



# Croatian Charm

Croatia offers history,  
relaxed luxury and  
(just maybe) David Beckham.  
By Shira Levine

**WAR IS HISTORICALLY BAD FOR TOURISM.** It tarnishes the image of a hotspot—regardless of how stunning the azure waters or majestic the limestone cityscape. Despite its unstable past, I have always felt unequivocally seduced by the beauty and mystery of Croatia and the Adriatic Coast. When King Edward VII abdicated the crown to marry Wallis Simpson, the stylish couple left England to cruise Dalmatia, ensconcing the destination as an exclusive utopia complete with name-dropping and island-hopping.

The reality is, the Yugoslav war ended twelve years ago (though the conflict continues between neighboring Serbia and Kosovo). Today, Croatia is a peaceful Mediterranean nation east of Italy. The crescent-shaped country is known as a less-congested destination where Italians come to relax and spend their mighty euros.

Once again, the region has become a playground for the glitterati. Bill and Melinda Gates regularly sail the coastline.

Dubrovnik—“the pearl of the Adriatic”—has enchanted Oprah Winfrey so much that rumors suggest she’s just a John Hancock away from purchasing a mega home there. David and Victoria Beckham are regulars on the luxe medieval island of Hvar. (Somehow Victoria “Posh Spice” manages to “stiletto strut” the car-free cobblestone streets with ease.) Those seeking elusive over exclusive should set a course for Hvar’s sister island, Brac.

Coastal Croatia is what lures us to the Balkans, but continental Croatia is what keeps us there, reminding us of the romance and history of the region. The Austro-Hungarian architectural roots of

**Above and Left:** Croatia’s stunning Baroque architecture has endured through centuries of armed conflict and withstood the test of time.



capital city Zagreb echo Vienna or Budapest. The verdant rolling countryside, dotted with Baroque castles and manors, makes for great historic and fairytale-inspired day trips. Consider renting a car to explore Trakoscan, Zrinski and Orsic castles. Weave (with the help of a hired driver) through Croatia's Wine Road and savor the refreshing crljenak—a zinfandel from the family-run Crnko and Zdjelarevic Vineyards.

Croatia is a decade into a post-war renaissance. Whether navigating the Adriatic by sea kayak, yacht or hired cruiser, or sipping grape blends while looking out at neighboring Slovenia and Hungary, it's effortless to experience Croatia's joie de vivre.

I began my cross-country dalliance in Dubrovnik by spending three days within the stari grad or "old city walls." Outside, the rugged ridges of the Dinaric Alps hover over azure waters. But through Pile Gate (one of three entrances into the old city) lies a jumbled pegboard of terra cotta roofs and narrow closes zigzagging within the city's 2km perimeter. Walking shoes are key; Stari Grad's slender lanes and steep white limestone stairways are pedestrian-only, linking like random arteries the slippery smooth placa (squares) and the stradun, a gleaming main thruway.

(Haggle with the waiting muscular men sporting what appears to be requisite athletic wear to carry your luggage.) There are only two hotels in Stari Grad: Pucic Palace and Hotel Stari Grad, and prices range from 88 to 227 euros per night. I stayed in a picturesque sobe, a studio apartment with colorful shuttered windows and ceramic flowerpot windowsills. (I found mine at Travellerspoint.com, which also lists B&Bs.)

**D**ubrovnik is safe from terror, and residents matter-of-factly point out evidence of post-war reconstruction and vitality. The view of Dubrovnik from a kayak (adriatic-sea-kayak.com) is priceless (actually about \$40), capturing the city's grandeur now poetically marred with the softened memories of a region once under siege. Visiting the old town is also worth the workout: 2,000 meters of 13th century limestone walls and pavement gleam on sunny days, the surfaces worn to a marble-like sheen. Come dusk, the fading sunlight dances across buildings dressed in colorfully painted window shutters, and a gentle glow tickles the ground, ultimately chilling the limestone.

Italian fare has noticeably influenced this region's cuisine. Fish is fresh and affordable. Eschew tourist havens like Atlas Club Nautika and scour those limestone arteries for outstanding gems like Lokanda Peskarija Tavern, located in the Old Harbor with outdoor seating. A prized choice of locals, my favorite dish was a steaming crock-pot of succulent grilled squid and octopus sautéed in garlic and butter. The seafood risotto in cuttlefish ink is also a regional specialty. "Zivjeli" is cheers in Croatian, an infectious shout heard over pivos (beers) and local white wines. Next

summer, you'll find the new upscale Larbirit Night Club (also a restaurant) thumping well past daybreak.

Ferry to Hvar, one island in Dalmatia you shouldn't miss. Quaint and mellow by day and urbane by night, Hvar boasts haute cuisine and jet-setting nightlife. The Hvar hamlet attracts yachts and international glamour, explaining why it's been dubbed "the new St. Tropez." Like Dubrovnik, a plethora of back streets decorate Hvar's stari grad with out-of-the-way places to dine and shop. I stayed at Hvar's oldest hotel, a centrally located gothic landmark called The Palace. The popular option is the newer, chic Adriana hotel.

The Palace has a newly renovated interior and the better terrace, Adriana, the better pool and extensive treatments at its Sensori Spa. Pizza is outstanding in Hvar, but the real gem was my discovery of Yaksa, a hip fusion wine bar and lounge feeding the gorgeous and elite. Order the sea bass and ask for Damir, server/bartender extraordinaire. He'll keep your glass of prosecco full, then take you for a few more drinks late night at Carpe Diem, a low-key club on the beach. In the near future, Yaksa will also offer accommodations for those who opt to while away the night in this cathedral-inspired hideaway.

Still itching to experience post-Milosevic Yugoslavia? Bosnia is just a short trip east from Dubrovnik. The magical Sarajevo is called "the New Jerusalem" because of its cross-section of religious diversity. With mosques, synagogues and cathedrals abounding, it's a progressive, chic Mecca. While at the Hotel Saraj, I was privy to a modern Muslim wedding where blonde, blue-eyed women choose to cover up but still openly share affection with the opposite sex by dancing and laughing. Captivated as I was by the varied and complex religious practices, the devotion I acquired was to Bosnian coffee. A shot of the brew made each day dazzle. ♦

