



Dubrovnik, Without THE Crowds

WHATEVER YOUR PLEASURE—
HISTORY, POP CULTURE
OR JUST PURE BEAUTY—
CROATIA HOLDS WHAT
YOU'RE LOOKING FOR IN AN
UNFORGETTABLE JOURNEY.

By Shayne Benowitz



LEFT TO RIGHT: The spectacular view of the city from one of Hotel Excelsior's suites; Old Town cuts a striking profile against the Adriatic Sea; it's also the departure point for kayak tours just outside the city walls; another hotel with paradisiacal amenities is Villa Orsula.



Spend Your Mornings on the Adriatic

While there's plenty to discover in the Old Town, the Adriatic Sea holds equal intrigue in Dubrovnik. Not only will you beat the crowds by spending your mornings on the sea, but you'll also beat the heat, which can rise to 90 degrees during the summer months. The Adriatic, however, averages about 77 degrees this time of year, making it eternally refreshing. Banje Beach is located just east of the Old Town with a beach club onsite where you can rent lounge chairs and daybeds or simply unroll a towel and take a dip.

This is also the departure point of a three-hour kayak tour past the city walls and around nearby Lokrum Island (+385 98 344 231; ivo_golik@hotmail.com; about \$30). While there are many kayak tour operators, the Banje Beach tour seemed to cater more to local tourists than cruise ship passengers. I was the only person on the 10 am trip I signed up for and ended up with a private tour by default. My guide Dražen was friendly and informative and, as we encountered other large groups floating together on similar tours, I felt lucky to be without a crowd. We paddled inside caves and past a funny nude beach on Lokrum Island and back to the mainland to swim and snorkel cliffside at a lovely cove accessible only by sea. You can also visit Lokrum by water taxi where there's plenty to discover throughout the nature preserve, including a botanical garden, saltwater lake and Benedictine monastery.

I stayed at the grand dame Hotel Excelsior (adriaticluxuryhotels.com/en/hotel-excelsior-dubrovnik; rates from \$320 per night), built in 1913, just east of Banje Beach, and the limestone swimming platform with a saltwater pool carved into the Adriatic was about as close to heaven as it gets for a leisurely morning under the sun. Many other Dubrovnik hotels on the Adriatic have similarly paradisiacal set ups that I think French Riviera-loving F. Scott Fitzgerald would approve of, including nearby boutique Villa Orsula and Grand Villa Argentina.

Yes —the medieval walled city of Croatia's Dubrovnik

has been discovered. During peak season, which runs from May to August, cruise ships and tour buses offload hoards of tourists daily who stream through the quaint, cobblestone streets of the pedestrian Old Town. If you let that fact alone deter you from visiting, though, you're making a huge mistake.

Dubrovnik is drop-dead gorgeous—and it's still possible to navigate around the masses and experience the charms of this ancient Central European city perched on the Adriatic Sea. With its chalky-white limestone façades and orange terra cotta tile roofs dating back to the 11th century, Dubrovnik's Old Town cuts a striking profile against the crisp, emerald sea. The spectacle extends to the dramatic and otherworldly Elaphiti Islands and Pelješac Peninsula, with their rolling topography piercing the horizon.

Dubrovnik is a fascinating place for history buffs as well as pop culture fanatics. (The walled city is a famed filming location for the rabidly popular television show *Game of Thrones*.) Croatia was part of one of the most complex and bloody civil wars of the modern era with the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the Croatian War of Independence, fought from 1991 to 1995. Today, though, it leads a peaceful existence bordered by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Hungary, Serbia and Montenegro. With Italy just across the Adriatic, Dubrovnik has had a longstanding relationship with Venice since the 1200s as both its sovereignty and a seafaring rival. As a result, Venetian influences can be felt in everything from the city's famous architecture to its food. Here's your guide to exploring Dubrovnik's natural beauty, historic intrigue and local character sans crowds.



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Buza, which means “hole in the wall,” is a nightspot that shouldn’t be missed; scale the city walls and walk Old Town above the rooftops for breathtaking views; the War Photo Limited Gallery is one of the most intriguing attractions and is open until 10 pm nightly.



the Israel-Lebanon conflict in 2006 and the Balkan Route where many Syrian and Afghan refugees are currently fleeing. The gallery artfully explores the consequences of war by shedding a chilling light on humanity that we so often miss in daily news stories and headlines.

The limestone-paved Stradun, polished to a shiny glow by centuries of foot traffic, is Old Town’s main thoroughfare. At night, under the stars, terraces are filled with locals enjoying a glass of wine from one of the Pelješac Peninsula’s wineries or an aperitif of rakija liqueur, an herbaceous fruit brandy produced locally. Try La Bodega or D’Vino for wine in a buzzy setting, Troubador for live jazz and Kamenice (which translates to oyster) for local Mali Ston oysters and a piping hot plate of green tagliatelle pasta with shrimp in a white wine cream sauce. For a sample of Bosnian fare, seek out (the curiously named) Taj Mahal restaurant and order the house specialty of veal and turkey prepared with mushrooms and cheese stuffed inside flaky pastry dough. Other popular restaurants include Rozario and Lady PiPi for fresh fish, Bota for oysters and sushi, Lokanda for mussels and views of the marina and Gradska Kavana Arsenal, perfect for a lunchtime break in a chic atmosphere.

One spot that must not be missed is Buza, which means “hole in the wall” and is accessed literally through a hole in the city wall revealing a swimming cove with café tables perched along the craggy cliffs. If you’re a true night owl, Club Revelin is a high-energy nightclub built into a 500-year-old fortress that’s constantly on DJ Mag’s Top 100 list. 🍸

IF YOU GO

Add Island Hopping to the Itinerary

With a handle on Old Town, the Adriatic is calling once again. Island hopping is a way of life along Dubrovnik’s Dalmatian Coast and there are countless options for chartering a yacht for full- and half-day visits (through calvadosclub.com) to the Pelješac Peninsula and islands of Hvar, Mljet or Korcula, which is purported to be the birthplace of Marco Polo. You’ll encounter unspoiled beaches, local wineries, olive groves and oyster farms along the way.

For the truly outward bound, you may wish to embark on a sailing vacation with a weeklong charter through the Sailing Collective (from \$2,600 per person; sailingcollective.com) from nearby Split.

Stay in the Lapad District

For return visitors or those who simply want a more local experience, opt to stay at the luxurious, newly renovated boutique Hotel Kompas (adriaticluxuryhotels.com/en/hotel-kompas-dubrovnik; rates from \$252 per night) in the Lapad District, a tranquil and chic residential neighborhood positioned around Lapad Bay. Old Town is a 15-minute drive from here, but there’s plenty of dining and entertainment along the bayside pedestrian promenade.

Visit in the Shoulder Season

Early May, late September and October.

Brave Old Town After 4 pm

Once I was invigorated by the cool saltwater and freshly showered, Hotel Excelsior proved to be the perfect embarkation point to discover everything Dubrovnik has to offer on foot. The city walls of Old Town are reachable in about 10 minutes and after 4 p.m., the cruise ships and tour buses have left for the day, leaving the town blessedly approachable and easy to navigate. One of the best ways to take in the beauty is by scaling the city walls for a mile-and-a-quarter walk circumnavigating Old Town above the rooftops (there’s a \$17 entrance fee). With 360-degree views of the limestone city with its medieval architecture, its rocky coast and the ever-glistening Adriatic, it’s almost too much to behold.

For another sweeping vantage point, make your way to the cable car north of Old Town (\$17 round trip) for a journey to the top of Srd Mountain before sunset, where you can enjoy bird’s-eye views of the city below. At 1,350 feet high, Srd has been a stronghold for Dubrovnik since the Napoleonic Wars of the early 1800s, and Fort Imperial, built during that time period, still stands today. You can also walk along trenches dug into the cliffs during the Siege of Dubrovnik, one of the fiercest battles during the Croatian War of Independence.

To understand the city’s long and complex history, I highly recommend arranging a private tour with the charming historian and guide Aljoša Lečić of Calvados Club Luxury & Experiential Travel (from \$142; calvadosclub.com).

Stay Out Late

One of the most fascinating attractions in Old Town is the War Photo Limited Gallery (\$6 entry fee; warphotold.com), which is open until 10 pm nightly, so you can swing by after sunset and have the place practically to yourself. “Ex-Yugoslavia” is the permanent exhibition illustrating the breakup of the former Yugoslavia through chilling photojournalism and multi-media video, while “Under Siege: Dubrovnik 1991” offers a look into the months-long siege in Dubrovnik during the War of Independence with photographs of the Old Town ablaze and men defending their city in little more than blue jeans and a rifle. Other recent exhibits have covered the war in Central African Republic in 2013,



LEFT TO RIGHT: The limestone-paved Stradun has been polished to a sheen thanks to centuries of foot traffic; Korcula is purported to be the birthplace of Marco Polo.