

A LAND OF STORIES

THE OPENING OF THE PELJEŠAC BRIDGE IN SOUTHERN CROATIA MEANS IT'S EASIER THAN EVER TO HEAD OUT ALONG THE COAST ON A ROAD TRIP FROM SPLIT TO DUBROVNIK, TAKING IN ANCIENT STONE VILLAGES, UNDERWATER WINE AND PIRATE LEGENDS

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From left: Pouring glasses of Plavac Mali wine at Edivo Winery; Split's historic core was built around Diocletian's Palace
Previous pages, clockwise from top left: Bottles of Plavac Mali wine at Edivo Winery; view along Stradun, the main street in the Old Town of Dubrovnik; shucking oysters in Mali Ston Bay; Ston Saltworks

Four frogs with violins gather beneath a window to serenade another frog in a dress. You don't see that every day. Nor a frog being shaved in a barber's shop. "People are so obsessed with technology, it can be tough to get them interested in frogs," says my guide Marina Bitunjac, as we ponder a scene in which one of the amphibious creatures balances a boot on his nose.

You'll find 507 such stuffed frogs in Split's Froggyland, arranged in a series of tableaux by taxidermist Ferenc Mere in the early 1900s. The various scenes on display include court cases, sporting contests and school lessons. One is titled 'Construction work on a holiday home' and features frog bricklayers, roofers and a site manager taking a pee behind a wall. Exhibits are accompanied by a soundtrack of rabbits set to music. It's utterly surreal.

I knew I'd love Split. The Dalmatian city is the first stop on a road trip I'm taking along the Croatian coast to Dubrovnik. Friends had raved about its Roman architecture, medieval bell towers and harbourside restaurants. But they hadn't mentioned its fabulous eccentricities. After Froggyland, Marina takes

me to rub Gregory of Nin's big toe. Gregory was a revered 10th-century bishop, and touching the toe of his 28ft-tall bronze statue, burnished gold by millions of fingers, is said to bring good luck. "Make a wish," says Marina (I wish for hand sanitiser) before we continue through the north gate of Diocletian's Palace.

The fourth-century complex is the lively, lived-in heart of Split's Old Town. Male quartets perform a cappella folk songs; neighbours call to each other across courtyards from windows linked by tightropes of washing. We reach the central square, abuzz with tourists, and Emperor Diocletian himself appears, announced by his imperial guard with a flurry of marching feet and a trumpeting fanfare. "Ave!" he cries from the raised terrace that led to his living quarters, and we look up and shout "Ave!" in reply. There's more trumpeting and another flurry of marching as the actors withdraw in their robes and sandals, and the throng of tourists in their T-shirts and flip-flops starts flowing once more through the arteries of the palace.

Fast forward a day — and 900 years — and I'm in the company of a 12th-century duchess. I've driven 15 miles south east to the town of Omiš, where the Cetina River meets the Adriatic Sea. Senka Vlahovic, who runs tour company Boho Travel Art, is wearing a medieval-style dress so substantial it threatens to sweep up anyone we pass on the pavement. But nobody bats an eyelid as she sails through the alleyways. "They're used to seeing me like this," she explains. "I've been doing this for years."

Once upon a time, Senka tells me, Omiš was a hotbed of pirates, who controlled the coast from Split to Dubrovnik. These weren't the yo-ho-ho-and-a-bottle-of-rum types — the pirate leaders belonged to the noble Kačić family, and their pirating was as much about projecting power as looting booty. For over 200 years, any ship that ventured into the Adriatic had to pay a tribute or risk the consequences.

The landscape adds to the sense of maritime drama. Grey mountains rise abruptly behind the town, pressing it towards the sea, and the Cetina River bleeds from a canyon cleaved deep and dark in the karst. I drive into the valley along a narrow road, the woods thickening, until I reach a chunky building said to have been a hideout of the Omiš pirates. Today, it's a restaurant called Kaštil Slanica, which serves the sorts of food they'd have eaten: earthy-tasting Cetina trout, snails, meat baked over embers under an iron dome called a *peka*. I try a plate of breaded frogs' legs and hope it hasn't left the holiday-home construction site short of workers.

The pirate leaders were defeated by the forces of the Venetian Republic at the end of the 13th century, but others keep the torch of adventure alive in the canyon. Duje Cerina and





Karlo Bartulovic, who meet me after lunch, truss me up in a harness and lead me along a track that climbs through the forest to the lip of the canyon. From there, a wire stretches across the abyss to an endpoint so far away you'd need Blackbeard's telescope to make it out. We've reached the first of eight zip-lines running back and forth over the valley like some hellish giant's cross-stitch.

"This is the longest and highest zip-line of the lot," announces Duje, and I nod politely and look around for the shorter, closer-to-the-ground line we'll be riding. "It's 800ft above the river and you'll travel at 70mph for nearly half a mile," continues Karlo as he hooks my harness to the cable and the bones in my legs become rubbery. "You aren't scared of heights, are you?" asks Duje — a question I'd like to suggest he should have asked earlier, but my throat is tight with nerves. I dangle for a moment above the ground, knees raised and ankles crossed, strung like a plucked chicken, before the brake is released and I shoot away in a whirl of pulley on wire until I'm just a screaming speck in the distance to the onlooking Duje and Karlo.

Later, I head further into the gorge for more adventuring, this time on a yellow inflatable raft in the charge of a broad-chested and kind-eyed action man called Stefan Baric. The owner of Rafting Pinta, he's led excursions on the Cetina for 25 years. He's perched me at the front, the best seat in the house. The water is golden-green and so flat I'm reluctant to disturb it with my paddle. We drift through avenues of maples and willows, as though pulled along on a silk ribbon, and Stefan points out sandstone banks with holes made by bee-eaters, and a long-tailed bird with a lilting flight that reminds me of calligraphy.

But it's all a deception. Ahead, the water becomes agitated at a clutch of rocks, swirls and bubbles around a boulder and finally collapses down a six-foot drop in a temper of whitewater. Stefan issues orders from the back of the raft — paddle hard left, paddle hard right — using his own paddle as a rudder. We bump across the rocks and lever around the boulder, and then we're into the stomach-lurching drop, the nose of the raft hitting the surface and shovelling up a wave that engulfs me, before washing meekly along the the raft to wet Stefan's ankles. "Wow, it's cold," he says, shaking a foot, while I flap and gasp like the bedraggled victim of a keelhauling.

There are more sedate ways to explore Croatia's coast, however. I backtrack a few miles to Gornja Podstrana, where I meet Mateo Barnic. He grew up in this ancient mountainside village and recently founded Horseback Riding Podstrana. I follow him on



a white-hoofed mare through gnarled oaks and scrubby grass chequered with weathered stones that once marked the boundaries of the villagers' farmland. There must have been easier spots to farm, but Mateo explains that the steep slopes offered refuge from the pirates below. "Lazier families built closer to the coast," he says, "and perhaps they were right — their land is worth far more today." Just 50 people live in the old village, the houses crumbling around them — but the joy of those sea views surely never fades.

Bridging the gap

I continue my journey southwards beneath karst peaks and hilltop churches, and past roadside vendors selling jams in a rainbow of colourful jars. I stop at the top of Mount Biokovo and inch out onto the Skywalk, a glass-floored walkway jutting from the cliff face, and anchor myself to the guard rail as a pair of children jump up and down to see if the glass will crack.

At the village of Komarna, a sliver of Bosnia-Herzegovina severs the Dalmatian belt. Until a year ago, those wanting to visit Croatia's southern tip had to endure time-wasting border checkpoints to leapfrog out of the country and back in again. Now, though,

From left: Kayaking around the fort walls of the old town in Dubrovnik; pulling up rope-grown oysters on the boat trip run by Bota Šare out to the oyster beds in Mali Ston Bay

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The harbour in the town of Makarska, near the Skywalk
Left: traditional Dalmatian bread made at Kastil Slanica in Omiš

“Around here, if you’re no good at learning you become a priest, a politician or a fisherman,” Daniel says, straight-faced

the elegant new Pelješac Bridge leads on to the Pelješac Peninsula and the road to Dubrovnik.

The 40-mile peninsula isn’t just a piece of connective tissue. The town of Ston has Europe’s longest intact medieval fortifications, five miles of them, built to protect Europe’s oldest saltworks at a time when salt was as valuable as gold. I walk the 14th-century walls and visit salt pools that have been sun-baked and hand-raked since 2000 BCE. I make time for a piece of traditional Ston cake: pastry filled with chocolate, walnut and macaroni.

From the sea

Less than a mile north east is a village of oyster farmers. The houses of Mali Ston gather at the edge of a sheltered bay, where I board a smart, old-fashioned clipper. In the wheelhouse, wearing snazzy sunglasses and a crushed linen shirt, is Daniel Separovic, a man who’s farmed oysters since abandoning school at 15. “Around here, if you’re no good at learning you become a priest, a politician or a fisherman,” he says, straight-faced. “Now, let’s start with some medicine,” he goes on, handing me a glass of herbal grappa the shade of straw. I wince as I swallow and he pours me another. “The second always tastes better.”

Daniel works for Bota Šare, a family business, harvesting 100,000 oysters a year to serve in its four restaurants. Mali Ston Bay has just what an oyster needs: a cool, impeccably clean cocktail of phytoplankton-dense, brackish water. “Put anything into this water and something will grow on it,” says Daniel, laying anchor and

tugging up a rope full of oysters, attached back to back along its length like bells on a Morris dancer’s stick. It’s taken two-and-a-half years to get to this point — a process that involves snagging baby oysters in a small net, moving them to a larger one to mature and, finally, attaching them to the rope. Which is why I don’t mention to Daniel that I’ve never quite seen the appeal of them. He shucks a few with practised twists of his knife, and I slurp them back and say what he wants to hear: that they’re subtle and minerally and far better than oysters from France.

Mussels, on the other hand, are very much my bag. Daniel pulls a sausage-shaped net of them from the water, picks out their frilly beards and empties the shells into a pot over a gas stove. “You cook mussels with fire only,” he declares, before giving a conspiratorial wink and adding a mammoth glug of wine. After two minutes and a drizzle of olive oil, the mussels are in my bowl, plump and sweet. This is a proper sea-to-spoon experience. “Mussels must drink three times,” says Daniel, filling a large wine glass. “Sea water when they’re on the rope, wine when in the pot, and more wine when in your stomach.”

Wine runs through the veins of those who live on the Pelješac Peninsula. Dispatches from Venetian diplomats in the 16th century waxed lyrical about vineyards near Ston, and today scores of local winemakers build on a heritage that dates back to the ancient Illyrians. But there are innovators here, too, and the next day I join one of them as he



The view from Mount Srd across Dubrovnik's walled Old Town and harbour

strips to his pants, wiggles into a wetsuit and disappears under the sea with a thumbs-up.

Edi Bajurin emerges in a mess of bubbles and clambers on board our boat with what looks like a torpedo tucked under his arm. He holds it out: an amphora, its terracotta surface encrusted with seashells. Inside is wine from Croatia's only underwater winery.

Back at their tasting room in the village of Drače, Edi and fellow founder of Edivo Winery, Ivo Secovic, sit me down to a spread of anchovies and indigenous Noah's Ark clams. In the middle of the table is the upper half of a Roman amphora that Edi recovered from the seabed. "I find lots of them, just sticking up in the sand," he tells me. They inspired an idea that's consumed the men for over a decade.

Their quest was to create something that captured the peninsula's geography and history: wine stored in amphoras, aged in the cool depths of the Adriatic. They had to find the perfect spot in Mali Ston Bay; the perfect balance of indigenous Plavac Mali grapes, from various vineyards, each with its slightly different character; the perfect material to make and seal the amphoras against salt water; and they had to work out how to clean them up after two years in the sea. "We wanted to leave the shells on the amphoras, but that presented a problem," says Ivo. "They smell like dead bodies after a few days," adds Edi.

Eventually, like vinicultural Goldilockses, they developed a red wine not too strong, not

too weak, but just right. It's characterful, with a fruity and complex flavour.

It's an hour's drive to my final stop, the city of Dubrovnik. While the afternoon matures and hundreds of swifts gun for insects, Marijeta Radic — a whirlwind of a guide, tripping over herself with eagerness to share her fondness for the place — takes me on a tour. A handsome place, with imposing walls and limestone streets worn smooth by time, it remained independent for 500 years when most of the region was under the yoke of the Venetian Republic or Ottoman empire.

We stroll along the old city's main avenue, Stradun, past shops displaying artworks, antiques and the *Game of Thrones* merchandise that has become so popular since the series was filmed here. And there's drama enough without fiction. Marijeta describes how the sea rages against the walls in winter and tells me about the apocalyptic earthquake of 1667, when boulders crashed down from Mount Srd. She pauses at a paving stone scarred with shrapnel from Serb bombing during the 1990s siege of Dubrovnik and remembers the years she spent in a refugee hotel with her family, eight of them to a room.

The tales continue to come, thick and fast, just as they have throughout my trip. I've heard about emperors, frogs and pirates; I've met those who try and try again. "Stories are all around you," Marijeta concludes as we part ways. "You just need to know where to look." ▢



GETTING THERE & AROUND

You can fly into Split and out of Dubrovnik, but — given it only takes three hours to drive between them — it can be cheaper to book a return flight from the same airport. Several carriers operate regular routes from the UK to Split and Dubrovnik, including British Airways, Croatia Airlines, EasyJet and Wizz Air. There are currently no flights from the UK to Dubrovnik in winter. ba.com croatiaairlines.com easyjet.com wizzair.com

Several car hire companies have offices at Split and Dubrovnik airports, including Nova Rent a Car. novarentacar.hr

WHEN TO GO

High season comes in July and August, when the sea is warm and there's a party atmosphere along the Dalmatian coast, but accommodation is at a premium. The crowds are thinner in late spring and early autumn when accommodation rates drop and the weather is still pleasant, often in the mid-20Cs.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Santa Lucia, Split. Doubles from €225 (£190), B&B. hotelsantalucia-central.com
Hotel Ostrea, Mali Ston. Doubles from €125 (£112), B&B. ostrea.hr
Valamar Lacroma Dubrovnik. Doubles from €199 (£170), B&B. valamar.com

MORE INFO

croatia.hr
dalmatia.hr
tzdubrovnik.hr

HOW TO DO IT

Unforgettable Croatia has a seven-night Croatia Active Culinary Trip from £1,695 per person, including flights from Gatwick, private transfers, accommodation in Split and Dubrovnik and various activities, tastings and tours. unforgettablecroatia.co.uk