



Cruising through history

The Dalmatian Coast serves as the seaward border to Croatia, a cruising ground of uncommon beauty that has been a magnet for travellers for centuries. **John Borthwick** reports from the Adriatic.

"On the last day of creation God desired to crown his work, and thus created the Kornati Islands out of tears, stars and breath."

George Bernard Shaw penned the sort of celebrity endorsement for which any national tourist board might sacrifice on a low altar its entire team of cliché-plagued copywriters. The Dalmatian coast of Croatia enjoyed the famous

playwright's plug entirely free, thanks to the inspiration of its clear waters, aromatic pines and, perhaps, pretty women.

Despite its name, you'll never see 101 spotted dogs in Dalmatia - in fact, probably not even one. It seems that the celebrated hound has nothing to do with this coast that shares its name. (I saw only one, in Hvar, a

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however, sailors who wish for slightly less company can cruise these waters solo with equal ease.

Kornati marina in Biograd is our starting point. The parking lot overflows with prosperity in the form of German, Swiss and Austrian cars, as do the piers with the yachts of the car owners. So much for travel anxieties - before I arrived I wondered what hangover might remain from the vicious war that wracked former Yugoslavia in the early '90s? Would it be all bullet holes and bad tempers? Far from it. While some Kalishnikov-inspired wall decorating is still in evidence, the neighbourhood brawl is long over and the Republic of Croatia is at peace with itself and even its neighbours.

Shakedown race

We start with a shakedown race of 15 nautical miles from Biograd to Vodice. Regardless of G. B. Shaw's rave reviews, the Kornati Islands, just to the west, aren't on our route, so I content myself with squinting at their vague, offshore outlines as substantial, indeed, as "tears, stars and breath". Some confusion arises about which in-shore island our fleet is meant to skirt, with the result that several front-runners take the short cut to disqualification. As one skipper puts it: "We came first, but someone else came first-er."


Vodice has a large modern marina and a shoreline that is perfect for an evening promenade. Typical of towns on this coast, there is a row of seafood restaurants, a petanque piste and a harbour of little local boats which are distinctly more modest than our flash Beneteau, Grand Soleil and Dufour showboats.

Sibenik is our first real encounter with the stunning history of Dalmatia. During two millennia this region was settled by Illyrians, Greeks, Romans, Venetians and Austro-Hungarians. The result is a coast dotted with walled fortress towns that are a layer cake of history. Hewn from grey-white karst limestone, these towns usually nestle within medieval ramparts. Step through an arched portal and you enter a maze of streets and dogleg alleys, marble plazas, chapels, mansions, cathedrals and centuries-old homes. Not to mention boutiques, bars, pizzerias and ice-cream stalls.

We moor beneath the battlements of St Mihovil's castle and St. Jacob's cathedral, a World Heritage-listed marvel, supposedly built without mortar. One of the Romanesque-Gothic cathedral's most unusual features is an external frieze of 71 heads - grimacing, grinning, scowling or staring - each one a character study of an actual 15th century Sibenik citizen.

pooch that someone keeps as a photo-opportunity novelty.) Namesake dogs are about the only thing that the Croatian coast lacks. Cruising sailors will find quality marinas - they've been here since the days of the Yugoslav Republic - with full service capacity and well-maintained yachts for bareboat or crewed charter.

Cruising is the best way to see this stretch of the Adriatic where the long, indented coastline, aligned northwest to southeast, is sheltered by a chain of barrier islands. I did just that, along with only 86 friends and 15 other yachts. We were the fleet of the inaugural Marco Polo Regatta (To be known from this year forward as the Croatia Yacht Rally), from Biograd (just south of Zadar) to Dubrovnik;



ABOVE: The town of Hvar combines good sailing with protected anchorages and diversions ashore.

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Skradin, upriver from Sibenik, is an easy one-hour motoring cruise. A pretty destination in its own right with a good ACI (Adriatic Croatia International) marina, it is the departure point for ferry excursions to the much-touted Krka Falls. My friends who take the trip return somewhat underwhelmed by the 12 falls - low-volume steps rather than tall, raging cataracts. Which makes me feel better about loitering with my camera in order to capture a religious procession and the weatherworn, war-weary faces of the rural Croatians.

Spectacular reward

Trogir, 26 miles southeast of Sibenik, is our spectacular reward for enduring all day the Adriatic's spectrum of possible winds - from doldrums and zephyrs to a cranky 20 knot headwind. (The dry northeasterly known as the bora never seems to arrive, even though the locals insist it "always" does.) Karmerlengo Fortress, with a classic, 14th century Crusader-style tower, guards the entrance to Trogir harbour. We moor beside it at a long, flag-stoned quay, just as other mariners have for centuries. Taking just ten paces we enter a medieval labyrinth of Moorish towers, murmured rosaries, tiny shops, cooking aromas, terracotta tiled roofs, church bells, bars, schoolkids and cooing pigeons. Other than the inevitable pizzerias and ice-creameries, much of the old town dates back to the 13th century; in 1997 it was placed on the World Heritage list.

Split, a one-hour bus excursion (or a sailing trip) further south, is the largest city in the southern Adriatic and the second largest in Croatia after the capital Zagreb. Celebrated for its huge, 1700-year old palace of the Roman

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ABOVE: Sailing in company makes for fun passages.

emperor Diocletian, the historic quarter is vast but almost overwhelmed by visitors and locals. Here I grab a strategic table and, over coffee, watch "the natives". I arrive at two fairly basic observations. That the young women are uncommonly beautiful - think of a nation of Cate Blanchets with a propensity for cigarettes and pastries. And that the waiters rarely smile. Perhaps decades of inter-ethnic rivalries have given rise to a lingering wariness - although surely nothing that a team of smile advisors from Thailand couldn't fix in a week.

Aromas of lavender

The island of Hvar, 21 nautical miles further on, is one of the most popular spots in the Adriatic. Aromas of lavender, coffee and salt tell you that there is no motor traffic in its old town. The centrepiece of this mini-Venice is a large piazza, the most beautiful in Dalmatia, where our follies and pieties are overseen by the four-storey bell tower of St Stjepan cathedral. In turn, a medieval citadel on the hill overlooks the town's monasteries, convents and palaces, as well as its cluster of offshore islands. Every structure facing the cobalt blue waters of the harbour seems to be in blinding white marble.

Palmizana marina on pine-clad St Klement Island is just a short distance from Hvar. Here we moor at yet another ACI marina then wander over the hill to Dagmar Meneghello's famous restaurant - it has been there since 1906 on land that has been in the family for 300 years. Huge meals of grilled fish, lamb and squid ink risotto, washed down by pretty ordinary Croatian wine, are the order of the night. The days we spend lazing at anchor and swimming in empty bays where the clarity of the waters is explained, I'm told, by the very low count of algae and weed present in the Adriatic.



LEFT: Lots of happy sailors aboard Red Run.

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Korcula town, on the island of the same name, is our next invasion port. After being becalmed earlier in the day, we swoop into Korcula on good winds for a close finish in front of its towers, turrets and battlements. Reputedly, this was the birthplace (in 1254) of Venetian-Genoese navigator and mega-wanderer Marco Polo. Marco may have been born here - or in several other spots around the Adriatic. What matters more is that this is a place of intricate and beautiful architecture, with spectacular fortifications and meandering, pedestrians-only streets.

Staying longer

As in most Croatian towns, you can check your emails, find accommodation (ranging from minus four star to a rental room in someone's house), eat like a king for a song, do your washing at the marina and wonder why you

“What matters more is that this is a place of intricate and beautiful architecture, with spectacular fortifications.”

aren't staying longer?

Mljet Island reminds us of how history here is as old as myth: this is believed to be where Calypso held Homer's hero Odysseus captive. On this national park island we overnight, moored in gin-clear waters, at the hamlet of Polace where a lovely, melancholy white tower - part of a 4th century Roman garrison - sits beside the shore. Some time during the last 16 centuries, the pragmatic locals drove their bayside road right through the base of the tower. The Mljet school bus today squeezes through the gap, with millimetres separating its mirrors on either side from ancient Rome. The kids, I suspect, never think twice about their close, daily encounter with history.

At Janska Cove we leave behind these dreaming islands and find ourselves again on the mainland of Croatia, the Balkans, Europe proper. We overnight in front of the Kompas Captain's House, the kind of waterfront restaurant that appears strategically out of nowhere on this uncrowded coast - a place where you pick up a lazy line, moor stern-to and step ashore to a flag-stoned pier where, somehow, a shower, a good feed, beer, ice cream and even a decent coffee await you in agreeable ambush.

ABOVE: The streets of Dubrovnik are a fascinating insight into the history of Europe.



LEFT: Making a run ashore for lunch in Palmizana presents a whole new range of possibilities.

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“The result is a coast dotted with walled fortress towns that are a layer cake of history.”

RIGHT: Anyone for lunch? Local seafood is delicious and plentiful.

BELOW: Sun, shelter and swimming along the coast near Palmizana.



Ston is, well, astonishing. We motor north from Janska up the narrow, shallow Stonski Kanal. Passing olive groves and old, labour intensive stone terraces, we are confronted by a 13th century fortress whose twin walls scale a 300 metre hill. This formidable structure guards at its base an ancient town and its once priceless resource, broad salt pans that are still in use today.

Massive walls

Going ashore, we climb the massive walls. Seven metres high and over two metres wide, the crenellated battlements snake to the top of the ridge and descend to the sea on the other side of this Peljesac Peninsula. Ston town, at the foot of the fortress is an odd, bi-polar settlement of decrepitude and lavish reconstruction, of falling-down Byzantine chapels and prosperous corner bars.

Jakljan Island is just one of the 1185 islands of Croatia's coast - only 47 of which are inhabited - but it is the one where we spend the last of our 13 nights on board the yacht. Pine-clad shores, a few buildings by the waterline, the silence of night stars and the inevitable French yacht moored nearby whose occupants inevitably insist on swimming naked. We raft up with one of our fellow regatta yachts and enjoy a large, last supper by pooling our food and sharing the remnants of our wine supplies - “the exchange of boaterly fluids” as someone quips.

Dubrovnik, the best-preserved Venetian walled city in the Mediterranean, is just 15 miles further south. The capricious Adriatic breezes again run out of puff and we motor sedately rather than sail heroically down to this fabled city by the sea. Its massive golden walls glow in the morning sun, parapets bristling with tourists, its shoreline bobbing with swimmers. A giant cruise liner sails into the picture and out again. Above us looms history carved in tears, stone and breath.

The writer and photographer travelled courtesy of Mariner Boating and Lauda Airlines.

ON THE WATER

Flying start

Hitting the starting line for the Croatia Yacht Rally is easy thanks to Lauda Air, as **Trevor Joyce** reports.



ABOVE: Dubrovnik and its ancient waterside attractions is the site of a selection of fine luxury hotels.

GETTING THERE

We flew to Croatia via Vienna, with Lauda, as this proved the most attractive option for access to Croatia. Lauda, which is based in Vienna, currently fly from Australia to Europe seven times a week and will increase its services to nine a week, in June 2004. They are one of only two European carriers still flying into Australia today.

Lauda is the long haul brand of the Austrian Airlines Group, which is comprised of Austrian Airlines, Austrian Arrows (the regional carrier) and Lauda Air. Lauda offers the fastest and easiest way to get to Europe. With only one stop in Kuala Lumpur you land in Vienna in just over 20 hours flying time. Vienna, in 'the heart of Europe', is perfectly positioned as the ideal gateway to Croatia.

Lauda and the Austrian Airlines Group offer great connections to Croatia. You can fly from Vienna directly into Zagreb, Split or Dubrovnik with Austrian Arrows. Or, they can also provide connections and airfares, in conjunction with Croatia Airlines, to fly you into other Croatian cities such as Zadar.

You can choose to fly from Australia straight through to Croatia, or stop for a few days in either Kuala Lumpur or Vienna.

In addition to Croatia, the Austrian Airlines Group can connect you to over 100 other European and Middle Eastern destinations. Their airfare structure gives you the opportunity to buy additional side-trips from Vienna to the rest of Europe at discounted rates, giving you extra flexibility and options.

On our way home from Croatia, we took a train from Vienna to Prague in the Czech Republic. After a few days stay, we flew with Austrian Arrows to Vienna to connect directly with Lauda back to Australia. Others took the hydrofoil down the Danube to Budapest, before flying back to Vienna and then home.

All Lauda flights from Australia are operated with Boeing 777s, which have the very latest in hi-tech in-flight entertainment, with each business class and economy class seat fitted with TV monitor, telephone and entertainment

program.

Lauda is a member of the Star Alliance, and offers 'Miles & More' as its frequent flier program. When you fly with Lauda you can earn reward points through Miles & More, or through any of the Star Alliance Partner programs.

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DUBROVNIK... where hotel beats boat

It's a fact that the best way to experience Croatia is from a yacht. There is an important exception, however, and that is Dubrovnik where the ACI marina is a long way from the main attraction, the medieval walled city and your yacht can give you more "bang for your buck" in other places. At the end of your charter then its best to move to a hotel, jump into the shower for as long as you like, sing all of the arias you can think of and then start exploring.

Then when you want to go to town you just take a bus to the terminal that's right outside the northern gate. The buses operate all through the day and even if you need to move after midnight a cab is only going to cost \$10.

One of Dubrovnik's famous hotels that is set to make a come back is The Dubrovnik Palace. It drips down a steep slope to the water's edge on the peninsula right next to the old city. The Palace unfortunately got hammered during the war so it has been completely rebuilt and only recently opened. Although rated 4 star the Palace will offer the same level of service as its 5 - star sister, the Excelsior.

The Excelsior is the closest of all of the mainstream hotels to the old city and if ever location, location, location was true it is so here. The hotel has three or four terraces and all of them overlook the southern entrance to Dubrovnik and it's only a five-minute walk from the hotel to the southern gate.

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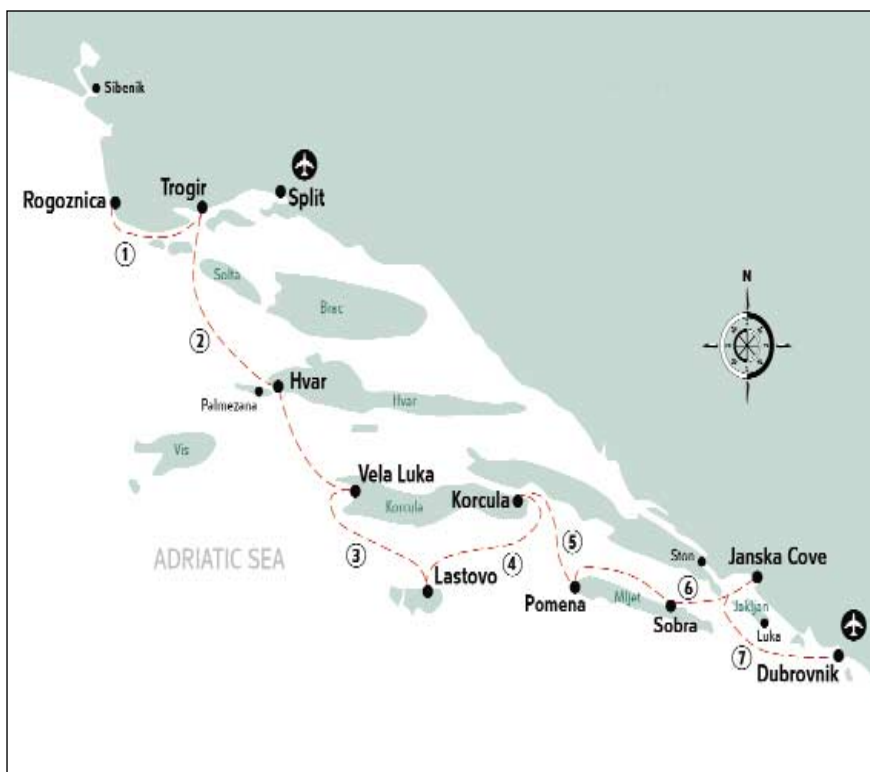
The Croatia Yacht Rally is a cruising regatta with races designed to stimulate the competitive juices without intimidating those with a more passive disposition. This year it will run from 5 - 19 September.

Firstly the event is non-spinnaker and secondly the design of the race courses and the start timing is a function of prevailing conditions, giving rise to the rather improbable prospect of motoring off to the start of a shortened course!

Handicapping is arbitrary although the initial ratings are taken from data published by the French Sailing Federation that rates almost every production boat ever built.

Adjustments are made after each race to reflect performance.

Racing is also designed to be in tune with the prevailing wind conditions, which are generally in the westerly quarter from about midday onwards. A typical race day will therefore involve a lazy start and a cruise to an anchorage in the general direction of the eventual destination, lunch and a swim and then a race over the last 12-15 miles to the party venue!



Date	From	To	At	What's on
5 Sep			Rogoznica	Crews arrive at the charter base and complete embarkation formalities
6 Sep	Rogoznica	Trogir		Race ① – 12 n.m.
7 Sep			Trogir	Lay Day – Trogir is UNESCO listed and nearby Split is also an attractive site seeing option.
8 Sep	Trogir	Hvar		Race ② – 20 n.m. Berthing at the ACI marina at Palmizana
9 Sep			Hvar	Lay Day – There are 21 islands with a host of anchorages in this group. The town of Hvar is also a big magnet.
10 Sep	Vela Luka	Lastova		Race ③ – 15 n.m. After the morning cruise from Hvar and a lunchtime stop in the bay of Vela Luka race to Lastova.
11 Sep			Lastova	There are these excellent anchorages with pristine white-sand beaches.
12 Sep	Lastova	Korcula		Race ④ – 19 n.m. Sail around the eastern end of the island to the ACI marina near the gate to the old city.
13 Sep			Korcula	The town is one of the most famous fortified towns in the Adriatic and a day is easy to lose.
14 Sep	Korcula	Pomona		Race ⑤ – 12 n.m. Pomona is on the island of Mijet, most of which is a national park.
15 Sep			Mijet	Stay in Pomona or cruise around to nearby Polace, a very safe anchorage with some excellent restaurants
16 Sep	Sobra	Janska		Race ⑥ – 12 n.m. Cruise in the morning and then race to Janska after a stop for lunch and a swim.
17 Sep			Janska	Cruise to Ston or to Luka on the island of Jakljan, which also has five very protected pine-clad anchorages
18 Sep	Janska	Dubrovnik		Race ⑦ – 12 n.m. with the finish in front of the walls of the old city.
19 Sep			Dubrovnik	There is an option to extend in Dubrovnik with the hotel accommodation offering the best opportunity to explore this incredible city.