

## **Water Adventure in Croatia**

What may be viewed by many as a simplified landscape of blue sea back-dropped by limestone mountains, proves a godsend for Croatian adventure sport devotees. When combined with a pleasant Mediterranean climate, there are numerous opportunities to expand vacation activities from just sun-bathing and night-clubbing.

For Croatians, most still with working ties to the land and sea through family farms and fishing boats, new sports are providing them with an appreciation for a difficult landscape that for generations they have battled. And they are also discovering there is more money to be made in industries that rely on protecting rather than degrading their environment.

Historically the Adriatic Sea has been the facilitator of Croatian life; long the conduit for foreign emperors, merchants, pirates and crusaders. It is now being reborn as a water enthusiast's paradise. The oft praised, island-filled, clear waters lend themselves to yacht cruising, swimming, scuba diving, kayaking and fishing.

### General Data on the Adriatic Sea

The 5 835km Croatian Adriatic coastline is intricately indented, with a total of 1 185 islands, islets and reefs. Its greatest depth is 1 330 m at the Southern Adriatic Depression and its waters are exceptionally transparent to a depth of 50 m. Sea temperature fluctuates throughout the year: In winter months, the surface temperature varies from 7C to 10C, rising, in the summer months to between 21C to 26C. The temperature at a depth of 20m to 30m (average diving depth) remains constant throughout the year, ranging from 16C to 17C.

The Adriatic is a calm sea, due to the relatively short fetch, with no high waves or strong currents. Wave heights range from 40cm to 150cm, to 4m to 5m in the most extreme weather conditions on the open sea. The speed of the sea current is about 0.5 knots, although in certain places and in special weather conditions it can reach up to 4 knots, and the tidal range is minimal, from 40cm in Dalmatia to 1m on the Istrian coastline.

### Diving

Diving tourism in Croatia has been increasing in popularity. Annual growth in the number of dive tourists since the mid-90s has led to an increase in the number of registered diving centres to over 100, with the largest number being located in the regions of Istria, Kvarner and Central Dalmatia.

In addition to plant and animal species endemic to the Adriatic, undoubtedly the most attractive diving sights in the Adriatic are underwater cliff faces and caves, and the wrecks of ships and airplanes.

The same limestone that makes up the Dinaric Alps drops away dramatically underwater, and is full of crevices, caves, sink holes and channels. Based on the number of caves so

far discovered on land it is estimated that there are at least 1500 underwater caves and holes still undiscovered in the Adriatic.

Even more interesting are the dive sites which conceal traces of times gone by - archaeological sites and underwater wrecks. The oldest sites contain the remains of sunken ships dating from antiquity, and are to be found on the ancient trading routes leading from Greece towards northern Italy, and in front of the colonies founded along those routes on the shores of the Adriatic: Cavtat (Epidaurus), Mljet (Meleda), Korčula (Kokira), Hvar (Pharos), Vis (Issa), Split (Asphalatos or Spalatum), Solin (Salona), Trogir (Tragurium), Rogoznica (Heracleia), anchorage sites in the Kornati Archipelago (Žirje, Lavsa and Murter), the wider area of Šibenik and Zadar (Liburnia and Jadera), Pula (Pola), the Roman villas on the Brijuni Islands, and many other locations once used by ancient mariners as refuges and anchorages.

During the Middle Ages trade links between Europe and the Middle East intensified. Venice became a booming metropolis and towns along the Croatian coastline, such as Dubrovnik, Split, Zadar, Pula, experienced strong development as much maritime traffic moved up and down the Adriatic – ship wrecks being a by-product of this economic growth.

Naval battles of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries also left their traces on the sea bed. Since World War One many wrecks have been lifted from the bottom of the sea (particularly along the Istrian coast), but there still remains a considerable number available to sports divers. Those at greater depths are still biding their time, waiting to be discovered and researched.

Two of the most interesting wrecks are:

#### Steamship 'Baron Gautsch'

The 83 metre steamship 'Baron Gautsch' was launched in Trieste in 1908. At that time the Austrian-Hungarian Empire controlled the Croatian coast, the Istrian town of Pula being its main naval base. When the War started the 'Baron Gautsch' was commandeered by the Austrian Navy to transport reinforcements to Kotor, in present day Montenegro. After the delivery of the troops, the steamship proceeded north again with war refugees.

At 2.50pm, 13<sup>th</sup> August 1914, the 'Baron Gautsch', 12 kilometres north of the Brijuni Islands, off the Istrian town of Rovinj, hit an Austrian mine. Over 200 refugees, including many children, drowned as a result of the negligence of the crew. The crew of the ship had been repeatedly warned by officials of the danger of sailing too close to the coast into mine fields.

The ship sank to the sandy bottom, 40 metres below the surface. During the following years it was used by the Yugoslav Navy for target practice. The vessel is now under the protection of the Ministry of Culture and has become a home for the area's large fish.

## US Air Force B17 Bomber 44-6630

Following the capitulation of Italy in 1943, Tito's partisans and the Allies liberated Vis Island, one of the remote Dalmatian Islands, to be used as a base of operations for attacks on German-held Yugoslavia. An emergency airstrip was built amongst the vineyards to allow damaged Allied aircraft to land.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> November 1944 a new B17G flown by Lieutenant Irving Emerson left Amendola, Italy to bomb Vienna. However, Vienna was covered by cloud so they were ordered to the secondary target of Maribor, Yugoslavia.

Over the target they were hit by anti-aircraft fire, causing the bomb-bay doors to jamb open, fires in two engines, the port wheel to drop down and the death of the co-pilot.

Lieutenant Emerson attempted to limp to Switzerland, but the plane didn't have sufficient altitude to clear the Alps, so they diverted to Vis. Unfortunately fuel ran out before they were able to land, and the aircraft ditched 100 metres off the island's southern shore. All the surviving crew members managed to clamber out and were rescued by local fishermen.

The fully intact wreck now sits 72 metres below the Adriatic. Divers can see the guns, engines and all instrumentation clearly. It is best to do the dive on mixed gas but 10 minutes bottom time is possible on just air.

## Useful Information and Contacts

According to current regulations it is possible to dive in Croatian waters if one has valid permission. Valid permission consists of an annual Diving Identity Card, costing 100 Kuna, and an Individual Permission for Independent Underwater Activities, costing 2400 Kuna. Should diving be planned with a registered diving centre, then the Individual Permission is not required. There are zones where diving is prohibited even with Individual Permission. These zones under special protection by the Ministry of Culture, and diving in those areas may be allowed only when accompanied by a diving guide from an authorized diving centre.

**Diving Tourism Group – DTG (Pro Diving Croatia)** is an organization which brings together local and foreign companies engaged in diving tourism in Croatia. The main aim of the Group is to promote Croatian diving and to improve the quality of both the equipment used and the services rendered by diving centres, through the categorization of such centres. Their website lists all registered dive centres.

Diving Tourism Group  
Trumbićeva Obala 4  
21000 Split  
w – [www.prodiving.hr](http://www.prodiving.hr) or [www.diving.hr](http://www.diving.hr)

**Croatian Diving Association (CDA)** is an association of amateur, non-profit diving clubs which direct their activities towards promoting recreational diving, organizing sports diving competitions and other activities in related fields (such as ecological campaigns).

Croatian Diving Association  
Dalmatinska 12  
10000 Zagreb  
t – +385 (0)1 484 8756

In the event of a diving accident, the **Centre for Search and Rescue at Sea (SAR)** in Rijeka should be contacted (telephone **9155**, VHS channel **16**).

Hyperbaric chambers are located in Split (two chambers: Institute for Maritime and Hyperbaric Medicine, and the Gošković Institute), in Pula (Polyclinic OXY Pula) and Zagreb (Polyclinic OXY Pula – Zagreb Branch, Dubrava Clinic Hospital). They are always prepared for the reception of injured divers, and the centres are linked with helicopter units for when swift transport is required.

In Rovinj, **Diving Petra** organizes dives on the ‘Baron Gautsch’ and other World War One and Two wrecks. Rovinj was voted as one of the most beautiful towns in Europe.

Diving Petra  
t – +385 (0)52 812 880  
w – [www.divingpetra.hr](http://www.divingpetra.hr)  
e – [info@divingpetra.hr](mailto:info@divingpetra.hr)

To visit the wreck of B17G 44-6630, plus other historical wrecks or complete a dive course with professional dive instructors on beautiful Vis Island contact **Issa Diving Centre**, in Komiza.

Issa Diving Centre  
t – +385 (0)21 713 651  
m – +385 (0)91 201 2731  
w – [www.scubadiving.hr](http://www.scubadiving.hr)  
e – [info@scubadiving.hr](mailto:info@scubadiving.hr)

## Kayaking

It can be deduced what is important to a specific culture by what they name carefully. For Dalmatians it is the wind. They named the winds from all directions and know the sea conditions produced by each of them. The *Jugo* blows moist from the south, bringing rolling seas making it a good sailing breeze, but its humidity and rain it brings makes everyone a little testy. The *Bura* clears the air, coming from the northeast, off the continent mostly during the winter. But it is gusty and cold – not pleasant to be in upon the sea. The cooling summer seabreeze, the *Maestral*, brings afternoon relief from the northwest. The characteristics of the winds are, of course, also important to seakayakers.

The Adriatic Sea, described by astronauts as the bluest sea on the planet, is an excellent sea for kayakers of all levels. Kayakers are never further than a one hour paddle from the next small fishing village, where food, water and a bed can always be found and the protection afforded by the many islands means an exceptionally strong wind is required to make the conditions unmanageable.

About the biggest surprise kayakers can expect when paddling in and out of the many small coves of the coast is the many naked tourists sunning themselves on the rocks – naturism is popular in Croatia.

Kayaking is a more affordable and energetic way of experiencing Croatia's maritime culture than on a yacht charter. Outfitters are now scattered up and down the coast providing all the equipment and information required for a day tour or a week expedition.

## Kornati National Park

“On the last day of Creation God desired to crown His work, and thus created the Kornati Islands out of tears, stars and breath.” *George Bernard Shaw*

Located 25 kilometres west of Šibenik and 25 kilometres south of Zadar are the 89 harshly attractive islands and reefs of the Kornati National Park that Shaw described. Created in 1980, the National Park is approximately 200 km<sup>2</sup> in area, of which less than 25% is dry land. It's possible for kayakers to spend days lost amongst this maze of bare islands and bays, staggered by the natural beauty, dining at the score of seafood restaurants and konobas or snorkelling the reefs.

The high ‘crowns’ of the islands run northwest to southwest, facing the open ocean. And as with icebergs, a lot more rock is below the water than above. Though the islands, criss-crossed by a checkerboard of 17<sup>th</sup> Century stone walls, appear to be desolate, they are actually home to hundreds of plant species and there is much birdlife including peregrines.

As always in Croatia, natural beauty exists alongside man's historical edifices. For reasons of control – either because of its strategic location, its large fishing grounds or the

occasional salt pan, the Kornati have evidence of inhabitation back to the Illyrians. The 6<sup>th</sup> Century Byzantine Tureta Fortress is an admirable example.

The Park's office is on the mainland in the town of Murter, and entrance tickets, fishing and diving permits and accommodations can be arranged there. There are also two Visitor Reception Centres – one in Zakan Harbour on Ravni Zakan Island and the other Vroje on Kornat Island, where tickets and information are also forthcoming. Reception staff often cruises around on small boats to sell tickets as well. Individual tickets are 50 kuna per person per day, though groups receive a discount.

Because it is a National Park there are strict regulations.

Some islands are specially protected – which means no visitors.

No camping is allowed within the Park, except with special permission. So kayakers will have either arrange to use a cottage or a boat as a base. Boats are able to throw out an anchor overnight in one of 16 coves only.

A fishing license can be bought but only 3kg of fish can be caught per day per license.

Divers need to be part of an organized group. Diving is limited to 7 zones, where the maximum dive depth is 40 metres and no night diving is permitted. Most importantly, no spear guns are to be within the Park – though a dive knife can be carried.

During the long, hot summer it is advised to pay attention to water requirements – there are no sources within the Park. Food supplies should also be organized before entering the Park, though during the summer season it is possible to buy produce from local boats plying their goods amongst the Islands.

### Hvar, Brač and Vis Islands

Whereas visiting the Kornati Islands gives kayakers a more natural experience, visiting Hvar, Brač and Vis Islands is cultural. These are the main islands of Central Dalmatia, and the fishing and viticultural traditions still survive along with the architecture of small stone cottages, glaring under the bright sun.

Hvar Island has become the centre of Dalmatia party-life during the summer. But equally essential to visit are the vineyards and lavender fields. For kayaking, the quiet south-side of the island with its cliffs and beaches makes the perfect location for relaxing day tours away from the crowds around the main town. *Hvaranin* also like to brag that their island receives more sunshine than any other in Croatia, which is required for a great day on the water.

The old fishermen gathered around the ports of Vis and Komiža lend Vis Island a Steinbeckesque feel. Nets dry in the sun, beside lobster pots as the small fishing boats bob tied to seawalls. In the centre of the island, the fertile valleys shelter small vineyards

producing sun-drenched, full-bodied wines. Vis Island, a Yugoslav Army base until the late-1980s, was saved from over exploitation and a kayak is the perfect way to get a fisherman's eye view of a centuries old way of life.

Zlatni Rat (Golden Point) is the famous beach on Brač Island, near the town of Bol. A good day tour is to hire a kayak and paddle to the beaches below the town of Murvica, where a tour Zmajeva Spilja (the Dragon's Cave) can be taken, or to the bay at the end of the trail to Pustinja Blaca, a 16<sup>th</sup> Century restored monastery.

### Dubrovnik

Approaching Dubrovnik's walls from the sea is a paddle all kayakers should do at least once in their lives. The towering limestone edifices rising from the sea above the kayak jealously protected from maritime depredations for centuries a town inside of narrow flagged streets, tall orange-tiled houses, Baroque palaces, churches and monasteries. From 1350 until 1806 Dubrovnik was an independent Republic and the leading merchant marine center of the eastern Mediterranean. Its boats were to be found in ports throughout Europe and were even mentioned by Shakespeare.

A day's kayaking around Dubrovnik should also include Lokrum Island, and if the tour is for several days the nearby Elafiti Islands definitely need to be visited.

### Useful Information

Camping on the beach in Croatia is technically illegal, but the locals are generally accepting of those who sleep only for 1 night and do not light campfires.

For kayaking tours in Central Dalmatia contact **Lifejacket Adventures**. Their tours include hiking and rock climbing as well as, for the more social kayaker, visits to vineyards and restaurants.

Lifejacket Adventures

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**Adriatic Kayak Tours** offers day and week tours around the walls of Dubrovnik.

Adriatic Kayak Tours

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