

Croatia – Jewel of the Adriatic – By Captain Stacey Brooks, Sea Dog Sailing

Croatia has come a long way since it broke out into full-blown war in the early 1990s. Within a mere 10-year period, this fierce nation experienced both the collapse of communism and a war of survival that would secure its independence.

Croatia is now a mighty and proud independent nation that has come an incredibly long way to rebuild itself in a very short period of time. Through aid, individual loans and financial backing from the World Bank and countries like Germany, Italy and partially the United States, Croatia has been able to quickly rebuild itself. There are still remnants of war scattered throughout mainland Croatia amongst homes and businesses that are still being rebuilt. However, the outlying islands and areas along the Peninsula seem to have been saved some damage.

Choosing to cruise the coast of Croatia, the many tiny islands and the Croatian peninsula is one of the most amazing sailing choices you can make as a sailor. Plan to take an absolute minimum of two weeks ... the cruising area is massive! This article will concentrate on cruising out of Dubrovnik but you can also easily cruise out of the harbor city of Split further up the coast.

East meets West

Croatia has a blend of Mediterranean and European flair that gives it a particular flavor. With nearly 2,000 km of dramatic shoreline and more than 1,000 islands in its waters, Croatia boasts one of the most unique stretches of coastline in all of Europe. Croatia is also situated in the middle of where West meets East – the point where the Catholicism of Western Europe meets the Islam and Orthodox Christianity of the East.

Getting to Croatia is fairly straight-forward; there are many ways to do it. One way is the direct route by flying non-stop from the United States to Rome, then jumping on Croatia Air to Dubrovnik. Most major European cities have connections to Dubrovnik. Another choice would be to take a ferry from the eastern Italian coastline over to either Split or into Dubrovnik.

The approach to Dubrovnik by air is quite breathtaking. Dubrovnik is an ancient walled city scattered with brick and red-tiled roofs throughout. The drive from the Dubrovnik airport to the actual town takes only about 45 minutes and is a totally breath-taking drive. The hilly drive along the rocky coastline is absolutely stunning. The road twists and turns down the coastline following the azure and gold Adriatic.

Chartering Facilities

The Sunsail charter base is a short distance from the old city center of Dubrovnik. The base itself is two miles up a river and incredibly well protected. Any sailor will be impressed upon arrival into the marina area. It is one of the most beautiful and well-equipped marina facilities in all of Europe! The marina itself has slip and dock

space for over 1,000 boats. There are four good restaurants, laundry facilities, shower facilities, a huge provisioning store, a glistening lap pool, a large fuel dock and chandlery as well as several professionally run charter companies including Sunsail and The Moorings. This facility could rival marinas in France, Italy and Greece with no problem. In addition, the staff members working at the marina and charter offices are both friendly and helpful and lack the attitude that is often attached to marinas in France and other parts of the Mediterranean. It is like a breath of fresh air and a very pleasant surprise!

The marina has several great restaurants where you can enjoy local wines and wonderful Croatian seafood specialties. This part of the peninsula is famous for producing some quite amazing wines. You will have a lovely evening or two before you take off on your sailing adventure up the two-mile river and then out to sea!

Where to sail

One choice of itinerary is to sail north along the coastline and head for the island of Sipan and the tiny well-protected seaside village of Luka. It is a small anchorage next to a small fishing village so don't be surprised to find yourself as one of only very few boats. This tiny place is like a small hidden paradise that time has forgotten. In fact, a lot of time has passed on this quiet island since Pompey's fleet is said to have evaded the ships of Julius Caesar here. With one small beautiful church, several quaint cafes and only a handful of houses, it is the perfect first-stop and introduction to this magnificent cruising ground. This place smells of lavender and the sea. Take a stroll around the horseshoe shaped harbor and search out the quaint restaurant simply named, "Marka."

Marka has several window boxes filled with flowers and a couple of blue and white checkered tables resting right next to the water's edge. The owner will be your friendly waiter. He makes his own olive oil, fishes every morning with his family for the restaurant, and the menu is simply whatever is in season and whatever he happens to pull in on the end of his line that day. All wines are local – they come from an island or two away. You will have just found heaven.

The next day, wake early to watch the sun hit the harbor walls, reflect off the sea and bring this small settlement to life. After some strong coffee and a light breakfast aboard, set sail for the island of Mljet – pronounced "Meshed." This is a lush, green island and one of the few Croatian islands that is truly a national park. To read about it is one thing – to see it is quite another. The approach is a small entrance. Be prepared to snake your way through the high cliff walls. Also, prepare to be rendered speechless as you soak in the wild, rugged beauty of this place. Croatians describe Mljet as their green island, and you will most assuredly see why.

The best of many things

Blessed with rich Mediterranean vegetation, a clear and clean sea, gentle sandy coves and rich underwater fauna, Mljet is breathtakingly beautiful. It is the island

widely known for growing an assortment of white and red wines of very special bouquet and strength. It is also famous for goat milk cheese, honey that used to be offered at the imperial courts, and most of all for the kindness and openness with which the islanders greet visitors to their island. Make sure you take time to spend at least two or three days exploring this magnificent place.

Not only is the beauty of Mijet unbelievable, but also the rich and long history of this small island is hard to grasp. The island has endured centuries of occupation and whims of various leaders and dictators. Those include Ulysses and his nymph Calypso, the Roman Emperor Augustus, Napoleon's army, the English fleet, a hundred years of Austrian rule, the Italian occupation including the annexation of the island to Mussolini's Italy from 1941-1943 as well as the anti-fascist movement of Tito's Partisans.

Mijet has endured so much, and one can only think that all these occupations must have been driven, not only by the island's geographical location, but also by the sheer richness and beauty of this place. Over time everyone wanted to own this island, but in the end no one owns her. The peacefulness on Mijet has been a long time coming and is well deserved.

After saying good-bye to Mijet, set sail for the Peljesac Peninsula and the village of Ston. The approach can be tough, and running aground is easy to do here. The passage is three-miles long but only 120-feet wide and in places barely 10 feet of water.

As you approach Ston, you will notice the large salt flats and then the five-and-a-half kilometer fortified wall that surrounds the city and connects it with the smaller settlement of Mali Ston. This wall is the second longest intact wall behind the Great Wall of China. This defensive system dates back to 1333 when the Republic of Dubrovnik began building the wall to control access in and out of the Peljesac Peninsula area.

Endless opportunities

Take time to hike the wall and enjoy the splendid view. Also, take some time to hike between Ston and Mali Ston. There are small restaurants between the two villages and along the sea. Breathe in the ocean air and enjoy your time here; just make sure the tide is up when you toss off your dock lines and sail out of Ston!

This is only a taste of what Croatia has to offer.

In this week-long itinerary you will have barely touched upon the beauties along the Croatian coast. There are so many opportunities here for not only a wonderful sailing experience but an enriching cultural experience as well. Croatia is for any sailor looking for a challenging sailing experience, wonderful food and wine, warm people and cultural enrichment.

This article is dedicated to the beautiful memory of Louize Christensen. Louize was an amazing and talented sailor and navigator. She not only sailed Croatia with Captain Stacey and Sea Dog Sailing, but all over the world. She will be greatly missed, but remembered every time we throw off our dock lines.