

Kayaking and Wine Tasting along the Dalmatian Coast



“Those who seek paradise on Earth should come to Dubrovnik” – George Bernard Shaw

Shaw’s statement may shock those who watched CNN as civil war shredded Yugoslavia during the last decade. Images of Dubrovnik being pounded by malicious vandals during the initial battles awoke the world to the war’s barbarity – the town was not a definition of paradise.

But as Dubrovnik is located on the Balkan Peninsula which sits at the confluence of three great religions - Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam - and provides access between three important geographical areas - Europe, Central Asia and Russia - the most recent war is only a continuation of struggles to control this important region.

However, there is a positive side to these generational disputes - the detritus left behind by the numerous ruling empires. Impressive structures built by Romans, Ottomans, Venetians, Austro-Hungarians or Napoleonic administrators still scatter the rocky Dalmatian coastline surrounding Dubrovnik, making it a living architectural museum.

And, with many years of peace but a relatively slow return of tourists (currently about 80% of pre-war levels), another reason to visit Dalmatia is its uncrowded natural beauty.

More than a thousand islands, many uninhabited, float olive green and limestone upon the blue Adriatic Sea, dramatically framed by the rocky coastal wall of the monstrous Dinaric Mountain Range, which glows purple in the afternoon sun. The clear waters are always warm and the sun shines incessantly in a cloudless sky. For an all-over tan, nothing beats the million hidden coves along the coast to which bronze, buff and sometimes too hairy-bottomed-and-backed bodies flock to dot the water’s edge.

Shaw is not the only author to have been beguiled by this part of the Adriatic Sea. Homer imprisoned his hero Odysseus for seven years on the Dalmatian island Mljet - as gorgeous an isle as Calypso, Odysseus’ captor, was beautiful.

As for culinary delights, it can go without saying that the seafood is incredibly fresh - fish, squid, scampi or octopus, grilled or in pastas or risottos - but a special mention has to be made of the wine. Most people do not think of Croatia as a class wine producing

country. But what a misconception! Wine has always been created here, since the Greeks first planted vines more than 2,500 years ago; it's intertwined in the legends, literature and lifestyle of the country. Dalmatia has a winemaking tradition closely resembling that of the Italians. The Plavac Mali (small blue) grape, used throughout the region for reds, is the same as the Sangiovese used in all the great Tuscan wines, as well as being related to the Zinfandel used in California.

Dalmatian life has always had the sea as its heart - making kayaking the perfect method for its exploration. You are never further than one hour paddle from the next small fishing village, where a meal and a bed can always be found and the protection afforded by the islands means an exceptionally strong wind is required to make the conditions unmanageable.

Several towns and islands worth visiting are:

Split

Split is the second largest Croatian city and the hub for maritime traffic around the Dalmatian Islands. International ferries arrive from Italy and local boats fan out to cover every inhabited island. As the ferries are cheap and they rarely charge for stowing a kayak, they are perfect for major leaps in any trip.



The old town of Split is centered on the retirement palace of one of the few Roman emperors to survive the job, Diocletian – a Dalmatian by birth. Within its fortified walls he built over 300,000 square feet of residences, administrative buildings, temples, barracks and baths. He imported building materials from Italy and Greece, as well as the famous marble from nearby Brac Island; the same marble was later used for the White House; and then decorated it with Egyptian sphinxes, now over 3,000 years old. In 305 A.D. he took his gold watch and moved in.

Hvar Island

In a 1997 Traveller Magazine article Hvar Island was voted in the Top Ten Island Destinations in the world. It is famous for three things – sunshine, of which it receives more than anywhere else in Croatia, wine and fields of lavender.

The best paddling on Hvar Island is to be found either on the south side, where pebble-beached little coves cut through red and white cliffs, or around the little islands of the Pakleni, also with many small coves in which to swim. There are several restaurants on the water's edge in which to eat, so packing a lunch is not necessary.



During the summer season, Hvar Town has also some of the best night-life in Dalmatia.

Vis Island

Vis was the first island liberated from the Nazis by Tito's partisans during World War II and was his base of operations for the remainder of the war. Interestingly, Winston Churchill's personal representative to Tito was Brigadier Fitzroy Maclean, whose exploits during and after the war, including many on Vis, were Ian Fleming's inspiration for James Bond, Agent 007.



Following the war a large army base remained on the island. The island was, therefore, saved from unsympathetic attempts to attract tourists. It is now trying to use tourism to complement its local industries without letting visitors damage the serenity of the island.

Its clear waters and abundant sunshine are natural magnets for the yachtsmen of the Adriatic Sea and divers from around the world.

Korcula



Korcula Town, known as 'Little Dubrovnik' for its medieval walls, is famous as the birthplace of Marco Polo, and it was in a sea-battle between the Venetians, who controlled Dalmatia at the time, and the Genovese in 1298, off the coast of Korcula, that Marco Polo was captured and taken as a POW to Genoa, where his memoirs were transcribed.

White wine is the preferred drop on Korcula, with two excellent varieties being produced. Grk is grown in the fields surrounding the town of Lumbarda and Posip in the valleys of Smokvica and Cara.

Again the southern side of the island has many bays, such as Pupnatska Luka, into which to paddle a kayak and have a relaxing swim.

Peljesac Peninsula

The sharp hills and rugged coast of the Peljesac Peninsula are only a short paddle across the Peljeski Channel from Korcula Town.

Dingac, a region midway along the Peninsula, arguably produces Croatia's best wine. The vineyards dramatically plunge down at 70 degrees straight into the water. These steep, southern-facing fields provide the Plavac grapes with maximum exposure to the already scorching summer sun, producing a very rich, complex, full bodied wine. The winery of Napa Valley expatriate, Mike Grgic, is found in the town of Trstenik, just south of Dingac.

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 jealously protected from maritime depredations for centuries inside a town 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.

Sitting at a café on the main street after the August crowds have left, you feel a comfort and familiarity found only in an old friend's living room.

But these places are only the beginning. There is much more - the aforementioned Mljet Island, as well as the islands of Brac, Solta and Lastovo, and the towns of Trogir and Makarska. And all of this is in only Southern Dalmatia. There is still Northern Dalmatia and the islands and towns surrounding Zadar and Istria to complete Croatia's coastline.

This all been said, old George should have the final word. He described the islands off Sibenik thus:

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