

Paradise close... Dalmatian Coast, Croatia

Suellen Grealy goes island-hopping on a charming boat charter in the Adriatic

Croatia intimidated me before I got to know it. Apparently, A-listers are scrambling to bag the best villas, and its hip factor rivals St Barts. This might seduce cooler types, but I worried I'd be shunned for wearing last season's tankini. All I want from an island in the sun is to bliss out in see-through water, and eat barbecued fish for supper, so would Croatia be for me?

There are around 1,000 islands along Croatia's Dalmatian Coast. Some are rocky

homes to a handful of goats; others have acres of vineyards and sizeable towns with thriving social scenes. Hvar Town, with its scenic harbour setting, is our starting point. Both Bill Gates and John Malkovich have been spotted enjoying the urban chic of the waterside bars and hotels. Yet wander into the squares and alleyways nearby and you'll find architecture unchanged since it was commissioned by Venetian princes all those centuries ago.

You could spend a week or two happily idling on Hvar (the island has the same name as its main town) or one of the other larger islands. Korčula, for instance, has lively bars and restaurants within the 14th-century walls and fairy-tale towers of its old town. Yet thick pine forests make it a hiker's idyll. Brač, source of the stone that built the White House, is also the location of Croatia's most famous beach, the golden spit at Zlatni Rat. These islands have a good boat-taxi, so you can reach even the most secluded beaches and fishing villages.

If you get the chance to island-hop, take it. The number of islands makes the seascape vastly more interesting than Greece, and there are endless bays to explore. It's yachtie-heaven.

I got lucky and joined a floating party on the Blue Star, a 27m Turkish-built schooner with sailboat charm and boutique hotel standards of comfort. We spent most of our time lounging on deck, or sitting round the enormous oval table. The nautical-style wooden interior is air-conditioned, which helps in the cabins. They're pretty, with comfy bunks, and each one has its own small, shipshape bathroom. The three-man



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
The monastery on Brač island; Korčula island; a quaint alley in Hvar Town

crew knew all the best spots for swimming, fishing and lazing, as well as partying. My favourite anchor-drop was in Palmizana bay on St Clement, one of the Pakleni islands off the coast of Hvar. I swam around the boat in water as clear as glass then scrambled ashore to collect some sun-warmed rosemary.

The bays of the Pakleni islands are full of restaurants serving up fresh local dishes. The family-run Meneghello restaurant in Palmizana is just one that comes highly recommended, but you can simply take your pick. We were happy just observing them from our own table aboard the Blue Star. The chef regularly appeared from his tiny galley below deck and clamped a charcoal brazier to the stern rail, from which he magicked up delicious grilled seafood lunches.

We also dropped anchor in the gorgeous bay at Vis, overlooked by a 16th-century palazzo. On

this island, you can get your dose of recent history by going inland to see Marshall Tito's wartime hidey-hole, or speeding along the coast to a Bond-style, and now deserted, former Yugoslav navy submarine dock. With islands like these, it didn't take long for me to answer my

question – yes, yes! Croatia really was for me.

What not to miss

- Cocktails at the waterfront Carpe Diem on Hvar island. It's hip but laid-back. Visit carpe-diem-hvar.com.
- Sunbathing on Zlatni Rat, the amazing beach that appears on all postcards of Brač.
- Authentic cuisine at family-run Pol Murvu on Vis. Call (00 385) 2171 5117.
- The pretty cobbled alleys and streets on Korčula, the birthplace of Marco Polo.

How to get there

The Blue Star costs from £1,090 per person per week (based on 10 sharing) full-board. Call (020) 7730 8007, or visit dalmatian-destinations.com. Flights with Croatia Airlines start from £150; call 0870 410 0310, or visit croatiaairlines.com.