

Croatia

Its relaxed atmosphere, extraordinary beauty and fascinating culture make Croatia a richly rewarding experience for visitors

WORDS EDEL CASSIDY



Hubbing the Adriatic Sea and located at a crossroads between eastern and western Europe, Croatia offers an intriguing blend of cultural influences. The country's diverse heritage is also due to its tumultuous history under the rule, at one point or another, of the Roman, Byzantine, Venetian, Ottoman and Hapsburg empires. It was invaded by Napoleon Bonaparte in the early nineteenth century, occupied by Germany and Italy during World War II, and then absorbed into the Republic of Yugoslavia. In 1991 it finally gained independence and, although it took four years of civil war to settle the differences between Serbs and Croats, the country has been flourishing ever since.

Croatia has much to offer visitors, so when planning my recent week-long trip, I decided to pick two locations and focus on them rather than try to cover the entire country.

Dubrovnik

George Bernard Shaw once said, 'Those who seek paradise on earth should come to Dubrovnik', while Lord Byron proclaimed it the 'Pearl of the Adriatic', so this ancient walled city was definitely on my list.

The main draw in Dubrovnik is the charming pedestrian-only Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Here are the highlights of my short stay:

Pile Gate: Originally a wooden drawbridge, this impressive gate is the main entrance to Dubrovnik's Old Town. It leads to Stradun, the main promenade that is home to art galleries, souvenir shops and boutiques, as well as many of the main historic monuments and buildings.

Onofrio's Great Fountain: This is one of Dubrovnik's most famous landmarks and is located near the entrance to Stradun. Still functioning after almost six hundred years, it was built in 1438 as part of a water-supply system that brought water from a spring twelve kilometres away.

Sponza Palace: Located in Luza Square at the end of Stradun, it was originally built as the city's customs house. It has also served as a mint, the state treasury and a bank. The impressive façade is a combination of Gothic and Renaissance architecture.

'It's only a two-kilometre walk to make a full circuit of the walls, but allow at least two hours so you have time to stop and take in the breathtaking views'



Original containers on display in the oldest pharmacy in Europe



Sculptural face on Onofrio's fountain



Stradun, the main promenade

Today, the palace houses the city archives.

Franciscan Monastery: Close to Pile Gate, the monastery houses a museum with an extensive library containing illuminated manuscripts and a large collection of music sheets and artworks. Above its entrance is an exquisite life-size Pieta. One of the finest features of the building is the cloister with rows of elegant double-pillared columns. It is also home to the oldest pharmacy in Europe. Founded in 1317 by monks, many of the pharmacy's original equipment, containers and medical books are on display; some of the traditional balms, lotions and potions that

are still made today are on sale.

City walls: No visit to Dubrovnik would be complete without a walk around the magnificent walls that surround the Old Town. Constructed between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, they have been constantly extended and refortified. The complex structure contains a myriad of towers, bastions, forts and turrets. It's only a two-kilometre walk to make a full

circuit of the walls, but allow at least two hours so you have time to stop and take in the breathtaking views. The highest point is the Minčeta Fortress which, at an elevation of twenty-five metres, offers panoramic city and sea views.

Srd: This is a hill just behind Dubrovnik. Accessible by cable car, it provides a birds-eye view of the ancient streets and distinctive red-tiled roofs of the Old Town contrasted against the blue expanse of the Adriatic. The Croatian War of Independence Museum is located here, a sombre reminder of the devastation and suffering that the people of Dubrovnik endured between 1991 and 1995.

Lokrum Island: This lush little paradise is a perfect escape from the hustle and bustle of the city, and is just fifteen minutes by ferry from the Old Port. The island's main attraction is its large medieval Benedictine monastery, which houses a restaurant, botanical garden and a display of the island's history. It is also home to a huge population



Ancient city walls surrounding the Old Town



View of Onofrio's fountain and Stradun from the city walls

Sun Gardens Dubrovnik

Five-star luxury accommodation on the Adriatic coast

I loved my stay at this resort, which is more like a self-contained village. If I hadn't had my heart set on exploring the historic charms Dubrovnik's Old Town, I would have been very happy never to have left the Sun Gardens Resort for the entire trip. There are sixteen restaurants and bars to choose from. The top-class spa has an eighteen-metre indoor pool, a hydrotherapy pool, traditional coal and salt saunas, a Turkish hammam and a Thalassotherapy Spa Bath, and it offers luxurious facials and body treatments using products made with natural ingredients. The resort also features three freshwater pools, a private beach, a sports centre, amenities for children, modern conference facilities and a retail shopping area.

Set in landscaped grounds overlooking the Adriatic, the spacious rooms and suites offer exceptional amenities, including Salvatore Ferragamo toiletries, and boast amazing views, each having a private balcony or terrace. The resort also has a selection of one, two or three-bedroom residences that are ideal for families. Despite the size of the resort and the number of guests it caters for, it never seems overcrowded, and the staff are friendly, welcoming and professional.

Ten minutes away from Dubrovnik, it is serviced by a regular shuttle service (car or boat) to take guests right into the town centre.

www.sungardensdubrovnik.com



Cable car ascending to Srd

of incredibly cute, friendly rabbits and peacocks. It's a great place to explore and is easy to get lost in, but keep an eye on the time. Everyone must leave by the end of the day. No one can stay overnight.

The story goes that Napoleon's army ordered the closure of the monastery and the expulsion of the Benedictines. But the monks did not go gracefully and placed a curse on the island: 'Whosoever claims Lokrum for his own personal pleasure shall be damned!' Many incidents since then have shown that the monks' curse lives on. Anyone who has attempted to live there has suffered unexplained mishaps and hardships or met with financial ruin and untimely death. Even staying overnight is forbidden; rumour has it that anyone who does will not see the light of dawn!

Korčula

PHOTOS DAMIR PAČIĆ

I also wanted to experience one of Croatia's many islands and was curious about Korčula. Like Ireland, it is known as the 'Emerald Isle' and claims to be the birthplace of the explorer Marco Polo.

There is a ferry service between Dubrovnik and Korčula, but we decided to drive to the island so we could take in the views along the coastline. It was certainly well worth it. The scenery was breathtaking, with dramatic cliffs, traditional villages, lush pine forests and vineyards, and views of the deep blue waters of the Adriatic Sea. Once we reached Orebić on the Pelješac peninsula it was just a short ferry ride across to Korčula.

The island's main town, also called Korčula, is one of the prettiest and best-preserved medieval centres in the Adriatic. The town is positioned on an oval-shaped peninsula that seems to float on the ocean. Influenced by the Venetian Renaissance, the compact walled town is a criss-cross grid of narrow pedestrian streets,



Aerial view of Korčula Old Town



Revelin Tower at the entrance to the fortified town of Korčula



A narrow pedestrian street



St Mark's Cathedral

tiny alleys and small squares – a medieval labyrinth. The pattern of the grid is quite unique in that it is shaped like a fish's skeleton rather than a chess board. The streets, mainly made up of steps, branch off the spine of the main street at an angle to protect the town and its residents from the mighty sea winds.

Highlights of the town include St Mark's Cathedral, the Town Museum and the Abbey Treasury. I strongly recommend hiring a guide, which can be arranged via the Korčula Tourist Board. www.visitkorcula.eu

Some other things to see and do:

Korčula Outdoor: The island has stunning scenery that provides the perfect backdrop

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for the outdoor enthusiast, and Korčula Outdoor offers a wide range of land and water activities, such as cycling, hiking, sailing, sea kayaking and rock climbing for people of all ages and levels of experience.

We spent a wonderful morning exploring the island on bicycles with Damir Pačić, who was extremely entertaining and informative. We made several stops along the way to take in the beautiful scenery while Damir filled us in on the local history and folklore.

En route, we visited a local vineyard for a wine tasting, accompanied by a selection

Lešić Dimitri Palace

Luxury apartments with full hotel service in Korčula

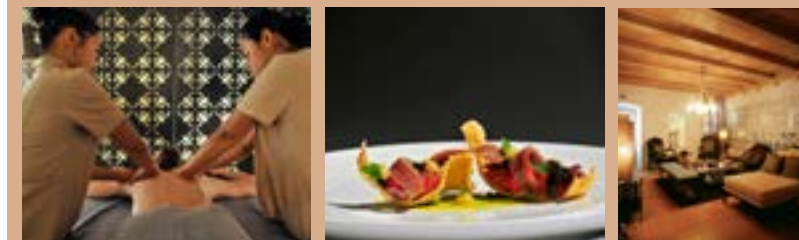
There is something very special about this former bishop's palace that dates back to the seventeenth century. It is definitely the best accommodation in Korčula. The location is ideal for exploring the town and is close to Marco Polo House, where the explorer is said to have been born.

The palace has been meticulously restored, retaining its historical character and distinctive style combined with a touch of contemporary interior design and modern technology. The five-star hotel consists of five independent suites, each paying homage to the steps in Marco Polo's journey on the Silk Road to China.

For fine dining and excellent wines, the hotel's Michelin recommended LD Restaurant serves a creative menu of fresh, local and organic produce from breakfast through to dinner. And you can dine indoors or al fresco along the water's edge with views across the Pelješac Channel. The focus is on local seasonal produce, such as wild asparagus, wild herbs and vegetables, paired with new season wine releases, olive oils, and the excellent local sea food and meat. The staff are knowledgeable, especially about the wines, and are happy to explain the various dishes.

The spa at Lešić Dimitri offers an extensive treatment list, with influences from the Silk Road – India, Thailand and the Mediterranean. A series of special Ayurvedic retreats for three, five or seven days are extremely popular. Natural products, created especially for Lešić Dimitri Palace using herbs, roots, flowers and fruits organically grown along the Silk Road from Dalmatia to Asia, feature in the treatments. A visit here to unwind and take the kinks out of tense muscles was just what was needed after a few days spent cycling, walking and climbing ancient steps.

www.ldpalace.com



Korkyra Baroque Festival

Korkyra Baroque Festival

I met the unassuming owner of Lešić Dimitri, Michael Unsworth, who is also founder of the Korkyra Baroque Festival. It was established in 2012 as a high-profile cultural event to promote local and international musical and cultural heritage. The concerts, held in historic venues in and around the town of Korčula as well as in new regional locations – Orebić, Ston, Trpanj, Vela Luka, Blato, Pupnat, Smokvica, Hvar, Ploče, Dubrovnik and the island of Vrnik – create a unique synergy and magic, and the Korkyra Baroque Festival is now well established as a staple of the global music scene. www.korkyrabaroque.com

of local cheeses, meats and olives, held on a lovely terrace overlooking the garden and vines. We sampled the delicious Grk white wine, which is exclusively produced in small batches on the sandy, dry soils around the village of Lumbarda. It has a rich harmonious flavour of sweet fruit notes with a herbal hint and a citrus lift. Each year only 30,000 bottles are produced, and most are snapped up by local hotels. www.korcula-outdoor.com

Eko Škoj: For a really authentic food experience, I recommend a visit to Eko Škoj in Žrnovo, nestling in the hills about



Kayaking with Korčula Outdoor



Enjoy stunning vistas while hiking on Korčula island

four kilometres from Korčula Town. It's a family-run organic food shop and restaurant that produces the most wonderful range of eco products, such as extra-virgin olive oil, preserves, quince, figs and some amazing liqueurs and brandy.

Dining at Eko Škoj is a home-from-home experience. Food is served in the charming kitchen of a stone house where proprietors Diana Marovic and her daughter Jelena are happy to chat about the traditional recipes of the island. The menu is based around the best seasonal ingredients the island has to offer. The food they serve is delicious and their enthusiasm is catching. Mijo took time out to show us the olive groves, the orchard, and the vegetable and herb garden.

It's a great place to do some shopping to take home. In addition to the range of traditional food, you will also find herbal cosmetics and soaps. www.ekoskoj.com.

Cukarin Pastry Shop: No visit to Ko-



Cukarin Pastry Shop

rčula would be complete without a visit to this fabulous artisan bakery. The effervescent personality of proprietor Smiljana Matijaca adds to the charm of this little shop renowned for its cakes and cookies unique to Korčula.

All ingredients, such as local lemons, bitter oranges, figs, almonds and carob, are



A selection of delicious dishes from Eko Škoj



Eko Škoj offers an authentic food experience

natural and free from additives.

I recommend the Marco Polo Bomb Cake, made in the shape of a cannonball and covered in chocolate with a creamy walnut filling. It takes its inspiration from the sea battle near Korčula where Marco Polo was captured and taken to prison in Genoa.

OPG Komparak: This bee and olive oil farm is well worth a visit to experience the honey bees at work. Vlaho Komparak, the owner, is passionate about his work. He pointed out the queen and drones, and explained the process of honey harvesting and extraction. We sampled some very tasty honey varieties, including sage, lavender and mandarin, and got to taste the organic olive oil produced there. **A**