



Croatia

Jewel of the Adriatic

The Adriatic Sea is a body of water steeped in stories of ancient battle between Romans, Greeks and all others in between. One country which has had a cliffside seat on such proceedings for oh... say... the last 3,000 years is Croatia.

Having been occupied, defeated, populated, decimated and resurrected more times than any of us could count, it once again has regained its crown as one of the truly enchanting jewels of world travel.

If one were to try and understand Croatia, then one analogy might be to compare it to a centuries-old crock pot full of individual seasonings that have simmered and transformed into that special flavour that your taste buds can't quite identify, but can't stop sampling.

As one of six regions that were lumped together to form the doomed Yugoslavia, Croatia likens itself these days to that far flung

western cousin who wants to join in on the "cool kids" party. In fact, it is scheduled to join the European Union in 2010, making it an official Euro hot spot. Not that it isn't now...

These days, the interlopers who touch today's Croatian soil are armed heavily with credit cards and cameras. Thousands of knowing travellers have been coming here for years to savour the culture and it is indeed rich.

Predominantly Catholic, Croatia lies across the Adriatic Sea at the upper back of Italy's boot. Its boomerang shape sees one side spraying down the coast stretching towards southward Greece, while the other side juts inland besides neighbours Slovenia, Hungary, Italy, Austria, Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina. The war being now over for over ten years, yes, it is indeed a safe place to be.

Suffice it to say, that there is no way we can adequately capture all of Croatia's spirit and mesmerizing trappings so, it's best to concentrate on a few key spots.

The interior and the north are interesting places, with Zagreb a bright light on anyone's radar, but most people gravitate towards the Adriatic coast, where history and a thousand sun drenched islands beckon.

Two cities of note here are the architecturally stunning Dubrovnik with its Old Town walled charm and artistic chops, and up the coastline, the lively city of Split, which is alluring in its own right, but also acts as a jumping off point for many island excursions. One other little

hideaway that we'll mention here is the charming coastal town of Trogir.

Though Mljet certainly has its unbothered magic, the three islands that most people talk about are Vis, Brač and Hvar. Vis has been open to the public for less than 20 years and doesn't have the big resort feel that her two lovely sisters sometimes do. However, it is very diverse with many landmarks bearing the styles of the civilizations who built them.

Brač is larger in size and definitely is more geared towards the visiting hordes! There are a number of fishing villages to poke around in but, with the island's main export being the fabulous stone that is used in building those stunning Adriatic structures, staying on the coastline is your best bet.

On the other hand, Hvar Island is a go-to place for most of the "beautiful people" crowd and they accept the raging masses with great panache. The greenest and sunniest of the islands, it is just so easy to melt away into the sunset here at a charismatic café with a plate of seafood pasta. A cool place to stay here? The only Croatian entry into the Small Luxury Hotels of the World... the Riva. Right on the waterfront and with funky cool interiors, it is right in the heart of Hvar Town and all those sunglasses-clad faux celebs.

A country of infinite wisdom, historic significance and breath grabbing scenery, Croatia certainly flies under the North American radar, but that will more than likely change dramatically in a very short time!