



CROATIA

CROATIANS HAVE FOUND A NEW THIRST FOR THE PRESENT, WITHOUT FORGETTING THEIR PAST

BY ALICE LAWLOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN CULLEN

BEYOND

CROATIANS DON'T DO SMALL TALK. Smile, attempt a “*dobar dan*” (“good day”) and you’ll get a conspiratorial grin in return. Ask how they are and you might be treated to a droll “*srednja žalost*” — translation: “moderate misery.” Their dry sense of humour — a consequence, perhaps, of living through more invasions than anyone cares to remember — is just the start. Scratch the surface of this culture and you’ll find a “live for today” attitude mixed with a deep respect for what has come before. Even better, the global tourism bandwagon hasn’t yet rolled into town. It’s Europe, but not as we know it.

Zagreb, the capital city, is often overlooked in favour of the picturesque coast. But for a taste of workaday Croatia, it can’t be beat. The downtown core is a happy mix of generations: from bustling Dolac market — where grizzled locals greet vendors like they’re family — to Eli’s Caffè, where twentysomethings jostle for their java.

At first glance, the Habsburg architecture of the city’s main square suggests an old-world sensibility. But this is no frozen-in-time backwater. Glance up, way up, and you’ll spot ads for big-box brands fastened to the tops of towers. Past the heritage buildings — and sometimes inside them — are designer boutiques and modern galleries. You just have to know where to look.

Dežmanov Prolaz street is a good place to start. It’s one of several passageways hidden behind the city’s main thoroughfares. Step through its inconspicuous archway and you’ll find an upscale perfumery, the flagship store of two cult Croatian designers and a brand-new café, Velvet, which sits next door to its own ultra-chic gallery. It’s possibly the hippest cul-de-sac in the world.

The more sedate Upper Town is home to one of the city’s best-kept secrets: Prasac, an intimate, 20-seat restaurant owned by chef Dino Galvagno. When it opened in 2008, word of Galvagno’s gourmet prowess spread quickly: The place was packed just two months later and has been ever since. The simple, Mediterranean-influenced menu includes classics like tuna ragout and a melt-in-the-mouth duck confit. “We go to the market every day, put it in the fridge and decide what to cook,” says Galvagno with a grin. “And we don’t waste anything. It’s no-nonsense ecological cooking.”


Croatia isn’t known for its food, but it should be. In Zagreb, chefs like Galvagno and Mario Čerhak of Marcellino are changing perceptions of Croatian cuisine with their upscale twists on modest Mediterranean fare. On the Dalmatian coast, delicious seafood is abundant, but outsiders rarely get a taste of the good stuff. As a general rule of thumb, the best places are the least flashy. Ask the waiter what’s fresh and the catch of the day will be brought to your table for inspection. The uglier it looks, the better it tastes. ▷

FROM CITY TO COAST
 Previous pages (left to right): A downtown apartment in Split; Buza, a cliffside bar in Dubrovnik; café life in Zagreb; the red roofs of Dubrovnik.



THE MANY FACES OF ZAGREB Clockwise from top left: Bustling Radičeva Street, home to designer stores and quirky boutiques; the new Museum of Contemporary Art; Trg Bana Jelačića, the main square and hub for just about everything; chef Dino Galvagno at his restaurant, Prasac.





GAZE AT DUBROVNIK FROM ABOVE AND IT SEEMS ETERNALLY IDYLIC. LIMESTONE HOUSES, DOMED BELL TOWERS AND AN IMPOSSIBLY BLUE SEA STRETCH TO THE HORIZON

If Zagreb is where Croatians work and play, the Dalmatian coast is where they relax. Entire towns are carved into sweeping cliffs that overlook the Adriatic — so clear and blue it seems to whisper, “Go on, jump in.” Dubrovnik bar owner Cameron Wilson heeds the call every morning, come rain or shine. “I just step out of my house, go through the *buža* (hole in the wall) and walk down the stone steps into the sea,” he says.

A Canadian expat, Wilson and his wife settled in Croatia as a temporary break from the nine-to-five. Three years later, they’re still here. “This city just has the hugest possibility of getting under your skin,” he says. “You can wander here; there’s no rush to your day. And there’s a real community that you don’t find in many places.” His bar, D’Vino, brings a welcome touch of sophistication to the tourist-laden Old Town. Its huge wine list showcases the best of Croatia — including many bottles of the country’s first appellation, Dingač — and, in a nod to Wilson’s roots, there’s a selection of icewine from Ontario.

Relaxing with a glass of Croatian wine — or an espresso — is the best way to fit in with Dubrovnik’s

laid-back locals. At the Troubadour jazz café, owner Marco never switches off his espresso machine, resulting in the creamiest drinks around. His place and the adjacent Gundulićeva Poljana square are ideal areas for people-watching. It’s easy to spot who belongs and who’s just passing through: Tourists zoom by while the locals always stroll, their appreciation for the here and now almost tangible.

It’s a side effect, perhaps, of living through conflict. Since the siege of Dubrovnik in 1992, this UNESCO World Heritage Site has been restored to its former glory. Well, almost. Gaze at the Old Town from above and it seems eternally idyllic. Limestone houses, domed bell towers and an impossibly blue sea stretch to the horizon. Look a little closer, though, and the city’s difficult past comes into focus. Bright new roof tiles — added during reconstruction in the 1990s — stand out like spots of light. But the scars of survival are worn with pride. Today, Dubrovnik rings with the sounds of happy contentment. Listen and you’ll hear the laughter of shopkeepers, the shouts of boys playing soccer and the catcalls of fishermen at the port. This is a people who excel at enjoying life. ▷

JEWEL OF THE ADRIATIC
Dubrovnik’s breathtaking vistas are best viewed atop the city walls in the Old Town. From there you’ll spot the Lovrijenac Fortress (pictured above left), where Shakespeare is performed during the Dubrovnik Summer Festival.



WHERE TO STAY

CHOOSE A PARTNER HOTEL AND EARN AEROPLAN MILES FOR YOUR STAY. HERE ARE A SELECTION OF OUR FAVOURITES IN CROATIA:

HILTON IMPERIAL DUBROVNIK A five-star hotel with spectacular views of Dubrovnik's Old Town. The two-storey spa has a glass-domed indoor pool and a Turkish bath. *Marijana Blazića 2; (385 20) 320-320; hilton.com.*

SHERATON ZAGREB HOTEL In the heart of Zagreb, this luxury hotel is a short walk from the city centre. Sample some local cuisine at Fontana or King Tomislav Restaurants. *Kneza Borne 2; (385 14) 553-535; sheraton.com/zagreb.*

LE MÉRIDIDIEN LAV, SPLIT This stylish 381-room hotel sits on its own beach and features an infinity pool with a stunning view of the Adriatic. Unwind with a cocktail at the Champagne Bar. *Grljevačka 2A; (385 21) 500-500; lemeridien.com/split.*

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Outside Dubrovnik, the hilly landscape is mirrored by a host of craggy islands. There are so many to explore that you could spend your entire trip island hopping, a vacation that's popular with the sailing crowd. The most upscale is Hvar, where celebrities and giant yachts are a common sight. The town's waterfront promenade is lined with cafés and bars, including the popular Carpe Diem — a bar name that's so ubiquitous in Croatia, it's almost a motto. On its patio, people lounge on bed-like sofas; inside, low tables and chaise longues give the feeling of laid-back luxe.

The elegant town is surrounded by rugged terrain. Gnarled vineyards and stone walls stripe the cliffside. Lavender grows everywhere, so on a breezy day the whole island is aromatic. A ferry from Stari Grad port takes you to Split, the largest city on the Dalmatian coast. It's a curious mix of Roman architecture and modern urban life; a microcosm of Croatia's extremes.

The Old Town sits within Diocletian's Palace, a vast 30,000-sq-m structure that was built in the 3rd century AD as a lavish home for Emperor Diocletian. After his death, it was split up into more modest dwellings, and by the 11th century, had become the heart of the city. Today, more than 1,600 years after he lived in it, Diocletian would still recognize his old abode. Inside the palace walls is everything you'd expect in a vibrant city centre — stores, restaurants, bars — all fit within the existing architecture.

Croatians clearly take their national heritage very seriously — and not just the relics of their past. There's no shortage of new architectural icons, with a vast Museum of Contemporary Art just opened in Zagreb. From the capital city to the coast, there's a palpable love of life that radiates from the bustling coffee shops and laid-back bars. Ask the Carpe Diem crowd what the next chapter of Croatia's story will bring and the answer is enigmatic. "Be patient," one of them says. "It's still being written."

LIVING HISTORY

A section of the perfectly preserved Diocletian's Palace in Split. Top: The Champagne Bar at Le Méridien Lav, Split.

SONGS OF THE SEA

Opposite page: Klapa Vestibul, a traditional a cappella group from Split.





STREET FARE Clockwise from top left: Sautéed scampi at Macondo, Hvar; Zagreb's busy main square; Croatian dessert wine at Carpe Diem, Hvar.

YOUR DETAILS

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📖 THINGS TO KNOW

Croatia is festival central from May through October, and the Dubrovnik Summer Festival is the biggest. Every July and August, the historic buildings of the Old Town play host to music, dance, theatre and opera. Shakespeare at the Lovrijenac Fortress — where Daniel Day-Lewis and Derek Jacobi have performed — is a festival favourite. For more information, visit croatia.hr.

COASTAL GEMS

CROATIA IS FAMOUS FOR ITS UNSPOILED COVES AND PRISTINE WATERS. GIVE THESE LITTLE-EXPLORED SPOTS A TRY

ZADAR This once-isolated city has been rediscovered for its dazzling medieval churches and the natural beauty of Paklenica and Plitvice Lakes National Parks. Check out Nikola Bašić's Sea Organ installation, which uses crashing waves to create a unique musical sound. **Get there:** Drive five hours from Zagreb.

TROGIR This UNESCO World Heritage Site sits on a small island between the mainland and Čiovo. Climb the 47-m bell tower for a stunning view of its cobblestone streets, dotted with bars and cafés. Or take in a performance at Kamerlengo Castle, a medieval fortress now used as an open-air theatre. **Get there:** Drive 30 minutes from Split.

VIS This rugged island is near one of Dalmatia's most magical sites: the Blue Cave, just off the coast on tiny Biševo Island. The cave is best explored around midday, when the sun's rays pass through its submerged entrance, illuminating the interior in a blue glow. **Get there:** Take a 2.5-hour ferry from Split to Vis, and another 45-minute boat to Biševo Island.

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🍴 WHERE TO EAT

PRASAC Simple but sumptuous Mediterranean-inspired fare in an intimate Old Town setting. Reservations are essential. *Vraničanijeva 6, Zagreb; (385 14) 851-411.*

DOMINO This local favourite is away from the busy main drag and serves the freshest Dalmatian-style seafood in town. *Od Domina 6, Dubrovnik; (385 20) 323-103.*

MACONDO A gourmet fish restaurant on a nameless cobbled street, steps from the centre of Hvar Town. Don't miss the gregada soup. *Two blocks north of Trg Sv Stjepana, Hvar Town, Hvar; (385 21) 742-850.*

VELVET Refined New York-style café serving fine teas, freshly ground coffee and designer pastries. *Dežmanova 9, Zagreb; (385 91) 158-8037.*

🛍 WHERE TO SHOP

I-GLE The flagship boutique of local designers Martina Vrdoljak Ranilović and Nataša Mihaljčićin sells chic womenswear and custom pieces for men. *Dežmanov Prolaz 4, Zagreb; (385 14) 846-508.*

DAMIEN'S Smart and stylish menswear by new Croatian designer and self-appointed "men's fashionista" Damjan Jacić. *Radićeva 21, Zagreb; (385 91) 731-2687.*

THE GREEN ROOM Hand-crafted jewellery and souvenirs in a shady garden oasis. Look for the sign in Bunićeva Poljana square. *Boškovićevo poljana bb, Dubrovnik; (385 91) 508-4850.*

🍷 WHERE TO DRINK AND PARTY

TROUBADOUR This place is popular for a reason. Well, three, actually: stellar coffee, live jazz and a great location. *Bunićeva poljana 2, Dubrovnik; (385 20) 323-476.*

D'VINO Dubrovnik's first real wine bar serves more than 80 varieties by the glass in a quiet, laid-back setting. *Palmotićevo 4A, Dubrovnik; (385 20) 321-223; columis.net/dvino.*

CARPE DIEM A waterfront location and killer cocktails mean this Hvar landmark is still the most happening spot in town. *Riva, Hvar Town, Hvar; (385 21) 742-369; carpe-diem-hvar.com.*