



the JEWELS of the Dalmatian coast

BY JANICE MUCALOV

Medieval walled cities, Venetian-style palaces, idyllic offshore islands, cobblestoned villages; Croatia is poised to become the next must-see destination and the ideal way to see it is on a cruise ship.



The best time to walk the wall is just before the sun sets,” our tour guide had told us earlier. And so, as the town is bathed in a vivid golden glow, we find ourselves atop the massive, two-kilometre-long, stone wall that surrounds the Old City of Dubrovnik.

On one side, laundry flutters outside shuttered apartment windows, kittens nap on rose-coloured tile roofs, and some 20 metres below us, white marble alleyways flaunt a treasure trove of Gothic and Renaissance churches, monasteries, Venetian-style palaces and ornately carved fountains, all crammed together with hole-in-the-wall boutiques and outdoor cafés. On the other side of the wall, laughing youths dive off the rocks at the wall’s

base into the cobalt-blue sea. Beyond, yachts and sailboats bobbing in a marina point the way to a picture-perfect beach.

“Those who seek paradise on earth should come to Dubrovnik,” raved playwright George Bernard Shaw when visiting the city in 1929. And it is true that Dubrovnik is the country’s medieval showplace city. But the entire southern Dalmatian coast of Croatia is sprinkled with fascinating medieval walled towns—as well as idyllic offshore islands and parks.

The easiest and most comfortable way to visit is by small cruise ship (indeed, most ports-of-call are so small they can’t accommodate the large cruise ships); we sailed aboard Elegant Cruises’ delightful



Above: View of the city wall around Dubrovnik.
Below: The port town of Split makes a perfect panorama.

62-passenger *Monet*. The calm protected waters off the Croatian coast also make for ideal smooth cruising territory.

Most 2006 cruises on the *Monet* are seven-night return trips from Venice—calling in at Cres, Split, Hvar, Dubrovnik, Mljet, Korcula, Zadar and Sibenik. Other small vessels visit some of the same places, and a few large liners include Dubrovnik in their itineraries.

Shore excursions typically include walking tours that focus on the art, history and archaeology of the sites. But on the smaller ships, you dock just steps away from the tiny towns visited, so it's easy to wander off and explore on your own.

On its seven-night cruises, the *Monet* first visits Cres. The island is quite wild and unspoiled, and the star attractions are the 70 or so pairs of Eurasian Griffons that weigh nine to 14 kilograms and have wingspans of nearly three metres. Depending on when you go, you can visit the island's ornithological reserve to see and learn about these huge carnivorous vultures. When the griffons are less active during the hot summer months, the lanes of Cres Town, a laid-back fishing village that reveals some 15th- and 16th-century Venetian architecture, are perfect for a leisurely stroll.

In Split, designated a UN World Heritage Site, we stepped back in time inside the 1700-year-old palace of the Roman emperor Diocletian. The palace is the heart of Split's historical inner

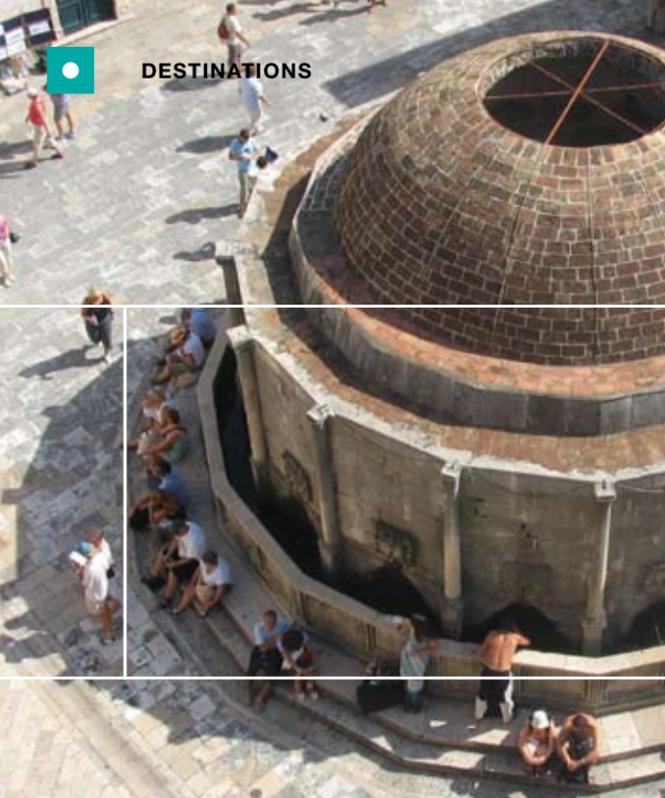
city, and it is vast—more than 3000 people live within the palace walls, which surround temples, churches, shops and cafés, all interlaced with pedestrian-only cobblestone streets. The exterior façade of the palace lines a picturesque harbour, where young lovers linger and wizened old men read the paper on park benches in the shade.

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Each day, we called in at a different site—sometimes two. One memorable day we had an early morning stop at Mljet National Park and saw a 12th-century Benedictine monastery perched on a pine-covered island in the middle of a saltwater lake. Then it was a barbecue lunch of fresh fish and Croatian sausage on deck as we cruised to Korcula, followed by a visit to the walled city of Korcula itself. True, there were none of those relaxing days at sea with no sights to see. But people who book the *Monet* come to experience this splendid coastline, not to hang out on the ship.

Our favourite island was perhaps Hvar, with its fragrant fields of lavender. Strolling through the 13th-century Old Town, we came across the 1612 theatre, the first public theatre built in Europe, with its beautifully painted ceiling, seafood restaurants and water taxis speeding sun-lovers off to nearby islets to swim in pristine waters.





Above: Palms line Split's picturesque harbour side. Left: Locals and tourists cool off beside a water fountain in Dubrovnik.

Photo by Janice Mucalov

The *Monet* leaves Hvar late at night, so that evening we stayed ashore for a dinner of roast suckling pig at a waterfront café, washed down with Croatian chardonnay. (Croatia produces some pleasant wines, but order a higher quality bottle rather than by the glass and avoid the risk of a morning-after headache.) We also bought tickets in the town centre to attend an outdoor classical concert in the old Franciscan monastery.

If Hvar is the prettiest port of call, then Dubrovnik is the most breathtaking, rightly claiming its reputation as the “Pearl of the Adriatic” (it’s situated across the Adriatic Sea from Italy). You enter the fortified Old City through the drawbridge over the 15th-century Pile Gate. Vehicles aren’t allowed inside, so meandering along the marble-paved streets and alleyways is a true delight.

Among the many historic buildings you can tour is the Franciscan Monastery. In the gardened cloister, a pharmacy dating back to 1317—the third oldest in Europe—still operates (you can actually stock up on some essentials like Aspirin here). It’s also a fascinating museum, displaying the ceramic bowls, metal instruments and mortar and pestle sets the monks used to prepare medicines.

Throughout the city, occasional pockmarks on houses and patched roofs are reminders of the

bombing Dubrovnik received in the early 1990s by the Yugoslavian army. But since the end of the Croatian war in 1995, the city has been virtually restored. We were interested in the country’s complex relationships with its neighbours, so we also visited the new museum of war photos called War Photo Limited. It proved to be one of the most moving experiences of the trip.

It was our guide for that morning’s walking tour of Dubrovnik who suggested we return to walk the wall at sunset. This meant we had time to swim and sun at the public beach, a 10-minute walk up the road from the Old City. With access to a cocktail bar as well as umbrellas and lounge chairs for rent, we were most content to while away the afternoon on the pebble shore. (And unlike many of Croatia’s nudist beaches, swimsuits are worn here!)

Then, as we watched the sun cast its gilded glow on the old walled city, we understood why Croatia is poised to become the next must-see destination. Europeans have for years thronged to Dubrovnik and the country’s sunny beaches and towns, but North Americans are just discovering this paradise. Now is a good time to heed Shaw’s advice and go. ●

CROATIA CRUISE CHOICES:

Elegant Cruises

Itinerary: Owned and operated by Elegant Cruises, the 62-passenger *Monet* and 105-passenger *Andrea* both offer seven-night round-trip cruises to Croatia from Venice between April and October. The *Andrea* also offers additional nine-, 10- and 11-night trips, which visit several Croatian ports of call. For value hunters, leisurely 14-night cruises on the *Monet* are available in November with possible 17-night programs in December, which include three free nights.

Experience: Both ships are a labour of love for the line’s president/owner, former sea captain Mato Stanovic, who is himself Croatian. At dinner, Croatian specialties like grilled squid in lemon and garlic are offered, along with complimentary Croatian wines. The crew on the *Monet* is also entirely Croatian. Most passengers are between 60 and 75; about 75% are North American and 25% European. The focus is on seeing and learning, less on doing activities. But you have time to squeeze in a swim or attend a concert ashore on your own.

Rates: For a seven-night cruise, \$2870 per person (outside cabin) to \$5677 (suite) on the *Monet*; \$2396 (inside cabin) to \$5971 (suite) on the *Andrea*. www.elegantcruises.com

Star Clippers

Itinerary: The largest true sailing ship in the world, the beautiful 134-metre, 227-passenger *Royal Clipper* (operated by Star Clippers) sails 10- and 11-night cruises between Rome and Venice that include Losinj, Hvar, Korcula and Dubrovnik. Cruises depart from June 10 to September 13.

Experience: Onboard, discover staterooms with marble ensuite bathrooms and a grand circular staircase sashaying down to the restaurant. Water sports—with water-skiing and banana boat rides using the ship’s own water toys—figure prominently. In Croatia, mountain biking and 4x4 jeep excursions are also offered along with city tours. Passengers are usually fairly fit and range in age from 35 to 65.

Rates: \$3698 to \$5011 per person for a good cabin on a 10-night cruise. www.starclippers.com

Windstar Cruises

Itinerary: In July and August, the 148-passenger *Wind Star* calls in at Hvar and Dubrovnik on several seven-night cruises between Venice and Athens.

Experience: This sleek yacht-like vessel appeals to sophisticated passengers, typically aged 45 to 65, seeking a deluxe but casual cruise experience. Wine-tasting, walking tours, dining ashore and swimming excursions are offered. Like Star Clippers, free watersports are included.

Rates: Priced from about \$3570 (listed at \$3099 USD). www.windstarcruises.com



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Note: All prices are in CAD dollars, converted as of March 9 2006. Rates quoted are brochure rates; discounts may be available.