

CROATIA OFF THE CHARTS

With charm, culture and crystal-clear waters, Croatia's Dalmatian coast has made a name for itself as the number one island-hopping destination. Read on for our guide to the best places to visit

Words: Matt Glasby

Pretty, proud and in possession of some of the most pristine waters you'll ever snorkel, the Dalmatian coast offers an abundance of riches. With 79 islands and 500 islets dotting the Adriatic like jewels, you're guaranteed to find one that suits. Hungry? How about a diet steeped in fresh seafood and Mediterranean cuisine? Thirsty? Award-winning vineyards cover the hills. Inquisitive? The country's head-spinning history means the influence of the Romans, Venetians and Austrians can be seen in both architecture and attitudes. Tired? Us too. Why not recline on a rocky beach and soak up some rays? Here's what not to miss. ➔

THE ONE FOR CULTURE KORCULA

With its white stones blushing pink in the sunshine, the approach to Korcula (pronounced "Korchula") by sea is one of the most beautiful in the Adriatic. Step straight off the catamaran for a coffee on the terrace of the elegant Hotel De Ville (hotelkorcula.com), before exploring this tiny walled city known for three things: wine, cheese and sword-dancing. Canny travellers should aim to experience them all – though perhaps not at once.

In the daytime, stroll the streets of "Little Dubrovnik" as it's known, which are cleverly offset so the wind can't whip through them. Don't miss the cathedral of St Mark, with its Tintoretto painting, seriously steep tower (£1) and black external clock showing the phases of the moon. Korcula is said to be the birthplace of explorer Marco Polo, a loose (and potentially fictional) connection the town is very keen to exploit. Like a cut-price Madame Tussauds, the Marco Polo Museum (£6, marcopolo.com.hr) restages his adventures in the Far East – to this day, visitors from China can enter free. If the travelogues Polo wrote are to be believed, he discovered pasta, ice cream and sex before marriage, so it's a wonder he got anything done at all.

After enjoying two of the above at the charming Aterina (*Trg Korculanskih klesara i kipara 2*), which prides itself on its Dalmatian tapas, it's time for Moreshka (£10, 8pm every Monday and Thursday through the summer). Taking place in a lantern-lit courtyard, this native sword-dance involves red soldiers facing off against black for the hand of a fair maiden. Like a slightly fightier *Riverdance*, it expresses Korcula's many historical conflicts through clattering choreography, and is exhilarating stuff – particularly as the dancers/fighters don't pull their punches ("Red soldiers get hit in the hands," we are warned, "blacks in the face!"), and master of ceremonies Darko Lozica is a spritely 82 years young. Get your breath back at Bokar (*Antuna Rozanovica 3*), where, over platters of Croatian cheese (from £6), those in the know say "Zivjeli!" (pronounced "Jivili!") with a glass of local Postup red wine (£4). Our kind of culture. ➔

PLACES TO STAY

1 **SENTIDO Kaktus, Supetar, Bol**
Stroll down to the hotel's own pebbly beach – or round Supetar's serene port – from this relaxing resort, surrounded by lush pine and olive trees.

2 **smartline Bluesun Neptun, Tucepi**
In the beautiful beach resort of Tucepi, known for its turquoise sea and clean beaches, this hotel is perfectly placed for fantastic island views across to Brac and Hvar.

3 **Radisson Blu Resort, Split**
Spend a day shopping and sightseeing in Split before relaxing with a drink on the beach and fine food at this elegant hotel. **BOOK IT:** all available at thomascook.com

Small pleasures
(Clockwise from right) Korcula; the cathedral; Hotel De Ville; the seafront; a Tintoretto painting; Moreshka; tapas at Aterina

Past master
(Clockwise from left) Marjac hill; Cafe Luxor; the seafront; inside the palace; Apetit; the bell tower; the Split cityscape; (previous) the Pakleni islands

THE ONE FOR HISTORY SPLIT

Split might be the best place in the world to lose yourself. Often dismissed as a mere stopover city, it boasts an extraordinary walled Old Town called the Diocletian's Palace: a villa/fortress dating back to 4AD, which was built as a retirement home for the eponymous Roman emperor. Set just back from the promenade, where people stroll and sip sundowners as various ferries putter out to the islands, it's a marvellous maze of white-marble alleys where you're just as likely to find designer clothes shops as Dalmatian singers belting out traditional tunes.

"Just walk and let yourself get lost," advises Ivana, our guide. "You'll always stumble upon something new." Or, indeed, old. Begin with

a tour of the palace's cavernous basements (£4). Originally used as wine cellars, then a (presumably spectacular) garbage dump, they were excavated in the 19th century and now offer a fabulous space for exhibitions/film shoots/budding Indiana Jones, littered with sarcophaguses (ancient coffins), amphora (containers) and other fascinating fragments from the city's Roman past.

Above ground, the DP is the only ancient palace in the world that's still inhabited – and how. As tourists mill through minuscule streets such as the one known, colloquially, as "*Pusti me proci!*" ("Let me pass!"), locals go about their daily lives. Looking down on them all is the dizzying bell tower of St Dominus (£2,

plus a head for heights). Alternatively, you can huff your way up Marjac hill, a mini Montjuic that acts as the lungs of this feisty city, or to the cute beach of Jezinac that languishes just round the headland.

At night, follow the trail of paper lanterns through the streets, stopping for dinner in whichever courtyard takes your fancy, although we recommend the elegant, Italian-inspired Apetit (apetit-split.hr). Afterwards, head to Cafe Luxor (lxor.hr/en) for a nightcap, where acoustic acts serenade a little amphitheatre with a selection of 1970s hits, perhaps the loveliest example of how history still mingles with modernity in these hallowed walls.

The Zlatni Rat
feels like it has been
created purely for
your pleasure



THE ONE FOR RELAXATION BRAC

Brač (pronounced "Bratch") is so laidback it's practically horizontal – and, trust us, you'll soon be the same. Crossing the island by car, we get stuck behind a wedding procession of approximately five vehicles. "Rush hour on Brač," says the driver. On the climb up to Vidova Gora, the highest point of all the Croatian islands, we pass panting mountain bikers, but, really, who's got the energy? From the viewpoint at the top you can see Brač laid out in all its lazy glory: the sleepy toy-town of Bol below; windsurfers slicing the waters between Brač and Hvar; and the famous "V" of the Zlatni Rat beach snaking out into the blue.

At the end of the promenade that stretches across Bol's peaceful seafront, you'll find one of the best beaches in Croatia, if not the world. The Zlatni Rat ("golden horn") is a perfect shelf of smooth pebbles fringed by glassy, eminently swimmable waters. But whereas most beaches are just a geological afterthought – what's left when sea meets shore – the Zlatni Rat feels like it has been created purely for your pleasure. Formed of material that collapsed from the mountains above, and added to over time by the sea, it actually gets *bigger* each year. The tip of the "V" even moves with the seasons: pointing west when the winds come from the east, and vice-versa. Once, when the tip stretched round to form a little lake, a local joker took a bath in it. You don't get much more relaxed than that...

Although it's all but deserted for the few hours we spend there, the Zlatni Rat can fill up fast in high season. If so, hire a boat to explore the 30km of empty coves to the west, or take the sealed road 5km to Murvica, where two perfect curls of pebbles, complete with natural shade and a beach bar, await. ➔

Horn of plenty
Brač's famous
Zlatni Rat;
peaceful
Supetar; views
from the Vidova
Gora



CROATIA

Sitting pretty
(Clockwise from top right) Backstreet Hvar; its promenade; monastery; central piazza; and fort; views from the top



THE ONE FOR GLAMOUR HVAR

Voted among the top ten most beautiful in the world, Hvar is an island with its top two buttons permanently undone. The definition of fit-but-you-know-it, its lovely harbour town capital (also called Hvar) has been playing host to celebs, from Tom Cruise to Roman Abramovich, for decades. In the 1930s, disgraced king Edward VIII and his wife Wallis Simpson were snapped swimming nude not far away. In 2011, Prince Harry was papped wearing slightly more, thank goodness.

But mostly Hvar is far too classy to raise a well-plucked eyebrow at such things. Forgo the fleet of fluorescent VWs for hire to navigate this elegant rabbit warren on foot. Arrayed around the central piazza, you'll find all sorts of genteel treats: a 17th-century theatre (reopening in 2017) that was, appropriately enough, the first where the commoners mixed with nobility; a museum of lace weaved from agave cactuses (£1); plus all manner of boutiques selling art, jewellery and cravats (the name comes from the word "Croat"). For views that will wear out your camera's panorama function, head up to the

16th-century fort, destroyed when lightning struck – d'oh! – its gunpowder room in 1579, but since rebuilt and used for posh society weddings.

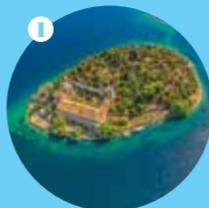
Back on the sublime seafront, where the beautiful people don't so much promenade as parade, Kod Kapetana (*Fabrika 30*) offers lovely seafood with views to match. Orson Welles once shot a film here, according to a photo in the bathroom. Not that owner Nikolai cares: "I don't mind if people are famous, just that they come, spend money, and have a good time," he says, which, frankly, could be Hvar's motto.

To get away from prying eyes – or the party crowd – hire a boat to explore the nearby Pakleni islands, or drive east to an unheralded cove such as Dubovica. Park on the hard shoulder, head down the perilous path, and you'll find a gorgeous beach that's only accessible by foot, or yacht: a little slice of heaven on Hvar. 

Thanks to the Croatian Tourist Board. croatia.hr

BE THERE: Plan your island-hopping summer escape. Our new holidays to Croatia launch in May 2017, book at thomascook.com

Isle take it:
three more
islands



Walk this way
Mljet

Put on your trainers and explore. More National Park than not, this 100 km sq island is covered in forest, has a population of just 1,088, and its main attraction is a 12th-century monastery marooned on an island in Veliko Jezero lake.



Day tripping
Lopud

The middle of the three Elafiti islands, where Dubrovnik's residents go to unwind, is completely car-less, which means you can head to sandy Sunj Bay by foot, bike or – our choice – golf buggy.



Adventure island
Vis

Once a military base, far-flung Vis is now the place to get away from it all. The Blue Cave on nearby Bisevo, a natural wonder bathed in azure, is not to be missed.