

Dalmatian

AN INTIMATE CRUISER IS THE PERFECT WAY TO REALLY EXPLORE THE PRISTINE ISLANDS, BEACHES
AND MEDIEVAL SPLENDOURS OF CROATIA'S DALMATIAN COAST, WRITES **JANE CORNWELL**.

discovery

TAKE ME THERE

Peregrin Adventures' eight-day Croatia Coastal Cruising trip costs from \$2503 per person. See peregrineadventures.com for more information.



Left: The port city of Split is a tourist hub. Right: *Peka* is a traditional slow-cooked Croatian dish, in this case with octopus.



Croatia

Anyone born near the sea in Croatia knows how to recognise the different winds that blow. “You have come during the perfect period,” says our driver, Ivano, as we speed out of Split, the blue-green Adriatic Sea glittering to the left, a hot summer sun flaring on the windscreen. “Right now, we have our wonderful breeze, the mistral. It is good for clearing hangovers, and also for sailing.”

Sailing is what they do a lot of around here, and it's easy to see why. The Dalmatian Coast – or the Adriatic Riviera – stretches 350 kilometres from the Istrian Peninsula in the north to the border with Montenegro in the south. All mountains, bays and islands (around 1200 of them) sprouting pine forests, olive groves and centuries-old harbour towns, it's a region of great beauty and historical interest.

Summertime is when the tourist hordes descend, pouring off the apartment-block-style cruise ships that dock in cities such as Split, where we fly into, and the World-Heritage-listed Dubrovnik, where we'll fly out of once we've spent a week meandering south on our small cruiser, Peregrine Dalmatia, visiting off-the-track places and enjoying warm local welcomes. There's just 30 of us, including our Croatian captain and crew, a nothing's-too-much-trouble bunch with insider know-how, jokes and a knack for making a mean cocktail.

Our 40-metre motor-cruiser was built in 2012 specifically for cruising the Dalmatian coast, but this is the first time Peregrine Adventures has chartered it for

“We feast on seafood plucked from the remarkably transparent Adriatic.”

a cruise. We meet the Peregrine Dalmatia in Sibenik, an hour's drive north of Split and a waterfront locale with a medieval warren of stone steps and alleys.

A plus for Australians on this adventure is that Peregrine falls under the aegis of the Melbourne-based Intrepid Group, the world's largest small-group adventure travel company.

Mindful of the ever-increasing popularity of cruising – and the downsides of holidaying on a liner with 4000 other people – the company has applied its signature style to the cruise industry. The destination is what matters, they say, with the focus is off the boat.

Still, the Peregrine Dalmatia, with its sleek lines and brass handrails, is as refined as its name implies and has a wooden deck aft for diving off. The cabins are on the small side (while nice, this is not extreme luxury). Nevertheless, they have good storage space, tinted windows, and, as I discover too late, a public address system on the wall behind my pillow.

The first announcement comes on

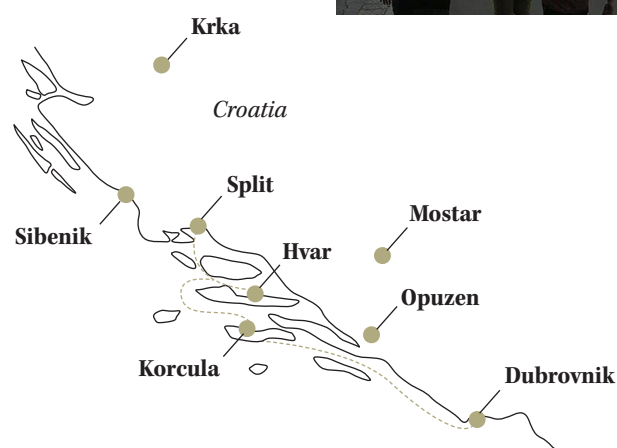
our first morning of sailing, delivered at full volume: “THE BUS IS LEAVING FOR KRKA.” Well, at least it got me out of bed.

A little more than 10 kilometres inland from Sibenik, Krka National Park is a sprawling 142-square-kilometre expanse of nature trails, tumbling waterfalls and stunning if chilly aquamarine lakes, one of which we gasp in as we paddle alongside hundreds of happily splashing families. Two-thirds of the great Krka River flows within the park's boundaries before emptying into the long, narrow Bay of Sibenik. Back on board the Peregrine Dalmatia, we set out for the so-called queen of the Dalmatian Islands, Hvar.

While more than 80 per cent of Croatia's islands have no people on them, Hvar is teeming with party-loving, gelato-licking, selfie-stick-wielding life. Or at least it is in Hvar town, which has traffic-free streets of marble and a swanky yacht-lined promenade with pricey cafes overlooked by a looming medieval fortress. The Peregrine Dalmatia can reach ports that other cruises can't, so we've berthed at Hvar Island's enchanting second town, Stari Grad. After visiting a lavender farm (just us, monitored by two mongeese, several donkeys and an old red dog) in the island's typically Mediterranean interior, we dine al fresco in a restaurant courtyard strewn with grapevines.

We eat well, both on board and off, feasting on fish and seafood plucked from the remarkably transparent Adriatic; nearly 100 of Croatia's beaches have been awarded Blue Flag status by the Foundation for Environmental Education.

Opposite page: The Peregrine Dalmatia stops for a mid-morning break so passengers can enjoy the sparkling waters of the Dalmatian Coast.



GO TO GUIDE

The cruiser

Peregrine Dalmatia has 17 cabins for 32 passengers. Each cabin has airconditioning/heating, a flat screen TV, plus en suite.

The experience

Extreme comfort meets no frills or fuss. My fellow guests were friendly and well travelled, mostly in the 45-plus age range. A series of on board dinners had people mingling and exchanging stories and email addresses.

Best spot on board

With a bar and loungers, the cruiser's sun deck is the perfect place to sit, especially in the evenings with freshly grilled fish al fresco.

Not so sure about

The bathrooms are elbow-bumpingly small. And don't forget to pull down the blind at night if you don't want passersby waving as you sit on the loo. There's no swimming pool on board, but plenty of sea to jump into.

What to pack

I spent most of the cruise in shorts and T-shirt.

What to read

Start with George R.R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*; much of the television series was filmed in Croatia.

Don't-miss stops ashore

Massimo Bar atop the old medieval Zakerjan Tower in Korcula and the lovely Konoba Mate eatery in the same town.

Above: Local legend has it that Venetian explorer Marco Polo was born in Korcula. Above right: Don't miss visiting Massimo bar atop the medieval Zakerjan Tower in Korcula.

"Every country in Europe is jealous of our clean water," says Ivano. There's meat too: *peka*, a slow-cooked lamb dish made with potatoes and other vegetables, and the typical red-wine-and-prunes-stewed beef delicacy known as *pasticada*, to be found on the menu of almost every traditional *konoba* (tavern).

In Opuzen, a town on the banks of the Neretva River near the border of Bosnia-Herzegovina, we pile into a small wooden boat and drift serenely through vast wetlands, spotting egrets, herons and an eagle, wheeling in the sky.

A restaurant, looming on a reedy bend, serves us – just us – the local specialty: frogs' legs grilled in garlic, or wrapped in bacon then smothered in gorgonzola sauce and deep fried, each dish resembling little pairs of high-waisted pants. Shots of *rakija*, the country's fierce fruit brandy, chase them down the hatch.

Back in Opuzen we dock and swim, joined by a giggling gang of local 10-year-olds and serenaded by an adolescent musician wielding a traditional single-stringed *gusle*, his bow carved to resemble a snake and lyrics telling either of warriors from battles long gone or bigging up the heroes of the Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995).

Reminders of this brutal, bitter war, which followed 50 years of communism and saw the break-up of Yugoslavia, are everywhere. There are bullet holes in the door of the cathedral in Split, and

rubble below Dubrovnik's indisputably spectacular city walls marks the areas restoration work has failed to reach.

Outsider art adorns the projectile-pocked walls of Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a riverside town whose legendary 16th-century bridge – a 28-metre arabesque over the Neretva – was destroyed by Croatian shells in 1993.

Rebuilt a decade later, the spectacular edifice is again a major attraction. Clutching our passports, we take an early morning bus over the border and arrive before the hottest part of the day, when the tourist buses arrive and fit-looking local men in budgie smugglers are wont to dive off the bridge, 20 metres up, for money.

We get plenty of rest time, too. There are swim stops in deserted little bays, where we chill in deckchairs, the ice in our G&Ts tinkling, or do laps of the boat.

After a seafood lunch onboard we cruise to Korcula, the sixth-largest Adriatic island and one of the most picturesque, with its dense pine forests and pebble beaches. It was here, in Korcula town, a medieval nirvana of squares, spires and stone houses with red-tiled roofs, that Marco Polo, then a young wannabe explorer, liked to sit up in the skinny stone tower attached to (what may or may not have been) his parents' house, watching the trading ships come in.

"The Italians say that Marco Polo was born in Venice but we Croatians know that



“Fit-looking local men are wont to dive off the bridge for money.”

he was born here in 1254, in that house,” says our chatty and knowledgeable crewmate, Dinko. “He was always talking to sailors and getting the travel bug.”

We are perusing the town’s narrow stone streets – laid out like a fishbone, Dinko tells us, to redirect the wind – when we happen upon a tower of our own.

Zakerjan Tower houses an outdoor bar named Massimo, which we reach after climbing a steep and rather precarious ladder. We order a round of cocktails over the ambient music wafting from a sound system, then another round as the sun

sets gold, red and orange over the sea. Unsurprisingly, climbing down proves much harder than climbing up.

There are other discoveries: Konoba Mate is a family-run restaurant in the tiny village of Pupnat (population 500), high up in the hills above Korcula town.

Owners Mirjana Farac and her farmer husband Mate are old friends of Dinko’s, though the produce they (or more specifically, their son and daughter) bring to a handful of tables on a shady patio attracts foodies from all over Europe. No wonder: there are

Above left: Mostar’s beautiful old bridge was rebuilt after the Bosnian War of the 1990s. Above right: Swimmers enjoy Krka National Park in the Dalmatian hinterland. Below: The Peregrine Dalmatia in the calm waters of the Adriatic.

plates of grilled vegetables, omelettes with asparagus, and figs stuffed with ricotta made from goat’s milk or wrapped in prosciutto blankets. There is grilled lamb and chicken, and fish cooked with onions, olives and fresh-picked sprigs of rosemary. There is cake, rakija and wine.

The Dalmatian Coast turns out to be an oenophile’s paradise, what with its long, hot dry summers and short, mild, wet winters providing ideal conditions for grapevines nestled on jagged slopes, the salty breeze rustling their leaves.

One of the region’s best-known reds (made from small, blue grapes) is *plavac mali* (literally, “little blue”), a wine rich in taste and high in alcohol. I try a local, dry white called *posip*, which has an intense aroma and a flavour not unlike apricots and figs.

I wake to find the Peregrine Dalmatia moving steadily through the water, having left early to cruise to Dubrovnik. The sun is out, as it has been all week, and I can see the tops of pine trees as we pass a nearby island, then another. With a twinge in my head after one glass of posip too many, I shower then take my coffee upstairs to the top deck. All around me, the sea ripples and glints.

There, ensconced on a lounger, I let the mistral do its work.

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The writer was a guest of Peregrine Adventures.

