

dinky guide

Destinations, Travel & Leisure For Couples

The delights of medieval Dubrovnik, Croatia

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By Karen Bowerman

You've probably seen the typical shot of Dubrovnik, Croatia's most popular tourist destination. Taken from a hill overlooking the city, it shows a mass of red-tiled roofs surrounded by a medieval wall encrusted with fortresses and towers. As I took in the scene for real, in the warmth of the Mediterranean sun, it was hard to imagine that this was a city that was once at war. But my taxi driver, who'd stopped to show me the view, remembered it well. *"It was 1991 and there were soldiers everywhere,"* he said. *"They attacked us from the air, the sea, the hills. We had no water and no electricity. The [Serbian-Montenegrin] siege went on for nine months and when it was over we still didn't celebrate."*

"Why not?"

"Because we thought it might begin again."

We continued our journey, and Dubrovnik's past was forgotten among gardens teeming with bougainvillea and cafes draped with vines. The coastal road rose, fell and wound round little bays until, after 15 minutes or so, we reached the Lapad Peninsula where I was spending a couple of days at Dubrovnik's Sun Gardens resort.

Sun Gardens is a destination in its own right, with a luxurious five star hotel and self-catering apartments, all with views of the sea. It's set in tiered, planted grounds, covering several acres, with pools, a pebble beach (the sea's 25 degrees even in winter), a small marina and a massive sports centre where facilities include a climbing wall, tennis courts and football pitch – all free to guests. It would have been easy to have spent my entire stay here, but there was medieval Dubrovnik to explore too.

The ancient city runs the length of a wide, pedestrianised street, the Stradun, that's impeccably clean and lined with baroque churches, cafes and museums. Marking the western entrance is Pile Gate with a stone statue of Dubrovnik's patron saint, St Blaise, above the archway.

My guide, Maya Milovic, pointed to a map nearby. It showed the city covered in triangles and dots – so many that, in places, the white background was almost black. Each symbol marked a building that was hit during the bombardment of the city. 68% of the historic town came under fire. The Franciscan monastery received 27 direct shells; the Stradun 59. Maya took me to the Memorial Room of the Defenders of Dubrovnik where photos of men and youths lined the walls. Some of the fighters were only 18 when they died. None were older than 35.

We stopped in front of a picture of Drago Miklausic, the son of Maya's colleague. *"He wanted to do something,"* Maya said. *"But he didn't have a proper weapon. None of them did. All they had were the guns they used for hunting. The attack happened so quickly that none of us were prepared. In the beginning, all the city had were a few policeman at the top of the hill. It was hopeless."* She told me her husband was in the army. He survived, although he was badly wounded.

We emerged into the sunlight and our conversation moved on. Maya spoke of the city's rapid reconstruction. Today, the only tell-tale signs of war are the patches of brightly-coloured roof tiles where bombed buildings were rebuilt. To Croats, Dubrovnik is now a symbol of resistance and freedom. Not far from Pile Gate, we visited a 14th century Franciscan monastery, home to an apothecary that's said to be the oldest European pharmacy still in business. In the cloisters, a small museum had a collection of medicine bottles and prescriptions. One read, *"take three times a day, but don't forget to pray!"*

The east of the Stradun opened onto a square. Nearby was the cathedral with its intriguing and incredibly well-stocked treasury almost hidden behind a heavy door with three, elaborate locks. The three keys were held separately, by the rector (the town's ruler) the bishop and a nobleman. Among the treasures was the 12th century skull reliquary of St Blaise, fashioned like a Byzantine crown.

As the afternoon drew on, Maya and I strolled along Dubrovnik's medieval walls, (the 2km circuit takes about an hour) before I returned to Sun Gardens to relax in the spa.

Dinner was next: turbot, asparagus, carrot puree and truffle potatoes at the hotel's Tartufo restaurant, where the manager and waiter, the delightful Mile and Faher, introduced me to Croatian wines. My favourite was the light-bodied Posip Intrada from the nearby island of Korcula. Just a handful of tables were booked that night, and although it was late in the season, it was still warm enough to dine outside. As the evening drew on and the stars came out, over the whispers of guests and the clinking of glasses, you could just hear the rumble of the sea.

More information on Dubrovnik:

Tourist Board, Dubrovnik

Visit Croatia

Stay

Radisson Blu Sun Gardens Resort, Dubrovnik - Rooms from **£93 per night**, including breakfast. The hotel also runs 3, 5 and 7 day detox programmes with special detox lunches and suppers and a daily choice of treatments, fitness classes/activities and use of the Spa. Prices for 3 day detox programme £350 in high season (May –Oct) and £280 in low season (Oct-May).

Take a **cable car ride** to the top of Mt Srd for sunset. The views are magnificent!

PHOTO GALLERY



Sun Gardens Resort