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Wild Tomato, Nelson / Marlborough

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TRAVEL

Dalmatia offers the best of Croatia

BY LYNDA PAPESCH PHOTOS LYNDA PAPESCH



ABOVE: Omiš was once a pirate haven.
BELOW: Vessels of all shapes and sizes in Hvar.
OPPOSITE PAGE, From left: Winery exploration in Bol on the island of Brač, beach after beach line the coast.

Getting to Croatia was easy. Six weeks later, having fallen in love with the country and its people, leaving proved the hard part.

An increasingly popular destination, Croatia offers beaches galore, crystal-clear waters, friendly people, history dating back to pre-Roman times, and a great currency exchange rate.

Having meandered down the Italian Riviera, my husband Justin and I found ourselves in Italy's port town of Ancona, from where we decided to catch the Jadrolinija night ferry to Dalmatia in Croatia. Our style of travel is not for everyone. Destinations when travelling in Europe are usually spur-of-the-moment, and the length of our stay in each area depends on how much we like it.

We loved Croatia from the moment we boarded that ferry. Many of the crew were Croatian, friendly, very courteous and even helpful. While most of our fellow passengers curled up on the deck with a picnic and a blanket for the night, we opted for dinner in the restaurant and a comfy reclining chair in the sleeping lounge.

By 8am the next morning we had arrived in Split, cleared customs and started our hunt for accommodation. Usually we book a few days in advance via Booking.com but in this instance we decided to wing it. We'd been told there was a plentiful supply of B&B-type accommodation, which proved to be the case.

Exiting customs, we were greeted by dozens of Croatians with handwritten signs saying 'Apartmani', each doing their best to convince you to stay at their place. Tourism is a growing business in Croatia, and also a means for many residents to make



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a bit of extra undeclared income. Official accommodation places are government-registered but there are many more 'unofficial' options where the price can be negotiated and the money goes straight into the pocket of the homeowner.

Our first call was to an information centre on the busy Split waterfront. In addition to shops and businesses, the waterfront is home to pop-up tourist-oriented hawkers offering goods of every description.

Finding accommodation proved easy and within an hour of arrival, we were collected by the landlord and whisked off to nearby Podstrana. For the princely sum of 50 euros a night (NZ\$85), we secured a brand-new studio apartment for two weeks. A small shopping centre was 100m away and the sparkling Adriatic a mere 500m walk.

After settling in, it was off to the beach. Wow! Along the Dalmatian coastline, the beaches are continuous, with fabulous white-pebble shorelines and alluring turquoise waters. Magical.

On our second day we decided to check out our immediate surroundings, so hopped on a bus back into Split – public transport is inexpensive, reliable and easily accessible, with loads of convenient stops – and hired a scooter for maximum flexibility. Our trusty scooter proved ideal. Rental options ranged from a basic 50cc to 250cc, the latter being our choice for carrying two. Scooting here, there and everywhere was a delight. Although Croatians drive on the right side of the road (instead of our left), they proved highly respectful of other drivers and of those on scooters. For a couple it's a great way to go.

The speed limit is 50km/h in urban areas, 80km/h on secondary roads and 130km/h on highways, and their motto is 'Leave sooner, drive slower, live longer'. Our first expedition took us into the hills that dominate much of inland Croatia. The Dalmatinska Zagora (which means 'behind the hills') are the mountains that tower over much of the coast. Imagine a narrow strip of coastline, beaches and towns, with a range of mountains running in a horizontal line behind.

Much of the Zagora is known for its scrub-covered hills and rocky wastes known as kamenjar (stone fields), and also for neat little towns full of traditional stone houses and extensively cultivated patches of agriculture. Add to that beautiful stone churches, creative artisans and welcoming locals – heading for the hills certainly has its benefits.

English has been taught in schools there for about 30

years now, so while some of the older residents have limited English vocabulary, a large percentage of the population speak our language. And in more ways than one – we found many similarities between Croatians and Kiwis.

Generally happy people, they're a nation of DIYers, hearty meat-eaters and love the outdoors. Many recreational activities along the Dalmatian coastline revolve around the sea because it is such a dominant geographical feature.

Young and old alike spend a lot of time at the beach, swimming and socialising. In New Zealand we have boy-racers in cars; in Dalmatia the boy-racers are in boats, zipping along from beach to beach, stopping occasionally to collect a mate or a girlfriend.

Clear waters aside, the beaches are home to a plethora of small bars providing beverages and ice cream, but not food, to locals and tourists. Beer (pivo) is cheap; 28 kuna (NZ\$6.34) for a 2-litre bottle of Lowenbrau, for example. Mixers – Coke, mineral water etc – not so cheap.

The exchange rate varies but is usually around one to five at the time of writing this (NZ\$1 = 4.419 kuna). Euros are accepted but many locals prefer kuna (and cash). A loaf of bread was as little as two kuna; a hamburger (the size of a dinner plate) 28 kuna.

Croatia has a population of about 4.3 million people who enjoy a Mediterranean climate and lifestyle. Many grow their own grapes, olives, tomatoes, capsicums, figs and citrus fruits, and most coastal families put their fishing nets out daily.

To understand Croatia is to know its history, especially the last century. The Croatian War of Independence was fought from 1991 to 1995 to exit the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Croat forces loyal to the government of Croatia fought the Serb-controlled Yugoslav People's Army and local Serb forces, gaining victory but at a heavy cost.

About 25 percent of its economy was ruined, with an



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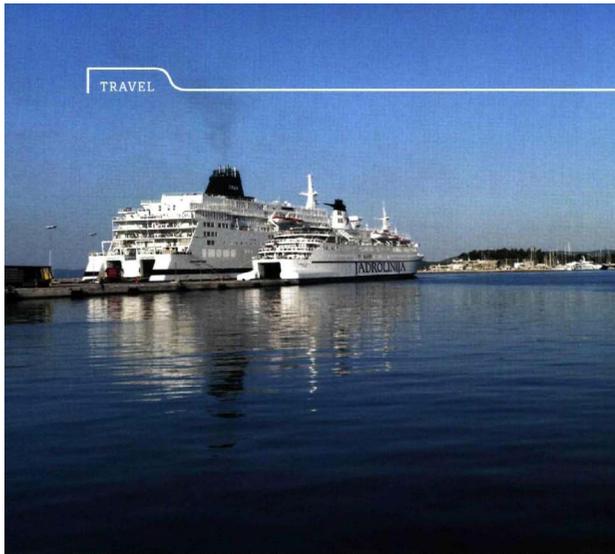
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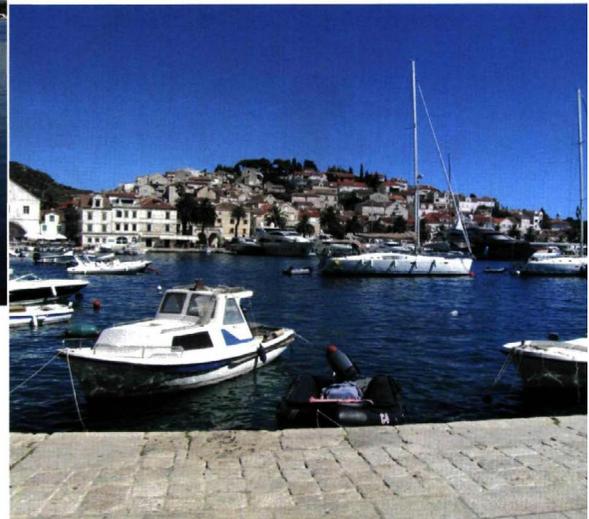


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LEFT: Regular ferry sailings from Split.
RIGHT: The waterfront in Split. BELOW: Beachside bars are a popular hangout.



estimated US\$37 billion in damaged infrastructure, lost output and refugee-related costs. At least 20,000 people lost their lives in the war, and many today still bear its scars. As do the buildings.

Rural and coastal small-town Croatia is a mix of bombed/ burned-out ruins and new-builds; many side by side. The economy has still not recovered, with a lot of unemployment and low wages. Tourism is a saving grace, especially on the Dalmatian coast, which is the main tourist attraction – that and the 1185 islands that lie off its coastline. Only 47 of those islands are inhabited, and there's nothing like exploring an uninhabited island and having your own beach.

Commercial ferries visit many of the larger islands regularly, or for a more adventurous time, 'party-boats' cruise the waters. Such vessels cater separately for the 18-35 age group and the over 35s, with regular multiple-day trip options between smaller ports and the main centres.

So many choices and so little time. Within a few days we knew we wanted to stay longer so sourced private accommodation for another month, an apartmani further along the coast at a small place called Dugi Rat, where the beach is regularly rated one of the loveliest in Europe.

The equivalent of an Airbnb, our studio apartment, with balcony overlooking the sea, cost 35 euros a night, negotiated for a long-term stay. It definitely pays to shop around for accommodation if planning a long-term visit.

That sorted, it was off to explore a few islands, including Brac, which is home to Croatia's most famous beach, Zlatni Rat (Golden Cape). A point jutting out into the sea near the town of Bol, it's often crowded but worth a look and a quick dip at least before settling at one of the less frenetic beaches for the day.

Another must-see for us was the island of Hvar, home to my husband's forebears. More expensive than the mainland, it is party island for young travellers, with beach-to-beach sunbathing and swimming during the day and continuous music after dark.

From Hvar we hired a small boat and motored off around the nearby Pakleni Islands, anchoring wherever we wanted to enjoy private beaches and small family restaurants in the middle of nowhere.

Back on the mainland, Omis proved a favourite destination. Located between Split and Makarska, Omis is at the mouth of the Cetina River, surrounded by massive gorges. Historically it was a favourite of pirates who were able to find sanctuary up the river. Beaches, islands, river, hiking and climbing activities are all

within easy reach from Omis.

The mountain town of Sinj proved an adventure that we scooted to along the motorway (not a good idea in hindsight). Sinj has been conquered and ruled by the Ottomans, Venetians, Austrians, French, Serbs, Slovenes and Yugoslavs before becoming part of the Sovereign Republic of Croatia, all of which is reflected in the amazing array of architectural styles there. It's also home to the annual Sinj Alka, an unrivalled show of horsemanship dating back more than 200 years.

I could write a book about things to do and see in Dalmatia, but nothing beats seeing it for yourself. All too soon our six weeks had passed, but rest assured we will return. 