

# Paradise found in Croatia



EXQUISITE: Dubrovnik old town from the high walls that surround the city, with the Adriatic Sea in the background



BREATHTAKING: Plitvice Lakes National Park



CAFÉ CULTURE: Relax in picturesque Stradun

"THOSE who seek paradise on Earth," wrote George Bernard Shaw, "should come to Dubrovnik." It is simply exquisite, a perfect walled city surrounded by green hills and a sparkling blue sea.

This part of the Adriatic is renowned for the clarity of its water, teeming marine life and magnificent coral. There are charming unspoilt towns and more than 1,000 spectacular islands along a beautiful coastline dotted with caves, coves, cliffs and fabulous beaches. It is in fact the ideal place for a cruise.

So it's surprising how few cruises go there. A quarter of a century ago when this region was part of Yugoslavia, it was a popular destination. Then came a bitter war and the visitors disappeared.

Now most of this breathtaking scenery belongs to Croatia and if you want to discover Croatian cruising ahead of the crowd then this is the right time.

Fred.Olsen Cruise Lines offers a selection of cruises that call at Dubrovnik and other ports along this superb coastline. I travelled on the Black Watch, sailing from and back to Southampton, which is ideal for non-fliers.

It makes the cruise longer, at three weeks, but there are stops at Gibraltar, Lisbon and Sicily, where Etna was smouldering above the snowline.

Days at sea were filled with lectures on everything from novel writing to the history of cruise ship design as well as the bridge clubs, table tennis matches and deck quoits.

There were also dance classes (my favourite). I arrived a ballroom virgin but was performing a cha-cha-cha after just a few days.

The Black Watch has a cosy feel with just 800 passengers and you can choose between buffet-style dining in the

## Dubrovnik is just one pearl among many jewels that are visited on this Adriatic cruise, says ANNA SELBY

Braemar Garden Café or the more formal waiter-served feast in the Glentinar Restaurant. You can also dance well into the night in the Lido Lounge and, for quieter moments, the observation lounge on the top deck offers magnificent views.

We visited two little-known ports. Rijeka, the gateway to magical Istria with its medieval hilltop towns, frescoed church walls and ancient bell towers; and Zadar, the centre of Dalmatia. Yes, there are plenty of spotty dogs.

Some of Europe's most breathtaking scenery is here

the city dances with light. The best way to get to know the place is to take a leisurely circuit of the city's majestic medieval walls, above the sparkling Adriatic. Gaze down on the red-tiled roofs and sea-green shutters, the alleys and the crowds of shoppers in the Stradun, the main street.

Much of the pedestrianised walled city is built on steep cobbled steps. Climbing in the midday sun I saw a welcome sign offering "cold drinks and the best views".

Just through the city walls was a small café sitting on the rocks above the sea.

The view was straight across to the closest of the Elaphite Islands, a day trip from the quay stopping off for a fish picnic.

There's also a 45-minute trip around the coast and the nearest island of Lokrum with its nudist beach.

Expect cheerful waves from the sunbathers.

You really couldn't do the Adriatic without seeing Venice. Arriving here by sea is unforgettable. We glided into the harbour in the early hours.

The city unfurling before us in all its glory as we passed through the Grand Canal.

It was then we caught the rarest of sights, a practically empty St Mark's Square. Just for a moment, Venice was entirely ours.

### THE KNOWLEDGE:

Fred.Olsen Cruise Lines (01473 742424/www.fredolsencruises.com) offers a 22-night Venice & the Adriatic cruise from £1,792pp (two sharing), full board. Departs Southampton October 6, 2011.



INTIMATE: The Black Watch has a 'cosy' feel

in two national parks. Krka is where the river of the same name flows between deep canyons and Plitvice is famed for its 16 emerald green lakes, each spilling as a waterfall into the next. If you're lucky you might see brown bears too.

There's a stop at Koper in Slovenia, with its snow-covered mountains, and the mysterious Lake Bled, a spot with more than a hint of Transylvania about it. Cloaked by forested peaks the lake has at its heart a tiny, steep island with a church.

Above it, high on a cliff at the water's edge, sits a medieval castle, perfect as a home for Count Dracula.

Dubrovnik is often called the "pearl of the Adriatic". The cobbled streets use the same creamy stone as the walls and

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