians are obsessively clean. They collect one's rubbish every day and you never see a smidgeon of a cig-end on Hvar's streets, which are paved with marble and to which we will come to on a yacht in minute.

Just to wind up the love affair with Vis—now definitely on the map because the Eton Ramblers are going to play cricket there on May 25, cricket having been established by Nelson's number two, Vice-Admiral Host, in 1810, when the British fleet was based in the bay. You have to get Ivo (the taxi driver, not Evo the artist) to take you over to Komiza, which is the only other town, a twist of old houses above the sickle bay where fishermen have been about their work since the 12th century. There's a bit of Renaissance, a lot of crumbly Venetian back streets, a rather lovely maritime museum, and an atmosphere of lazy days in cafés drinking coffee, with wonderful old people drinking the wonderful organic Vis wine (Vugava is the white and Plavac the red). Drink in Komiza at Bako, on the edge of the water, toying with some crisp-fried calamari. Eat dinner in Konoba Jastozera, possibly the only restaurant in the world into which you could bring your boat through an aquatic door. The tables are arranged on rickety wooden floors above the water in which much of dinner swims. It was in 1883 that an Italian customs officer began breeding lobsters here—the big mistake was that he used government money for the construction of Jastozera and was imprisoned. Shame. One rarely hears of an Italian customs officer doing anything useful.

From Vis you can pop over to Hvar, divinely pretty, an island with the most sunshine on the coast and glowing with lavender, sage, rosemary and pine trees. It smells of sybarism. It was islanders from Hvar who, after phyloxera devastated the Dalmatian vineyards, pioneered wine growing in California. Here shopaholics can have a fix, the boutique hotel has burst out in the form of Riva, on the harbour, with red leather, transparent showers and pictures of James Dean and Audrey Hepburn. Were they still with us, they'd be Croatia-bound. I can see Hepburn, in huge dark glasses and Capri pants, walking the marble streets and perhaps having lunch in the garden shade of Palaca Paladini, eating grilled red mullet. The young and fun, even the old and bold, can drink and dance at Carpe Diem, a bar-nightclub of such compelling It-ness that Eddie Irvine and F1 babes roared up in their power boats from Italy for just one drink of an evening.

One enters these blessed isles through Split; your yacht might be meeting you, but the ferry is perfectly adequate. Perhaps a peep into Diocletian's Palace, one of the best Roman ruins other than Leptis Magna in Libya, in a city to which the Venetians added a facsimile of San Marco, might hint that this isn't any old Riviera. I sat in the sun in a café on the seafront, as one might have sat in a café in Cannes years ago, and rejoiced in Split's chattering classes—from chic young to spiffing *grande dames*—around me, and the fact that I felt safe enough to leave my laptop bag with the sweet waiter while I went to the local market to buy honey and smoked ham. All was right with the world. Why isn't all the world as right as this?

express ticket to... CROATIA

SLEEP

Boutique hotels are burgeoning here. *Riva*, in Hvar Town, overlooks the harbour and packs a smooth vibe. It's also the first and only Croatian member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World. Even the most compact room has been brilliantly designed, although maybe you have to be size zero to truly enjoy the transparent showers. The hotel's B.B. Club swings on to a fabulous terrace. (☎ 00 385 21 750 750 ☎ suncanihvar.com). *Hotel Vestibul Palace* in Split is adorable. This design hotel is actually inside the Diocletian Palace. (☎ 00 385 21 329 329 ☎ vestibulpalace.com). You might also book into a smart B&B. *Nico's Pizzeria* has some very good small apartments in a square overlooking the harbour. (☎ 00 385 91 764 6573). And then there's *Evo's*. Evo, an artist, is splendid, very old-school, and his family house in Kut overlooks the bay of Vis (☎ 00 385 21711 087).

EAT

Pojoda in Kut has a lovely walled garden, magic risotto, excellent fish (☎ 00 385 21711 575). *Darko's*, near Tito's Cave, is owned, of course, by Darko. No surname even if one could pronounce it. (☎ 00 385 91 523 9184). *Val*, also in Kut, is where to go for lobster, grilled fish, fat prawns. The yachties pile in here (☎ 00 385 91 508 2015). At *Bako*, sit beside the seaside in Komiza and eat octopus marinated in red wine. (☎ 00 385 21 713 742). Or visit *Jastozera*—it's pure food theatre. (☎ 00 385 21 713 859). At *Palaca Paladini* in Hvar, you can sit in the garden and dine on fine fish and meat dishes. How many times can one say charming and mean it? (☎ 00 385 217 42104).

JET-SET

During summer British Airways flies from London Gatwick to Split six times a week (☎ 0870 850 9 850 ☎ britishairways.com). From Split take the ferry to Vis. Jefferson's private holidays are now sprinkling their *glamour* around Croatia and can arrange week-long trips—for groups of up to eight people—which include home pick-up in a *limousine, private-jet*, yacht, boat-transfers, and *champagne* in every conveyance. (☎ 0870 850 8181 ☎ jeffersons.com).

SAIL ON

A boat is a necessity. In the summer season, the sailing is dreamy and restaurants open in turquoise coves. Michael Bird founded Dalmatian Destinations, and has insider knowledge and great yachts: *Blue Star* is beautifully old-fashioned; *Galatea* more luxurious. Both have reasonable charter prices and Bird is passionate about Croatia and cares about his clients (☎ 020 7730 8007 ☎ dalmatiandestinations.com). Edmiston's (☎ 020 7495 5151 ☎ edmistoncompany.com) can charter any number of flash gin-palaces, from the Gettys' *Talitha G* to Sir Donald Gosling's *Leander*. But beware, the trick to doing Croatia is in being low-key.