

A Culinary Journey Through Croatia

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By Helen Gibson



Not only have I never been to Croatia, but I've also not heard much about the place either. Little did I know that the country is full of amazing history and architecture, as well as being a foodie's paradise. So as a food-fan you can imagine my utter delight when I embarked on a three-day culinary tour of Dubrovnik and the surrounding area.



Sun Gardens

The few days of fun started by arriving at **Sun Gardens**, a beautiful resort on the Dalmatian coast. Sun Gardens is situated in the community of Orasaz, just 6 miles from the old town of Dubrovnik, and consists of 201 luxury rooms. This five-star hotel includes 207 fully appointed residences, a world-class spa, top-of-the-range sports centre, three pools, a private beach, a marina and enough restaurants to keep everyone happy. Whew! With all this on my doorstep, it was a wonder I wanted to leave at all, but I'd heard great things about the rest of the country and was here to get my fill!



Food From La Pasta

Once settled in the beautifully bright (and big!) room, we headed down to the promenade of the resort where numerous restaurants serve local and international cuisine. We settled on La Pasta, and munched our way through an array of meats and cheeses while sipping ice-cold white wine made locally. This was my first introduction to Croatian wine, and after the first sip I was hooked. I learnt from the waiter that many households have their own vineyards, be they huge fields of vines, or small, backyard productions. Due to the climate and environment, Croatia produces some of the finest grapes I've ever tasted, so it's no wonder locals take advantage of this.



OCCO Spa

As we had started our day early (a 6am flight from Heathrow!), we spent the rest of the day getting to know **Sun Gardens**. A holistic massage in the OCCO Spa set us up for an afternoon lying by one of the pools while sipping more Croatian wine. The resort is open to families, couples, friends and solo-explorers so it can get busy in the height of the season but with three pools, none are ever overcrowded. And if you want to get away from the kids, visit the Marina Pool, which is only open to adults.

After resting all day, we had worked up an appetite for a hearty meal of Croatian steak and even more wine. It's hard to say no when each bottle tastes better than the last!



Breakfast On The Rooftop Terrace

Having sampled the delights of **Sun Gardens**, we woke up the next morning ready to explore after indulging in one of the best breakfasts I've ever had on Sun Garden's rooftop terrace. The breathtaking views that came with the food only got us more excited about our day ahead...



Ston Old Town

We were met at the hotel reception by our own personal guide who knew everything about Croatia. We drove the 40 minutes it took to get to Ston where we visited the “Walls Of Ston” which is an impressive five kilometers long and, we were told, the second longest protective wall in the world. Ston remains somewhat off the beaten track, and the cobbled streets, whitewashed houses and historical architecture make you feel like you have stepped back in time.



Ston

Another 40 minutes drive into the Croatian hills and we found ourselves pulling up to **Saint Hills Vinaria**, an old, family-run vineyard in the heart of Peljesac. It's here that you'll get a thorough history of winemaking in Croatia. It's also here that you will taste some of the best wine you'll ever have. It's a proper family affair, with each vineyard named after one of their three children (and the olive vineyard named after the littlest), who have all been named after saints. Stop off here for a tour of the vines, and a hearty taste of **Saint Hills'** offerings.



Saint Hills Vineyard

It would have been easy to spend all afternoon in Saint Hills, with their beautiful rooftop overlooking the hills, gorgeous restaurant and of course vats of wine, but we had no time to linger – there were oysters to eat!



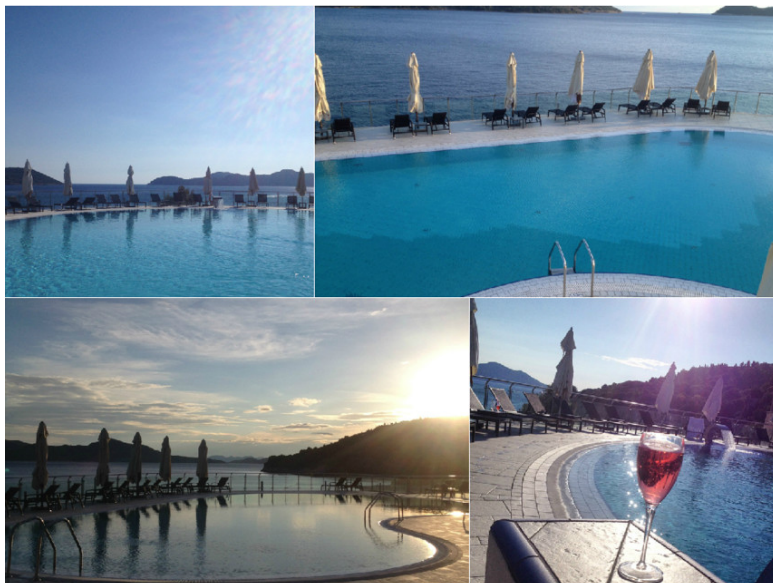
Oyster Boats

We headed back down the mountains to Mali Ston, a small village on the Peljesac peninsula. Here we settled in to **Bota Sare**, a restaurant where we tucked in to a seafood lunch of paella, whole grilled sea bass and oysters freshly pulled from the water in front of us. Croatia serves some of the freshest seafood you'll come across, straight from The Mediterranean, so fresh in fact that locals simply grill it with nothing added.



Oyster Tasting

After a long (and not so difficult) day, we headed back to the resort for a quick dip in the clear waters of the Adriatic Sea. Though it was only our second night, I felt like I knew everything there was to know about Croatian cuisine. That was until we sat down for dinner at the resort's Cilantro restaurant. Here we tucked in to the "Taste For All Senses" menu that showcased the best regional produce, with each course complemented by (Croatian, naturally) wine. Our informative waiter handed us glasses of Grappa while talking us through the menu. Dishes like Mediterranean shrimp with black truffle, and slow-roasted veal arrived one after the other until we were ready to crawl back to our rooms and fall into bed.



Sun Garden's Pools

On our final day in Croatia we were up early to enjoy another delicious breakfast overlooking the unrivaled views of the nearby Elafiti Islands while we waited for our private boat to pick us up from the resort's marina. Once ready, we jumped on board the cute little boat and were handed a couple of bottles of homemade Grappa (made by the captain's wife). We settled in on the top deck and watched islands fly by as we were taken to a tiny beach on Lopud Island that is only accessible by water. As it's the only sandy beach in the area, it can get busy, but the beach bar helps elevate things by serving cold beers and fruity cocktails. Small, private boats surround the shore and locals mix with tourists to make this place feel like a real find.



Boat Trip To The Elafiti Islands

We traveled onwards though to the island of Sipan, where we visited **Hotel Sipan**, a small boutique place on the waterfront, to gorge on yet more fresh seafood, fragrant olive oil and homemade bread. Delish! Once fed and watered, we headed back to Sun Gardens where we dropped our stuff and were joined once again by our (very) knowledgeable guide.

To finish our trip, we jumped on a speedboat and belted across to Dubrovnik itself where we were given a historic tour of the Old Town. This place is so beautiful that you can see why George Bernard Shaw named it “The Pearl of the Adriatic”.



Dubrovnik

Dubrovnik is a UNESCO World Heritage site, and for good reason. The city dates back to the 7th century and is one of the most beautiful cities in the world. It's a mix of Renaissance and Baroque architecture, with a vibrant restaurant scene and nightlife which makes Dubrovnik an absolute must-visit in Croatia. For the rest of the afternoon, we meandered through marble-paved streets and climbed steep stairs that lead to tiny courtyards. You could spend days here, but we only had one night, and had to fit in (yet more) wine tasting and dinner.

Before getting a car back to the resort, we sampled local wines at **Matusko Wine Bar** in the heart of the Old Town and feasted on a six-course meal in **Restaurant Dubrovnik**; a beautiful little place nestled above a small side street among quaint Croatian houses. Here we spent our last night leisurely sipping wine, nibbling on fresh, tasty dishes and watching the stars. Bliss!



Sun Gardens At Sunset

Sun Garden's offers this culinary package starting at €709 for two people for a four-night stay and includes:

- Four nights accommodation in a spacious, Deluxe Suite, with private balcony overlooking the Adriatic
- Dubrovnik Airport pick up and drop off
- Daily breakfast
- Welcome gift of the finest selection of Croatian cheeses, olives and local wines
- Excursion to the renowned Pelješac wine region by private boat, wine tasting and vineyard tour
- Visit to the medieval town of Ston and tour of the Ston city walls
- Oyster tasting at Mali Ston
- 'Tastes for all Senses' tasting menu

Visit: <http://www.dubrovniksungardens.com>

<http://www.graziadaily.co.uk/2015/07/a-culinary-journey-through-croatia>