

Escape: Short haul



A group tour from Split to Dubrovnik is a joy at every turn – and brings friendly travellers together

Join the A-team in Croatia

Sun and smiles: Korcula island beach is a great place to explore with new friends Picture: GETTY

by JOSA KEYES

EVER since I read Illyrian Spring, a racy 1930s romance set in Croatia, the country has held an allure. Unlike heroine Lady Kilmichael, though, I don't have time to float around all summer in search of enlightenment

and romance with a much younger guy (I wish). Instead, I've joined an eight-day 'Split to Dubrovnik' group tour from Intrepid Travel, a popular operator for solo travellers: more than half their customers go it alone. Over a Croatian speciality, the Hugo spritzer (prosecco, elderflower cordial and fizzy water), our amazing team bonds. There are two Australian couples in their late 60s; Jenny, a well-travelled Australian nurse in her 40s; two American couples, one in their 60s, one in their early 20s; and a New Zealand couple in their 50s. Oh, and me, too. We hear tales of exciting escapes from

perilous situations in remote places, and swap safety tips for lone women abroad.

Jenny, an inveterate solo traveller, also has good advice for newbie singletons like me. Always stay in small hotels where they will know you are travelling alone.

You don't expect a holiday romance — the men are all partnered up — but warm friendships quickly develop and us singles are constantly invited on off-piste mini expeditions, mostly involving drinks.

There's some old-fashioned 'gallantry', and one wife in particular has a hilarious way of rolling her eyes, but there's no tension.

Our tour guide is Daniela Bajic Kovacic, born in Split, whose playful attitude and kindness belie the streak of steel required to keep us in order.

On our first evening, we dive into traditional Croatian food and drink at Ostarija u Vidjakovi, a quirky tavern in Split. It's all red-and-white gingham tablecloths, agricultural equipment hanging from the walls and old black-and-white photographs of misty-eyed Yugoslavian actors.

WE ARE introduced enthusiastically to *rakija*, a delicious aperitif that's both a local obsession and soon a running theme of our tour. Families have their own jealously guarded recipes and distil *rakija* from pressed grapes left over from wine-making.

It's then infused with anything from cherries to walnuts and carob (Daniela's favourite).

The table is soon heaving with robust local specialities. The centrepiece is *pasticada*, a deliriously rich dish: beef marinated in vinegar and cooked with sweet wine, garlic and plums. It's served with gnocchi stained black with squid ink, as well as cuttle fish with broad beans.

Split is a fascinating mix of Roman buildings and later dwellings, squeezed tightly within the walls of Croatian-born Emperor Diocletian's huge retirement palace, with its huge vaulted basement that will be recognisable to

Game Of Thrones fans as the lair of Daenerys Targaryen's dragons.

The pleasure here is to wander the pale Roman pavements, stopping for coffee and cake or to admire ancient arches disappearing through walls into people's homes, 2,000-year-old pillars and even older Egyptian sphinxes imported by the emperor.

Dinners are communal and sociable. In Split, I learn a new word over one meal: 'dallies' — immigrants from this Dalmatian coast to New Zealand in the 1920s. Their descendants with us on the Intrepid trip have come partially to uncover their long-lost roots.

From Split, we take a ferry to Lastovo, a tiny and quiet island with its main town hidden from pirates up in the hills.

Waking up to a glorious sea view, we set out with Helena and Ivica Lesic on their boat for a day of exploration, fishing, and eating the ultra-fresh catch cooked on board.

It's no exaggeration to say Intrepid has helped transform the couple's lives in the past few years. Previously, Helena used to wait anxiously on land for her husband as he navigated the over-fished waters in all weathers just to scrape a living.

Now, she's out with him during the extended season, regaling us with her homemade orange, lemon and ginger *rakija*, explaining life on a tiny island, and introducing us to the mysterious Yugoslav submarine tunnels where we picnic on the boat out of the rain.

On Lastovo, our group further bonds as we grab rubbish sacks and clear a nearby beach of plastic, gossiping as we bend and gather. When we finish, the beach looks a lot better than before.

A quick ferry hop takes us onward from Lastovo to Korcula.

The old town here sticks out like a fat thumb into the sea, full of unexpected pleasures, from a froggy fountain to the fishbone patterns of the narrow alleys designed to trap cooling sea breezes.

I've briefly had enough socialising, so I wander off alone to immerse myself in the atmosphere and drink a glass of the grassy

local white wine — Posip Jezina, Krajanic 2022 — on the waterfront.

Back on the mainland, we go for a delicious tasting at a family wine co-operative at Ston; local grape growers bring their crop here for collective wine-making.

Then we feast on the late President Tito's favourite oysters at the Konoba Bakus restaurant before driving along the winding coast road to Dubrovnik.

Here, we climb the city walls, looking out to sea and inwards at the new bright orange tiles that far outnumber the older weathered roofs; a sign of brave regeneration after Dubrovnik's bombardment in the 1991 civil war.

On the final evening, we're driven up to the hilltop Napoleonic defences for a fine view over the Old Town and across the shining Adriatic Sea. And next up is our last supper.

AFTER kicking off with *rakija*, we indulge in veal, lamb and potatoes traditionally cooked under iron domes heaped with burning embers to add a delicious smokiness. This feast is accompanied by even more stories.

But one sticks out. A young American in the group suddenly reveals he has family roots in Serbia — the traditional foe of Croatia — and says he's here to disprove ancient enmities.

Croatia is quite different to your average Mediterranean destination, offering so many fresh experiences. And, for the solo traveller, it delivers great company when you want it, or positive solitude when you don't.

TRAVEL FACTS

EIGHT-day Split to Dubrovnik tours from £2,076pp B&B including hotels, transfers, guided tours, three dinners, one lunch;

maximum group size is 12 (intrepidtravel.com). Single supplement £825. None if you share a room with another solo traveller of the same gender or you are the only solo traveller.

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