

To Dubrovnik and the Croatian Coast

After a tedious start from Gatwick we landed at Dubrovnik airport and were taken by our Riviera Travel tour Manager, Andrew, by coach driven by the redoubtable Stephan to our hotel at Drvenic some 3 hours north along the coast. This was to be our base for the next three days. That night the wind blew gale force from the rocky heights behind the hotel and left a turbulent sea. Next day we were driven along the coast and North to the Krka valley, a National Park where the river cascades through a marshy valley, traversed by wooden walkways, before tumbling into a pool. Here Rosemary swam to be told by Andrew she was only the second in his experience to do so; the first being an American.



From here we took a boat down to near the mouth of the river where our coach collected us.

The next day we were driven back along the coast to Split where we were guided through the Emperor Diocletian's Palace; a vast walled town still occupied by residents living above the vaults which had been cleared of an accumulation of ordure to disclose the most delicate Roman brickwork. We emerged on the East side to find a large statue to the Bishop who had obtained a dispensation to allow the Mass to be said in Croatian instead of Latin in the middle ages. The Italian occupiers had ordered the statue to be removed. It was cut up and stored until after WWII when it was resurrected and now its feet are highly polished by passers by seeking good luck.



Bishop of Nin

Then further North to the medieval fortress of Trogir noted for the ornate archway into its church.

Back in our hotel we packed our bags ready for a move into Dubrovnik the next day. On the way we entered Bosnia-Herzegovina to visit the ancient town of Mostar seeing the battle scarred buildings from the savage war of the 1990's. Here we saw the striking bridge between the Christian and Muslim halves of the town which had been rebuilt by UNESCO and opened by our own Prince Charles. We learned that of the many contributions to heal the scars of war the greatest contribution had come from Spain.



We settled into our new hotel. A large but better run place than before and the next day we had a guided tour of the striking walled city of Dubrovnik. Thankfully no cruise ships were in but it was still fairly crowded. There were many fine

buildings to be seen. Perhaps the most memorable was where the archives are stored commemorating the many citizens who had died under the combined assaults of Serbia and Montenegro. This included a TV screen showing the shelling and buildings burning. After a pleasant meal in an attractive harbour we climbed up and went round half the high walls to look down on the roofs contrasting the different coloured tiles where the many had been replaced with those made from clay from Toulouse! Throughout this city which had suffered so much in the recent war was rebuilt and pristine except for one wall on which was inscribed in black spray paint IRA Belfast. What feelings the perpetrators hoped to arouse I know not apart from disgust.

The next day we decided to take a boat trip round the three Elafiti islands. The boat pulled into a ramshackle jetty near the hotel and instead of a safety briefing the skipper offered each of us a slug of firewater; a novel experience. Passing the third island we saw a new cross on the shore with flowers and a wreath. We were told five Croatians had been killed there by the Serbs. All three islands were attractive and we went to Lopud Island for a pleasant lunch where Rosemary had her third swim (that in the hotel pool had been freezing). Here we learned the true use of the canvas structures shaped like a French pissoire: they were for changing in! Then back to our hotel seeing a vast cruise ship berthed in the creek by the striking new bridge named after the Croatian President who had seen his country through the recent war.

On our final day we went south into Montenegro. Having split from Serbia it is now Europe's newest country. As no love is lost between Croatia and this neighbour the frontier was strictly controlled. The countryside became greener and soon we were on the banks of the large inland sea surrounded by 8,000 ft mountains. Unfortunately one of our fellow travellers was very ill here and it was a little while before our driver could pull in by a restaurant car park. After some time the victim emerged seemingly wearing a pair of the anxious restaurateur's trousers. One felt for both of them. We then stopped by the ancient walled city of Budva which contained many strikingly beautiful buildings. Then on to Kotor, another

walled town with signs of its history displayed in an interesting maritime museum. We returned across the inland sea by vehicle ferry and so back to our hotel to prepare for an early start the next morning.

This time we were due to leave early to catch our Croatian Airlines plane back to Gatwick where reality kicked in with a very long walk to immigration control and so to find our car. It had been a lovely well organised holiday to see a fascinating part of Europe.

Peter Thomas

