

Croatia's

Jewel-Studded Coast



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The country of Croatia, on the Adriatic Sea, promises over 1500 kilometres of unspoiled coastline, crystal clear seas, islands planted in olive groves, lemon orchards, rosemary and lavender and ancient walled cities to charm its visitors. Formerly Yugoslavia, Croatia has a long history of settlers and conquerors, of economic prosperity and civil conflict, each leaving its footprint on the cities and coastal towns of Croatia and her many islands. Greek, Roman, Slavs, Turks, Venetians, Serbs – perhaps it is fair to say that they have each added to the strength and beauty of the cord that holds this lovely necklace together – a strand of jewels that simply sparkle.

We travel to Croatia by overnight ferry from Ancona, Italy.

From the open deck we gaze at Split, the largest city on the Adriatic Coast and the heart of Dalmatia. Its approaching harbour shimmers in the dawning light, beckoning us. At 7:00 in the morning, it is too early to check into our hotel, so we leave our luggage and head toward the centre of the old town, the site of Diocletian's Palace. Designed in 295 AD by the Roman Emperor to serve as his retirement home, it was a vast complex, part residence, part fortified garrison, rectangular in plan with four outer walls, one of which faced the sea so that boats could sail directly into the palace. It is no surprise that the position of Diocletian's private living quarters overlooked the sea, while the northern half of the compound accommodated soldiers and servants.



What is so unique about the *Grad* (Old Town) where the original street plan still exists, is that at every turn you are likely to find yourself stepping over a building block, or leaning against an old column of the original palace structure that underlies the buildings and courtyards of today's very vibrant city. In a very real sense, Diocletian's palace is still very much lived in. After Diocletian's death, Roman rulers used the immense stone structure as a retreat. In the Middle Ages, the nobility and wealthy merchants built residences within the palace walls, borrowing heavily from the ancient stone of the imperial residence to refashion new palaces, and thus Diocletian's villa has been occupied in some fashion ever since.

At this early hour, a lively market is in full swing outside its 14th century wall. We pass through the eastern gate and soon reach the Peristil, still intact today as a main public square, surrounded by a labyrinth of medieval stone buildings and narrow alleyways. Dominating this immense space is the Cathedral of St. Domnius, once the mausoleum designed to be the Emperor's final resting place. A lone, black granite Egyptian sphinx from 1500 B.C. stands guard, the only one that remains of a dozen. Following the death of Diocletian, infamous for his brutal persecution of the faithful, embittered Christians destroyed the others.

What possesses me I do not know, but I am inspired at this early hour to climb the 13th-century bell tower for a panoramic view of the harbour. Bright light and strong gusts of wind from the sea slice through the open arches of this lofty 60-meter tower. As I look down at my husband, seated on a stone step and looking quite small, my knees begin to tremble and I am glad that my seasickness meds are still working. How glad I am to return to the ancient stones of the pavement below to continue our wanderings on terra firma!

Passing beneath the *Zeljezna Vrata* or Iron Gate, we enjoy the pedestrian-only space known as the People's Plaza, the main square of Split since the 14th century. Referred to by the locals, as *Pjaca*, from the Italian word piazza, this elegant square is paved in white marble. It is crowned by the 15th-century Town Hall with its three Venetian arches, which certainly call to mind the grand squares of the Veneto. And like its Italian cousin, the sizeable square is ringed with open-air cafés.

The fish market is our next stop, not because we want to

buy fresh fish, but we are in search of Restoran Noštromo, a well-known local seafood restaurant. Zlatko Marinović is no ordinary chef. He brings to the table a history rich in experience that precedes that gained in the kitchen. His superior cuisine and the awards it has garnered, belie the fact that he has been a chef for so few years. He opened Noštromo a little less than a decade ago - its name a tribute to his father who spent a part of every afternoon of his life with the fishermen at Matejuška. With his young son in tow, Stipe taught Zlatko everything there was to learn about fish and their seasons, how to prepare the long lines and how to tie a hook. Most importantly Zlatko inherited his father's respect for the land and the sea and a strong understanding that their gifts were to be revered and never wasted.

In his book, Zlatko presents a touching vignette of what this means. In his words, "In the city, below the rocks of Marjan my whole life, elderly women in traditional folk costumes were going down our street to the church of St. Fran. With their right hand they would hold the wall, whilst with their left hand they would balance with a stick and continue with their slow walk. If they would come upon a dropped piece of bread on their pathways, they would pick it up, kiss it and put it away on some small wall or window sill. A simple, old-fashioned respect for our daily bread."

I had only to read these words to know that I would love this man and anything his hands prepared. Just as the simple wooden tables are made elegant by lovely china and table linens, the seafood, direct from the fish stalls outside his doors, is made exquisite by Zlatko's careful selection of ingredients and his sensitive, I would guess even reverent, handling. His knowledge and his passion become his signature creations and I would find it difficult to name which dish I enjoyed more. Octopus salad and icy cold carpaccio of fish on a bed of arugula drizzled with golden olive oil were brought to new heights with Zlatko's expertise. And it seems right that the much prized, much protected date-shells were subject to his preparation, much to our gratification. The main entrée of grilled red mullet with scampi was no less than a work of art.

Sometimes a meal stands out for its taste, or for the atmosphere in which it was served, or for the conviviality of its chef. Our lunch at Noštromo, our first in Croatia, was this and so much more – for me it was a spiritual connection to a





man and his profound passion for his country, for the Adriatic and the fruits of the sea, for the cultural and culinary traditions of Dalmatia, and for fine artistic expression. Exceptional food. A remarkable chef. A father's pride.

Our second day in Croatia takes us by bus to the medieval island town of Trogir, connected to the mainland by a bridge. Nicknamed "The Stone Beauty," Trogir boasts a rich, varied culture that goes back 2300 years, beginning with the Greeks. During its long history, Trogir has known domination and independence, great prosperity and enemy aggression, epidemics and hunger, and has endured all of the above. When wandering the tranquil streets, one easily forgets Trogir's troubled past and instead falls captive to its natural beauty and to the "stone" evidence of its rich artistic heritage. From the beginning of the Middle Ages, the old Greek town of Tragurion underwent a significant artistic flowering, when builders



and stonemasons began to build churches and public buildings, decorating them with interlaced ornamentation.

Not only a popular excursion for tourists, but also a trendy destination for locals seeking a weekend retreat from the city, Trogir is a truly enchanting town. A sun-splashed waterfront promenade, studded with anchored yachts and pleasure boats, culminates in Kula Kameriengo, a Venetian fortress with fine views from the battlements. A battle of another sort is taking place on the promenade itself. A large group of bystanders has gathered to watch as two local teams compete amicably at a tournament of *bocce*. The group is amazingly quiet; at times, the only sound to be heard is the clacking of the wooden balls as they make contact. All around, the *Riva* boulevard is bustling with young families pushing strollers and couples walking hand in hand, while others sip wine at the outdoor cafes and restaurants. Enclosed by 15th-century walls, Trogir is compact in size and very much lived-in, in spite of its status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Back in Split, we end our day with another pleasant walk, this time along the palm-lined seafront promenade of Split, heading southwest to the ACI Marina with its sweeping views of the harbour. And it is not unpleasant to retrace our steps, eventually passing the busy ferry terminal. Following a gentle

slope that continues along the seashore brings us to the entrance of our hotel. Hotel Park, built in 1921, is the oldest hotel in Split. Nestled in a wooded park, Hotel Park's terrace is also graced with splendid palm trees, their fronds stirring in the gentle Mediterranean breeze while golden rays of sunshine softly fade on the horizon. From our window, we have a seagull's view of the popular Bačvice Bay and its beaches, flanked by the wooded park that gives the hotel its name. Weary from exploring the sights of the city, we open our window wide to let the pure sea-scented breeze seep into our room. It is not surprising that Diocletian chose this particular position on the Adriatic for his summer palace as long as 17 centuries ago. The attraction has endured.

FOR FERRY INFORMATION

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WHERE TO STAY

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WHERE TO EAT

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