

DAZZLING DALMATIAN COAST

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A MERE GLIMMER ON THE VAST MEDITERRANEAN MAP, THE DALMATIAN COAST IS ONE OF EUROPE'S MOST FASCINATING CRUISE ITINERARIES, A PLACE WHERE THE PAST AND PRESENT COLLIDE WITH PURE AUTHENTICITY. VILLAGES THAT HAVEN'T CHANGED MUCH SINCE MEDIEVAL TIMES ARE JUXTAPOSED BY MODERN DEVELOPMENTS. AFTER SURVIVING TRIBULATIONS OF THE 1990S YUGOSLAV WARS THAT CULMINATED IN NEW TERRITORIAL BORDERS, THE LOCALS THRIVE WITH EXUBERANCE FOR THE GOOD LIFE: LA DOLCE VITA. THEIR SPIRITS ARE PALPABLE IN SITES AND EXPERIENCES THAT RANGE FROM THE SIMPLE TO SUBLIME.



Take our episode in Rovinj, after berthing alongside a bevy of billionaires' mega-yachts moored at this historic gem of Croatia's Istrian Peninsula, we were climbing up a steep laneway, feeling suspended in time amid the quaint charm of medieval homes, their wrought iron balconies festooned with vines, when a woman stepped on her threshold and splashed a pail of water, sending a cascade of liquid toward us that wet the cobblestones with a scented concoction of lemon and lavender, then proceeded to vigorously sweep her path. This simple chore – like many that compose the fabric of life in the inner corners of cities and villages on the Dalmatian Coast – spoke volumes of the locals' tenacious pride in the peaceful existence of their homes.

Seeing beauty in the Dalmatian Coast is inevitable; seeing its historic perspective takes understanding. Dalmatia fringes the Adriatic Sea, running from northern Croatia's Istrian Peninsula south to Montenegro's Gulf of Kotor. Its strategic port cities evolved from Roman times, their architecture influenced by conquerors: Venetians, who flaunted images of their symbolic lion on city walls and in squares; Greeks; Napoleon's French army; and Austrian Hapsburgs who succeeded him. Post WW2, Tito ruled the land as communist Yugoslavia. When Croatia declared independence in 1991, Serbian and Montenegrin militia sieged Dubrovnik. In 2006, Montenegro declared its independence. When Croatia joined the European Union in July 2013, it effectively isolated Dubrovnik from the rest of Croatia by Neum, the only coastal town of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which imposed strict border patrols. Now the best way to experience the Dalmatian Coast's charms and UNESCO World Heritage Sites is by cruise ship or sailboat.

Prepare to be dazzled. The turquoise Adriatic Sea is dotted with an archipelago of idyllic isles and flotillas of boats, their sails puffing in the breeze. The craggy coastline is sculpted with karst cliffs that beg divers to show their skills; tucked with dark coves and scallops of white beaches that kiss the sea; and punctuated by a backdrop of towering alps, the highest in Montenegro, etching the sky at 1894 metres. Passengers disembark in enchanting ports swathed in the romantic fables of conquests; where the pace of life is sybaritically Mediterranean, touched by Italian culture wafting across the sea. Then there's the sensuality of sailing into

sunrises and sunsets that meld sea and sky to glowing horizons.

With so many sites and modern metamorphoses, the Dalmatian Coast has lured us on three memorable visits. En route to Montenegro, I suggest you rise before dawn, cameras poised to capture the sunrise over the fjord-like entrance to Kotor Bay and the black mountains that inspired its name. After tendering ashore to the UNESCO World Heritage city of Kotor – among the Adriatic's best-preserved medieval Venetian cities – pass the quintessential frieze of the Venetian lion and – given stamina – hike up the steep, 15th century walls for panoramic views. Active types can kayak or hire a guide and boat to reach two miniature isles that float like gems on the aqua water: St. George has an 11th century Benedictine abbey; Our Lady of the Rock houses a 1632 church and museum built on a pile of rocks deposited by sailors and fishermen in tribute to the Virgin Mary. Luxury seekers will enjoy boating to Tivat where Porto Montenegro – inspired by Canadian visionary Peter Munk – is the world's newest “Riviera.” It

attracts international Royalty, celebrities and billionaire business magnets who moor super-yachts at the marina built on the site of the former Yugoslav naval facility for massive warships. Near the marina, Tito's tall ship sits alongside a bank of small hotels with outdoor cafés. Hotel Pine is a perfect place to taste Dalmatia's robust prosciutto, sirizulga cheese, succulent Dorado fish and calamari drizzled with rosemary-infused olive, served with crisp Plantazo Chardonnay. If you're in for thrills, taxi back to Kotor on the switchback road that borders pine forests, citrus trees, banks of hibiscus and oleander on one side, and precariously hugs the cliff's bayside edge at the other.

Medieval Dubrovnik – called “the Pearl of the Adriatic” by Lord Byron – is a UNESCO highlight. Revived to its pre-war glory, its hefty walls curve strategically out to the sea on a rocky promontory and coddle the Old City against the stony backdrop of Mount Srd. Aside from guided tours, it's best to follow a recent, locally drawn map. An energetic walk around the 14th century



*St Stephen's Cathedral
and bell tower, Hvar*



The famous terracotta rooftops of Dubrovnik's old town

wall and ramparts provides a splendid visual tapestry of terra cotta roofs ribboned by narrow streets, and the broad Stradum boulevard, its white stones polished by time and bordered by architectural treasures with Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque style. Favourite sites include the ancient Pharmacy Museum stocked with cringe-inducing medical instruments. The Dominican Monastery with Titian's painting of Mary Magdalene. Clare's Convent, where Visia Dubrovnik 5D Theatrum takes visitors on a virtual voyage through 1,500 years of Croatia and a 3D history of Dubrovnik. For spectacular views, ride the Cable Car to the top of Mount Srd, where a fortress showcases sobering images of war. Culture buffs may enjoy two houses of worship tucked in humble laneways: the Serbian Orthodox Church has precious Byzantine Icons; the small Sephardic Synagogue (reputedly Europe's 2nd oldest after the Prague Synagogue) has archives and artifacts documenting the city's Jewish heritage. In mid-day heat, you may find hordes of visitors jostling for cool water spouting from the whimsical gargoyles of Onofrio's Fountain.

Imbibe the local scene at Gunduliceva's morning market, where vendors selling candied orange rinds, nuts, figs, and lavender sachets hustle alongside artists crafting bracelets from silver and semi-precious stones. To tuck under shade, settle into a konoba café terrace in Luza Square for a glass of Croatian wine while being entertained by busking jazz musicians.

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Split surprises, as much for the pristine state of the Roman Emperor Diocletian's 4th century summer palace as for the harbour moored with super-yachts, the stunning Riva seaside promenade fringed with palm trees, lined with shops touting the world's luxury brands, and shaded with cafés where ritzy types chill out on frosty flutes of Grappa and Prosecco. Dip into the fish market to see vendors weighing everything from sardines to mussels to monkfish with old iron weights. Split's abundance of escapades include kayaking; white-water rafting on the Cetina River; harvesting oysters and mussels with local fishermen; and a sailing jaunt to Hvar, reputed as "Croatia's St. Tropez."

Approaching in the dawning light, Rovinj is a dreamy vision, its tiers of painted houses reflecting like watercolours in the azure sea. Known by archeology buffs as the gateway to ancient Pula's 3,000-year-old Roman amphitheatre, Rovinj's ancient walls and town square display the Venetian lion. A steep maze of streets leads past artists' galleries and stone walls lined with canvases and jewelry. If you return via a wooded path fragrant with Aleppo pines, wild lemon and oleander to the historic fisherman's harbour lined with traditional batana boats that boast UNESCO status, you may just wonder if the aromatic air and scenery have an aphrodisiac allure that made you love the Dalamatian Coast.

Early evening light on the island of Hvar

