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# Beauty and the buzz

*Cruising around Croatia's Hvar Island offers something for revelers and serenity-seekers alike, Necee Regis discovers.*

**T**he late afternoon sun sparkles on the crystal-clear waters of the Adriatic Sea as we motor along the southern Dalmatian coast. Silhouetted islands undulate on the horizon, their blue-gray shapes soft and dreamy, like casually draped scarves. The illusion of softness dissipates as we approach Hvar Island's dramatic limestone and dolomite cliffs en route to its capital city, also named Hvar.

A former fishing village-turned-important naval base in the era of the Venetian Republic, Hvar today is an upscale destination offering culinary delights, chic cocktail bars and lux accommodations. Yet for all its reputation as a nightlife-loving party island – which indeed it still is – Hvar is also a place of wild beauty where sweet-scented lavender, olive trees and indigenous grape varietals thrive on rock- and pine-covered hills, and seemingly endless small quiet coves await discovery. It's a destination unlike any other with the best of two worlds, the solitude of nature and the vibrancy of city life.

## Beauty

Stretching 42 miles top to bottom and only six-and-a-half miles wide, Hvar is one of the longest islands in the Adriatic. And with an estimated 2,800 hours of sunshine each year, it is said to be the sunniest spot in Europe. It's no wonder visitors arrive in droves in the summer months to soak up its many pleasures.

"Like in Venetian times, boats sail from island to island looking for a safe port, though now they sail for pleasure and not business," says guide Jana Vucetic. "When [the] town is crowded you can always find a nearby island where you can enjoy a peaceful spot by yourself."

Lying just opposite Hvar town's harbor, the Pakleni Islands offer this serenity and solitude. Possibly named after paklina, a black pine resin used to coat wooden boats, they are often referred to as a necklace of pearls or as lily pads floating in the sea. As you sail through the labyrinth of intimate bays and craggy inlets, the islands seem like scattered puzzle pieces of a once-seamless landscape, offering new experiences around every bend.

"There are about twenty islands and rocks in the Pakleni chain. Most have nice beaches," says Georges Buj of the Hvar Tourist Board. "You're not coming to Hvar for big beaches, you are coming for small ones."

On the Pakleni Island of St. Clement is one of 22

Adriatic Croatia International Club (ACI) marinas that dot the country's Adriatic coastline. Hidden in a quiet cove, the seasonally open ACI Palmizana marina is surrounded by a thick pine tree forest and can accommodate vessels up to 99 feet. "Everyone who comes here is surprised by the aquamarine water," says the marina director, Pjer Filičević. "You can see down fifteen meters and observe all the fish. There is a natural current in the marina. Even when we are full, the water is clean."

From the marina, it's a 10-minute hike through pine-scented woods to a wide, sandy cove with shore-side bistros, including Meneghello Restaurant and Toto's, both run by the Meneghello family, who settled on the island in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. You also can simply drop anchor and tender in for a lunch of freshly caught Adriatic fish, lobster, calamari, grilled meats and Dalmatian wines.

It's a straight shot about eighteen nautical miles from here to the island of Vis, the farthest inhabited island off the Croatian mainland, and the nearby islets of Biševo and Ravnik, celebrated for their Blue and Green Caves. While Green Cave is accessible by small boat, Blue Cave's access is by shuttlecraft only. The best time to visit is between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., when the aquamarine



*With an estimated 2,800 hours of sunshine each year, Hvar is said to be the sunniest spot in Europe.*

Many rock formations along the coastline have cave-like passages for visitors to explore.



*Limestone rock formations, known as karst, make up more than 50 percent of Croatia's landmass.*

light that bathes the cave turns white objects silver.

Waits can be long but worth the effort. "Some Italians tell me that Vis is more beautiful than Capri," says Buj. Like Capri, tour groups have discovered these small jewel-like islands, so it's recommended to visit early or late in the season.

The numerous hidden lagoons and beaches that can be found by simply circumnavigating Hvar are a good way to escape the tour crowds. Motoring east from the town harbor, the crenelated coastline is a series of towering stone cliffs and scalloped inlets of deep, crystal-clear water. Small towns perched on hillsides overlook slopes of lavender and grapes planted in soil whose rocks – meticulously removed and piled in neat rows – striate the landscape.

Limestone rock formations, known as karst, make up more than 50 percent of Croatia's landmass. It's been said that Venice owes its existence to Croatia because the city's foundations were built from Croatian limestone, a material valued since Roman time. Ground and polished to a beautiful white finish, it is celebrated for its ebony purity all over



Serene beaches and exquisite architecture (far left) add to the charm of Hvar Island.

PHOTOGRAPHS OPPOSITE PAGE: (TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT), ISTOCK/ARICH X (BOTTOM RIGHT). THIS PAGE: ISTOCK/BORJE KYTOR, (TOP), (BOTTOM)

Small hillside towns in Hvar overlook massive fields of sweet-scented lavender.



the world. In fact, the imposing columns of the White House in Washington, D.C., are crafted from Croatian limestone.

Some of these rock formations have cave-like passages to explore, making kayaking a popular diversion along Hvar's coastline when the sea is calm. The quaint village of Zračće, three-and-a-half miles from Hvar town, with its two deep coves, pebble beaches and small restaurants, is touted as a snorkeling paradise. The island's highest peak is St. Nicholas, rising 2,060 feet above sea level and the town of Stari Grad. This area is known for its stunning Red Cliffs, whose vertically stratified reddish rocks are best observed from the water. A narrow path winding its way upward from the beach through woods reaches a Stone Age cave and the remnants of a 16<sup>th</sup>-century church and monastery.

"All around Hvar island, you can always find a pleasant place to anchor where no one else is around, where everything is wild and free," says Buj. "It's never boring for someone who likes nature."





Nightlife kicks into high gear after midnight and goes into the wee hours of the morning. Popular spots include **Hula Hula**, a rustic seaside beach bar (said to have the best sunset views), which is a 15-minute walk west of the center of town; **Kiva Bar**, a no-frills rock bar where you can dance all night; **Carpe Diem**, an expansive indoor-outdoor in-town cocktail lounge and club; **Carpe Diem Beach**, day and nighttime party-central in Stipanska Bay with cocktails, food, pool and beach volleyball; and **Veneranda**, an electronic dance club within the walls of a former monastery, which offers sunrise views from its terrace.



After all the shopping, dining and dancing, indulge in a traditional Thai spa massage and other relaxing treatments offered at the **Adriana's Sensori Spa**. The sun will soon beckon you back to the crystal-clear water.

## The Buzz

When you're ready for some action, culture and really great food, head to the picture-perfect town of Hvar and dock stern-to right along the bustling waterfront. Cream-colored stone buildings with red-tile roofs stacked on hills surround a horseshoe-shaped harbor packed with tour boats, fishing vessels and yachts.

Salty breezes mix with the fragrant scent of lavender products offered for sale along a wide promenade lined with impressive Venetian palaces and a historic arsenal. Towering above it all, as if gazing out to sea, is the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish Fortress. It's worth the half-hour hike up steep stairs and winding paths to its upper ramparts to catch stunning panoramic views – especially at sunset – of the town, harbor and Pakleni Islands. (You can always cheat and taxi to the summit.)

Adjacent to the harbor is the main square, said to be the largest open square in Dalmatia. Locals, who mix with visitors in the restaurants and boutique shops that rim its edges, call it “the living room of the town.” Stephen's Cathedral and its imposing bell tower preside over one end. Stroll any side street into a labyrinth of lanes and stairways to discover more shops, cafés, bakeries, restaurants, churches and artisan workshops.

Don't be afraid to wander without a map as all streets

PHOTOGRAPHS: OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF HULA HULA (TOP), TOMISLAV/CARPE DIEM (CIRCLE LEFT AND RIGHT), NECE REGIS (CENTER AND BOTTOM CIRCLE), ISTOCK/FRMINGUT (BOTTOM). THIS PAGE: NECE REGIS (TOP); BOTTOM LEFT AND CENTER, IVO PERVAN/CROATIAN TOURIST BOARD (BOTTOM RIGHT)



The top of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish Fortress offers breathtaking views of the town, harbor and Pakleni Islands.

eventually loop back to the square and harbor. Worth finding are the Coral Shop, where artists Aaron and Lucrecia Schwarz handcraft one-of-a-kind silver, rare stone and local red coral jewelry, and the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Benedictine convent, where nuns make, display and sell intricate lace made from dried agave leaf fibers. Their technique has been recognized and listed by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Hvar and Dubrovnik are Croatia's only two luxury travel destinations, says Anja Levak, marketing manager for the exclusive hotel group Suncani Hvar.

“Hvar is called the ‘New Saint-Tropez,’ but it wants to

keep its charm. Locals cherish every stone and are careful with development.”

Dining in Hvar is a social event.

*Don't be afraid to wander without a map as all streets eventually loop back to the square and harbor.*



Local handmade crafts include lavender soap, silver and red coral jewelry and lace made from dried agave leaf fibers.



Cafés and restaurants, especially those directly along the waterfront, brim with revelers enjoying island specialties, including fresh seafood and wine. In high season, reservations – required at most establishments – need to be made days in advance.

“Dalmatian food is very simple food. We use olive oil for everything, including frying eggs,” says Chef Juica Bihandzic, who for 19 years has presided over the kitchen at Restaurant Gariful, a harborside seafood-centric hotspot. “We work with six or seven fishermen who catch fish just for us,” the chef adds, pointing to a menu that features sea bass, John Dory, red snapper, sea bream, corvina, amberjack, octopus, oysters and more.

The specialty of the house is “Drunk Lobster,” a spiny lobster plucked live from a tank (guests can choose their own) and cooked in a slightly spicy red Dalmatian sauce with cognac. It is served cut in pieces atop fresh pasta handmade by a woman on the nearby island of Korcula. The 12-page wine list runs the gamut from Croatian varietals to international choices, including vintage Champagnes. For those who prefer to avoid the crowds, Gariful Yacht Supply will prepare and deliver food, wine, cigars, toiletries and guest amenities to your yacht, or even cater a meal on board.

Carnivores head to the fashionable Butchery & Wine at the Adriana Hvar hotel, where the menu features lamb rack, duck breast, loin of venison, Kobe and Texas Black Angus rib eye, bistecca alla fiorentina, Charolais tenderloin and many other cuts of lava-grilled steaks. In the winding streets away from the harbor, Giaxa serves upscale world cuisine with a local twist in a Late Gothic-style former family palace. Not to be missed is the Dalmatian Brodeto (fish stew), a swoon-worthy dish of fish, scampi, octopus and mussels in tomato and white wine sauce with polenta. ☑