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May 2015 | £4.20

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THIS MONTH

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Distant shores

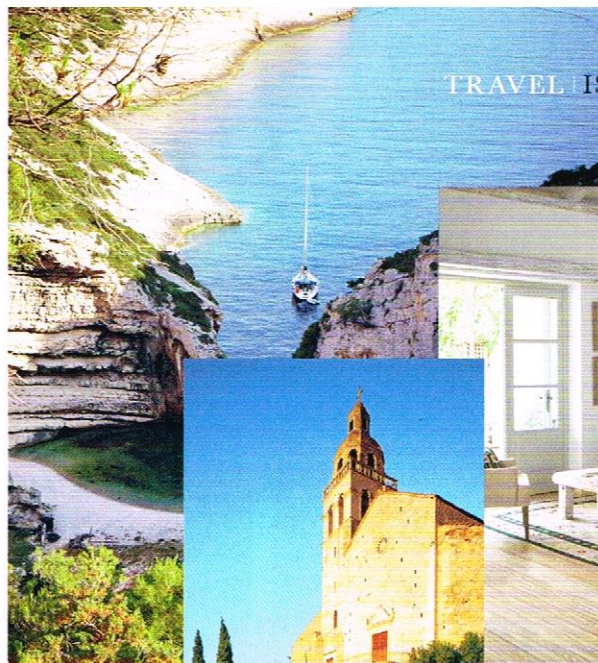
In search of secret coves and historic military forts, **Lisa Johnson** scooters, cycles and sails across and around the Croatian island of Vis

It's early morning in late September and the sun is already hot on the pale-stone houses that line the Vis waterfront. I'm trying to imagine what it's like here in peak season, when up to 250 yachts are moored in the bay, and the population of 2,500 increases to five times that. Even then, I'm told, this 90-square-kilometre island, 30 nautical miles from Split, never feels overcrowded.

Ten years after Croatia emerged as the new must-visit summer destination, Vis has soul to spare. The houses still have their Venetian balconies, the hills are still covered in vines and the shoreline still sparkles with aquamarine coves and silvery-white pebble beaches. Radiant days are spent scootering over to Komiza and its thirteenth-century Benedictine monastery, boating to the iridescent Blue Cave and lunching at Stoncica cove, where grilled sardines are served with earthy Vugava wine. In the evenings, there are suppers of cuttlefish croquettes and fine Kozlovic Malvazija wine at the enchanting outdoor Spanish-Croatian restaurant Lola, and screenings in an open-air cinema.

The key to Vis's authenticity is its remote location in the western Adriatic and a recent history that has particular resonance for British visitors. If you cycle to the dilapidated Ceska Vila, where former Yugoslav president Josip Tito is said to have stayed, you pass a peaceful cemetery to the British war dead: Royal Navy officers stationed here during the Napoleonic Wars and Allied pilots used the island as a haven during the First World War. When the war was over, Vis became a military zone, off limits to tourists until 1989.

Vestiges of Vis's military history add to its overall appeal. Overlooking the bay on its western shore is Fort George, built in 1811 after admiral William Hoste led the British to victory over the French and now imaginatively restored as a sunset bar and club. Off the southern road to Komiza is the cave where Tito holed up, near the ghostly outline of a landing strip that was once used by Allied planes. And from communist times, there is an extraordinary submarine cave, where a Yugoslav motor torpedo boat once lurked behind a camouflaged metal curtain.



Croatia declared independence in 1991, but it wasn't until the end of the Balkan War that tourism really started picking up again. Among the early visitors was former banker Michael Bird, who fell in love with Vis on a sailing holiday in 2001 and bought a 200-year-old property in Kut, at the eastern end of Vis town. Now a family home with a tranquil outdoor courtyard, Garden House, as it is called, is also available to rent through Michael's

travel company Dalmatian Destinations, as are other historic houses - from Villa Jaksa, a sixteenth-century palazzo with a striking loggia now owned by the granddaughter of Croatian sculptor Yvan Mestrovic, to the contemporary, minimalist Pool House.

The best way to see Croatia is by yacht, sailing north along the mainland from Dubrovnik to Split and partying on the island of Hvar en route; a base on Vis makes a magical addition.

Skip the ferry for a 50-minute ride back to the airport by speed boat and leaving will all be part of the thrill □

ABOVE FROM LEFT Vis's rocky shoreline. St Nicholas church in Komiza, on the western coast of the island. Garden House in Kut. BELOW Komiza and its unspoilt harbour are framed by hills



WAYS AND MEANS

Lisa Johnson travelled as a guest of Dalmatian Destinations (dalmatiandestinations.com). Villa prices start at €2,400 a week for Pool House (sleeps two), €2,900 for Garden House (sleeps six), €2,950 for Villa Serena (sleeps eight), €3,100 for Villa Vis (sleeps 10) and €5,250 for Villa Jaksa (sleeps 16). Prices for yacht and gulet charters range from €7,000 to €49,000 a week.

