



DESTINATION DUBROVNIK

Beyond the Croatian city's ancient walls, *Tracy Ramsden* discovers a glittering coastline steeped in culture, sophistication and world-class cuisine

Clockwise from above: Dubrovnik's Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, seen from the Adriatic Sea; the terracotta rooftops of Old Town; a view of the famous Dalmatian coastline

Navigating a labyrinth of narrow limestone pathways between elegant Baroque buildings, I round a corner and find myself suddenly face-to-plastic-bosom with a 5ft 6in Khaleesi, who wobbles rigidly before I steady her. The mannequin is not as majestic, nor as beautiful, as the real *Game Of Thrones*' Queen of Dragons, but she's disconcerting nonetheless. Thankfully, this less-than-discreet entrance to a novelty gift shop – packed with geeky, Westeros-themed memorabilia – is as naff as it gets, because Dubrovnik was firmly on the map long before it doubled up as the fictional capital city, King's Landing, on the world's biggest TV show.

It is mid-July – peak season – and I'm here with my husband and our two boys to find out why the jet set are swapping Italy's Amalfi Coast for what Lord Byron famously called 'the pearl of the Adriatic'. (Beyoncé and Jay-Z have

also holidayed in Dubrovnik – unlikely wearing *GOT* tees.) And it isn't difficult to see the appeal, as we wind the cliff-hugging roads from Dubrovnik airport, with terracotta rooftops and lush green hillsides to our left; clear blue, sparkling waters to our right.

The historic Dalmatian Coast stretches the length of Croatia's western edge, from the island of Rab in the north to the Bay of Kotor in the south. Dubrovnik sits near the bottom, close to the border with Montenegro and, along with 79 islands and 500 islets, it has a front-row seat for epic views across the Adriatic Sea.

Our first stop is a walking tour (around 90 minutes) of the ancient walled city, or Old Town, which I've been reliably informed is essential. Tip: take comfy shoes – some of the stone steps are steep – and a good camera for unfiltered sea shots. Almost destroyed during the Yugoslav Wars of the 90s, today, the Old Town is a pedestrian-only city – a UNESCO World Heritage Site, no less – that has been beautifully restored to its former splendour. Encircled by stone walls that are up to six metres thick in places, the city is accessed via two monumental arched gates, Pile (to the west) and Ploče (to the east), joined by the main thoroughfare, Stradun. Down grid-like alleyways we discover charming cafes and elegant courtyard restaurants, cute playgrounds and friendly locals, who wave to say hello while hanging out their washing. We reward our walking efforts with an (almost) Italian-standard gelato, which we eat while sitting outside the city gates, soaking up panoramic views of the mystical fortress.

It gets *very* busy in summer, but there are a couple of clever tricks to avoid the crowds. Firstly, find out in advance when the cruise ships are due to dock – the Port Authority website publishes monthly updates – to ensure your trip feels less like the M25 during rush hour. If you time it just right, you can lose yourself in a maze of wonder without falling into the tourist trap.

My second tip is to stay in a hotel that's off the beaten track. We are spending a week at Sun Gardens, an upmarket, family-friendly resort around 30 minutes' drive from both the airport and Old Town. A member of the Elegant Resorts collection (alongside hotspots such as Crete's beautiful Daios Cove), it combines practicality – think seven on-site restaurants, three pools and its own private beach – with unapologetic luxury. The Spa Centre is the perfect yin to the 'lively' family pool's yang. It may sound like two worlds colliding, but it works. From the moment we are welcomed with a platter of fresh fruit and bowls of candied orange peel, everyone is happy.

The resort is vast, but it has a boutique feel, thanks to little pockets of calm – I spend one memorable afternoon enjoying a Swedish massage treatment (about £76 for ►



50 minutes) in the Spa Centre. Later, down a set of rocky steps, the pebble beach gives some serious Ibiza vibes, with rows of huge daybeds, white canopies, chilled-out house music and waiters on hand to bring cold cocktails. Further along the beach, there are water sports and a rock fashioned into a jetty where we take turns to dive head first from 15ft high into the crystal-clear waters below – without sand, it's clearer than any spot I've seen. Swimming in the cool, open water is exhilarating.

As someone who finds an extensive menu intimidating, it's reassuring to discover that the resort restaurants are designed to cater to all tastes, in the simplest way possible. There's a seafood restaurant, The Market (go for the stuffed squid with pancetta, followed by the prawn risotto, about £15), a casual Mediterranean bistro (Cilantro), a barbecue grill for meat lovers, aptly called The Butcher, and an exceptional pizzeria, La Pasta, where we find ourselves most lunchtimes (margherita pizzas start from about £10). In fact, you probably don't *need* to leave the resort, but when we eventually do, we do it in style.

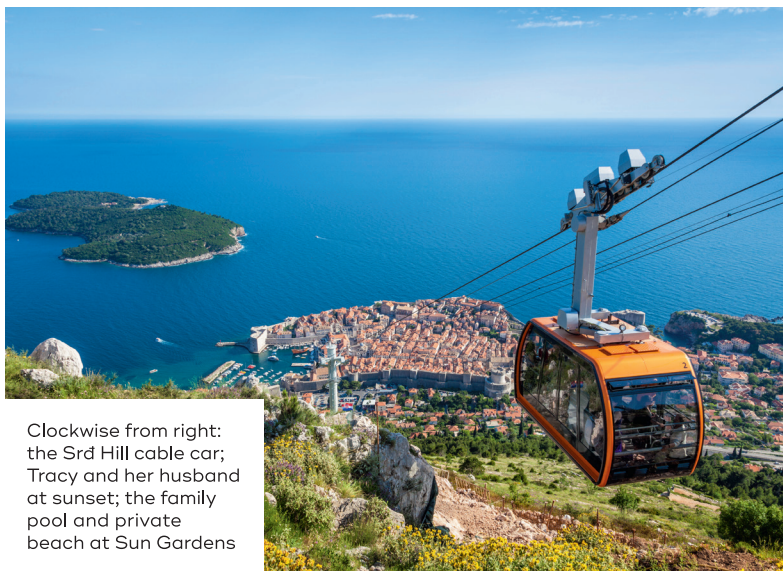
A standard taxi ride into the Old Town costs around 245 Croatian kuna (about £28) and takes 30 minutes, but one afternoon, after chatting to a local guy down by the beach, things turn a bit Bond and he offers to take us into Dubrovnik by speedboat. The kids love it, as they each take turns at the wheel, and I hold on a little tighter than normal. We bounce along smugly, wind in our hair, before arriving in port a cool 15 minutes later, squeezing a space between a cruise ship and Roman Abramovich's yacht (probably).

In town, we ride the cable car to the top of Srđ Hill for breathtaking views of the Elaphiti islands (also worth hopping over to on a boat trip). Up here, the cavernous tunnels of the Fort Imperial have been converted



into a museum exhibition dedicated to the Homeland War, with art, documents and armaments. It provides a fascinating insight into the all-too-recent conflict and, if it leaves you with an appetite for a little more culture, back in Old Town, War Photo Limited is a gallery exhibiting powerful and often heartbreaking war photography.

For our last night, we decide to go fancy and book a table overlooking the sea at Pjerin restaurant, at the seriously stylish Villa Dubrovnik, part of the Mytha Hotel Anthology. Croatia's signature fusion of fresh Mediterranean fare and traditional seafood dishes – preferably washed down with a good local wine – is captured here. And it tastes all the better when enjoyed from the sophisticated terrace (all white-washed table linen and angular furniture) that feels as though it was carved into the craggy cove. The tasting menu with paired wines (from about £88) includes red prawns carpaccio, wild sea bass and braised veal cheek and it is truly unforgettable, as



Clockwise from right: the Srđ Hill cable car; Tracy and her husband at sunset; the family pool and private beach at Sun Gardens



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is the service. Our three-year-old makes a mess of the tablecloth with his 'tomato pasta' before befriending a fellow diner, a retiree called Clive, who helps him with his Lego as we tuck into our desserts (hazelnut trilogy with fresh raspberry).

Not for the first time on this trip, I think we might just have discovered that holy grail: a holiday for everyone. As the flame-orange sun dips below the horizon, swarms of swifts dip and dive overhead, and it feels as though Dubrovnik is giving us a personal send-off. And what a show it is. ■

Stay: Sun Gardens, Dubrovnik, a member of the Elegant Resorts collection. Seven nights from £995 per person, based on two people sharing a standard room including breakfast, economy flights, private transfers and UK airport lounge passes. Based on May 2019 departure. For further information, contact Elegant Resorts reservations on 01244 897294 or visit the website, elegantresorts.co.uk