

Hvar Hauteur

Train travel from Umbria to Ancona is like following a lifeline through an alpine gorge with perched groups of up to 10 stone houses popping up from oaken clusters. Sheer limestone cuttings break the treelined hills in stark white fissures girdled by muddy streams with badly cut fringes.

A typical town of Genga perhaps not on any itinerary looms out of the canopy presenting yet another archetypical fairytale presentation of the unforgettable Marche village. Ancona is a very sedate and normal departure town to head across the Adriatic for what is a searching visit trying to cram the 2500 years of Croatia into 2 weeks as part of a 3 month European sojourn.

The port presents an informal exit from one country to another with passport control in the hands of a rare pleasant Italian customs official. The Jadrolina car ferry has the capacity to take super large articulated vehicles which is problematic for passengers manoeuvring baggage aboard lugging large portes around truck extremities. Cabins deep in the bilges ordered with just a washbasin are E69 pp but all share facilities are adequate for an 8 hour voyage.

Dump your gear and advance to the upper decks where entertainment zones contain a buffet, cinema, dutyfree shops, a la carte restaurant and at least 2 bars to compete with non cabin dwellers perching for the night.

A swarthy aura pervades the cusineery as waiters in black waistcoats, moustaches, and tight pants present a sort of Iron Curtain Balkan insouciance into the fight for drinks. This is the main domain and centre of activities as the pleasant port views of Ancona slide into the darkness.



The stereo sound of graunching and grinding provides the wakeup call to the free continental breakfast as Split splutters in the morning gloom. It is a foreboding first up look for a new country and the bustle of unloading and thinking of voyages ahead stir the genitalia into fast action.

Good luck prevails as a ferry is leaving within the hour for Hvar so an instant decision to avoid any choice is made to go. The SS Dubrovnik the inter country ferry is now the same boat to Hvar with the same overnight tired crew testing the Work Health and Safety limits to the max.

It is easy to get an early morning top up when the barman is the same guy serving your last evening drink a few hours before. The boat is Starigrad bound and the ferry port is out of the town by a few clicks so not available for a morning optic nerve but still 25 kms from Hvar.

No cars can be unloaded at Hvar so the Starigrad port provides the main entry at this end of the island. The bus company seems to be owned by the same cowboys from Capri as 35 luggage laden bods get into a 20 seater for the ride. This casual attitude rests easy with the driver as he halts the bus halfway up a hill to allow a passenger to dive over the edge to activate the faucet for a piddle.

Rear entry to Hvar town has that common vista to many towns not able to hide the fields of dead cars but here there is an added bonus of a boat graveyard as well. The road wends its way down the hillside above the town leading to disembarkation outside the old town square.

Here is a brilliant opening gambit as the visitor walks past the very old St Stephens Cathedral, Groda Palaces and through the longish piazza style entry straight onto the boardwalk of Hvar harbour and Venetian Loggia.



Originally called Pharos and founded by the Siracusans in 4thBC Hvar (Dimos) had a series of players in the Romans, Venetians, and Byzantines until the Yugoslavia of unpopular choice left them to be part of Croatia.

Where is the apartment is the catchcry, as no street names or numbers seem to exist and who thought of a map? Questions are asked and answered at the gelateria as the apartment was right above it next to the old scaffolded building perched at the harbour head. The residence "Apartment Dean" is on the second floor above the shop alongside what was the C16th Arsenal and public theatre.

The public theatre was the first in the Balkans which people of all classes could watch drama regardless of social standing.



All the towns 4 main historical buildings are surrounding this area and the apartment is the first private building intruding and appears in every promotional tourist photo.

Doubtful internet accommodation searches of what had seemed an apartment too good to be true proved to be the site of a million dreams and the centre of the Hvar universe.

Shutters are flung open, bags tossed aside, and the Aussie flag unfurled and hung over the boardwalk perhaps to the chagrin of the munchers below. The mission is now to venture into the Hvar cuisine scene and recharge 2 days of travel food with some real live unprocessed food.

The Arsenal restaurant on the waterfront should provide the benchmark for an upfront entry test for Croatian wallet massaging techniques right from the very start? Typical Croatian fare is the backbone of the menu with Dalmatian Vegetables (potato and spinach), cevapcic (cherap-che-che) cigar shaped sausage, mixed grill, char-roasted vegetables and the ever present ajvar relish.

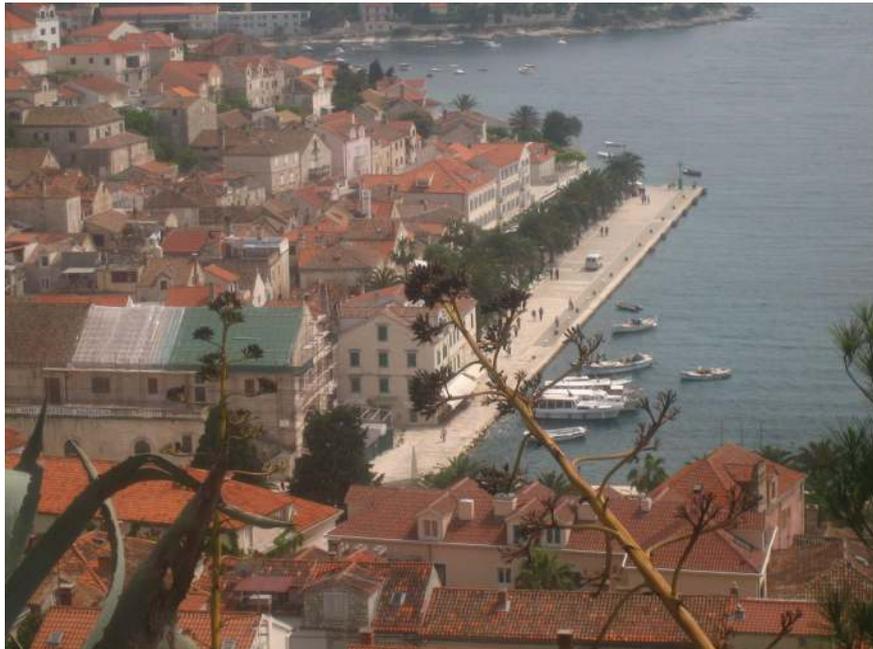
Hard pressed to complain as the water lapped the table edge , priced right at \$A44 for 4 adults with local wine ,plus the added bonus of a professional waiter.

The main historic buildings of Hvar are surrounded by many Cafes in the large piazza all competing with menus, chair arrangements and duelling musical fare, as they spill onto the squares and boardwalks.

A scene not as quiet in the mid April period to recognise that full summer must be a cacophony of blistering noise. Not far away for the self catering types is the supermarket with modern visual USA style shelves but with unintelligible delineation of goods and a self labelling/weighing fruit section testing cross cultural translation. Here in the bowels of good time shopping lurk good deals for the very palatable Croatian wines, beers and cheap but perfumed local rum.

The southern boardwalk is a shrine to the "Paul and Shark" or "Nautical" set ensconced in their immaculate Bavaria fully equipped yachts moored rear ended in a bunch the whole length of the strip. A party seemed to be happening at the rear deck as the yachties drank the remainder of the day's spoils before disembarking into the cafes.

There was connectivity between the water, yachts, boardwalk wanderers and a buzz about the cafes that infuses into the drinking person's soul as the interaction drew everyone in. Santa Barbara Café Bar faced onto this scene and the beer was cold and Jaksa the young owner had a gift for the right amount of largess as he gave discounts on consumption and frequency.



The ability to sit in the front row at a World Series postcard offering and pay the equivalent of \$2.40 for a coffee and \$3.50 for a large cold Karlovacko Pivo (beer) makes it hard to wrest the body home to sleep. It is not a long walk to take in the drinking haunts and soon a familiarity with fellow travellers exists as the continual crossing over of common locales strikes a conversational blow.

A good repartee with a bunch of French revellers interspersed with the effervescing Irish leads to a proclamation that "get into it now as the days of calm are over" the end of all good is gone. The reason a guide book by Rick Steve's has hit the shelves expounding the joys of Croatia so the Americanization of the Balkans with the white shoe brigade is about to happen.

Rainy days interfere with any holiday but somehow Hvar is tolerable in the dampness as days become virtual victual fuel stops with siesta lay-ups to regroup. The seas surged with the unseasonable weather and the tight harbour threw the water over the walkways turning the passage into a wet or dry lottery.

The "fuel" stops bring out the inevitable and yesterday's drinkers are good for a political rollicking re the Bush /Iraq war an issue tossed about with liquid alacrity.

The night scene is slack due to the inclement weather and the wind blows the heart out of the revellers in the open Cafes. The only venue on the seaside doing any trade is the very ordinary Casino poker palace with a nonchalant but sleazy management hovering about in a cigarette induced haze.



One night Thor gave a message to his followers with a bevy of lightning strikes causing palpitations and shudders as a torrent of water poured into the Apartment. The waterfall inside was so loud it rose above the calamitous fireworks and our feet were soon wet.

The owner in the third floor Unit had been knee deep and the inevitable overflow searched us out. It appears the 16th C Theatre renovations next door allowed the debris to build up on the rooftop terrace above and the downpour did the rest.

The ancient cracks open up and there is a certain unease running around with buckets and towels in wet conditions with exposed third world knitted electrical connections.

Weather clears after 2 days and the aimless sport of walking eases into the corpulent frames and the pathway south around the boardwalk past the yachts drifts into the fringe dwellers.

It is a poor Titoesque construction area where a vapid style of Yugo construction looks archetypical of bad planning, poor material and devoid of any aesthetic charm. The pathway around the hillside does lead to the charming vista of the solitary Church sitting forlornly perched on a bleached Island on the sparkling Adriatic Sea.

The days are warm and the only way to see the 100 km length of Hvar is to invest in a scooter at \$80 per day for 2 people plus the required fuel top up at the end of hire.

It is a there and back ride to Sucurage on the tip of the Island facing Split with a couple of back roads returning to change the view. The road to Starigrad and Jelsa is a breeze before chasing the rural bits with just enough hairpins to upset the equilibrium. Starigrad is like the country cousin of Hvar without the glitterati and many bypass it coming off the ferry in the quest for the bling and glamour.

Entering the town leads to a promenade area along the waterfront with buildings of seemingly less polish but in a patina of archaeological richness reflected benignly in the calm harbour.



The bars and cafes were very casual and a lackadaical approach to service is not an issue as the pace of life tinkers with the day's psychology. The view over this inlet was edged with houses and went deep into the harbour.

Sitting musing here at 6 o'clock alerts one to a Croatian passeggiata set to a Berlin Wall style of dress with a Croatian nonchalance. A macho swagger accompanied the young bucks in what appeared to be a male dominated ritual with few real female interruptions.



A few kilometres further along the main highway a seemingly bush, land locked road has an advertisement poking out of shrubbery showing a picture book town. The detour to Vrboska is a gem as the hill leads to a town hidden from all in an idyllic inlet in what is a perfect yacht basin.

The scooters were driven down along a café lined waterfront over a small bridge around the quiet waterfront and then out the other side in a full circuit. The place reeks of the

well heeled judging by the expensive and large moored boats lining the edges but the aura is of the simple lifestyle off the main track.

The exit onto the meandering road which is easy travelling until the entry into Jelsa reveals another perfect Inlet harbour perhaps the New Holland or Olde Europe revisited. The houses and town perch over another mill pond and the calm of the Adriatic reflects the hillside as Islands rim the horizon.

A meander down the pathways onto the waterfront enables the scooters to be parked while the search for food and drink commenced. The quiet is shattered by the "Hamburg Fat Peoples Cycle Club " that rolled along the length of the boardwalk with Teutonic tonsorial exhortations to halt the parade at the Gelataria.

What a thrashing the gelataria was getting as at the same time a contingent of dialectically challenged big breasted Deep South American women exited a tour to cries of "What's Nocello".

This amplified the unsaid proposition that these two nations win the mixed doubles in dialectal vulgarity hands down. Seems the best contract on offer would have been the welding or anti rust franchise for the metal chairs.

Jelsa did not seem to squirm with the noise works but a shift to the quieter end of town leads to the road to "suk your raj" (Sukuraj) and the hills surrounding. The road climbs to 2000 meters past gentle rocky beaches bearing the remains of sites



Sign posted as Kamps. The Kamps are broken down tourist facilities that do not appear to ingratiate themselves into the surrounds and the infrastructure circa 1960s now looks forlorn. The road climbs through conifers and alpine shrubbery with views similar to the Remarkables in Southern New Zealand. Onward ever to the end of the Island interrupted by a visit to a nondescript pit stop called Poljica at a cantina for the compulsory vino and cold Pivo top up.

Not a soul for miles until the door is opened and a room is full of card playing, loud talking Poljackas, who draw breath, stare and continue. The barman tears himself away just long enough to serve then slips back into the fray without another look at his only foreign customers.

The evening ride back to Hvar along the hillside and through the tunnels is an easy rewind of the morning's journey and a ride through the old town streets to return the scooters is only upset by the reception committee.

A lesson for young players is to photograph even the most innocuous of scratches as the inevitable stickup occurs. A no rights policy exists as to who or what determines the "scratch" which now requires immediate recompense.

No amount of remonstrations, visits to the Police Station, phone calls by our Croatian Apartment owner lowers the demand.

The signed imprint of a credit card as a prerequisite to hire lets the John Dillinger of hiring into a new form of hold-up. Perhaps travellers can get even by carrying a dummy credit card that cannot be accessed as the initial payment has to be in cash.

Hvar in the weekend takes on a new persona as the yachting fraternity now inundate the area and create a theatre of the sail whilst jockeying for the best docking positions.

A popular walk with Kodak moments at every turn is the meandering track up hill to the fortress hovering above the town a sentinel to ancient Venetian battles.



Views from the ramparts soak up the ambience and thoughts of pirates past and cannon shots dropping into the bay are not beyond comprehension. The restoration is excellent and a Theatre, museum and Café have been built inside but a trip into the pokey subterranean dungeons soon has thoughts of forgotten horrors.

Lying in a stone coffin with a glimpse out of a rocky slot at the sea below does draw the imagination of who was here at the wrong part of history. It seems a fairytale that the megalithic fortress was brought to its knees by the power of nature as a lightning strike hit the magazine blasting it into closure some centuries past.

Hvar is small and a summer will fill the soul with salt, sun and holiday verve but like any trip into the Dalmatian Coast there is more to see and getting onto the mainland is not onerous. Departure from Hvar can be arranged at Jadrolina offices on the boardwalk and the fast Catamaran pulls right up outside and Split is but an hour away.