

Croatia’s dramatic Dalmatian Coast, encompassing the historic cities of Split and Dubrovnik (and a sprinkling of islands and smaller resorts), is around 350 km long and is easily traversed by sailboat, ferry, bus or car. Or all of the above.

After experiencing a dearth of tourism due to the 1991 to 1995 civil war with Yugoslavia, this fabled coastline has made a comeback as the new Riviera, its war scars adding layers to its rich, complex history and intoxicating charm.

So what’s the appeal? For starters, the coast, a mix of crystal-clear bays and beaches, rugged cliffs, vineyards, olive groves and forests, could be the most beautiful in Europe. Its ancient towns are clean and well preserved and offer a heady mix of Greek, Roman, Venetian and Slavic architecture; it has a yachting scene to rival Monte Carlo; a *korzo* culture (think Italian *passaggiata*) befitting Las Ramblas; a vibey nightlife; delicious cuisine; a wonderful climate and ... it’s very affordable (1 kuna = R150).

The coast is dotted with numerous islands and resorts – Brac, Korcula, Trogir and Vis, to name a few – but Split, Durbrovnik and Hvar should be mandatory.

SPLIT

It’s easy to fall in love with Split, Croatia’s second largest city (after Zagreb), and the most authentic and vibrant of all the coastal towns we visited. The fourth-century Diocletian’s Palace (built from the same marble as the White House!) dominates the Unesco-registered city centre – a hub of ancient churches, palaces and museums.

Its vanilla-coloured paved alleys are lined with boutiques, restaurants, *apartamans* (apartments to hire) and homes. When you’re done exploring the old town’s courtyards and picturesque piazzas, where children chase pigeons and old men play cards at outdoor tables, head for the Riva. It’s the harbour-facing, palm tree-lined boulevard, where trendy locals rendezvous for *kava* (coffee) and families take their late-afternoon *korzo* (stroll).

Then go for a swim in the clean, warm (yet refreshing), sparkling Adriatic. But don’t expect sand, as the beaches are pebbly or rocky.

STAY Perfectly positioned on the periphery of the old town and a stone’s throw from the Riva, Studio Loza’s great

location is its drawcard, not to mention its close proximity to Split’s best beaches (Bacvice) and some of its best (untouristy) local restaurants.

This affordable and convenient self-catering accommodation offers WiFi and a veranda with amazing views of Europe’s iconic orange-tiled rooftops.

www.studioloza.com

DUBROVNIK

Arrive in Dubrovnik by car, as the view from the city’s iconic 21st-century spindle-shaped bridge against the backdrop of the twinkling Adriatic – dotted with yachts, liners, kayaks and swimmers – is magnificent. That aside, the walled old town, which was nearly obliterated by artillery fire during the war, surpasses any Hollywood set comparisons and travel-brochure hyperbole.

A lyrical mix of ancient and cutting edge, medieval churches, Renaissance palaces, baroque-style museums and Napoleon-era fortresses sit cheek by jowl with trendy shops, ice cream parlours and boisterous *konobas* (taverns).

Take a walk down the limestone-paved Stradun (main boulevard, also called Placa) for the best people-watching ever: Gwyneth Paltrow wannabes in micro-minis and stilettos (Gwyneth herself is a regular visitor, as are Beyoncé, Jay-Z and the Jolie-Pitts), G-Star-clad teenage boys smoking self-consciously and the inescapable cruise-ship customers.

For an unforgettable swim, walk to Café Buža (cafebuza.com) on the cliffs of the old town. Pass the ridiculously overpriced bar and take the steep steps down to the rocky outcrop, where flopping into the turquoise Adriatic is obligatory. Or take the



The beautiful south

Whether you hire a car, charter a yacht or island-hop by ferry, a trip along Croatia’s Dalmatian Coast should be at the top of any honeymooner’s list

WORDS NIKKI BENATAR

page 164, from left

Have a cup of coffee at one of Split's trendy cafes; Dubrovnik's a mix of the old and the new this page, clockwise from right

Hotel Amfora's deluxe room; St Stephen's cathedral in Hvar is a must-see; the small island is a paradise for lovers; the view from Amfora



10-minute ferry ride to Lokrum island, a sprawling botanical garden where locals hang out over the weekend. It also offers great swimming, snorkelling and walks (it's a car-free zone).

STAY On the water's edge, close to the Port of Gruz and a short bus ride into the old town, hotel Kazbek is the last word in affordable luxury. The 16th-century stone villa, once the summer residence of a local noble family, has been beautifully renovated to reflect its Renaissance roots, while accommodating all the up-to-the-minute mod cons you'd expect from a five-star hotel. With only 12 rooms, a gourmet restaurant,



friendly, knowledgeable staff and a secluded outdoor pool, it really is the perfect haven for a romantic stay.

www.kazbekdubrovnik.com

HVAR

A glut of glittering Ibiza-style bars, clubs and lounges snake their way along the waterside promenade of Hvar (pronounced 'var'). It's by far the trendiest of the Dalmatian islands and a favourite among Hollywood A-listers (Tom Cruise visited two weeks before us) who moor their mega yachts in its chichi marina. A morning is all you



require to explore the marble-paved old town. Stop at St Stephen's cathedral, which presides over the main square (*Pjaca*), and the Benedictine monastery, whose nuns have never left its walls. Then climb to the fortress for views of the harbour and the surrounding Pakleni islands. Like all of Croatia's ancient coastal towns, Hvar's paved alleys are lined with shops, galleries and cafes, and the swimming is amazing.

STAY Kerzner-style cascading pools, gorgeous sea-facing restaurants and a pianist with a fondness for tinkling out Sinatra classics on the patio every evening, set hotel Amfora apart from the rest. Our newly renovated room (1602) had spectacular views of the yachts and islands beyond.

www.suncanihvar.com ♥

THE DETAILS

Flights Most South Africans fly to London and catch a connection to Split or Dubrovnik (which flies daily between April and October).

Ferries Catch a ferry between Dubrovnik and Split (stopping at Korcula and Hvar). These run three times a week in season and you can find the timetable at www.jadrolinija.hr.

Catamarans These are speedier than ferries and also run between the islands. Find the timetable at www.krilo.hr.

Language Most people speak English, but are appreciative if you attempt a few words in Croatian.

Food Dalmatian cuisine is quite diverse, reflecting the flavours of its past conquerors (Venetian, Greek, Ottoman, French and Austrian) and Slavic neighbours. Common fare includes thin-based pizza, *pašticada* (meat and gnocchi stew) and grilled fish.

Mosquitoes These pests are rife, so go prepared with your lotions and potions.

Recommended read *Rick Steves' Croatia & Slovenia*