Natural Beauty on the Dalmatian Coast

Published: May 2009
By Peter Jon Lindberg
Travel + Leisure

Is the Dalmatian Coast the next Riviera? Dubrovnik and the islands off Southern Croatia are tempting travelers with natural beauty and a buzzing nightlife. Peter Jon Lindberg succumbs to their charms.

My friends and I play a travel game we call Swoon. The rules are simple: Choose a storied locale from a particular moment in the past 50 years, and the place that earns the most "aaah's" wins. Someone invariably picks St.-Tropez circa 1955, or Ubud in the seventies. Pre charter flight Ibiza. Post Cold War Prague. Such places are the geographical equivalents of Truman Capote's Black and White Ball or Manchester's Hacienda Club: that perfect confluence of location and time—before the rest of the world arrived, before the inevitable Wild On! specials on E! Think of Bahia in the sixties, Saigon in the nineties, or Tangier in Paul Bowles's day.

Think of these and you'll begin to understand the Dalmatian Coast in 2005. Right now, the islands of southern Croatia are—among a certain group of people—the premier destination in the Mediterranean region. They glimmer on the periphery enough to attract the trendy, yet hang enough off the radar to elicit blank stares among the rest. And the rest don't know it now, but they'll be coming soon, too.

Europeans long favored Croatia's coastal resorts as a low-key alternative—Greece, Italy, and Spain without the tourist junk or the exorbitant prices. (In the 1970's and 80's, Yugoslavia drew more British travelers than any other European country besides Spain; most of them were bound for Dalmatia.) When Yugoslavia erupted into civil war in 1991, the Dalmatian Coast was not as hard hit as the inland regions of Bosnia and Serbia. But violence was widespread even here, and tourists—the backbone of Dalmatia's economy—disappeared altogether.

Today the pockmarks of mortar fire are faintly visible in Dubrovnik's ancient walls, grim reminders of the 1991-92 siege by Yugoslav forces. In most of Croatia, the war now feels ages, not just a decade, gone. And tourism is increasing by as much as 50 percent a year.
Europeans are again flocking here each summer—arriving by yacht, by sailboat, by car ferry, or by Gulfstream—and picking up where they left off. Americans, too, are finally being clued in: dozens of cruise lines and tour companies have added Dalmatia to their itineraries in recent years. And, for better or worse, Croatia was recently given the Wild On! treatment on E! If that's not a tipping point, I don't know what is.

So what's the appeal? The landscape, for starters. This is the most stunning coastline in Europe: a mix of limpid bays, craggy bluffs, hidden coves and beaches, vineyards, olive groves, and forests of cypress and pine. Remarkably well preserved ancient towns hold vivid examples of Greek, Roman, Venetian, and Slavic architecture. The sailing and yachting scene here rivals any other, with hundreds of ports and dozens of marinas and countless natural inlets scattered across a thousand islands. Dalmatian cuisine—consisting of superb fish, shrimp, octopus, and oysters, along with increasingly renowned wines—compares favorably to Italian cooking, and borrows heavily from it: here risotto becomes rizot and prosciutto becomes the delectable prsut. But Dalmatian food is earthier and rougher than Italian, blending hints of Hungarian (paprika-laced goulash), Turkish (kebab-style raznjici, or meat skewers), and Slavic (sour dumplings). It's also exceptionally affordable.

Finally, an exuberant nightlife dominates on the larger islands of Hvar and Brac, where revelers keep the party going until sunrise. There's a palpable urgency to the proceedings. This may be the most widespread consequence of the war: everyone—Croatians themselves, as well as their blissed-out guests—seems to be making up for lost time. For now, it's Croatia's moment; who knows how long it will last?

DUBROVNIK
Dalmatia's most famous city is touted as an unspoiled gem, though this is really a matter of degree. While it's not yet as overrun as, say, Prague or Positano (the two unlikely places that Dubrovnik most resembles), it's well within the crosshairs of mass tourism. Dubrovnik's Old Town maintains a precarious equilibrium between Then and Now, Here and Elsewhere. Menus in Italian, English, and German hang outside every tra-ditional wooden-beamed konoba, or tavern. Benetton and Diesel boutiques line the medieval lanes. And pushcart vendors proffer not just handmade olive soaps but also Old Town mouse pads.

Such culture clashes form the essence of this city, and always have. In the Old Town, one feels a sense of displacement, as if all of Europe had come to cluster within Dubrovnik's fortified walls. At various points, most of Europe has. Witness the twisting staircase above Gundulic Square, an explicit homage to the Spanish Steps; the 16th-century Baroque cathedrals abutting Renaissance palaces and medieval fortresses; and the Gradska Kavana, a café straight out of fin de siècle Vienna.
The Old Town is shaped like a cereal bowl; from its elevated rim you can gaze across the city's orange roofs to the vividly blue Adriatic beyond. Down below, at the center of the bowl, lies the Stradun, Dubrovnik's limestone main drag. Centuries of casual strollers have buffed the street to an icy gloss—you expect a Zamboni to arrive at any moment. Each evening the Stradun roars to life for the nightly korso, or promenade. A motley crowd emerges: teenagers in sun-bleached-blond dreadlocks, grizzled Croatian men smoking pipes, cruise-ship passengers in flip-flops, Italian men in Ferragamo loafers. A white-haired nun passes by, cocooned in an all-white habit. She's trailed by a surfer dude in satin shorts, nothing more. Both wear crucifixes.

The summer crowds may seem unavoidable down on the main streets, so strike up any lane into the higher parts of town. Here the only signs of life are alley cats dozing on the cool and shady stone. The air carries the scent of jasmine and lemon trees, laundry soap, cat spray, and, occasionally, the buttery aroma of scampi frying in tiny kitchens. Climbing a deserted lane one afternoon, I heard, of all things, faint strains of Dixieland echoing down the alleyways. I soon came upon an open doorway, inside which—barely visible in the dim—sat a half-dozen young Croats in shorts, gleefully blowing jazz for an audience of indifferent cats.

I was lucky enough to score a bed at the 19-room Pucic Palace, the Old Town's first upmarket hotel, carved out of an 18th-century nobleman's mansion. Even now, as tourism explodes, hotels in Dalmatia are mostly Socialist-era holdovers with lackluster service and design. The Pucic Palace is the glittering exception, a stylish blend of contemporary (gallery lighting, Bulgari bath products) and old-world (copper-shelled, claw-foot tubs; rustic beamed ceilings, olive-wood floors). Balconies look over Gundulic Square, one of Dubrovnik's prime social spots. At night it's filled with café tables and Cinzano-sippers, but by sunrise the entire piazza is transformed into a farmers' market. Each morning I would step outside to buy a breakfast of figs, plums, and Charentais melons. The peach bins were swarming with honeybees, but the stall tender paid them no heed; she simply tossed a few peaches into a paper sack, bees and all, then handed them over with a toothless smile. I closed the bag tight, tucked it deep inside my backpack, and waited till noon to open it, by which time the bees had passed out. The peaches were sublime.

The Old Town has some compelling museums—the best of them focusing on 16th-century religious art—but they draw curiously few visitors, and most of those seem to be merely seeking respite from the heat. You almost get the sense that Dubrovnik's tourists can't wait to get out of the city and into the surf, or at least onto a chaise longue. Browsing displays of medieval coins, muskets, and teacups at the Rector's Palace were two barefoot Spanish girls in dripping wet swimsuits. The guards hardly noticed.

Despite its sober visage—stone battlements, stately Baroque façades—Dubrovnik in July feels as louche as any Mediterranean beach resort. For every Franciscan monastery, there's a raucous café serving cocktails called Test Tube Baby and Blow Job. The bacchanal reaches its
apex at Buza. If this isn't the perfect beach bar, I'll eat a honeybee. A literal hole-in-the-wall (reached via a tiny opening in the Old Town ramparts, and marked by a sign reading COLD DRINKS), Buza unfolds across a series of terraces hewn to the cliffs. There's nothing but a narrow railing between you and the Adriatic. Plastic chairs and tables cluster under a thatch canopy; the bar itself is just a refrigerator and a stereo, both powered by an extension cord running up the cliffside. At sunset I joined the locals leaping off 20-foot-high bluffs into the green water below. Dean Martin was crooning "Cha Cha de Amor" while a 12-year-old girl waited tables, bringing chilly Ozujsko beer from the fridge. At some point, a yacht pulled up and dropped anchor in the cove below. We all watched as the bronzed pilot dove into the water, swam up to the rocks, climbed the winding staircase, sat down at a table, and ordered a beer.

KORCULA
The sharp scent of pine resin mingles with salt air on Korcula, three hours by ferry from Dubrovnik. Forests of Aleppo pine, cypress, and holm oak make this one of the Adriatic's most verdant isles. It's known for top-notch wines and for being one of several alleged birthplaces of Marco Polo.

Korcula's primary draw, however, is the town of the same name. A snow-globe version of Dubrovnik, with a compact historic quarter encased within stone walls, Korcula took shape under Venetian rule between the 10th and 18th centuries. The Italian influence lingers in Renaissance-era loggias, arched bridges linking the upper stories of palaces, and myriad statues of St. Mark. In contrast to Dubrovnik's, the architecture is quite rough-hewn—all of Korcula looks to be carved from a single piece of stone, like an Adriatic Petra—and is on a decidedly smaller scale, with squat fluted windows and minuscule doorways rimmed with green shutters. The 30-odd lanes wending through the old quarter are so narrow that one could leap from rooftop to rooftop clear across town.

The English writer Rebecca West, visiting in 1937, likened Korcula to "a goldsmith's toy, a tortoise made of precious metals, sitting on its peninsula as on a show-stand." Not much has changed. Days begin with ink-black espresso at one of Korcula's ubiquitous cafés, followed perhaps by a circuit around the pine-fringed promenade just outside the city walls. The Old Town's promontory juts like a thumb into the shimmering bay, lapped by waves on three sides. From inside the walls, however, you'd have little idea you were on the sea; the crooked passageways huddle in shadow for most of the day. I alternated stints at the sun-drenched town beach with cooling strolls down the old quarter's lanes. Peering into darkened ground-floor kitchens I could glimpse the dim figures of housewives preparing lunch: grilled squid, sautéed shrimp, wine-braised octopus. At Korcula's jumbled Abbey Treasury museum, a charming old docent followed me from room to room, pointing out Titians and Tintorettos and switching lights on and off as we went.
In the afternoons I would bike out for a bracing swim at Przina beach, a pebbly strand on Korcula's southern peninsula, near the town of Lumbarda. Lumbarda is famous for Grk wine (wonderful name, that), a pungent white with the sweet character of liqueur. Vineyards crept over the roadside here; wheel-crushed grapes stained the asphalt. The road wound past olive, lime, and almond groves, past stalks of blood-red sunflowers, past a medieval chapel dropped in the center of a vineyard. With slices of prsut and sharp paski sir cheese procured from a butcher, I stopped to picnic beside the shell of a stone farmhouse; a copse of trees poked up through what remained of the roof.

I returned to Korcula Town just before sunset, the evening air soft as a silk shirt. The passageways were bathed in the glow of amber lamps; moonlight cast a blue aura on ship masts and church steeples. Several women were grilling garlicky dorado on a barbecue while their children squeezed in a game of soccer. I assumed they were Korculan, but upon closer inspection, I realized they were all speaking French. (Foreigners—particularly French and Italian—are buying up property here at a dizzying pace.)

Just beyond the medieval walls, Vespas were honking their way through the crowds by the marina. Beck's "Sexx Laws" thumped from a harbor front disco. At the Internet café, Croatian teenagers were playing Grand Theft Auto. But down the musty, catacomb-like corridors of the Old Town, the night slipped back 100, 500, 750 years, and Korcula looked much as it must have in Marco Polo's day. The wine, of course, helped.

HVAR
By far the most glamorous of the Adriatic islands, Hvar is heir to that noble lineage running from Cannes and Capri through St. Bart's and South Beach: the latest of the famous international playgrounds. At the height of summer, Hvar Town is so relentlessly gorgeous it makes your eyes ache. Everything screams, Ogle me: the harbor edged with bougainvillea, the perfectly aged Renaissance façades, the absurdly huge yachts and sailboats, and a nonstop parade of caramelized torsos. As if the cast and setting didn't already suggest a perfume ad, Hvar's entire waterfront is redolent of lavender, which proliferates on the island and is sold in satchels by sidewalk vendors.

Each afternoon in summer, another dozen yachts glide into Hvar's mandrac—the marine equivalent of the driveway at Monte Carlo's casino. Here come the new arrivals, in their brushed-steel cleats and finery: the Pescatore from Tuscany, the Commitment from London, the Aerie from Cap d'Ail, the Coup de Grace from Barbados. And here come their occupants, strutting insouciantly down gangways to alight on the pier: men in cream linen suits and Gucci sandals, divas in sheer silk wraps and Michael Kors bikinis. These people can make an ATM withdrawal look sexy.
You could spend a month within two blocks of the marina and never tire of the daily routine. At the morning market, Claudia Cardinale look-alikes rub shoulders with black-cloaked biddies shopping for figs and olive oil. As the sun climbs higher, the yachties move from café to konoba around St. Stephen's Square, and breakfast seamlessly merges with lunch. After a swim off the rocks, it's time for midday cocktails at chic quayside bars, where all the chairs face out to provide views of the show. Hvar's Renaissance-era planners must have anticipated the town's eventual function as one of the world's preeminent catwalks.

At twilight the yachties are all dining on their decks, served by white-gloved attendants. The air fills with the clink of Prosecco glasses, voices chattering in a dozen languages, and the clapping of high heels on stone—and Hvar's evening promenade begins. The top-shelf crowd congregates at Carpe Diem, the ne plus ultra of trendy boîtes. Wicker sofas and cushioned cube-stools are occupied by couples who pay with Bank of Geneva platinum cards—probably nobility from some obscure corner of Europe. When the terrace is full they adjourn to the loggia and drape themselves across marble ledges with uncanny grace.

On this particular night, however, Carpe Diem was not the most fabulous spot in town. Just past midnight, a five-story superyacht slid into a berth opposite the club. On the terrace at Carpe Diem, all heads turned as the crew emerged, clad in marine whites with brass epaulets. Ropes were secured, decks scrubbed, torches lit on the ship's sprawling veranda. Two sailors prepared the gangway, then posted themselves on the pier to tend, no joke, a velvet rope.

One by one, elegantly dressed women strode through the assembled throng, got the once-over from the doormen, and were ushered up the gangway. Baccarat glasses appeared; votives flickered in the breeze. Soon enough the lucky inviteds were shedding all but their skimpiest clothing and gyrating to hypnotic soul music—a scene straight out of a high-class porn movie. I passed by again at 5 a.m. and the celebrants were still on deck, still dancing half-naked in the predawn light. By breakfast time the ship was gone. The owners, for all I know, never got off the boat.

VIS
Just 12.5 miles across the water from Hvar Town, the island of Vis is as insular as its neighbor is cosmopolitan, its hardscrabble landscape a far cry from Hvar's sparkle and polish. Foreign visitors were not allowed on Vis until 1989; before then the island was largely controlled by the Yugoslav army, with just a scant population of farmers and fishermen for company.
A crucial strategic outpost for warding off seaborne invaders, Vis has been variously occupied by Greeks, Romans, Illyrians, Venetians, and Austro-Hungarians. Toward the end of World War II, Tito set up his Partisan headquarters in a mountain cave here and, with the help of the British, transformed the whole of Vis into a military base. During the Cold War, miles of tunnels were carved into the rock to connect subterranean barracks, gun turrets, and missile silos. Portions of the tunnels remain. Today you can comb through the rubble and find Eminem graffiti covering the skeletons of rocket launchers.

From the sea, Vis seems an unforgiving hunk of rock, dotted with parched scrub and brush. Despite its desolate appearance, Vis holds remarkable natural bounty. More than 500 varieties of herbs flourish on the island (consider that the whole of England has only around 300). Climbing those scrubby hillsides, you can grow dizzy from the scent of rosemary and sage. Asparagus, garlic, and arugula all grow wild here, alongside the mandarin-orange and carob trees—carob infuses the local grappa. There are also some passable island wines, such as the dry white Vugava and the ruby-red Plavac, which, for some reason, Viskis often dilute with ice cubes.

I sampled the wild asparagus at Konoba Bako, in Komiza, where I had the best meal of my trip. Komiza is an unpretentious fishing village with few stores and cafés, and even fewer tourists. Those who come tend to gather at Konoba Bako, whose waterfront terrace makes an idyllic backdrop for simply prepared seafood. Lunch began with pristine oysters from Mali Ston, northwest of Dubrovnik, where underground springs and freshwater rivers create an ideal feeding ground for shellfish (Mali Ston oysters were purportedly a favorite of Emperor Franz Josef's). A luscious pâté of anchovies followed, then a sublimely tender stewed octopus. Finally, out came a grilled dorado, its skin as crisp as a roast chicken's, its pearlescent flesh so rich and juicy that olive oil and lemon seemed redundant.

BRAC
Brac was always renowned for its quarries; the island's creamy white marble was used for the walls of Diocletian's Palace in nearby Split and, farther afield, for the White House. Nowadays the stone trade has ceded to the sun-and-surf market. Possessing Croatia's most famous beach, as well as a limpid bay for swimming and snorkeling, Brac is an obvious haven for sporty types. On the breezy harbor around Bol, the island's tourist hub, windsurfers slice the water like dorsal fins. The downside: Brac is becoming popular with package vacationers, and is being developed accordingly. Sprawling, chain-style resorts are still rare on the Dalmatian Coast—pensions, B&B's, and small hotels have long dominated the market here—but Brac now has more than its share of behemoths. (This may explain the preponderance of Jet Skis.)
The upside: there's enough beachfront for now to accommodate the crowds. And the town of Bol, diminutive though it may be, manages to absorb the ferryloads of visitors without sacrificing its mellow, understated character. After the evening ferries depart, Bol settles into the pleasant vibe of an after-party. Still, most travelers come here on day trips from Hvar or Split and skip the town altogether, heading straight for the beach.

Brac's mountainous interior is spotted like, well, a dalmatian—harsh gray stone broken by patches of scraggly maquis. Against this towering, nearly monochromatic backdrop, the coastline seems to explode in a riot of emerald greens, terra-cotta reds, and aqua blues, as if all of the island's color had long ago trickled down the hillsides to the sea. Just west of Bol, a ring of evergreens hugs the shore, shading a limestone promenade. Carpeted in pine needles and lined with vendors selling seashells, sarongs, and coral necklaces, the pathway stretches for a mile alongside 40-foot-high cliffs. Cicadas and crickets thrum in the trees. Through the forest you can catch glimpses of an impossibly blue bay glistening in the sun.

Finally, the path slopes downward and you emerge onto Zlatni Rat (Golden Cape), the beach everyone comes here for. It is, even skeptics will admit, an extraordinary spot. The cape forms a V that thrusts into the bay, rimmed by a broad, flat strand of polished shale. (There are hardly any sandy beaches in Dalmatia—and if you miss the softness, you certainly don't miss the mess.) The beach slides gently into the water, translucent as an indoor swimming pool and nearly as warm. Commerce is nonexistent, except for a couple of stalls selling kiwi, melon, and coconut gelatos. The far side of the beach is reserved for nude bathers (naturism is quite the rage in Croatia) but, given the size of European bikinis, there's precious little to indicate when you've found it.

The best way to tour the Dalmatian Coast is by yacht or sailboat—but it's easy to piece together an island-to-island journey using ferry lines. (Most ferries accommodate cars, but I'd advise against driving in Dalmatia: biking, walking, and public transportation are viable options, and car ferries often require that drivers show up hours early.) Jadrolinija (385-51/666-111; www.jadrolinija.hr), Croatia's largest ferry operator, has regular service between Dubrovnik and Split, with some ships calling at Korcula and Hvar; other companies make runs to Brac from Split or Hvar. (In July and August, book a few days ahead, as the ferries fill up.) For day trips or multiday excursions from Hvar to Vis, contact AlterNatura (385-21/717-239; www.alternatura.hr), a Vis-based adventure outfitter. Butterfield & Robinson (800/678-1147; www.butterfield.com) offers an eight-night Dalmatian Coast cruise—docking in Dubrovnik, Korcula, Hvar, Brac, and Split, then continuing on to northern Dalmatia and Venice—aboard a 32-passenger yacht.
DUBROVNIK

Pucic Palace
The top choice for style and service, at the center of the Old Town in an impeccably restored 18th-century villa. Rooms are smallish, but comfortable and well designed. Doubles from $584. 1 Ulica Od Puca; 385-20/326-200; [www.thepucicpalace.com](http://www.thepucicpalace.com)

Atlas Club Nautika
An upmarket restaurant (complete with a pianist) that's exceedingly popular with both locals and travelers, not least for its cliffside view over the harbor and its terrific seafood risotto. Dinner for two $146. 3 Brsalje; 385-20/442-526

Rozarij
At the end of a narrow lane crowded with tourist restaurants, this one stands out, with house-made pastas and grilled fish and shellfish. Lunch for two $30. 4 Zladarska; 385-20/321-257

Buza Bar
Ispod Mira; no phone

KORCULA

Hotel Korcula
A former villa on the waterfront abutting the Old Town walls. Despite the lumpy beds and slightly faded interiors, an unbeatable location (with stunning sea views) makes this the top option in town. Doubles from $196. 5 Obala Franje Tudjmana; 385-20/726-480; [www.korcula-hotels.com](http://www.korcula-hotels.com)

Adio Mare
Touristy, crowded, and kitschy it may be, but this is a requisite stop for sublime fresh fish and good Korculan wines. 92 Ulica Marco Polo; 385-20/711-253

Cocktail Bar Massimo
Trendy bar occupying the upper levels of a medieval turret at the "prow" of the Old Town, with dead-on views of the Peljesac Peninsula. Setaliste Petra Karnevelica; 385-20/715-073

Caffè Bar Arula
The best among many outdoor cafés near the Old Town's Land Gate; the adjoining bakery has marvelous croissants and Croatian pastries. 19 Plokata; 385-20/711-005

HVAR

Hotel Palace
There's a surprisingly mediocre hotel selection in Hvar Town, but the Palace is ideally situated (ask for a balcony room facing the marina) and offers decent value, though rooms
are bare-bones and old-fashioned—the hotel dates from the Hapsburg era. Doubles from $173 (no reservations by phone). St. Stephen Square; 385-21/741-956; www.suncanihvar.hr

Konoba Menego
One of the only restaurants on Hvar focusing on Croatian cuisine and ingredients (small plates of sir, prsut, anchovies, bacon, and olives, all from local producers). Meals are served on long wooden tables in a cool grotto-like tavern. Try the outstanding homemade lemonade and wild-orange grappa. Dinner for two $36. Groda; 385-21/742-036; www.menego.hr

Macondo Restaurant
Buttery spaghetti with lobster is the standout at this jam-packed local favorite, on a narrow backstreet above town. Dinner for two $48. Groda; 385-21/742-850

Carpe Diem
Mecca for the beau monde, who linger here all day, from 9 A.M. espressos through 3 A.M. cocktails. Riva; 385-21/742-369

Zimmer Frei
A cooler, less ostentatious alternative to Carpe Diem, this tiny alleyside bar fills up nightly with 18- to 35-year-old hipsters. With its all-white walls, white benches, white cushions, white lilies, and white candles, Zimmer Frei could be in South Beach, but the crowd is mainly Croatian. Pjaca, Hvar town; no phone

Veneranda
An alfresco club and disco tucked amid the pine groves on a hillside overlooking the harbor. The first crowds arrive at 9:30 P.M. for nightly films at the outdoor cinema; later, the yachts trickle in from the marina to dance until sunrise. Hvar town; no phone

VIS
Konoba Bako
Superb grilled fish, octopus goulash, and house-made breads are the highlights at this harborside landmark in Vis's prettiest town. Lunch for two $53. 1 Gunduliceva, Komiza; 385-21/713-742

BRAC
Hotel Kastil
The island's most stylish property, in a retrofitted Turkish fortress smack on the waterfront, with spare, airy guest rooms and a great in-house café. Doubles from $152. 1 Riva Frane Radica, Bol; 385-21/635-995; www.kastil.hr

Konoba Gust
A convivial joint decorated with farm and fishing tools and vintage photos, just above the
main square. Excellent pasticada (beef stewed with wine, prunes, and vinegar). Dinner for two $59. 14 Riva Frane Radica, Bol; 385-21/635-911

Varadero
Just below the Hotel Kastil, in Bol. Open-air patio bar with harbor views, top-notch cocktails, and a fabulous crowd. 1 Riva Frane Radica; no phone