

# SAIL

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CONVERSE

Story by Bob Payne; photographs by Gary John Norman



have to admit, as we ghost across a quiet blue sea, approaching a long-anticipated island called Susak, that not many people I know are just now wishing that they too could be cruising the waters of Croatia. Which is too bad for them. Because I have discovered, where I feared I might find the rubble of war and the tension of an uncertain peace, some of the most pleasant bareboat chartering I have ever experienced.

Along with two shipmates—British photographer Gary John Norman and Croatian engineer Marino Skoko—I have enjoyed good weather, easy sailing, interesting shoreside distractions, and the opportunity, because of coastal Croatia's long association with nearby Italy, to begin each morning with an espresso.

At the moment, the only thing that could make the cruise more pleasant is if the crew of the boat passing just to windward would put their clothes back on. Sailing in the buff seems to be popular here, especially among the Germans and Austrians who make up the majority of charterers. But far too often, I've noticed, it falls considerably short of one's expectations for it as a spectator sport.

We are aboard a new German-built Bavaria 47, chartered out of Pula, a Croatian town at the tip of the Istrian Peninsula, on the Adriatic Sea, about 60 miles south of Trieste, Italy. The boat is up to the standards of any I have chartered in the Caribbean and is very well equipped, although it is lacking the one thing somebody back home joked might prove essential for cruising here—a foredeck gunmount.

The joke, I've learned, only points out how little we in America really know about a region that for years we saw on television almost every night. Some coastal areas in the south—most notably the ancient walled city of Dubrovnik—did come under attack. But even at the height of the conflict, the northern part of the coast and the 1,185 or so islands of the Adriatic, most of which belong to Croatia, remained virtually untouched. "Yes, there was war

here," said a young girl who sold me an ice cream on the island of Rab. "In the fifteenth century, I think."

Throughout much of the former Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia, animosities remain. But even inland there hasn't really been any fighting since 1995. And for the past two summers on Croatia's coast and islands, bareboating, and tourism in general, is coming back strong. "Why? Because the Adriatic is our Caribbean," one German told me. "Except we do not have always to listen to that song about the yellow bird."

Croatia's cruising ground, basically stretching 239 miles from Pula south to Dubrovnik, was far too much for us to cover in a week. So we pushed south for the first two days, motor-sailing in light winds and under a

**Kornati National Park at sunrise (previous page); the architecture in Rab is typical of the Croatian coast**



#### ● *Getting there*

For the most convenient connections, from London or Frankfurt fly Croatia Airlines to Pula, through Zagreb. Visas are not required for U.S. citizens.

#### ● *Charts and guides*

*Navigational Guide to the Adriatic—Croatian Coast*, English ed. (The Miroslav Krleža Lexicographical Institute, Zagreb, 1993). It includes a 1:400,000 strip chart useful for trip planning and is available in many bookstores in Croatia. Best for navigation are the 1:100,000 small-craft charts published by the State Hydrographic Institute in Split.

#### ● *Sailing conditions*

The height of the charter season is June through August, with August virtually belonging to the Italians. For less-crowded anchorages, lower prices, but still the possibility of excellent weather, visit during the last two weeks of May or the first two of September. Prevailing summer conditions are light northwest winds, called the maestral. Occasionally punctuating them are the bora, more often a winter wind but not unknown in summer, which blows from land to sea and can bring violent, unexpected gusts (look out for cloud caps on the mountains of the mainland), and the sirocco, more common in summer, a warm, humid, slow-building southerly that brings rain



**The waterfalls at Skradin**

bright blue sky 130 miles south to Skradin, a mainland village near a national park of waterfalls and pine forests, then made our way back at a more leisurely pace.

That barely allowed us to reach the

most famous area for Adriatic cruising—the Dalmatian Coast. But we discovered it didn't really matter. Within the section we did cruise were so many islands—some as dry and barren as any in the Greek Cyclades, some covered with vineyards and olive groves and pine trees, some harboring walled towns so

ancient in appearance you almost expected to see armored knights in the ice-cream shops—that we could have stayed for years without seeing them all.

Still, fearing that we might be missing something, I asked Marino, whose answers were always thoughtful, what the difference was between



and high winds. Tidal differences are negligible.

• **Chartering**

Charter companies abound, but one of the few seeking to reach American sailors is Kiriacoulis, a Greek company with considerable experience in Croatian waters. They are currently based in Pula, in the north, with plans to expand to Split and Dubrovnik. The U.S. agent I used is Le Boat,

**CruiseNotes**

tel. 800-992-0291. Some charter brokers book bareboats in Croatia. For a list write to SAIL, 84 State Street, Boston, MA 02109, sailmail@channel1.com

Croatian law requires bareboat skippers to have a license, or some other kind of documentation from a recognized authority, possibly including a letter from a yacht club, attesting to their qualifications. But the law is a bit vague, so before signing with any company, make sure you understand your legal obligations, should an issue come up involving an accident or insurance claim.

• **Provisioning**

Normally of a do-it-yourself nature, but stores are well-stocked. Even in the smallest villages, basics such as fresh bread are always available. Croatian wine is plentiful, and some of it—despite the occasional screw-on top—is quite drinkable.

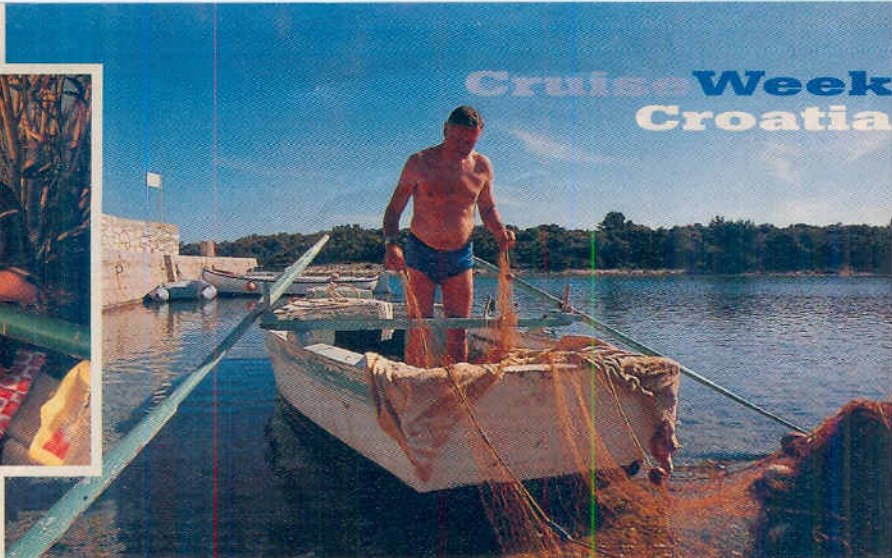


Map illustration by Paul Mirto





**Left, Mali Losinj's harbor is good for people watching. Above, goods for cruisers at Rab; right, a fisherman readies his nets**



the islands where we were and the islands of Dalmatia. "About one more day's sailing," he said.

What made the sailing so easy was that we were in what amounted to a fenced-off sea, the fence formed by the rows of narrow, ragged islands that run parallel to the coast. The result was that no matter what the wind did we were always sailing in flat water, and, although we had no bad weather, we were always within easy reach of someplace we could tuck into should a rare summer storm make it necessary.

Among the islands, our favorites were Rab, where beneath medieval stone towers we washed down thin-crust pizza with surprisingly good Croatian wine; Mali Losinj, in whose busy harbor we could watch people buy vegetables off small wooden freight boats that were tied along the seawall; and Dugi Otok, where we asked a fisherman who was painting his rowboat on the beach near a private-property sign if it would be all right for us to walk ashore. "I don't mind at all," he said. "It is only the owner's dogs who will object."

Wherever we went among the islands, finding a place for the night was always easy. Many of the better-protected coves had a good system of moorings. Soliscica, almost like a South Seas lagoon in appearance, and Mir, a short walk from what has to be the best cliff-top sunset views in Croatia, were among my favorites. But what really surprised me were the marinas.

When I'm cruising, I usually avoid marinas, unless I'm out of ice, or fuel, or patience with someone on board. But in Croatia I enjoyed checking them out just because they were so

different from what I had imagined. They were modern and well-maintained, and some berthed hundreds of pleasure craft where I had expected to find hardly any. ACY's chain of 21 marinas alone can accommodate some 7,000 boats.

The area I liked best, though, was far from the marinas. It was a group of islands—ragged, barren, and consisting mostly of yellowish stone and rock—that form Kornati National Park. It was so quiet, as we ghosted in toward one island, that the only sound I heard was the tinkling of goat bells. And at another, as we dropped our anchor in a tucked-away cove, the only thing we disturbed was a pair of dolphin.

Even when we were in the Kornati, though, an island Marino kept assuring us would compare favorably with them all—an island we had to see—was Susak, which means "sandy island." It was one of the few sandy islands in all the Adriatic, he said, with an enthusiasm that got me imagining something along the lines of Miami Beach or Waikiki and Gary dreaming of cover photos.

But now, on the final day of our cruise, as we approach Susak, it is becoming all too clear to me that people who live in a sea of rocky islands are not the best choice to judge the merits of a sandy one. Susak is sandy all right, but there is no beach, and the sand is the consistency of porous concrete. Gary quietly puts most of his camera gear away, and we discuss, as Marino readies the anchor, whether we want to go ashore at all. Politeness finally dictates that we do, and I'm glad. Because if we hadn't visited Susak I would have missed one of the more

pleasant experiences of our cruise.

Gary and I are climbing the path behind the tiny village of ancient houses when we come upon an old woman, dressed in black, who is pushing a wheelbarrow filled with sand up toward where we can see a cemetery. I offer to push it for her, and after not much resistance, because the morning is warm and the hill is steep, she agrees. As we walk, we pass several other women, who are coming down the path and who seem to think, or so I gather from their delightful, cackling laughter, that me pushing a wheelbarrow for their friend is just about the funniest thing they have ever seen.

At the cemetery gate the woman indicates we are at her destination and takes the wheelbarrow back from me. Apparently assuming, because I am a stranger and not obviously Italian (no designer sunglasses, for instance) that I must be German, she rattles off something in that language.

"Sorry, I only speak English," I say. "I am American."

"American?" she responds excitedly. "You know my daughter? From New Jersey?"

It is more than an hour before we return to the boat. And not before the old lady walks back down the hill with us to her house, shows us her family photos (I concede, under close questioning, that, yes, the daughter might possibly look familiar), and presents me with a bottle of home-made brandy. For which she charges me only six dollars.



*At the urging of many people who know him, SAIL contributing editor Bob Payne is currently seeking other war zones to cruise.*