

Dreaming of Dalmatia

Taking to the seas off the coast of Croatia is the only way to visit its spectacular islands, with ancient architecture, jaw-dropping views and a genuine sense of history. **Nina Cuthbert** set sail to explore its magic





It may be stating the obvious to know that the aftermath of war has detrimental effects on a country's tourism. The names of towns and cities across certain lands become household vocabulary and images of landmarks come filtering through the television set during the ten o'clock news – and more often than not, prior to the violence, these places were pretty much unheard of. The former Yugoslavia, now divided into separate states is one such place, a civil war still fresh in our minds, an era that has passed but still carries with it the scars of bloodshed and a people who were once as one.

Croatia has always been blessed with an enviable coastline, one which many would have said during the war, would bring great revenue to the country once the destruction was over. And they couldn't have been more right. Seeing the land by boat and visiting the neighbouring islands was the best way to witness its beauty in all its grandeur, a greedy 180 degree view, stealing all that is on offer.

Dalmatian Destinations started in February 2005, with a bespoke approach to seeing Croatia from a different angle. This trip involved an 27-metre schooner, departing from the port of Trogir, a short distance from Split, charting the seas for five days. The yacht was spacious, with six en-suite double cabins, a bar, indoor dining area and a deck space that allowed you to bask in the sun, lying upon mattresses and deliciously comfortable, oversized cushions that do nothing but induce severe sloth-like behaviour. It is not compulsory to have your sea legs and the seas are so remarkably calm that you often forget you are on water – but in case of the odd stretch of choppy waters, with the help of a thoroughly concerting crew, you will no doubt graduate to them with flying colours.

Upon arrival in the beautiful and ancient port of Trogir, the boat occasionally has to moor further out to sea, requiring a smaller powerboat to transport you over. And arriving at night makes the extra journey that much more worthwhile as the yacht is lit up like a Christmas tree, and a delicious dinner, prepared by the on-board chef is the perfect way to end a day of travelling.

The following morning the boat starts its journey to Hvar, an island located a mere 4.5km from the mainland with a port abundant with stunning Venetian architecture. The sea, unpredictable as it can be, is a little up and down but looking at the horizon is always ample remedy. And, should you happen to be lucky enough, wild dolphins can be sighted leaping around the bough, mesmerising you with their teasing and trickery, most definitely curing any ills the sea can bring.

Hvar plays host to a 13th-century castle atop a hill, complete with elaborate battlements, cannons and ancient archaeological finds that have been tended to with much care. The walk



Previous page: A view from an enclave on the island of Vis, opposite, the 27-metre schooner in full swing, this page, above, the side streets of Hvar, below, the coastline of Vis



HOW TO GET THERE

Dalmatian Destinations, 020 7730 8007
www.dalmatiandestinations.com

Prices starts from £1,090 per person and includes a week's charter on board a 27 metre schooner. The schooner accommodates up to 10 guests on a full board basis and includes all meals and drinks on board, mooring fees, port taxes and Croatia airport transfers. Flights on Croatia Airlines start from £90, excluding tax (0870 410 0310 www.croatiaairlines.com).

up is not too heart-stopping, but the view from various lookout points is. The coastline is breathtaking, the sea pure and thankfully the construction, minimal. The town is home to many narrow cobbled streets, edged by small boutique shops selling unique items of jewellery and clothing. There are restaurants galore and bars that include the famed Carpe Diem – purveyor of wondrous cocktails to be sipped at the water's edge. The waters surrounding Hvar are still and warm and rest assured, jumping off the side of the boat is endless fun.

Finding a still place to moor for the night is easy and once the anchor is released, it is as though you have returned to land. Sea legs gaining strength, graduation imminent and the gentle rocking motion as sleep sets in, just like being a baby.

The next morning the sun is out, golden lights flicker over the surface of the surrounding water making it impossible to depart until you have jumped in again and submerged yourself. While a little bracing at first, it becomes a refreshing and enjoyable temperature and nothing like the freezing horrors off Cornwall.

Next stop is the island of Vis, oozing in history, stone architecture that is simple and inviting and once home to General Tito, in the form of the cave in which he hid for some two years. The hideaway is high up and climbing the

semi-steep hill path is not much fun on a hot day and sadly is a little anti-climactic once there. But it is interesting to note the tiny space in which he lived and of course, the spectacular view from the top. Vineyard upon vineyard lie between the hills, some covering an old Second World War RAF landing strip, and, armed with this knowledge, it is imperative that a local tavern is found and some wine sampled.

The very rustic, eccentric and utterly charming Pod Murvu is a side of Croatia most people would miss. This family home, for five generations, doubles up as an eatery for anyone who happens to be wandering by (most probably lost) and for those in the know. 'A quick pint' is not the order of the day here however. The laid back natives are virtually horizontal with relaxation and you must also follow suit. Fresh wine from personal vineyards is served and by way of welcome and allowing tourists into the 'inner circle', grape juice on the cusp of fermentation is also served – the journey it has taken to get here all the more prevalent and less likely to be taken for granted. A remote and private spot that is just like home, Pod Morvu was frequented on a number of occasions by Princess Caroline of Monaco – privacy was assured, paparazzi notably and thankfully absent.

The main town of Vis is home to several delightful shops selling individual Croatian wares but most notably is Val, a restaurant specialising in fruits from the sea. The fish soup is so good you will keep going back for more, the main courses of fish so fresh that any fresher and you would be in a sushi bar in the heart of Japan. There is plenty for those who are not keen on our underwater friends, but aboard the yacht, the chef throws his line overboard, catches a fish and then grills it on the deck's barbecue. Cooking really doesn't get much better than this, so perhaps it would be time to quell that dislike and go bravely where you haven't been before.

Travelling back is smooth running and when the sails go up at intermittent points, the feeling is like being a pirate, a princess or even Peter Pan. On board is a place to eat spectacularly well, laze around to your hearts content and make idle conversation that means nothing in the great scheme of things. However, among the far-reaching seas, the hilltop views and between the slight architecture lies room for thought. Thoughts on this country, its laid back inhabitants and quiet, unassuming atmosphere. Thoughts on the islands, free from airports, only accessible by sea and somewhat carefully protected from the outside. And naturally, thoughts on a war that will never be forgotten, where wounds will never be completely healed. But still, Croatia's blissful regeneration is something to be resolutely admired and for those who do venture forth to discover it, will only be taken aback by its magic.