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Captivated BY CROATIA



With superb sailing, fantastic scenery, crystal clear waters and so many interesting stopovers, Croatia is an ideal charter destination. As **Ross Farncombe** explains, you get a lot for your money. The only real problem was getting there in the first place.

We must have looked a motley crew standing at the side of the road. The trouble was that we were waiting for a bus and there wasn't a bus stop in sight. However, the instructions that I had acquired from the internet were quite precise – just go to Trogir and wait for any bus opposite the market going to either Rijeka or Zadar. They are every half hour and “they all go through Biograd”.

After some three-quarters of an hour I got the impression my crew was starting to think that maybe we should have

bitten the bullet and paid the €160 for the 120km journey that we were quoted for a cab direct from the airport. But then, after some discussion with a local or two, the next bus that fought its way through the hectic traffic was, we were assured, going to Biograd. We threw our bags into the hold and found seats on the bustling coach; having paid a little over 240 kunas (£7.50) each, for the journey, once again it looked like a good idea.

The coach trip took the best part of 2½ hours, but after a very early flight out of

Gatwick, the four of us – me, Ian, Kevin and new cabin boy Pete – had no trouble sleeping for the best part of the journey. I would advise you to stay awake, though, because the bus takes the coast road instead of the motorway and gives a spectacular introduction to the beauty of the Croatian coast and countryside.

I must admit to having slight reservations about Biograd, because it sounded more like a highly toxic leftover chemical works from a bygone era. However, Biograd was first mentioned in the mid 10th

Century as a royal Croatian city and again in the 11th Century as the centre of Croatian kings – although only the ruins of St John's monastery remain after most of the town was destroyed during the Turkish-Venetian wars in the mid-17th Century. Nowadays, Biograd is a typical tourist town as well as a boating Mecca with two excellent marinas at Kornati and Sangulin.

The walk from the bus stop to the marina complex was not much more than 400m and the entrance is right by



Main: The gorgeous split level bar and restaurant at Opat.
Above: Holidaymakers enjoying the delights of the Krka Falls.



the busy ferry terminal. The Kiriacoulis office is right by the main entrance and it was there that we deposited our kit before retiring to the bar across the road for a couple of thirst-slaking beers. We were in no hurry, because we were a day early for our charter, but the operator had kindly arranged for us to be able to sleep on a spare boat for our first night.

POSH NOSH

Be warned! Biograd is just like any other tourist town when it comes to catching out the unwary. Dinner that night for an adequate fish dinner was a very expensive K1475 (£50 per head). The fish is good, but can be extremely costly, so it's best to check the price before ordering.

Saturday morning and we were looking forward to

getting away nice and early, having been assured that this was to be. We used the dinghy to motor across the marina to the supermarket, which provided a very convenient way of victualling the ship. We were ready for the off, but no one else was. With our Bavaria 39 returning from the last charter with several faults, it was actually 1730 before we slipped our mooring and set off, motoring SE for Vrgada. The bay on the N side of this, one of the smaller islands from over a thousand that make up this region, looked to provide a reasonable anchorage for our first night away, but no sooner had the hook bitten than a young guy appeared in a dinghy assuring us that with an imminent southerly wind we were in the wrong place. It would be better if we

went into the small harbour around to the east and moored alongside the ferry. The cynic in me suggested that it was probably there that we would find another expensive restaurant in which we would feel obliged to eat, but decided that discretion, as always, was the better part of valour and we retrieved our anchor.

The harbour was charming, but unbelievably quiet. There was no sign of life at all as we attacked our first sundowner. As the light faded we ventured ashore, only to turn the first corner and discover a tiny, but bustling village square. We walked around the harbour and found the equally busy Hotel Adrijana that looked after us royally with the blackest cuttlefish risotto I have ever eaten and a good selection of steaks and kebabs – all for a

mere K450 (£15) per head.

I don't know what happened to the threatened southerly wind that night, but we had enjoyed an excellent start to our week away.

DOWN TO KRKA

The Sunday saw us continuing SE, reaching out on a steady N F3-4, following the basic lie of the islands past Murter down to Tivat, before turning E for the canal entrance at Jadria. We then entered the inland waterway of the Krka National Park. From the channel entrance it is around 12M to the marina at Skradin, but the gorges are stunning and the inland lakes enormous. The marina is first class with all facilities to hand for K377 (£50 per night) and the historic Roman village itself is very picturesque. Plenty to »

CRUISING

WEATHER

The Dalmatian coast, Istria and the islands have a mild Mediterranean climate. In southern Dalmatia, where the sirocco (known here as the jugo) brings a moderating influence from Africa, summers are sunny, warm and dry, while the winters are rainy. In the north the winters are drier and colder as a result of the cold northeasterly bora. In the summer the mistral has a cooling effect on the coast and the islands. The average temperature ranges from 2°-8°C (36°-46°F) in January, to 18°-24°C (64°-75°F) in June. Rainfall is moderate and occurs mainly in the winter.



BOAT AND OPERATOR

Our boat was a new Bavaria 39 Cruiser with three double cabins and two heads and the trip was booked through the UK agent for Kiriacoulis, Tenrag Yacht Charters. The cost of one week on a similar boat and time for 2009 would be £1,791 excluding discounts for repeat business and special offers. Kiriacoulis has recently opened a new base in Croatia, Krvavica (Marina Ramova), situated some 75km south of Split and 175km N of Dubrovnik.

Contact Tenrag Yacht Charters
01227 721874 www.tenrag.com



FOOD AND DRINK

In the coastal regions of Croatia the cuisine has a Mediterranean flavour with plenty of olive oil used in the preparation. The tradition of grilling and roasting fish has been carried down from generation to generation, where the taste of the fish depends on the grilling technique and the type of firewood chosen. There is also the tantalising Dalmatian olive oil method of cooking, *gradelavanje*, which gives the fish a particularly delicious taste and many Croatian fish restaurants have their own fishing boats, so you can be assured it's fresh. Grilled pork and roasted lamb are common and beef is often cooked in a delicious tomato sauce.

Connoisseurs of cheese must try the thick white cheese, *svjezi sir*, usually eaten with salt and pepper as an accompaniment to a salad. *Paski sir*, a hard cheese from the Isle of Pag, is also excellent.

Croatian wines were already reputable, but they are becoming more and more renowned. Foreign beers tend to be expensive, so unless you have a preference choose Croatian, which is excellent. *Rakija* (Water of life), when made from a base of plums, is *Slivovica*, from grapes *Loza* and from herbs *Travarica*.



CHARTS & PILOTS

CHARTS: Imray chart M25 (Otok Rab to Sibenik), Admiralty Small Craft SC5767

BOOKS: *Adriatic Pilot* by T & D Thompson (Imray, £32.50), *Croatia Cruising Companion* by J Cody and J Nash (Wiley Nautical £24.99)

OFFER: Imray is offering a 10 per cent discount to ST readers who quote this article when ordering the *Adriatic Pilot* by phone.

Also available from Imray: *Adriatic Sea Pilot Vol 1, Piranski Zaljev to Visko More* and *Vol II, Sedmovrace to RT Ostra*. Both £65 and published by the Hrvatski Hidrografski Institut.

Contact: Imray 01480 462114 www.imray.com



choose from for eating and we had a very pleasant meal in the Bonaca just half way up the hill for K800 (£25 per head).

The next day was the real reason for our coming this way and that was to visit the Krka waterfalls. A regular ferry service runs from along the quayside up to the falls another 3M or so upstream. Although the admission price was K80 (£10 each) it does include the cost of the return water taxi. The series of eight falls drops a total of 49m and is a spectacular sight even despite the reduced flow in summer months. In the winter they must be awesome.

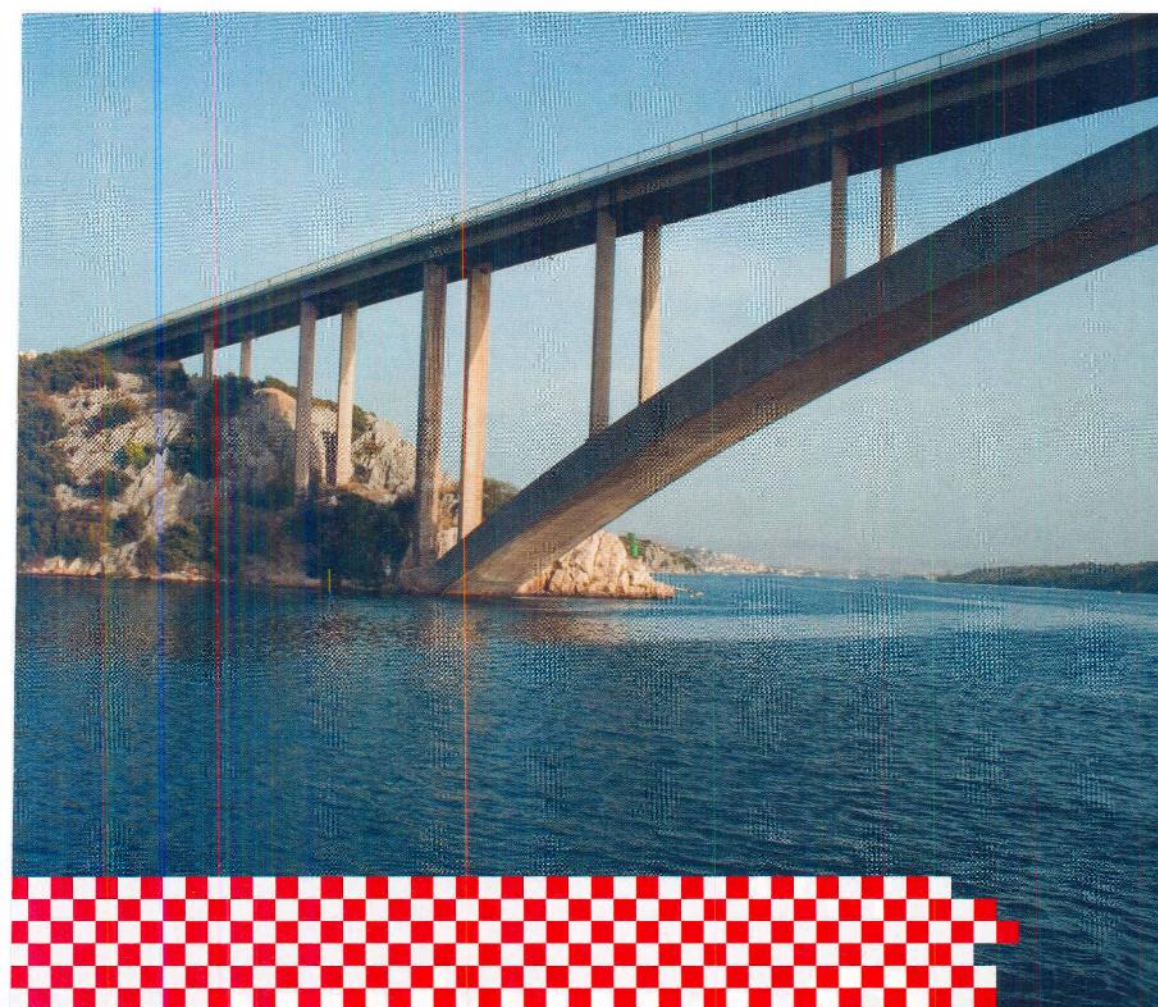
We got back from the falls after lunch and left at 1600 for the long but enjoyable motor back down the Krka river into the Adriatic once more. A further 5M SE and we reached the tiny island of Krapanj.

We picked up a pontoon mooring on the N side of the island, run by the adjacent Spongiola hotel. Power and water were available and full use of the hotel's excellent pool, gym and shower – all for a very reasonable K250 (£32 per night).

That night we walked along the front, drawn by the only visible naked light, and found a charming beach restaurant. Simple, but honest food served by good people in a nice easy atmosphere. A starter of Calamari followed by an enormous mixed grill washed down with bottles of local wine for a measly K430 (£14 per head). The island was formerly inhabited by sponge divers and one can understand why, because, to this day, the waters around it are crystal clear. Something for which the Croats should be proud, because it puts most of the Mediterranean to shame.

SUPER SAILING

On Tuesday morning, after a leisurely start, we set off around the S side of the island, out past the tip of Zlarin, then headed up the coast, cracking along in a fresh 18-22kn of northerly breeze. Croatia certainly never let us down when it came to a good wind for sailing. Some 20M on and we were in Tribunj marina. Tribunj is a fishing village and a tourist resort, but very pleasant all the same and with



Opposite, left: in early evening the restaurant at Opat fills rapidly; right: slipping quietly into Tribunj. This page, left: one of the bridges spanning the gorge to Skradin; top right: busy Saturday changeover; bottom right: the Kiriacoulis office at Biograd.

a fully equipped marina for K330 (£42 per night). As one would expect in such a resort, there is a plentiful selection of restaurants to choose from, but probably all at the slightly higher 'tourist' rate K750 (£24 per head).

The next morning produced yet more excellent sailing as we continued along down this exquisite coastline. We dropped the hook in a small bay for a swim and some lunch, again enjoying the warm, clear waters.

I'd been told about Rogoznica or (Roger's Knickers as it's apparently known to some friends of mine), but somehow, having found our way into the bay, we were drawn away from the huge Marina Frapa to the W and instead moored stern to at the quay on the very S of the village on the island. Here you'll find a lively town quay bustling with bars and restaurants and yet surprisingly our excellent fish dinner that night was not the usual jaw dropper, but a very reasonable K730 (£23 per head). Maybe all the tourists stick to the other side of town. The

fishing boat that we watched offloading later that night certainly seemed to have a fair sized catch – maybe the locals were able to hang on to just a bit of it.

The Kornati National Park includes some 89 islands and they are only occupied during the summer months. It can be quite interesting picking one's way between them, because they tend to merge into one on the horizon. We had picked Opat as our destination, right on the southern tip of Kornati itself. When we arrived in mid-afternoon it was very quiet and the standard swim ensued, followed by Kevin and Pete doing their 'yomping' thing up to the top of the hill on the other side of the bay. During the rest of the afternoon a few more boats arrived and Ian and I greeted our intrepid heroes' return by setting them up a beer at the waterside bar. This is a beautiful setting, but bear in mind that to keep it that way, absolutely everything has to be either imported (including the firewood for the kitchen) or exported (along with all the rubbish).

It is worthwhile booking

ahead for the restaurant to guarantee a good table, preferably with a view across the bay. We were in luck and were soon enjoying a fabulous meal, all four of us sharing the one huge fish as a main course. The wine flowed and it was a suitably fitting last night to our week away. Mind you, it pretty much had to be, because the bill was a huge K2,300 (£75 per head). It was worth every penny though.

JOLLY GERMANS

Opat provided me with one of my most memorable nights afloat, despite the contingent of German students on the adjacent 50-footer determined to make the place seem like West Cowes on an August Saturday evening. How we never resorted to slipping their lines I shall never know.

Our last day away and the wind finally deserted us. However, the motor up the W coast of Kornati was stunning. We were going to cut between Kornati and Katina

through the Vela Proversa, but the channel is well marked and we did not experience anything like the 3kn current that was mentioned in one of the guides. We wove our way along the W side of Zut, then E around the S of Pasman and back to Biograd. We'd had a superb week in which we travelled a reasonable distance and yet I know that we have barely scratched the surface of this remarkable part of the world. I suspect that this strip of Croatian coast is one that you could visit year after year and never end up revisiting old haunts. It is just so vast.

With an early flight out on Saturday, we decided that to risk the excitement of the bus journey was probably more than any of us could endure on the return, so a cab was booked and 90 minutes later and £110 lighter, a stress-free return was enjoyed by all. Believe me, to cab it both ways you'll be missing out on many of the glorious sights that Croatia has to offer.