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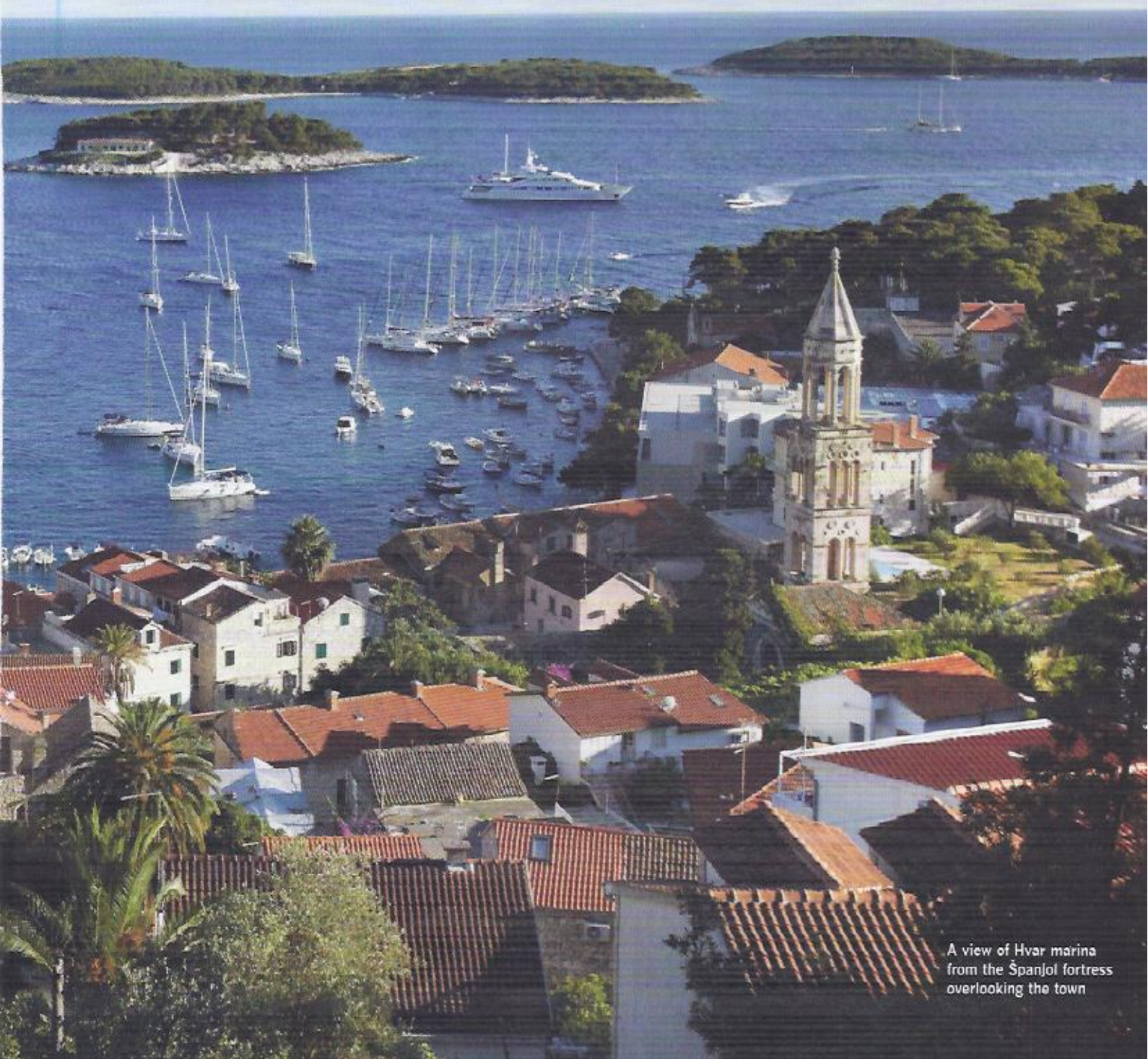
PLUS

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Sea and be seen

As yacht-loads of beautiful people set a course for Croatia's Dalmatian coast, Lisa Grainger checks out the hotels, bars and restaurants drawing them in. Photographs by Sean Gleason



A view of Hvar marina from the Španjol fortress overlooking the town



Left, harbourside seats at Hvar's Hula Hula Bar. Below, lunch at Luka's Taverna in Kobas Bay. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Hvar harbour and waterfront; Italian tourists in Hvar; the bar at the Riva, Hvar Yacht Harbour Hotel

city, one would never know there had been a war. On the ramparts of its 12th-century citadel, contented tourists look out over shimmering seas and terracotta roofs, taking in the scent of orange and over ripe figs; below them, men in pressed linen jackets savour espressos in the shade of bougainvillea. In the evening, the sound of jazz and clinking wine glasses drifts down from rooftop bars as little yachts return to harbour with cargoes of bikini-clad beauties.

Croatia is known for its rustic charm; but in the past 10 years, since Italians crowned the Croatian coast their new Amalfi and the English discovered that the Adriatic coast is as beautiful as the South of France (without quite the same financial sting or crowds), it has become increasingly sophisticated. Alongside the faded traditional hotels there are now a handful of slick little bars, gastronomic restaurants and hip hotels packed with savvy visitors from Tokyo, New York and beyond.

The food, thanks to the quality of local ingredients, is astoundingly good. In eight days – travelling from Dubrovnik along the coast to the Pelješac peninsula, then to the islands of Korčula, Hvar and Vis – I had only one disappointing meal; and, in the name of investigative travel journalism, I ate for England. At Gil's restaurant in Dubrovnik, on the citadel walls overlooking the harbour, I sampled an eight-course gastro-menu, with sesame tuna, truffle tortellini and grilled lobster with asparagus. In the oyster-harvesting village of Ston, a fisherman opened six huge shells for me so I could appreciate the creatures' buttery saltiness straight from the water. In little villages on the Pelješac peninsula, six types of *pršut* (the Croatian version of prosciutto) were offered in the rustic restaurant Konoba Antunović, each accompanied by different dark-red, mineral-rich wines by Mare Mrgudić; and at Frano Miloš's vineyard, pudding was provided in the form of thick, honey-fragranced Stagnum dessert wine.

But the most delicious thing to eat on this coast is fish. Croatia is only due to enter the EU in 2013,

If

I could give just one tip to anyone thinking of

going to Croatia, it would be this: don't take fitted clothes. As well as improving the mind, any visit will increase the girth. The country has taken all the richest ingredients from a succession of invaders – Greeks, Romans, Slavs, Ottomans, French, Venetians and Austrians – and turned them into one great feast: of history, culture and art, and a cuisine that makes one wish one wasn't quite so greedy.

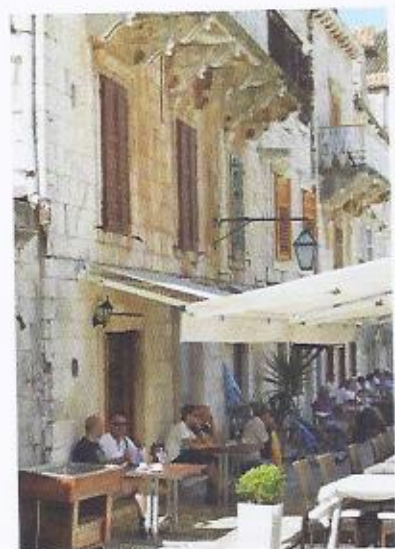
Just over a decade ago, following the war that broke up the six republics of the former Yugoslavia, much of Croatia lay in ruins. Its prized Adriatic town, Dubrovnik, had been under siege for seven months and bombed by more than 2,000 mortars. Today, strolling around the UNESCO-listed walled





Bonj 'les bains' beach club in Hvar. *Opposite, clockwise from top: the lobby lounge at the Adriana, Hvar Spa Hotel; on the beach at Carpe Diem on Stipanska island; a café in Hvar*

so these waters have yet to be destroyed by large-scale European trawlers. There are said to be 400 varieties of edible sea creatures in this part of the Adriatic, from sea bass, tuna, bream and sardines to giant langoustines and squid (the latter often cooked in its own ink with rice). Most restaurants have arrangements with specific fishermen, who transport their catch directly to the kitchen door. Nikša Barišić, the owner of the charming Macondo restaurant in his old family home in Hvar, gets five boatloads a day. 'Some little fishes we fry, the sardines we stuff and barbecue, the bass we cook over wood with herbs, and the lobsters we serve with homemade spaghetti,' he says. 'Every day fresh, every day different.'



NOT THAT EATING and drinking are the only things to do on this popular part of Croatia's coastline. Tanning on the pebble beaches, exploring ancient cities and partying are taken just as seriously.

And rather wonderfully for those who like their luxuries, such activities can now be experienced in considerable style, hence the influx of celebrities: Beyoncé (who dined at Gil's), Tom Cruise (who stayed on a little island off Dubrovnik), Princess Caroline of Monaco, Eva Longoria, Kevin Spacey and Gwyneth Paltrow (all spotted eating out in Hvar).

'Because there are now really good restaurants and cafés on

Hvar



Where to stay

The four-star **Adriana, Hvar Spa Hotel** (00 385 21 750200; www.suncanithvar.com; doubles from €159), beside the throbbing **Carpe Diem** nightclub, is by far the best hotel on the island. Although the vivid purple interiors of its reception and bar jar slightly against the vivid blues of the marina, its bedrooms are more muted, with contemporary decor and the best sea views in town; suites 306 and 314 are recommended. Even better, there's a spa in which to detox after partying, an OPI nail bar to refresh rock buffed toenails, a 25-metre infinity pool, spacious balconies for sunbathing, and a glass-fronted bar which is a good vantage point from which to watch the super yachts below. Guests can use the **Bonj'les bains** beach club, (from about £35 a day for a sun-lounger to £290 for a private seaside deck with chairs for six, a shaded four-poster and Champagne) with steps straight into the sea and waitress service.

Where to eat

The restaurants in Hvar are some of the best in Croatia, in particular **Zori** (00 385 21 718231; www.zori.hr; about £70 for two without wine) on the islet of Palmižana, run by brother and sister team Natko Kovačević and Iva Tomlinović. Their family has lived here for 300 years, the restaurant evolving from a simple seaside taverna to a relaxed but elegant space with folding glass walls and a palm-shaded terrace. Iva is the cook, producing knockout dishes such as delicate octopus salad, Nobu style marinated tuna tartare and a fine sour-orange tart. **Passarola** (00 385 21 717374; www.restaurant-passarola.eu; about £100) may look basic – simple white walls, wooden tables and a slightly bland roof terrace – but the food is sophisticated. Its chef, Hrvoje Zirojević, has been in the Croatian cooking team (yes, one exists!) five times, and turns out creative, tasty dishes – scampi-stuffed fig, smoked squid, monkfish with

rosemary gnocchi – and his waiters, clearly enjoy educating guests on local wines to match. For simpler fish, served on little wooden tables in a charming cobbled street, try **Macondo** (00 385 21 742850, about £50). Although the fish platters are perfectly cooked and just caught fresh, locals return primarily for the Croatian speciality of gregada, an unctuous fisherman's stew, thick with potato and garlic.

What to do

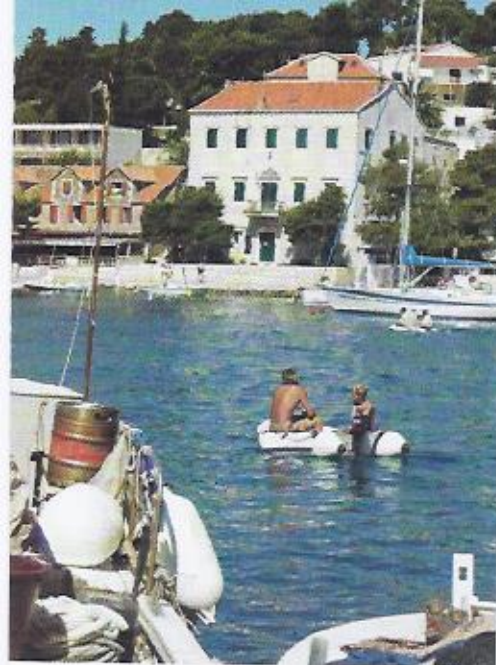
In summer, most people come here to party, so the day usually starts late. Drink coffee on the quayside (the terrace at **Riva, Hvar Yacht Harbour Hotel** is well located for watching boats), wander around the food market to the island's oldest shop – **Deliciae Mediterraneae**, selling wine, cheese and ham – then on to the Benedictine convent and the very pretty cathedral.

It's a great treat to whizz about the island on a hired scooter; the hilly interior is craggy and unspoilt, with ancient stone walls, olive groves and lavender. In half a day you can get to **Stari Grad**, Hvar's least touristic town, stopping on the way back at **Milna** or **Zarace** for a swim. If you're brave, hire a boat at the quayside and explore the **Pakleni Islands** (prices range from about £50 for a little chugger to £600 a day for a Sea Ray Sundancer 290, a return boat taxi to the best beach, Palmižana, costs about £10 per person).

Spend evenings at the relaxed beachside **Hula Hula Bar** (or the smarter rooftop bar at the Adriana hotel) and dance under the trees at the beach outpost of Carpe Diem (www.carpe-diem-hvar.com) on the nearby island of Stipanska, where parties generally start after midnight.

Don't miss out on jewellery shopping. There are several beautiful boutiques, the best of which is owned by **Tanja Čurin** (00 385 21 742218; www.tanjacurinjewelry.com.hr), who mixes stones from all over the world in theatrical but stylish ways.





Hula Bar, where a DJ spins discs while cool couples sip Caipirinhas on loungers, watching the sun slip beneath the sea. By 10pm, everyone is glammed-up again and back out on the streets, eating, parading and – after midnight – shimmying in bars overlooking the marina, by pools, or on terraces beneath a roof of stars.

WHILE PARTYING in hip hotels is always welcome, on this trip my Louboutins got less wear than my walking shoes: there's certainly plenty to see in Croatia's historic towns. In Dubrovnik, for example, a Dominican monastery heavy with holy artefacts, from gold-embroidered robes to the bones of saints partially enclosed in silver; a Franciscan monastery with one of the oldest pharmacies in the world (and a scarily large cupboard of poisons); and a cathedral treasury with, it is claimed, a piece of the cross on which Jesus was crucified.

Hvar island's marina, set below a medieval castle, lies alongside one of Europe's most romantic piazzas, surrounded by the continent's oldest municipal theatre and a Benedictine convent in which nuns still fashion fine white lace from agave threads.

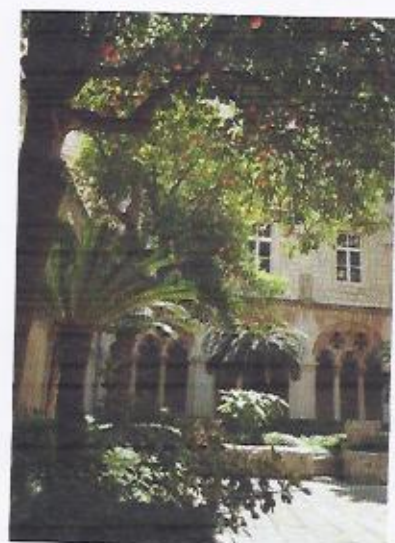
Korčula's 14th-century town walls are adorned with examples of masterful masonry skills: lions that growl menacingly above the cathedral door, delicate Romanesque pillars, Latin inscriptions artfully carved into walls.

And Vis, still remarkably untouched, has churches dating

these islands,' says Michael Bird of luxury holiday company Dalmatian Destinations, 'the coast is now firmly on the mega-yacht itinerary. So you do get the really wealthy here: Roman Abramovich, Bill Gates, the Hollywood set.' In high season, from July to September, he says, the super-yachts are often so enormous that from sea one can't see the buildings for boats. 'Last year, on Vis island, which has only 89 moorings, we had 300 yachts moored, including 26 mega-yachts. So it gets pretty busy.'

Even in mid-June, when I visited, the harbours were humming with the wealthy and the well-heeled, hanging out in Missoni mini-dresses and Havaianas flip-flops by day and shaking toned, bronzed bodies with young Euro-studs (and a few suave old Cohiba-smoking sugar-daddies) at nightclubs under the stars.

In Hvar in summer, the pace of life changes to take account of the serious partying that happens all night, every night. Breakfast starts at 11am-ish in a cool part of the piazza, with tired eyes hidden behind tortoiseshell Wayfarer or gold Aviator sunglasses. Lunch is taken at a shaded beach taverna such as Zori (where I had my best meal in Croatia) or at the glamorous 1930s Bonj 'les bains' bathing club, where four-poster, Balinese-style daybeds can be hired for the day and Champagne is delivered in silver ice-buckets by gregarious waitresses in tiny white skirts. Cocktails might be taken in the rooftop bar at the Adriana hotel or the waterside Hula



Korčula

Where to stay

Lešić Dimitri Palace (00 385 20 715560; www.lesic-dimitri.com) is an unexpected treat: a former palace divided by its British owners into six contemporary apartments, each with living spaces and private kitchens. The decor, by a Thai designer and inspired by Marco Polo (who is said to have been born on the island), is part Philippe Starck, part Aman. The prettiest apartment is the Ceylon, a cool, white rooftop studio with sea views (from €350 B&B); the Venice, a three-bedroom space with red ceilings and statement furniture, is for those with more opulent tastes (from €1,050 B&B). The hotel has its own handsome, navy-hulled sailing boat, the *Vipera*, for island excursions and swimming trips (from €150 for two hours), as well as a motorboat for moonlit suppers. The general manager, Toni Lozica, a larger-than-life local with a substantial appetite for wine, food and song, leads excursions to vineyards.

Where to eat

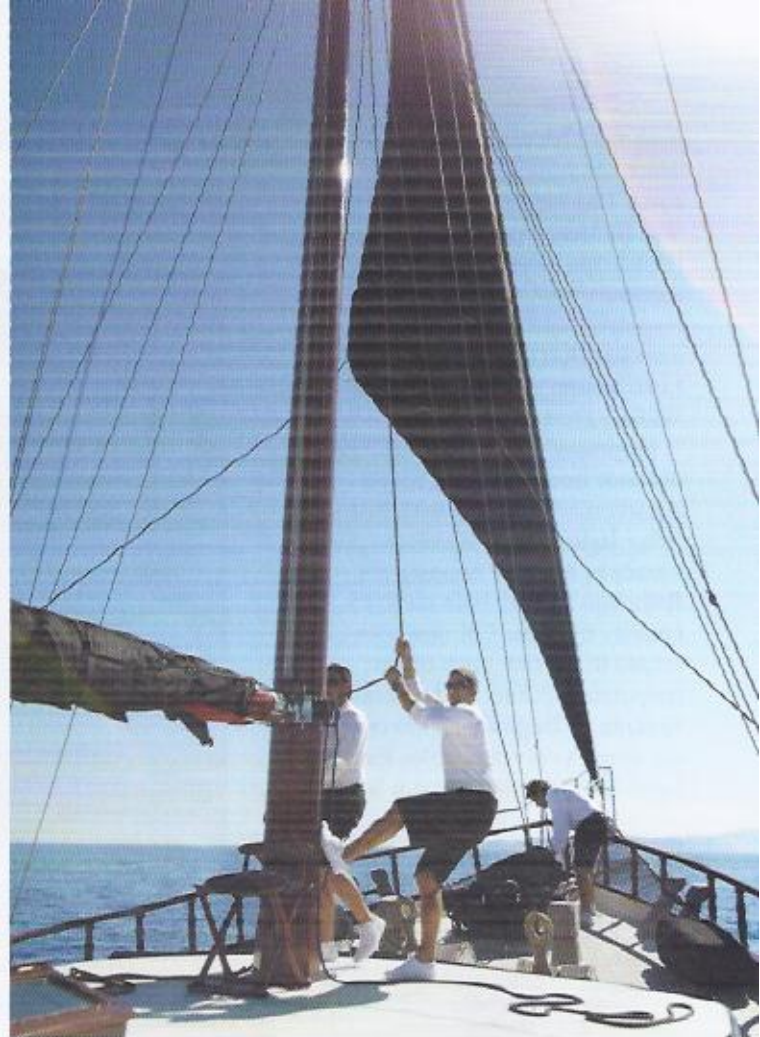
The seafood platters at the Lešić Dimitri Palace are worth trying; the sommelier is passionate about Croatian wines, which he pairs with platters of crostini, followed by fish and meat carpaccio, then pungerit strawberry granita, all served beneath fragrant pines by the sea (about £200 for two with wine; the Grk and Pošip whites are particularly good). The barbecued fish here is delicious, too. Even better is the fish and seafood at the waterside restaurant **Konoba More** (00 385 20 712068; about £100 for two without wine) in Lumbarda, where Stipe Jurjvić and his wife have cooked for most of their lives. The lobster pasta, made with enormous crustaceans from the restaurant's own sea pond, is very moreish.

What to do

Explore **Korčula town** before the cruise ships come in; after 9am, it's packed with tour groups. On entering the 14th-century castellated gates, stop at **St Mark's Cathedral** (don't miss the Tintoretto altarpiece or the modern bronze of St Blaise by local sculptor Ivan Meštrović). Then take a boat to **Lumbarda** for lunch (it has one of the island's few sandy beaches) or go swimming in **Vrnik**, an islet with clear, blue waters popular with locals. The wooded hill above Korčula town offers pretty views at sunset; if this doesn't appeal, rent a bicycle or scooter (see <http://ikorcula.net/eng> or www.kalela.hr for details) and go for a late-afternoon wine tour in the interior (you'll find inspiration at www.korculainfo.com). Korčula has no chic bars, but you can take a boat-taxi to peaceful **Kobas Bay** on the Pelješac peninsula, which is inhabited by just five families, including the owner of the laid-back **Luka's Taverna** (00 385 20 754771), who lures yachties in with his homemade, alcoholic herb concoctions.

Anouska Hempel's
boat, the *Beluga*,
now available for
charter. Opposite,
clockwise from
top: a suite at the
Villa Dubrovnik;
Uje olive-oil shop
in Dubrovnik;
Jorge Ramos on
the *Beluga*'s deck





Loungers at Villa Dubrovnik hotel. Clockwise from above: the hotel's restaurant; aboard the *Beluga*; a bridal party in Dubrovnik

from the 12th century; caves in which the future Yugoslav leader Josip Tito was based during World War II; forts constructed by the British, whose graves overlook the seas on which they defeated Napoleon; and, unexpectedly, a cricket club started by one of Lord Nelson's men, Captain Sir William Hoste, in 1809.

Surprisingly, given its considerable distance from the UK, Croatia is particularly popular with Britons. After Italians (who dominate the islands in July and August), it's Brits who holiday here most; 15 families from the UK now own homes in the tiny town of Vis (population 2,500). On the island of Korčula an Englishman has opened the island's only chic hotel, the Lešić Dimitri Palace. And it is an



English woman, Anouska Hempel or Lady Weinberg, who owns *Beluga*, the most glamorous Turkish gulet on the Adriatic, which from this year can be chartered by luxury-lovers who want to see the Croatian coast in serious style.

This isn't a boat for those who like their technology, glass or space. It is, rather, a handsome, 25-metre sailing cruiser, painted black and powered by black sails. Like a floating version of Lady Weinberg's former London hotel, Blakes, it is decorated in a tightly controlled palette of monochromes, wood and rattan, with high-quality detailing such as Frette sheets, fine Rosenthal china, pewter platters, and Château de

Dubrovnik



Where to stay

The only contemporary, beachside boutique hotel here is the 56-room **Villa Dubrovnik** (00 385 20 500300; www.villa-dubrovnik.hr; doubles from €155), 10 minutes' walk from the Ploče Gate and with expansive views of the old city. The cool, white-and-wood interior is utterly relaxing, as is the large, indoor infinity pool and spa, the loungers set out on seaside platforms for sunbathing and the steps cut into the rocks to make swimming in the sea stress-free. Staff are young, friendly and keen, and the two-storey spa is decadently spacious, with saunas and steam rooms and angel-fingered massages using natural Terraké products. Of the six suites, the Deluxe is the best, with a large terrace and Jacuzzi overlooking the sea.

Where to eat and drink

For views – if not comfort or quality of service – the places to hang out are the two casual bars at **Café Bar Buža** (00 385 98 361934; www.cafebuza.com), both set beside the citadel walls on steep rocks facing the sea, where fashionable Euro-youngsters sunbathe and sip Campari and orange as the sun sets. Or try the loungey (and, late at night, pouring) **Eastwest Beach Club** (00 385 20 412220; www.ew-dubrovnik.com). For food, **Gil's Cuisine and Pop Lounge** (00 385 20 322221; www.gilsdubrovnik.com; about £130 for two without wine) is the hippest haunt in town: a multi-level French fusion restaurant set in the citadel's ramparts, serving dishes from turbot with white truffle custard to sesame-and-chocolate pudding. The cellar holds an impressive 300 wines, most of which are sipped on the restaurant's rooftop lounge by revellers dancing in the moonlight. Although the interiors don't look promising – it's in a slightly gloomy 1881 seafarer's house – **Nautika Restaurant** (00 385

20 442526; www.nautikarestaurant.com; about £140 for two) has two gorgeous, sunny terraces overlooking 12th century forts, and its menus feature perfectly cooked Croatian dishes: sea bass with mango salad, cuttlefish risotto, chocolate soufflé with olive cream sauce. In July and August, during the Dubrovnik Summer Festival (www.dubrovnik-festival.hr/dubrovnik-summer-festival), it's the place to eat.

Where to shop

Croatia is known for the quality of its jewellers, who use stones and semi-precious corals in innovative ways. Favourites include **Clara Stones** (Nalješkovićeva 8; 00 385 20 321706; www.clarastones.com), which sells coral and silver jewellery, and **Zlatarna Krizek** (Boškovićeva 2; 00 385 20 322027; www.krizek.hr), for earrings hung with balls of intricate gold filigree. For gourmet presents in pretty packaging, try **Uje** (Placa 9; 00 385 20 324055; www.uje.hr), which stocks such treats as lemon-infused olive oil, sweet toasted almonds and fig compote; and stop off at the centuries-old pharmacy in the **Franciscan monastery** for locally produced organic face cream infused with the scent of rose, almond and orange blossom.

What to do

If you don't fancy a guided tour, get a copy of the **DK Eyewitness Travel Guide: Croatia** (Dorling Kindersley, £10.99), which has a good overview of Dubrovnik's main sights, and stroll around in your own time, taking a cable-car up the hillside above the city in the morning, and exploring the walls at sunset, stopping for a drink at Café Bar Buža.





Bagnols glassware. Her former butler, Jorge Ramos, and Blakes' head chef, Neville Campbell, are jetted in to serve pretty coloured jellies, delicious salads, and mountains of truffles – in ice cream, on scrambled eggs, served with cream on angel-hair pasta.

When *Beluga* sailed into the harbour at Hvar to collect me, its stark, black sails and hull seemed a little *Pirates of the Caribbean*; on board, however, it was utterly seductive. Two of the three cabins have baths (although only the main cabin is spacious; the other two are comfortable crash-pads rather than airy chambers). By the time you wake up, tanning mats have been lined up on the roof with black pillows and black towels. On the aft deck, a wide, black awning, cleverly lined in cool, white cotton, provides enough shade to spend lazy afternoons with books and games, or taking advantage of the Wi-Fi access and satellite phone. There's a music system to crank up for cocktails (served from a generous bar) and dozens of well-designed objects to

admire: trays, glasses, games boards, baskets, trunks, hats, cushions. As the equally stylish Jorge Ramos says: 'Everything is the best you can get, and everything is perfect. For Lady W, it's all in the detail.'

At the end of my first day on board, *Beluga* looked so dramatic moored in a violently blue bay that I felt obliged to dive in and admire her from her watery surrounds: her wide black body reflecting ripples of light, her sleek black sails offsetting the cloudless blazing skies, and her handsome staff lined up in their black shorts and white linen shirts, ready to hand me a towel (black naturally), shower me down with fresh water (from a white shower-hose) and hand me an icy G&T with a little sprig of mint (a splash of colour is allowed by Lady W, if it's edible).

If I had £34,000 a week to spare, next year's holiday decision would be black and white, too. I'd be back again to lavish *Beluga* with admiring glances and love. Instead, alas, I'm left with memories of a brief but (as with most things in Croatia) rather delicious affair.

Chic Croatia

The writer and photographer's trip was arranged by **Dalmatian Destinations** (0333 700 8007; www.dalmatiandestinations.com), which can organise a similar 10-day land- and sea-based trip from €3,200 per person. This includes a one-week gulet cruise (based on a party of guests sharing, and including all meals, crew and transfers) combined with three days on Hvar. Lady Weinberg's boat, *Beluga*, is available exclusively for charter through Dalmatian Destinations: from €40,000 per week for up to seven guests to include five crew and all food and drinks.

Getting there

From London, **British Airways** (www.ba.com), **EasyJet** (www.easyjet.com) and **Croatia Airlines** (www.croatiaairlines.com) fly to Split and/or Dubrovnik. **Flybe** (www.flybe.com) flies to Dubrovnik from Birmingham, and **BmiBaby** (www.bmibaby.com) from East Midlands airport.

Journey time Flights take two hours 40 minutes to Dubrovnik, and 10 minutes less to Split.

Ferries run regularly between both cities and the main islands (less frequently in winter).

Weather to go

May, June and September are the best times to visit, when the average temperature is 20°C and the towns are less crowded than in peak season (July and August; average temperature 26°C). Winters can be cold, with snow on mountains; January and February are the wettest months.