

SAILS BONUS

Tim Slee takes a three-day voyage of discovery exploring the dazzling Dalmatian coast

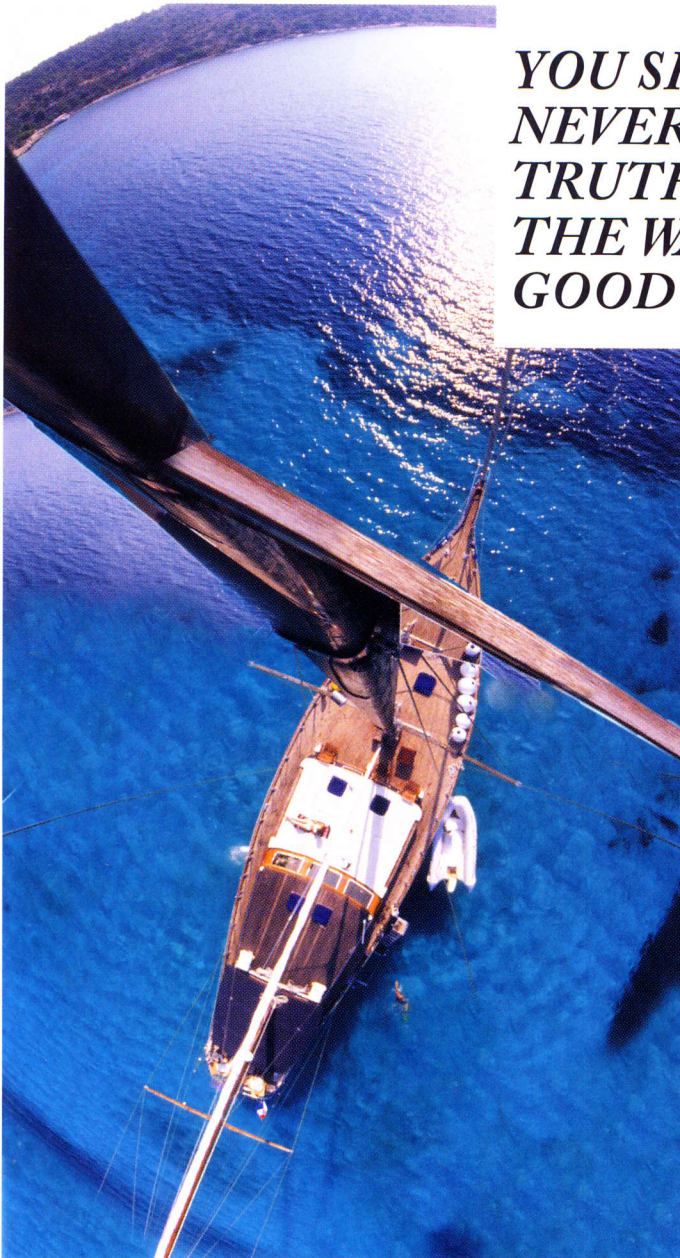
Pictures by Keith Macgregor

Dolphins? Yes, I saw a bunch of them. Azure blue seas like the sort you see on a postcard? Check. Umpteen beautiful islands, each looking like the sort of place where Tom Hanks might have filmed *Cast Away*? Tick. All this and more on our own luxury, private four-day cruise of the Adriatic. Jealous, aren't you?

Croatia, or more specifically the Dalmatian coast, offers the sort of scenery that looks as if it was crafted in ancient times by hammer and chisel. From Pula to Dubrovnik, there are more than 1,400 islands, all different, all with their own stories and unique character.

If you've never been to Croatia before and fancy giving it a crack then save yourself the hassle of trying to choose where best to go and what to see. It's all good. But you absolutely have to see it by boat.

For our trip, we chartered the seven-berth *Sedna*, a beautiful wooden-hulled yacht with a crew of three. If it hadn't been for my travelling companion, who persuaded me to join her, I would have still been at my desk in London. Instead, I was sat on board a fantastic boat, being crewed from island to island, flanked by dolphins and drinking champagne. The crew consisted of Zoran our Captain, his right-hand man Boban and the chef who rarely spoke but cooked some of the most fantastic food on God's earth. The yacht had capacity to sleep seven but realistically it is three rooms with the largest having a smaller bed for a child. The going rate for chartering the boat is from €9,000 per week at the end of the season in October to €12,000 in July and August – the peak months. However, Zoran suggested that September was the best month as sailing conditions and weather are usually spot on.



YOU SHOULD NEVER LET THE TRUTH GET IN THE WAY OF A GOOD STORY

although possible is sometimes just not practical, so as is the norm nowadays I opted for a long weekend. I wish I had deviated from the norm, as there's just so much to see that if you are to do this coast

The history of Croatia is diverse, rich and varied to say the least. Ruled by the Greeks, Romans, Ottomans, Venetians, and of course (!) the Austro-Hungarians this has left the country with historic ruins, medieval villages, ancient forests and National parks all lapped by the waters of the Adriatic. One of the islands Korcula which sits just south of Hvar even claims to be the birth place of 13th century explorer Marco Polo.

I can't tell you much about the Croatian mainland, as the only place I went that was inland was Zagreb airport, which was just a stop over on the way back to Gatwick, and that scored about a 3.5 out of 10. As I write this, and with qualification to Euro 2008 at stake, England have been beaten by Croatia at Wembley. What a pity that the Croatian team don't rate as poorly as Zagreb airport. Oh well, roll on World Cup 2010. Let's av'em.



If you fancy splashing out on a boat all to yourself, I can vouch you will have a fantastic time. Alternatively, a break with friends is a good way to take advantage of a luxury holiday that won't break this year's bonus.

On the topic of money, I should mention that meals and drinks are included, and they are an experience in themselves. To give you one example, whilst harboured in an idyllic cove, we set about snorkelling as the crew busied themselves ashore collecting firewood for the evening's BBQ. It remains an endearing memory of the trip as the chef served the most incredible fish dish of lubin and vegetables and various other seafood combinations.

As you will no doubt appreciate working in the City, getting a whole week off work

justice you should consider taking a full week. Our trip gave us a taste of something we will certainly be returning to.

I'm Cornish and on our visit to Brac and the fishing port of Milna, I couldn't help noticing similarities between the island and the south west of Britain—though Milna, with its cobbled streets and picture postcard shuttered windows looked like a film set.

As we found with other towns we visited, you don't have to walk far to find a restaurant; they line the harbour, as do the bars and shops. As one of the largest of the islands, Hvar is the most popular to visit. Alas, we went in the last few weeks of the season, so lying on the beach wasn't really an option although I did manage to catch a few rays on deck between islands.

A couple of confessions, the dolphins were actually swimming away from the boat, and the champagne was cava, but you should never let the truth get in the way of a good story. ■

Tim Slee travelled with Dalmatian Destinations, a specialist in the provision of crewed charter boats in Croatia. With their knowledge of this unique coastline, the team manages every aspect of your charter, from catering, to restaurant bookings, spa treatments, tours, and complimentary airport transfers.

A three double cabin 21-metre Schooner starts from €10,500 for a one week charter.

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Flights were booked with Croatia Airlines and start at €180. 0870 4100 310