

Cruising the Dalmatian Islands



Avid readers of *"Faith Matters"* will recall that last October Rosemary and I had toured parts of Croatia, Bosnia and Montenegro by coach and had much enjoyed the experience. Our appetite had been whetted by seeing some of the many offshore islands along the coast and when a Saga tour catalogue came through the door we were intrigued to see an all inclusive small boat week's cruise advertised for a modest fee. On booking we learned that such had been the demand another small boat, the 33m MV VAPOR, had been chartered to take two dozen more Saga members.

We checked into Gatwick on 4 May and were struck by the changed attitude of the staff. This must be due to the takeover of the airport by the new management company. We also flew by BA whose cabin crews were between strikes so all was well and we landed at Dubrovnik in good order with a less exciting approach than with Air Croatia the year before. We were met by our Saga rep, Dijana Ikoivic, and taken by coach to Dubrovnik harbour to embark in the VAPOR which turned out to be a trim sparkling white craft with a cheerful crew.



The cabins were small, as we expected, but too small, for one couple who jumped ship later. We set off and passed the attractive Elaphite Islands and secured alongside in the small fishing harbour of Slano. Dijana walked us round the village. As elsewhere there were signs of the vicious war of the 1990s including a striking memorial in the waterfront garden. We re-embarked for free drinks (as throughout the cruise) and a homely meal cooked by the Captain's wife.

We were up betimes for breakfast and a prompt departure for Korčula; one of the larger islands in the Adriatic reputedly the birthplace in 1254 of

the famous traveller Marco Polo. As we approached the town quay we passed shipbuilding yards and signs of prosperity. In the afternoon we had a guided tour of the Old Town surrounded by 13th Century fortifications built by the Venetians including some intriguing half round towers. It must have been more economical to build them like that.



The next day we sailed along the coast to Makarska; a sheltered harbour on the mainland guarded by a striking bronze statue of St Peter pointing inwards with one hand and clutching a key in the other.

The next day we headed for the island of Brac where John Blake was killed in 1944, whose death is commemorated by the fine oak lectern in our Church (I wrote the circumstances up in the July 2003 edition of *"Faith Matters"*). Brac is famed for the high quality white limestone which has been quarried for centuries at the entrance to the creek leading to the village of Pucisca. The White House in Washington and the Royal Palace in Stockholm, as well as Diocletian's Palace in Split and the Vienna and Budapest Parliaments, are all faced with stone from Pucisca. We secured alongside and were taken to the Stonemason's School where up to 56 students at a time are taught the manual skills of working in this striking stone.



That afternoon we left for Split which was crowded for a festival. Most of our fellow passengers went for the tour around the Palace which we had visited last year but we toured the myriad of stalls in the market. That evening we were treated to a spectacular firework display. Next day we made the long passage to Hvar where we berthed alongside the town square. On visiting the Church we saw the flower arrangers busy preparing impressive displays for a ceremony to come which gladdened Rosemary's heart.

On the penultimate day we left early for *"one of the most beautiful islands in the world"*; Mljet. This is a wooded island encircling two salty lakes entailing a longish walk to the second lake where we embarked in a small boat and were taken to an island on which was a former monastery. All very attractive. On return we dropped behind the rest of our party and it was touching that the two deckhands were watching to help us across the several similar craft to which the VAPOR rafted up. Next morning we were away heading back to our berth in the Dubrovnik harbour. We had been round this splendid city before but took the opportunity to complete our circuit of the southern walls. All very impressive. The next day our coach took us to the airport for our flight back to the much improved Gatwick. It was a week well spent in the loveliest surroundings.

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