

Dubrovnik's summer playground

Olive oil and stunning scenery in Croatia

SUZANNE MORPHET
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

DUBROVNIK, CROATIA—It was a simple lunch on an ordinary plastic tablecloth. Salty prosciutto, sun-warmed tomatoes and homemade goat cheese. Oh, and olive oil drizzled over everything. I was on an olive farm, after all, on the tiny island of Sipan, off Croatia's south coast.

We passed the goats on our walk through the olive orchard to get to this hilltop farm with expansive views over the Adriatic.

After eating, we stepped inside the shed housing the owners' olive press, where two large millstones have been squeezing out liquid gold for decades, maybe centuries. No wonder people from Dubrovnik escape the city walls in summer to come to the Elaphite Islands.

Despite their proximity to the 'pearl of the Adriatic' the islands are largely undeveloped and unspoiled. Only three of the 13 are populated and two of those are car-free.

Fewer people live here year-round now than in the 15th and 16th centuries.

It's possible to ferry between the islands and stay in small inns or B and Bs but I chose to travel on a 44-foot sailing catamaran operated by Huck Finn Adventure Travel (a Croatian company, despite the name) to make the most of my time.

Within 45 minutes of arriving at Dubrovnik Airport, I was barefoot on the Huck Finn, cruising through azure blue water. Two kayaks were lashed to the bow and a half a dozen bicycles mounted on the stern.

The sleek white catamaran—she's French-built and just five years old—can accommodate ten guests for multi-day adventures. But on the last trip of the season there were

only two of us, along with company owner Zeljko Kelemen and a couple of guides.

KAYAKING KOLOCEP

Launching our kayaks from the bow of the ship, we paddled into a light breeze, the salty air warm on our faces. Steep white limestone cliffs towered over us, topped with vivid green pine trees.

Kolocep is the smallest of the three populated islands and the closest to Dubrovnik—just a 20-minute boat ride away. A 1.5 km walking trail connects the island's two small settlements, each situated on a sweeping bay dotted with pleasure boats. Ripe red pomegranates hung from tree branches like baubles at Christmas. On market days, women sell olive oil, candied oranges and lemons.

WALKING LOPUD

Pushing open a heavy side door of the 15th century Franciscan monastery, we found ourselves in the middle of afternoon mass. A couple dozen parishioners were reciting a prayer while their white-robed priest slumped against a wall, his lips moving in synch.

We quietly retreated and continuing exploring Lopud on foot. In its heyday, the island boasted more than 30 churches and chapels for its 2,000 inhabitants. Dubrovnik's nobility built white stone villas with red-tiled roofs and filled their gardens with lemon and olive trees.

Fewer than 100 people live here year-round now. Some, like Franka Karamehmedovic, who rents out rooms in her 300-year old villa, returned after the Croatian war. She likes the sandy beaches and the car-free streets where her young grandson can wander and play. "Where else could he do this?" she asked.

CYCLING SIPAN

Pedaling up the narrow, winding road that leads out of the main town of Sipanska Luka, we passed cascading bougainvillea, gated gardens and at the top, a sign warning of boars ahead. Sipan is the largest of the islands, a charming mix of tangled overgrowth and cultivated orchards.

We stopped at a large walled church that once protected islanders, their oil and their grain from marauding pirates. Inside, large patches of paint were peeling off the walls. This church is one of many slowly decaying under the hot Mediterranean sun; there are simply too few people living here to support their illustrious past.

Fortunately for us, half a dozen of the 400 islanders are fishermen. That night we dined on smoked tuna, pasta with fresh shrimp and octopus patties at Kod Marka, an acclaimed waterfront restaurant.

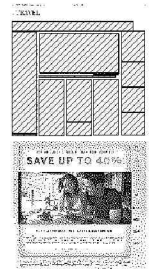
The next morning I chatted with his son Dino and learned that the elder Prizmic also makes his own wine vinegar. "The slow way," said Dino, relaxing in the sun.

Suzanne Mophet is a Victoria, B.C. based freelance writer whose trip was subsidized by Huck Finn Adventure Travel and the Croatian National Tourist Board. She can be found on-line at www.suzannemorphet.com

JUST THE FACTS

ARRIVING Fly Air Canada or Lufthansa from Toronto to Frankfurt, then continue to Dubrovnik on Croatia Airlines.

GOING Huck Finn Adventure Travel specializes in outdoor activities and looks for opportunities for guests to interact with islanders, such as lunching with the olive farmers on Sipan and having coffee with the owner of Villa Franka. A five-day biking-kayaking-sailing trip through the



Elaphite Islands ranges from US \$715 to \$945 per person (double rooms), depending on the month. huckfinncroatia.co. A five-day guided biking-kayaking-sailing trip through the Elaphite Islands begins at C\$711 per person. Sleep onboard the Huck Finn yacht for three nights and stay one night in a guesthouse on one of the islands. Guests are responsible for meals other than breakfast. Eight-day tours and custom tours

are also available. For details see www.huckfinncroatia.com

DINING Your guides will suggest restaurants and may have pre-arranged some meals, such as lunch on the olive farm on Sipan Island (about \$15) that's not open to the general public. Each island has only a few restaurants. On Sipan, Kod Marka mains start around \$20. Fine dining at Obala on Lopud runs about \$50 per main with wine.

Kolocep has fewer options; try the Hotel Villas Kolocep or pick up picnic items at the store near the ferry dock.

LINGERING The nearby village of Ston on the mainland boasts the biggest preserved saltworks in the Mediterranean. Climb the stone walls that encircle the village for great views. The area is also known for its tasty oysters and mussels.



SUZANNE MORPHET FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Diners enjoy gourmet Mediterranean fare at Kod Marka on the waterfront of Luka Sipanska, on Sipan Island.