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Culture & Coastlines

Peel back the historic layers of stunning Croatia.

BY SUSAN B. BARNES

Nestled along the Adriatic Sea opposite Italy and with a true Mediterranean vibe, the little country of Croatia—with a population of more than 4.25 million—is a country of 1,000 islands and a popular holiday destination for Europeans, but not yet truly discovered by Americans. That's sure to change soon. Though small in size, Croatia is filled with quiet fishing villages, a handful of buzzing cities, medieval towns and UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

RICH HISTORY

Long before its rise in popularity as a vacation destination, Croatia had been a destination for the ages. The Dalmats were a tribe who lived in the region from 4 B.C., and the Greeks established themselves on the islands

of Korčula, Hvar and Vis. In 9 A.D., the Roman Empire reigned the territory of today's Croatia; Roman Emperor Diocletian built his retirement palace in Split—which still stands and is open for touring—when he retired from his reign, in 305 A.D. Fast forward 2,000-plus years and today's Croatia is proud of its history, culture and traditions, while at the same time looking forward to a bright future.

CITY LIVING

Zagreb is Croatia's thriving capital city, with a population of more than one million people. Filled with green spaces, Zagreb is easily explored by foot, and even easier via a walking tour. Be sure and stroll through late 19th-century Zrinjevac Park and the Gothic-style Cathedral of the Assumption, where the



Top: Hvar's marina is a popular spot to indulge at cafés, people-watch and shop.

Above: St. Lawrence Monastery's Medieval Mediterranean Garden is one of only a few gardens of this type in Europe.

BACK TO NATURE

Aside from its more than 327 miles of coastline, Croatia has plenty of green space, beaches and parks to enjoy. Two of the most notable are Kornati National Park, a group of arid islands that dot the coastline and are accessible only by boat, and Krka National Park, lush with waterfalls and walking paths. Both parks can easily be visited from Šibenik.



city was founded, as well as along the 16th-century Renaissance wall that was erected to protect the cathedral.

A smaller city on the Adriatic coast, south of Zagreb, Trogir is rich in Renaissance and Baroque architecture protected by UNESCO World Heritage. Inside the city's defense walls, restored in the 15th century by the Venetians, a thriving community lived, worked and played, much as it does today. The wall, with its original gates from the 16th century, is so impressive that Napoleon spared it when he invaded the area in the early 19th century.

On the Dalmatian Coast, just south of Trogir, lies Split, another bustling city rich in history. Looming large over the city's harbor is the aforementioned Diocletian's Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage Monument. In its heyday, more than 9,000 people lived inside the palace's walls; today, it still teems with life thanks to businesses and

Above left: Abundant galleries, museums and shops make it easy to explore the old city of Hvar. Above right: Hvar hosts one of the oldest surviving theatres in Europe—it opened in 1612—with the original walls restored and standing tall.

visitors alike. For additional cultural immersions, plan to visit during the Split Summer Festival, held each summer, mid-July through mid-August. The month-long festival features open-air theater, music and dance performances around the city, including in and around the palace.

ISLAND LIFE

With more than 1,000 islands off its coast, there are plenty of places to live the island life in Croatia. My suggestion: set sail from Split

aboard a hydrofoil (seasonal; ferries available year-round) and arrive about an hour and a half later on the tropical island of Hvar, the oldest establishment in all of Croatia, with its waving palm trees, crystal-clear waters and bright, Mediterranean sunshine. Highlights of a day spent wandering the historic city include the early 17th-century theatre, one of the first municipal theaters in Europe, and the Gothic Cathedral of St. Steven, built in the 16th and 17th centuries. For incredible views, visit the 16th-century Španjola fortress high above the city.

Getting There

It may take a while to get to Croatia, but it's certainly worth it! Airlines fly from major European hubs, such as London, Munich and Amsterdam, into Croatia, whether Zagreb, Split or Dubrovnik. The best way to get out and explore once you've arrived is to rent a car. However, the bus system works well to get from city to city. For more on Croatia, visit croatia.hr



Šibenik's narrow roads invite visitors to explore the town's historic nooks and crannies.

Truly, though, Hvar is to be enjoyed leisurely, strolling along the marina, shopping the boutiques and sipping coffee at a sidewalk café.

IT'S MEDIEVAL

A stay in Šibenik on the Adriatic coast is like experiencing a medieval fairytale. Centuries-old cobblestone streets wind through the old city center, established in 1290 and delivering wonder around every corner. Wind your way up, up, up and follow markers for the Medieval Mediterranean Garden of St. Lawrence Monastery, reopened in 2007 after a hundred years of neglect. Šibenik is another town that boasts waterfront views and sidewalk cafés; be sure to take advantage and sit a spell.

This is but a taste of all that Croatia has to explore. Discover for yourself all the treasures that this Mediterranean country offers. 

Seeing Stars in Croatia

- Adriana Hvar Spa Hotel | suncanihvar.com/adriana-hvar-spa-hotel.html
- Atrium Hotel (Split) | hotel-atrium.hr
- Esplanade Zagreb Hotel | esplanade.hr
- Hotel PAŠIKE (Trogir) | hotelpasike.com
- Hotel Trogir Palace | hotel-palace.net
- Hotel Villa Sikaa (Trogir) | vila-sikaa-r.com
- Le Méridien Lav Hotel (Split) | lemeridien-lavsplit.com
- Riva Hvar Yacht Harbour Hotel | suncanihvar.com/riva-hvar-yacht-harbour-hotel.html
- Sheraton Zagreb Hotel | hotel-sheratonzagreb.com
- The Westin Zagreb | hotelwestinzagreb.com

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