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Villa breaks

Beach holiday



Sands at Donja Brela on
the Dalmatian Coast.
Opposite, traditional *trulli* in
Locorotondo in Puglia

or country retreat?

There are two sides to the Adriatic, this year's hot tip for European villa rentals. One has the secluded islands of Croatia's Dalmatian coast, the other the hillside villages of Puglia in Italy. **Sophie Butler** puts the case for both



Villa breaks

SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK, more often in summer, elderly car ferries make the 10-hour journey across 150 miles of Adriatic Sea between Dubrovnik and Bari. The ferry links two distinctive regions, Dalmatia in Croatia and Puglia in Italy, both narrow strips of land in the southernmost part of their countries. Each has a colourful history of occupation, with ancient Greeks, Romans, Venetians, Byzantines and Normans all leaving their mark.

Thanks to an increasing number of no-frills flights from the UK and other parts of Europe, Puglia and Dalmatia are experiencing a surge of interest from property developers and expats keen to transform neglected or derelict buildings into holiday homes. The result is a fast-growing collection of superb properties at prices that compare favourably to villas in better-known Mediterranean destinations.

But this is pretty much where the similarity between the two regions ends. The style and type of accommodation, the landscape, the activities and sightseeing on offer, could not be more different on either side of the Adriatic.

Mountainous and rugged, the natural beauty of Dalmatia's coastline is immediately apparent,



Above, view from Vis Town on the Croatian island of the same name. Below, the port of Otranto in Puglia

with many of Croatia's 1,185 islands strung out along 200 miles of rocky shore. The escarpments of the Dinaric Alps rise steeply and run, spine-like, in parallel to the sea, forcing settlements onto the flatter sea shores and islands. For this reason, villa holidays in Dalmatia are all about the sea – which is clearer, bluer (and often choppier) than on the Italian side.

By contrast, at least on first impression, the largely flat, agricultural and arid landscape of Puglia appears less appealing. But the region's hinterland of narrow lanes, which twist and turn through olive groves, pastureland, woods and vineyards, soon grows on you.

Most of the villas in Puglia are away from the coast, on the higher and cooler uplands of the central Murge plateau and in the fertile, winemaking areas of the Salento peninsula. But more than the landscape, it's the style of accommodation here that is the main draw for villa owners and developers. Quaint *trulli* built with dry-stone walls (usually plastered and white-washed) and conical grey-stone tiled roofs, once home to impoverished landworkers, make wonderful rural hideaways with high, domed ceilings and thick walls

to protect against the intense summer heat.

At the more expensive end of the spectrum, stunning grand villas have been created from Puglian *masserie*, huge fortified manor houses once the hub of the region's large agricultural estates. Defensive walls provided shelter for animals, storage for crops and housing for farm workers while the more comfortable, upper-floor quarters were used by the wealthy landowners. Today, many of them have fabulous swimming pools, fragrant citrus orchards, stylish dining terraces and antique-filled interiors. The combination of size, privacy, well-equipped kitchens and friendly caretakers

(who are often happy to help out with cooking) make these villas an excellent choice for large groups and family gatherings.

As most of the villas in Puglia are in rural settings, a car is essential. Lazy days by the pool can alternate with gentle tours to nearby cities and market towns such as Lecce, famous for its baroque architecture, and the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Alberobello with its *trulli* houses. Fortified wine-producing centres including Ostuni, Cisternino, Locorotondo and Martina Franca, with their ancient



AT A GLANCE BEST FOR...

- DALMATIA**
- Seaside villas
 - Boat trips and island holidays
 - Dramatic landscapes
 - Clear sea water
 - Car-free holidays
- PUGLIA**
- Rural villas with pools
 - Interesting towns
 - Sand beaches
 - Gentle touring
 - Easy access

Villa breaks

► citadels, churches and *palazzi* make good day trips, as do walled ports such as Monopoli and Otranto.

Your holiday might also include a day or two at one of the region's sandy beaches backed by low-lying, marram-grass-topped dunes. The best stretches lie to the south of Monopoli (around Savellettri, Torre Canne and Monticelli) and the seaside nature reserve at Torre Guaceto, to the south of Brindisi. Public areas are busy in the summer, but there are private lidos and beach clubs and some villa rentals include access to these.



The harbour town of Komiža on the island of Vis

plenty of scope for exploration by private boat or on organised excursions. And whether you stay on the mainland or on one of Dalmatia's many islands, your villa is sure to be within easy reach of the sea.

Unlike Puglia, Dalmatia has a distinct lack of sandy beaches. The closest the region gets to a beach resort is the Makarska Riviera: around 15 miles of pebble and

shingle shores backed by pines, two hours' drive north of Dubrovnik. Small villages strung out along this coast can make a good base for a stay-put seaside break.

An alternative to staying on the mainland is to catch a ferry or catamaran to one of the Dalmatian islands, each with its own character. The largest and best known are Hvar, Brač and Korčula, where elegant, Venetian-built harbourside houses and *palazzi* make stylish and comfortable holiday villas. Converted rural houses and modern developments of villas (usually but not always with pools) lie just inland.

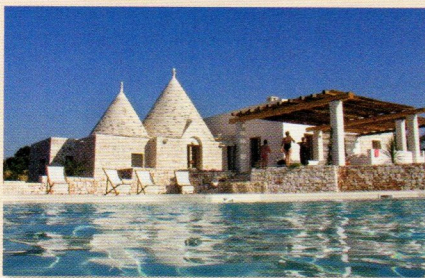
Once you reach one of these far-flung European outposts, time really does appear to slow down. The remote island of Vis is one of Dalmatia's newest and smartest villa destinations. Around 30 miles from the mainland and measuring 60 square miles, the island has been home to Illyrians, Greeks and Romans; and in the Middle Ages, it was settled by Benedictine monks. More recently, the high central hills were a World War II resistance hideout for Tito, before the ►

A VILLA HOLIDAY ON Croatia's Dalmatian coast will involve far less driving and sightseeing than in Puglia, although Dubrovnik's Old Town, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and Split, with its Roman palace built by Emperor Diocletian in 305AD, are both well worth visiting.

In Dalmatia it's best to park your car and get out on the water: miles of rocky coastline, indented with coves and small ports give

SIX OF THE BEST VILLAS IN PUGLIA & DALMATIA

Villa agent details on following page



BEST TOURING BASE

Villa Santoro, Puglia Restored trulli have been extended to create this peaceful hillside retreat and pool set in two acres of grounds. Close to Ostuni and Martina Franca. From €3,250 per week through Villa Puglia

BEST GARDEN HIDEAWAY



The Garden House, Croatia Near the harbour on Vis, this hideaway (sleeping six) has a spacious kitchen that opens onto a shaded dining area and walled garden, complete with lion's head fountain. From £2,500 per week through Dalmatian Destinations

BEST FOR LARGE GROUPS

Palazzo Jaskia, Croatia A 16th-century Venetian palazzo on Vis, sleeping 14, with an elegant first-floor living room from where four arched doors lead onto a long terrace overlooking the sea. There's a communal courtyard at the front and a small, private garden behind, shaded by orange trees. From £4,750 per week through Dalmatian Destinations

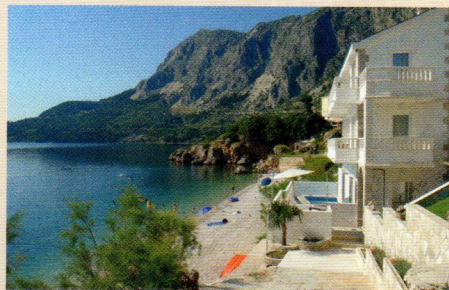


BEST FOR GRAND STYLE

Masseria Lamacoppa, Puglia A restored, 18th-century manor house, sleeping 11, in 70 hectares of classic Puglian countryside. The high-ceilinged rooms are beautifully furnished with antiques and art books. An



over-large rectangular pool and Jacuzzi lie a little way from the house. From £9,120 per week through Think Puglia

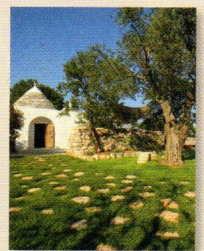


BEST NEW SEA-FRONT VILLA

Villa S, Croatia This mainland villa (sleeping 10) is in the village of Drasnice, midway between Split and Dubrovnik. As well as a veranda overlooking a pebble beach, it has a plunge pool and roof terrace. From £2,758 per week through Croatian Affair

BEST FOR A ROMANTIC BREAK

Trullo Cutetto, Puglia Accessed along a rough track, this three-room trullo (comprising



bedroom, living area, kitchen/shower-room), sleeping two, is perfect for an intimate romantic break. It has a small plunge pool and outside terrace, plus nearby pizzeria for eat-ins or takeaways. From £1,450 per week through Think Puglia

Villa breaks

► entire island became a military zone, unvisited by foreigners until 1992, uniquely saving it from overdevelopment.

On this island, thickly cultivated with olive groves and vineyards, cars are superfluous. Most of the rented accommodation is in Kut, a small harbourside settlement of Venetian-built, stone houses joined by a pedestrian promenade to Vis Town, where the narrow alleyways are hung with washing and cats stretch out in the sun. Any morning might involve a 10-minute cycle to the harbour to buy fresh fish and vegetables or local specialities such as honey, capers, fig jam, herbs, olives and pungent pots of oregano. Later, you might take a gentle walk along the wooded shores with a picnic, or hire a boat to find a small bay for swimming (villas don't have pools here) and a shoreside restaurant for a long, leisurely lunch.

BOTH DALMATIA AND Puglia excel at good-value local food and wine. While pasta, meat and fish are the chief mainstays on both sides of the Adriatic, each cuisine is distinctive. Simple, family-run restaurants in Dalmatia serve prosciutto with Pag Island cheese (made of milk from sheep grazed on herbs grown in the salty sea air) followed by grilled vegetables, lamb chops or steaks with a carafe of local wine (white *pošip* or red *plavac mali*) for around £15 per head. Other specialities include fish soups, stews (*brodetto*) and risottos, wine-based meat casseroles, shrimp or tuna pates and octopus salads followed by crême caramel or pannacotta. Pasta dishes start at around £6.

In Puglia, antipasti in family-run trattorias offer the best value. Little



Milna Bay on the south coast of Vis. Below, cone-roofed trulli in Puglia

more than £12–£15 will buy two people a spread of dishes which might include *polpettine* (deep-fried meat-and-potato croquettes), strong-tasting *ricotta forte* accompanied by tomatoes, marinated artichoke hearts (*carciofi*), small sweet pickled onions (*lampascioni*), mozzarella, salami, sardines steeped in oil and grilled vegetables with local cheese such as *pecorino* (sheep) or *caprino* (goat), accompanied by half a litre

of local wine. Or opt for a bowl of *orecchiette*, the region's distinctive ear-shaped pasta shells. Around £20 per head will buy a more substantial meal including *filetto di manzo* or *vitello* steaks with *patate fritte* or *patate al forno*.

Whatever your personal taste – the rural heartlands of Puglia or the dramatic seascapes of Dalmatia – there is now plenty of choice to satisfy most villa-holiday requirements. **T**

ADRIATIC VILLA LOWDOWN

PUGLIA AGENTS

For an excellent selection of around 20 luxury villas, sleeping from two to groups of 17, contact **ThinkPuglia** (www.thinkpuglia.com). Also strong on upmarket villas, **Villa Puglia** (www.villapuglia.com) offers more than a dozen properties sleeping from four to 14, mainly around Ostuni and Cisternino. For more luxury villas in the region, contact private travel consultant **Global Artichoke** (www.globalartichoke.com). Other operators include southern Italy specialist **Long Travel** (www.long-travel.co.uk) and **Dolce Vita Villas** (www.dolcevitalivillas.com).

DALMATIA AGENTS

Just over a dozen top-notch properties are offered by **Dalmatian Destinations** (www.dalmatiandestinations.com), mainly on the island of Vis but also Dubrovnik (ranging from two to eight bedrooms), and fully-crewed boat charters. **Croatian Affair** (www.affairtravel.com) has



40 mid- and high-end villas in mainland regions of Split and Dubrovnik. Also try **Croatian Villas** (www.croatianvillas.com) and **James Villas** (www.jamesvillas.co.uk).

BOOKING DIRECT

Holiday Rentals (www.holiday-rentals.co.uk) lists more

than 3,000 self-catering properties in Croatia, mostly on the Dalmatian coast, and nearly 900 in Puglia. Try **Owners Direct** (www.ownersdirect.co.uk) for more than 400 Croatian apartments and villas, plus around 200 in sought-after areas of Puglia.

GETTING THERE

PUGLIA

British Airways (www.ba.com) flies from Gatwick to Bari; **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) from Stansted to Bari and Brindisi.

DALMATIA

British Airways from Gatwick to Dubrovnik; **EasyJet** (www.easyjet.com) from Gatwick and Stansted to Split and Dubrovnik, also Bristol to Split.

CAR HIRE

Avis (www.avis.com), **Hertz** (www.hertz.co.uk) or **Holiday Autos** (www.holidayautos.co.uk). Compare costs on **www.carrentals.co.uk**.

Journey time Two hours 45 minutes to Bari; the same to Split and Dubrovnik

