



THE CHARMS OF ISTRIA

The Croatian peninsula of Istria is a laid-back place with idyllic villages, an Italian influence and a truffle-hunting industry

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Images in the mind are quite often shattered by reality; sometimes in the most pleasant way. I went to Croatia, with notions of a war-ravaged country and sad people. I came back with pictures of friendly, smiling people and beauty at every turn. We are a bunch of people exploring the joys of a Eurail Select pass (open rail travel). There is something liberating about a Eurail pass: it's like a blank slate where you can fill the dates and the places and write your own story.

We take a train to Opatija on the Adriatic coast. Picture perfect villages, emerald green meadows, rolling hills and Lego train stations all whizz past in a cinematic rendering. Opatija lies in a part of Croatia where the Slovenian and Italian borders are a few minutes away. The Italian influence is omnipresent — the chic women, the obsession for gelato, and the laid-back vibe. The Adriatic is a magical blue and the sun is out. The mountains encircling Opatija absorb the cold Bura wind and make its climate benign; for beach bums on loungers, this is paradise.

Opatija is the gateway to the region of Istria. We drive down to the fortified town of Motovun, through winding sunlit roads, groves of olive and vineyards with our local guide from the Tourism Board, Ozren. He's passionate about responsible tourism and waxes eloquently about how Istria is a wonderful destination of coastline, clean waters of the Adriatic and more importantly, easy on the pocket — compared to countries like Italy (it still is on the local currency Kuna and not the euro). Legend has it that Motovun was built by giants out of stones that they collected from the nearby river. Motovun was part of the Venetian empire and reminders are everywhere — stone lions which were symbols of Venice guard the entrance and the coat

of arms has the same motif. Motovun's old town perched on a hill like a sentry is evocative of its rich past with an old church and a walk on the ramparts. Surrounding the town is the Motovun forest which is famous for its enticing mushrooms, and black and white truffles. Ozren entertains us with the story of truffles — how they release a peculiar odour and from October to January are hunted out with the help of hunting dogs. "It's the truffle which decides when it wants to be found," he says. Usually truffles are hunted at night when scent, not sight, is depended upon. The biggest truffle weighing 1.3 kg was discovered here and made it into the *Guinness Book of Records*.

Ozren talks about how Istria survived the war with hardly any damage. After the war, they decided to avoid mass tourism, rebranded themselves as the 'Green Mediterranean' and sold their pebbly beaches, vineyards and fresh produce. Today, there are konobas or taverns; agro tourism, where one eats only what is grown on the land, and wine bars. There are over 1200 kms of biking trails, wine routes and plush villas that can be rented with pools.

Driving down to the village of Ipsi, we visit the stone villa of Kluadio Ipsa, the hero of a local success story, Ipsa olive oil. We are invited to learn about the process of making olive oil, taught the rustic niceties of olive oil tasting and feast on a rustic spread of *bruschetta*, sundried tomatoes, scrambled eggs with grated truffles and local wine. It's a family olive oil business handed down from generation to generation. We learn the nuts and bolts of olive oil; how the time between tree and bottle should be short, how an early harvest is advantageous and how working the land can determine the quality. Olive oil tasting is an art like wine tasting: "Heat the oil with the palm of your hands and swirl it in your mouth," we are told. It's a surreal afternoon where life is in the slow lane.

Post lunch, it's the road to the Adriatic coast.

We drive along the breathtaking Limski Fjord surrounded by lush vegetation, home to many oyster farms. Time is short and we choose to see Porec and Rovinj, two of the most famous towns. Porec, with its harbour of fishing boats and yachts and narrow winding streets, is attractive. Its main calling card is the Basilica of Euphrasius (a UNESCO World Heritage site) with 6th century iridescent mosaics. We enjoy the atmospheric interiors with a lady singing an aria, frescoes and a riot of stones and metal.

We save the best for the last. I fall in love... hopelessly... with picture postcard Rovinj, our last halt on the Adriatic Coast. All the clichés about Croatian seaside towns come alive here. A romantic place of stunning beauty and the most exquisite terracotta roofs perched dramatically on an incline, cobbled squares, meandering atmospheric lanes and a thousand fishing boats bobbing on the brilliant blue waters of the Adriatic.

Greeks, Romans, Venetians, Austro-Hungarians have all ruled this town down the years. Along the seaside, we join a crowd of bystanders gawking at a luxury hatch belonging to billionaire Roman Abramovich, the owner of Chelsea Football Club. We walk along the narrow streets that corkscrew over the hill crammed with art galleries and lead you to the town square and the church of St Stephen. Life is a celebration here. There is even a bar phen. The menu is loaded with truffles, wild asparagus, and pastas like tagliatelle and gnocchi and seafood delicacies like fish, shrimps, mussels, and clams with glugs of blossomy local wines. There's just the sound of the waves, and the moon-dappled streets now. Istria has a way of leaving you satiated. A lot like truffles, it is earthy, unique and unforgettable.

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Travel Essentials

Fly to Zagreb on Swiss International Airlines, connecting in Zurich, for Dh2954, then continue via train to the Istrian peninsula, or hire a car (about 200km on from Zagreb). Travel time will be about 13 hours due to the connection. The best time to travel is May to September as the Croatian winter can be extremely cold.

