

Three flights, three train journeys and three countries; **Kirsten Price** and family ditched their usual villa holiday for something more exciting

I'm sitting on the rooftop terrace of the beautiful Sun Gardens Hotel in Croatia, watching my husband Steve drop oysters from their shell into his mouth. It's only breakfast, and he's already in heaven, as are our children, Harry, 13, and Annie, nine, who can't stop visiting the amazing buffet for more sticky pastries and chocolate spread-laden crepes. This hotel, just a few miles from Dubrovnik, is the first stop of the Price family's great European Tour 2018. The year we decided to ditch our traditional Mallorca villa holiday with friends – friends we've been holidaying with every year for, well, years – and take a gamble with our vacation. Why?, you might ask. And, in fact, I did often ask myself the same question when spending many an evening at home on my laptop booking hotels, villas, flights and trains, and coordinating our itinerary. But in the end, it was worth it – and here's why. I wanted my children to see holidays as an opportunity to travel and have new experiences, not just the chance to leap in and out of a swimming pool and eat as many pizzas as they want in a fortnight. This holiday took us out of our comfort zone and gave us so many memories that, when we inevitably revert to the villa holidays of yesteryear, we will do so knowing that we can, and did, do something very different at least once.

The Sun Gardens Hotel in Croatia, above, has stunning views over the Adriatic Sea; below, Steve, Harry, Kirsten and Annie

ICONIC VENICE

We started planning our trip by making a list of the places we really wanted to go... Disneyland and New York for the kids, Canada and the Rockies or Italy for Steve, and Croatia for me. But budget restrictions quickly knocked out long-haul travelling (things are so much more expensive for four rather than two), leaving us with Italy and Croatia. Conveniently, these countries share a border, so we decided to plan a holiday that would allow us to visit both... and yet not live out of a suitcase.

Croatia was our first destination, and the Sun Gardens Hotel made a magnificent base.



We'd booked interconnecting club rooms rather than an apartment, both with balconies and fabulous views over the stunning Adriatic Sea. The rooms gave us access to the club lounge, where we could have a post-pool afternoon tea or make use of the complimentary bar after dinner, and indulge in that magnificent breakfast. Staying here meant we could combine trips by bus or boat into Dubrovnik to see the sights, including the famous historic city walls, and, on return to the hotel, my sporty crew would be satisfied with a game of squash or badminton while I could spend an hour or two pottering about in the spa.

All too soon it was time to pack our bags for the next stop on our adventure – the beautiful and iconic city of Venice, just a 30-minute ►



Clockwise from left: The 'James Bond-style' entrance at JW Marriott; a Venetian canal; Brera Apartment in Milan; a Lake Como boat ride; 'awesome' Milan Cathedral



I wanted my children to see *holidays* as a time for *new experiences*

flight away. Of course, seasoned travellers know that Venice in August can be a heaving melting pot of tourists, heat and humidity, so I'd decided once again to book a hotel outside the city. The JW Marriott is a 20-minute boat ride from St Mark's Square and set on its own island, Isola delle Rose, with a James Bond-style entrance – and, indeed, our arrival by water taxi to this glamorous building did make us feel like movie stars. Checking into our Maisonette Loft Suite caused excitement in itself, with the kids happy to camp out on a sofa bed downstairs while we slept on a mezzanine level, and we all loved having a small garden to ourselves. Three nights here gave us the opportunity to explore the city, take a gondola ride, visit Murano island to see the glass-making factories and then return each afternoon to chill by one of the three swimming pools or relax in one of the beautiful outdoor areas with a good book.

FABULOUS MILAN

Our next stop, Milan, was a three-hour train ride away but very easy to do and, once we arrived, it was a quick hop in a taxi to the Brera Apartment, this time our home for just one night. In an itinerary-loaded 24 hours, we managed to visit the awesome Milan Cathedral, have a quick go at window shopping in the designer boutiques and

HOW TO BOOK

The Price family flew from London to Dubrovnik, then to Venice, and back from Milan to London with Easyjet (easyjet.com). They booked train tickets from Venice to Milan, on to Como and back to Milan, with Trenitalia (trenitalia.com).

SUN GARDENS DUBROVNIK

A club room sleeping two costs from €260 per night, including access to the Exclusive Club lounge, breakfast served on the rooftop terrace, afternoon tea and open bar with complimentary hot drinks, soft drinks and selected spirits. sungardensdubrovnik.com

JW MARRIOTT VENICE

Rooms start from €395 per night for two adults on a bed and breakfast basis. A Maisonette Loft Suite starts from €450 per night for two adults and two children on a bed and breakfast basis. jwvenice.com

BRERA APARTMENTS, MILAN

A two-bedroomed apartment costs from £77 per night. Children receive a welcome gift and a city guide. i-escape.com/brera-apartments

COMO, ITALY

Villa Larius Balcone, Carate Urio, from £1,465 for two nights. lakecomohomes.com

elegant Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II shopping mall before flopping out at our chic, modernist designer home – if only our own house was this cool!

By now, we were all getting a little tired of travelling and sightseeing, and looking forward to the last stop of our holiday – a seven-night stay on the shores of Lake Como in northern Italy. Another train ride delivered us to our apartment Villa Larius Balcone in the small village Carate Urio and only half a mile from where George Clooney and wife Amal have a home. Here, we'd hit the jackpot as we were close to Como, where we could enjoy amazing restaurants, dawdle through the town squares and narrow streets, and bask in the glamour of the village of Bellagio. We spent our days paddleboarding, went on a day trip to Lugano in southern Switzerland, and enjoyed ferry rides to lakeside lunch spots.

The experience was definitely a hit, and made a welcome change from lying prostrate on sun loungers, plus we have a gazillion photos to remind ourselves of all the wonderful things we did and saw. And, while we're off to a Mallorcan villa with friends this year, the four of us will be boring them silly with tales of our European adventure, and Steve will be visiting the seafood stall in the local supermarket to make sure he has oysters for breakfast again. ■