

# Island hopping in Croatia

*The Dalmatian coast offers a Mediterranean experience that's not quite what you expect. Philip Tetley-Jones dipped into the delights of the Southern Croatian islands.*





The best glass of wine you will ever drink is the one poured in a Croatian island Konoba (bar) after two hours climbing by bicycle through olive orchards and rock-strewn meadows. Having tackled dehydration issues with a glass of water, it seems only natural to try the local vintage. The obliging landlord brings out a fresh glass and pours a generous measure.

It is red, smooth and full-bodied, with a hint of raisiny sweetness. We learn that is made right here on the premises from the grapes grown in the family vineyard. Our multinational group of travellers agrees that the Adriatic islands hide more treasures than previously suspected.

We were half way through a one-week island-hopping tour of the southern Croatian islands between Split and Dubrovnik. Our home was the Kapitan Jure, a refurbished wooden cruising boat with 20 or so private cabins and an on-board chef and crew. Each day our floating home would tie up at the dock of a new Dalmatian town and our team would unload the bicycles provided as part of the package. Photocopied maps would be handed out and we would set out on that day's trek.

In the course of six days we chugged and pedalled through the southern Adriatic islands of Croatia, calling into most of them and getting an all too brief taste of island life. Here are the islands we encountered on our Dalmatian sojourn

### Brac

In the Croatian language it has an accent over the final letter, softening the c so it's pronounced more like 'Brasch.' There's not too much that's soft about the landscape, though. Like most of the Adriatic group, it has a picturesque coast with villages and natural harbours set against a mountainous interior. Olives and Mediterranean maquis scrub are the main vegetation. The island is also home to one of Croatia's most idyllic coastal holiday areas – the beach they call the Golden Horn. If you visit during high summer you'll enjoy sunny days but will have to fight for your place in the sun, as half of Austria and Germany seems to decamp here for its summer vacation.

### Korcula

The most famous town of the region, medieval Korcula guards the harbour on the island of the same name. The locals will firmly tell you that Marco Polo was a native – none of this nonsense about him being a Venetian. The Polo house still stands in the old stone town, looking in need of a few repairs but steeped in atmosphere all the same. Korcula was a strategic port, fought over by Turks, Venetians and other powers for centuries. Nowadays the battlements are maintained for their photogenic value, and you can enjoy a mojito in a tower-top bar.

### Mljet

Pronounced 'Mil-yet', this is the isle of honey. It's also the home of the most amazing old monastery brooding under pine-covered slopes by the side of a saltwater lake. The setting feels much more like Eastern Europe than the Mediterranean, but when the sun comes out, your summer holiday feeling is restored. The island is small, with good cycling tracks tempting you to explore the villages and nature trails.

### Hvar

Hvar Town is a real camera seducer as you approach by sea. The combination of off-white limestone buildings, set alongside a harbour lined with phoenix palms and overseen by a hulking castle, makes one want to fire off photo after photo. This would be a superb base for a few days, with the other picturesque towns of the island waiting for you to discover them. Traffic on all the Dalmatian islands is very light, making a bike the rewarding option if you can handle a few hill climbs. And of course, the reward of a hill climb is a refreshing stop in a traditional roadside tavern.

### Solta

Little Solta's attractions are modest compared to Korcula or the mainland. Nevertheless, there is real pleasure in wandering through the old stone villages on a sunny day, soaking up the atmosphere and wondering where all the people have gone. Actually, that last question is easy to answer. Many of them went to New Zealand. Ask your Dally mates, and you'll probably find that Grandad left his stony ancestral farm on Solta or Hvar to seek his fortune on the gumfields of Northland last century. Now, New Zealanders of all stripes are making the opposite journey. ★

## Croatia Fact File

<b>Capital:</b>	Zagreb.
<b>Currency:</b>	Kuna, although the Euro is also widely accepted.
<b>Exchange rate:</b>	NZ\$1 = 4.20 Kuna
<b>Language:</b>	Serbo-Croat, though German and English are also widely spoken.
<b>Time Zone:</b>	GMT + 1
<b>When to go:</b>	The northern spring from April to June is pleasantly warm with occasional bursts of wind and rain. High summer can be hot and crowded. After September the tourist trade starts to wind down and bargain deals can be had.
<b>For more information:</b>	For information or enquiries please phone: 0800 955 655