CROATIA – A BRIEF GLIMPSE

Emerald green pine trees and bright green painted window shutters. Did you know the shutters are painted green because that colour repels flies?

Sapphire blue skies and ocean.

White stonewalls and white craggy mountaintops.
Burnt orange tiled roofs and bright orange honeysuckle vines.

These are the four main colours I associate with the Croatian coastal landscape.

Everywhere we visit is centuries old. Our new friends who look after us ever so well, Bartul and Deni, Gita and Marco, live in stone houses which are many hundreds of years old.

Far from the madding crowds, off the beaten tracks, in the middle of nowhere, we stumbled across Istarske Toplice, a crumbling castle. Just below this ruin was Konoba Petrapilosa. Not good coffee, but what a find.

Hotel Mozart awaited us on OPATIJA RIVIERA. Soft pink hues matching the setting sun, the hotel building took us back to the old world glitz and glamour of the early 1900’s. From our central balcony overlooking the Adriatic we watched the day unfold.
Begun in 1885 and completed in 1911, the 12 km Promenade connects the old Sanatoriums of yesteryear with the harbour, hotels and villas. We dined at Hotel Milenji, serenaded by local Croatian singers and dancers.

We returned to our favourite apartment, Villa Grisia, in the medieval village of ROVINJ. Two years ago, after spending a fabulous month there, we knew we would return at some time. Nothing had changed. The market ladies, the stall owners, the restaurant owners were still the same. The only difference was we missed the company of Viane and Jim.
It was fun to return to our favourite haunts, including Café Batana, Red Island (the water was a little cool!), and having sunset drinks at Restaurant Puntalina, with the batana plying the waters, super yachts in the harbour and balancing tables and chairs on the rickety cobblestones.

We celebrated my birthday at “Dreams”, one of our favourite restaurants.

On our return to Villa Grisia at about 9.30pm we found champagne and flowers poked through the wrought iron gate. Rajko and Nada had driven from Lucia to surprise us! We phoned them. They were only a few minutes walk away, so returned and we polished off the champagne under the stars on our own patio. And then I was serenaded with “Happy Birthday”. We shared a splendid evening with two very special friends. We continue to make magical memories.
Tucked away in high-forested areas of the Karst are 16 blue and green lakes. It is not until one walks along steep wooded trails that you first glimpse the fringe of the lakes of **PLITIVICKA JEZERA NATIONAL PARK**.

Linked together with foaming cascades, pounding waterfalls, gentle brooks and swiftly flowing streams, the lakes are like a fairyland. Aqua blue, emerald green, moss green, sky blue - words cannot describe the sheer beauty of these crystal clear waters. We walked over rough-hewn wooden walkways and bridges criss-crossing the lakes. Sometimes Johno was hidden from sight by tall rushes or overhanging foliage. Myriads of fluttering butterflies flitted through the bush, while silvery brown trout swam near the surface, competing with the ducks for a few morsels of food. The trails are well marked and well worn by thousands of visitors, yet overall there was an idyllic feeling of peace and tranquillity. Fallen trees lie petrified in the shallows, continuously changing their eerie appearance of a deserted graveyard. As the trail winds up and down the gorge, superb views of the lake change constantly.

Veliki Slap (Big Waterfall) was not as impressive as we had thought, due to the lack of rain, but nothing stopped our appreciation and wonder of this magnificent panorama. As we rode a small “train” to the top of the northern lakes we could not even glimpse water through the thick forest.
As the small ferry meandered down the lake I remarked to Johno that I had not seen my lifetime companion, the heron, on this trip to Europe. I turned my head, and there, standing perfectly still on a fallen tree, was a blue heron. I gasped, then smiled happily as he looked straight into my eyes. Even here in this isolated region ‘he’ was taking care of me.

Throughout history ZADAR has been a significant city and an important port. It has been described in all the itineraries of the great pilgrimages from Venice across to Zadar, Crete, Rhodes, Cyprus then onto Palestine. Today it is a bustling melting pot of colourful people. I have come to the conclusion that Mediterranean people love nothing better than to gossip and exchange ideas over endless cups of coffee. The first coffee shop in Zadar was opened in 1730!

The old town is completely walled in and we were able to walk around it before heading into the old town for dinner. The sea sounded like an organ as it gently lapped against the concrete embankment. We were startled by the mellow tones ringing out from various holes cut into the slabs of concrete.
OTOK BRAC – Island of Brac – The Island of Sun, Stone and Sea.

Supetar, the main town of Brac, is a charming and picturesque harbour village set into a horseshoe shaped bay surrounded by a necklace of small fishing boats. Gita, Supetar’s Librarian and Gallery Curator, met us as we drove off the ferry. She had organized lectures by Johno and Rajko. Everywhere we wandered up and down the steep narrow winding street we were greeted by a dimpled, smiling Johno!

We stayed in an apartment owned by Gita and Marco. Their wonderful hospitality extends to a spontaneous breakfast after we call out “hi” to Marco as we pass by and see him tending to his garden.

We open our wooden shutters to brilliant blue skies and hours of sunshine. Enchanting villages are dotted around the island displaying excellent examples of traditional stone architecture. Brac, is the island of stone. Stone houses, walls, balconies intertwined in bougainvillea, churches, bell towers and streets paved in white stone slabs or pebbles. Courtyards are adorned with vines, tangerine and lemon trees, figs and rosy red pomegranates.
The houses are built to withstand sun, wind and time. Silvery blue olive groves are planted between stone shelters, cairns and rock walls. The stone from this island has been used in the construction of famous buildings around the world, including the White House in Washington DC.

Originally the villages were built inland because of the threat of pirates. Today’s small towns nestle in the coastal coves and small bays. The landscape is harsh and stony but it is fragrant with basil, thyme and rosemary. The scent of white pines on the coastline and black pines on Vidora Gora, the highest point of Brac, will long remain with us.

From this vantage spot we gazed down to world famous Zlatni Rat. This white pebbled beach forms a long spit which constantly moves from one side to the other, due to the sea currents and wind. We enjoyed gazing at this beach at dusk, when it was completely empty of tourists. Only rows of vacant plastic sun loungers remained, waiting for the sun tanning bodies to return in the morning.

Huge 1200 guest hotels have been built to cater for tourists during the season. We were happy to stay in Gita and Marco’s apartment away from the hustle and bustle.

Skrip is the oldest settlement and we were amazed to find Andrea, a world-class archaeologist and historian, curator of the tiny museum. She gave us a fascinating insight into the history of the island and indeed Croatia.

The most important aspect of our short stay in Brac has been about the people whom we have come to know. The friendly neighbour who climbed down from his ladder to fill our basket with his grapes. Gorana, the waitress who ever so seriously took our orders explaining that the cheese, wine and olives were all from her family gardens. Ivan, the Tourist Authority CEO, who although telling us he loves everything
French, hastened to add how proud he is of his island. He plans to host an annual international small island symposium in Supetar one day.

We sat under the stars and watched the premiere of a splendid documentary about Brac. Our new friend, the Slovenian film director, generously gave us a DVD. As the “Bura” wind blew, so the outdoor screen rippled, emphasizing the stormy weather depicted in the film. We met the poet and narrator in the film as he sang and danced during the supper that followed.

The locals, including Gita and Marco, broke out into a melodious Klapa, the traditional style of singing, which has no accompaniment. Some of the songs had an African beat to them.
Johno’s lecture was held in an amazing gallery showcasing splendid bronze sculptures of famous Croatians. There was an interesting cross section in the audience, including high school students with their Professors. With Rajko interpreting, the audience was very receptive, and Johno was happy with the evening.

Gita is an accomplished musician, and played in the orchestra for a concert we attended at Kaktus Hotel.

Everywhere in this natural, unspoiled island there is a festive atmosphere. We loved our early morning coffees at Café Lanterna.

With our new, and older friends, we enjoyed a leisurely late afternoon lunch amongst olive groves set into the hillside and we dined at traditional Kobana in the evenings.
Peaceful, quiet and harmonious with nature, Brac is a wonderful holiday destination. It is the perfect place to relax and unwind.

Gita, Marco and Mate, your family has become our family. We will never forget the special times spent with you.

SPLIT

The Diocletian's famous palace, listed by UNESCO, is the trademark and majestic centerpiece of Split. Cafes and restaurants line up side by side outside the stone houses that form the wall around the Palace. Tourists in their thousands promenade up and down the waterfront. They drink endless cups of coffee or wine, chatting whilst they watch the world go by.
Stone archways and walls, as thick as a man, tower over the ice-cream stalls and shops nestling into the ruins. Ferns, bougainvillea and TV antennae rival one another as they poke out from any niche or cranny, high on the top of buildings.

**HVAR**

A network of ferries connects the islands with the “continent”, as the locals refer to mainland Croatia. We took a two-hour ferry ride from Split to Stari Grad, the port on the island of Hvar. Then followed a hair-raising drive, zigzagging up and down the steep precipices to the town of Hvar.

Cream stonewalls, terracotta tiled roofs, and emerald green shutters, brilliant blue skies and sea combine to make Hvar a town of scenic beauty. The Adriatic is a sailors’ paradise and each day new super yachts moor alongside the shiny paved streets.

Apartments are advertised everywhere you look. Even the smallest building houses rooms for rent. There are beautiful old villas set in lush gardens of oleanders, hibiscus, and palm trees, agave and cactus plants. Many are now renovated into major hotels or private apartments. The bathing sheds were opened in 1930 and today have been restored to their old glory, as well as adding an up market konoba or restaurant.

The Fortress overlooks the harbour, the historical Town Loggia, St Stephen’s square and the Arsenal built in the 17th Century.
There appears to be younger tourists coming to this town. We could hear loud music from the Konoba and discos playing until the early hours of the morning.

The fragrance of lavender permeates the whole island. Bags of lavender, oils, soaps and perfumes are sold on every corner. The villages are renowned for their Hvar Plavac wines made from the small grapes, which flourish on the drained, steep slopes.

The town is protected by the Pakleni islands, a group of islets, which are easily accessible, especially by naturists who have discovered the sundrenched bays and coves. Two islands are reserved exclusively for nudists. No, we did not make the trip.

We dined on the Dalmatian delicacy, “Lamb under the Bell.” We ordered the dish the night before, and were not disappointed. The lamb was succulent, tender and flavourful with local herbs.

Hvar, is a world famous jewel of a tourist resort.

**KORCULA and MLJET**

Thank you dear Bartul for arranging two perfect days on your beautiful island, and for also taking us to Mljet. Bartul is engineer on the Paul Gaugin, and fortunately was home for his three months leave.

The island of Korcula is separated from the “continent” by a 1270 metre wide channel. The well-preserved medieval town is shaped like a fish. The main street and St Marks Cathedral form the backbone, with narrow lanes running down to the cruise ship terminal on one side, and cafes, bars and konobas on a promenade overlooking the sea on the other.
Amongst all the souvenir shops and galleries, we even found a Kiwi icecream shop. And did you know Marco Polo was born here on the island of Korcula?

The Knights of Morescka were extremely ferocious as they presented us with a fascinating sword dance. Sparks flew as steel clashed against steel. The ‘Red King’ and his army won against the ‘Black King’. ‘Bula’, the heroine, was returned safely to her fiancée. This exciting dance has been performed in Korcula for more than FOUR HUNDRED YEARS! We saw it only because Bartul contacted Nenad (previously Staff Captain on the Paul Gauguin) who was in Korcula for a day. He is now captain of a cruise ship, and the sword dance was being performed for the passengers on board. Bartul, like Gita, seems to know everyone!

One of the advantages of Korcula as a tourist destination is the unspoiled quality and clarity of the surrounding sea. The transparency and colours of the seawater astounded us. Visibility can reach 21 metres. It is a wonderland for diving, snorkelling and boating.

For many years the major industry was shipbuilding. Timber was used from the holm-oak trees, which are widespread over the islands.

The picturesque island, with its magnificent bays, rocky indentations, olive plantations and vineyards, totally enchanted us.

If only the stone walls could talk, what amazing fables and legends and stories they would tell of the sea captains and sailors, coral divers, adventurers and explorers.
We soaked up the sunshine and enjoyed the gentle breeze as we gently motored in Bartul's boat, from the bustling port of Korcula to the green island of Mljet. After a comfortable sixty-minute boat trip we arrived in a small bay cluttered with a variety of fishing boats and yachts.

One can visit the island for a day and enjoy hiking, swimming, diving or kayaking, but as this part of Mljet is a National Park, there is no camping. This part of the island remains as it was when the ancient Greek poet, Homer, wrote about it. The Apostle Paul also mentions Mljet on his voyage through the Adriatic to Rome.

Rich green forests gently descend the slopes to the surface of two crystal clear seawater lakes. We strolled along shaded paved pathways, occasionally passed by cyclists or other people also enjoying nature. A tranquil feeling of peace emanates from this beautiful and serene place. The silence of the forest is only broken by the gentle lapping of waves on the rocks, the constant buzz of the cicadas in the noonday heat, and the soft whisper of pine needles blowing in the breeze.
Outside the park a few homes remain amongst the pine forest. Only the owners are allowed to take fish from the lakes. A small islet in the middle of Large Lake is the setting for a Benedictine monastery, which dates back to the 12th century.

Once again, thank you dear Bartul for arranging two perfect days on your two beautiful islands. We enjoyed meeting you again, in your homeland, as well as meeting your wife Deni. We look forward to reminiscing and sharing our photos and memories when we sail away with you on the Paul Gauguin, in late October.

DUBROVNIK

Leaving Korcula early in the morning we took a ten minute ferry ride to Orebić, on the “mainland”, then continued driving along the coastline through vineyards, tiny villages, mussel and oyster farms and salt ponds where salt is still harvested in the traditional way. As we approached the town of Ston we were amazed at the remains of a 5 kilometre wall which used to surround the city.
Situated at the southern extremity of Croatia's long coastline, Dubrovnik stands out as the pearl of the Adriatic. The old town (Stari Grad) is now designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Our hotel, The Grand Villa Argentina, consists of five gracious olde worlde mansions converted into modern boutique villas in the 1950s, yet they still retain their original charm and glamour. Our room in Villa Glavic, has a panoramic view to the island of Lokrum and the fortified Grad. Absolutely splendid! Even the view when taking a shower is breathtaking.

The only downside is the climb of 100 stairs to reach our room. There is no elevator!

Each day various cruise ships and tall masted sailing ships anchor in front of Villa Argentina. On the island of Lokrum, tall slender cypress stand like sentinels on the top ridge of the island.

Dubrovnik is a combination of the past, present and future. Each stone in this stunning city is steeped in history.

Placa Stradun is the favourite promenade of the 900 citizens of the old town, as well as the many visitors. Four storey homes built with similar facades, and to the same height, flank the highly polished paving stones. Narrow alleyways stretch back from the Stradun to the city walls. Today galleries, souvenir shops and restaurants rub shoulders with the Rectors Palace, Sponza Palace and the famous Church of Blaise. Roland's Column stands in the main square and important announcements are still made from the platform at the top.
Each evening guards march through Stradun, to the beat of drums. Two stand guard at the Ploce entrance and two others are marched back to the Pile entrance.

It took us two hours to climb the stone steps and walk around the two kilometre ramparts, towers, bastions, castles and forts. When the Minceta Tower was built in 1464 the builders did not have enough stones to complete the building. Everyone arriving from nearby villages was ordered to bring the largest, heaviest stone they could carry in order to complete it.

From the ramparts we overlooked the city roofs, a sea of terracotta tiles, occasionally interspersed with ruins, and the odd green garden. It is a living town and we could hear children playing indoors and see sports courts built high above the buildings.
Many centuries ago the people of Dubrovnik allowed the exiled Sephardic people to find refuge in their city. Today in the same spirit of tolerance you can find the second oldest synagogue in Europe, an Orthodox church and an Islamic centre alongside numerous Catholic churches.

Only twenty years ago Dubrovnik was under siege and the walls were filled with soldiers. Today it continues as a place of peace, culture and rich Croatian history, water sports and activities and amazing entertainment. It is a place for the young and old, and for the curious – and even for those with a fear of heights!

The Dubrovnik Riviera, Pearl of the Adriatic. Croatia, one of the world's jewels.