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Cruising the BVI in an Oceanis 423





Hidden Treasures of Dalmatia

Food, wine, land mines and classic rock mix to create a memorable charter cruise off the Croatian coast

Story and photography by Michelle Hurni

To put yourself in Croatia for this story, make sure you plug in the stereo and crank out two songs, “Hotel California” and “Stairway to Heaven.” Now play them over and over again, spray a little sea water on your face, and soak up the sun. Despite (or because of?) the music, southern Dalmatia captured our hearts, from island hopping to the food and wine.

When Yugoslavia divided into three countries, Croatia got the best end of the deal—the majority of coastline along the Adriatic Sea. In its latest ad campaign, Croatia called itself

“the Mediterranean as it once was,” so get there before the clock turns too far forward. Just as beautiful as Greece and Italy, it’s clean and pristine, even 15 years post civil war.

Our goal for our charter in Croatia was to find the country that wasn’t in the **Rough Guide**, and aboard *Martinki* it was an easy task. From wines and olive oil to deep water soloing and collapsed arches, our mission was easily accomplished.

Our sailing adventure started at the Sunsail base north of Split, where five of us piled aboard our 41-foot charter yacht to discover 10 different islands in the azure sea. On board were three adults—Peggy, George and Michelle—and two teenage boys, Garrett, 15, and Chris, 37. Well, Chris acted

like a teenager, anyway, or maybe that’s just an Aussie trait.

The clash of cultures—Italian, Croatian, Hungarian and Grecian—made for gastronomic pleasures that aren’t mentioned in the guidebooks. The Mediterranean landscape dictates what foods are produced, but it’s the inventive chefs who bring fresh ingredients of tomatoes, olive oil, garlic, figs, seafood and wine to the table in the form of fresh gnocchi, pizza, risotto and fish. Our indoctrination to the culinary treats began immediately, and for 10 days we sailed from cove to cove, indulging our every food fantasy.

With time on our hands as we sailed across the crystal clear water, and constant monitoring of the controls from the four licensed cap-



Chris and Peggy relax on *Martinki*. Before Komiza awakens, all is still in the harbor on the island of Vis, above. Cruisers tuck into Stiniva Cove on the other side of Vis, left.



tains on board, serious matters were discussed. Of course, all the world's problems were solved by our international contingent.

Refusing to crank the engine, we set a blistering pace to the west end of the island of Solta, which set off the discussion, "Which is more accurate, navigational instruments on deck, or the GPS below?" Comparing the two and finding our pace to be a whopping 2.5 knots, we concurred with Chris' answer, "Whichever says we are going faster."

As the sun dropped close to the horizon, we let a wreck on the chart lure us into Sesula cove and our anchor found a home on the sandy bottom. After paddling around the cove with masks and snorkels, we finally gave up on the wreck and let a hand-painted wooden

sign for a cocktail bar above lure us out of the water. Assured by the waiter that the wreck is no longer there, we relaxed under the palm branch ceiling and let the discovery begin.

Our plans to have a "cocktail," then return to *Martinki* to cook aboard, were quickly thwarted when we took a peek at the extensive menu. The squid seemed a popular choice, and with multiple varieties to choose from, we were able to quickly pick our favorites. It was good grilled, better fried, and best when cooked in red wine. If only we had known to order ahead, the local lamb is slow cooked over hot coals for 24 hours in a cast-iron dome called a peke. On our lazy sailing schedule, however, that option was not available. We found the grilled lamb to be a delicious substitute. Another specialty

of the island is a pungent sheep cheese called *ovciji sir*, indeed a treasure, especially on the fresh baked bread.

Along the coast, grilled seafood is a popular tradition. On the island of Vis, *Konoba Bako* is known for its traditional fish specialties. The lobster is so fresh the cooks have to move it back onto the flame when it tries to escape.

If you're lucky enough to find a hot chocolate menu on the table, by all means, don't pass it up. Available in many forms, from plain to hazelnut and white chocolate, don't let the name fool you. It may look like hot chocolate, but it's so thick a spoon can stand upright by itself, and it's more a blend of hot pudding and mousse than any chocolate you've ever sipped.

Olive oil is a revered item in the Med, and there are card tables in every harbor loaded down with the local offerings. Packaging ranges from intricately blown glass bottles to two-liter plastic bottles filled with the liquid gold. Some have infusions of basil, rosemary, peppercorns and thyme, while others are just pure thick oil.

We approached a table where samples were offered, but not in the traditional fashion we expected—maybe with a piece of bread—but in a plastic shot glass. George touched his finger to the oil, bringing it up for a taste, but the salesman shook his head, and took a tiny cup and tilted it into his mouth. Skeptical, we all cringed as George poured the entire shot glass of oil into his mouth. When he smiled and nodded his approval, we all reached for a glass.

Where wine is cheaper than water, there's no reason not to do as the locals, and drink up. Just like the olive oil, a bottle of wine isn't necessarily packaged in glass. Every harbor had a small farmers market, usually just a few steps from the dock. Alongside their offerings of limes and potatoes, a local might have his own wine available for around \$5 per bottle.

With the war in Croatia over for 15 years, tourism has been booming for the past five. Go 30 kilometers inland and the scarred and burned-out landscape remains leftover from the war, but the coastline has been cleaned up for the tourists and the war feels like a distant memory. Croatia is

being promoted around the world, rivaling Italy for its grapes, and the commercial wine growers know they have a gold mine soaking up the sun on their hills.

Through a Web site, we located a small town on the southern side of Hvar, where a famous Croatian wine producer, Zlatan Plenkovic, decided to hit up the boating crowd and put in a new dock.

Sailing along the southern coast of Hvar, the highest mountain on the island, Sveti Nikola, rose above, its vineyards clinging to the mountainside a sure sign we were close to some famous Croatian wine. We swept past the dock to assess access to the inner

harbor, but with the swells, we couldn't see an entrance. We shouted out to some stoneworkers on the dock, asking if we could get our boat in. They pointed vigorously toward the end of the dock.

On a wing and a prayer, George swung the boat into the inner "harbor" with barely enough room to spit on either side of the boat. Rocks taunted us just off our starboard side, while the dock was close enough to touch on the port side. As we slid through the opening, we breathed a sigh of relief, then tossed our lines to the workers and secured *Martinki*.

The restaurant on the dock was unique, made of stone and glass, but closed for repairs after the windows were shattered by the wind. The stoneworkers assured us we could find local wine up in the village, near the church.

We started up on foot, following the winding road upward. No cars, just a few locals sitting on their porches. To our question "vino?" they gestured up the hill, so we continued up the switchbacks. Past straight lines of grapes, past cases of bottles awaiting their sweet fruit. Sweat poured out of us under the scorching sun, and we looked longingly at *Martinki* bobbing in the clear water far below. The promise of wine lured us on.

Suddenly an explosion ripped through the silence and we ducked for cover as rocks the size of bricks whistled by our heads. With the warnings of land mines left over from the recent war dancing in our heads, we ran for cover behind a stone wall. When the shower of rocks stopped, we warily stood up and looked around.

'The water seemed far below by the time I decided to let go. In fact, it was plenty of time to think about how far I was falling. The landing was refreshing, and with a dingy shuttle, I climbed two more routes before heading back to the boat.'

A man sitting on his porch shook his head. "Mines," he said.

"Should we continue up?" we asked.

"It's safe now,"

Cautiously, we continued up the hill to the town far above. Reaching the church, a lone man walked down an alleyway, waving us farther up the hill. Through an open doorway, a woman offered us a taste of her homemade wine, but the sweet red wine wasn't the treasure



we were expecting. We continued higher until there was nothing left but sheer limestone cliffs and the remains of a 15th century Augustine monastery. Disappointed, we headed back down the hill to the village on the water and into the first open doorway we spotted.

In the end—hot, tired and hungry—we found the local wine. It was in a pizza joint, just around the corner from where *Martinki* was moored.

Hvar is one of the most fragrant places on earth; the hills a soft purple, the breeze carrying aloft a scent of lavender. On shore, soap, oils and lotions infused with lavender were available for sale, but that's not what brought us to our anchorage.

There are only a few places in the world where the sport of deep water soloing is possible. One of those happens to be on the southern cliffs of Hvar, just a few miles from our wine excursion at Nedjelja. A small enclave of climbers used ropes to ascend to the left while we dropped anchor 20 meters from the base of the cliff.

In the climbing world, soloing is as it sounds. Climbing. Alone. With nothing anchoring the climber to the rock or stopping a fall. In DWS, when the climber reaches the top, or falls making a move, he or she drops into the water below. The cliffbase.com Web site warns "DWS is a stupid and dangerous sport," so only the experienced need apply. Assuming 20 years of world class climbing is experience, I was up for the challenge.

In typical climbing areas, climbers approach the base of a climb via a trail, but

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Clockwise from above: One of the finer olive oil and wine shops in the town of Jelsa offers its liquid gold. In Primosten, it looks like hot chocolate, but tastes like heaven. The chef at Konoba Bako on Vis roasts fresh lobsters. The Blue Cave is a must see destination on Bisevo. Time stands still in the town of Milna on Brac. The Blue Cave glows. Classics med-moor in the town of Hvar. The author deep water solos up an overhanging limestone face on Hvar.

for DWS, the mode of transport is a bobbing dingy. After checking the depth with a mask and snorkel, the "landing" was deemed safe and I started up the overhanging limestone. Chris was onboard *Martinki*, snapping photos of my controlled movement above the Adriatic Sea: 10 feet, 20, feet. 30 feet. The water seemed far below by the time I decided to let go. The landing was refreshing, and with a dingy shuttle, I climbed two more routes before heading back to the boat.

Climbing aboard, we noticed how violently *Martinki* was rocking in the swell. After jumping into the water from 35 feet, you would think it would be Chris asking me, "Are you OK?" but when we saw how green his face was, it was the reverse. After taking hundreds of photos while looking through the viewfinder, he claimed, "I only threw up a little."


There are many things in the vicinity of Vis that make the six-hour sail from Hvar worth it. The first is a complete tourist trap on the small islet of Bisevo, the Blue Cave. Yes, it is in the **Rough Guide**, and every other piece of literature printed about Croatia, but it's a phenomenon worth seeing.

We dropped anchor in a busy cove, then ventured into the cave in our dingy. With a flashlight in hand, we navigated through the tunnel, a blue glow luring us 50 yards in. We rounded a bend and the cave opened up in front of us. Noon is prime time and the sun shone through the water of a submerged side entrance and lighted up the sandy bottom, reflecting an eerie blue light onto the walls and ceiling. We watched the light show in wonder until tourists from the town of Komiza joined us.

On the chart on the southern side of the island Vis, Stiniva Cove is barely a blip, but we ventured into paradise. Sailing in with a prevailing southern breeze, we were the only boat in the cove. Just ahead of us an archway collapsed, leaving overhanging rock on each side, and a gentle cove for snorkeling. After anchoring *Martinki*, we piled into our dingy for a ride to the sheltered beach.

Between the five of us, we have sailed the Caribbean, Thailand, Australia and Seychelles, where the term "beach" conjures up images of soft sand. In Croatia, the process is just beginning. The beaches consisted of smooth, round rocks, ranging from ping pong ball to baseball size.

As the rocks tumbled over themselves in the placid waves, the sound of sand being made was soothing. Alone on the beach, we relaxed on our towels, content with our typical Croatian picnic lunch of wine, fruit, tomatoes, cheese and olives. The only thing missing was a serenade of "Hotel California."



Croatia Charter Info

For more information on this charter, contact Sunsail on the Web at www.sunsail.com, or by phone at (888) 350-3573.

Other charter companies in the area: Go Cats, www.gocats1.com, (800) 592-1254; King Yacht Charters, www.sailingcharters.com, (800) 521-7552; Nautor Swan, www.nautorswancharter.com, (401) 846-1090; Ocean Voyages, www.oceanvoyages.com, (800) 299-4444; Star Clipper, www.starclippers.com, (800) 442-0551; The Moorings, (888) 952-6014, www.moorings.com.