

# Boat, bike &



Home to hundreds of islands sprinkled across cobalt seas, Croatia's coast is one of the Mediterranean's most popular cruising destinations. It has friendly locals, great food and a sense of 'breathing' history. And – if you hop on a bike – you can also enjoy majestic views from the islands' peaks.



# beyond

feature

Discover  
Croatia

WORDS, PHOTOGRAPHY  
AND VIDEO BY  
LAWRENCE SCHÄFFLER



I sailed the Croatian coast many years ago – meandering south through the chain of islands between Split and Dubrovnik. It remains one of my all-time favourite cruising destinations. But cruising presents a limited view of the islands

because they're experienced solely through the lens of harbour towns.

Inland, there's a lot more to explore. And the best way to savour the change of scenery is a Boat & Bike adventure. It's become a hot attraction among boaties keen to add variety (and a little exercise) to a standard charter through the islands. It's a simple enough concept.

You join a medium-sized, comfortable vessel (30–40 passengers) that's equipped with e-bikes (those who enjoy self-flagellation can opt for normal bikes). The ship drops the cyclists at one end of each island in the morning and – after you've cycled across – picks you up on the other side in the afternoon. And yes, there is an appreciable change of elevation – but it's relatively easy on an e-bike.

Our eight-day odyssey (in August 2023) covered 190km at a very leisurely pace and took us from Split in the north, traversing islands such as Brač, Hvar, Korčula and Mljet before finishing on the mainland at Dubrovnik – a jewel among the ancient cities dotting the Adriatic coast.

The route across each island is along quiet, perfectly



maintained roads and winds through mountainous terrain and verdant vegetation. There's very little traffic and around each blind corner you're greeted with another glorious view.

You'll work up a bit of a sweat (even on an e-bike) but the views are worth it. There are regular stops to rehydrate, have lunch, chat and take photos – and for every climb there's the corresponding freewheel down to sea level. Rest-assured – it's a fun, group activity – the Tour de France it is not.

Our cruise was organised by Island Hopping (what else?) – a German-based company

launched 25 years ago. Today it operates around 300 hybrid bike/boat cruises annually, all over the world. Mainly around the Mediterranean but also in Northern Europe (Netherlands, Denmark and Scotland) as well as further afield (Vietnam, South Africa and Patagonia).

The company runs a range of vessels – both sail and motorised – catering to various levels of comfort/luxury – with corresponding prices. There are five categories to choose from: Tall Ships, Comfort, Premium, Deluxe – and First Class.

A Tall Ship is a nice option for those who fancy the romance of sail over a throbbing diesel. But it would be amiss of me not to point out that in summer the Mediterranean is usually fairly docile – sail typically defaults to motoring.

### HARMONIA

Our vessel – the *Harmonia* – is a 38m schooner-rigged motor-sailer (we never hoisted any sails). She's one of a number in the Deluxe fleet and has 18 air-conditioned cabins (on two decks) sleeping a maximum of 36 passengers.

Each cabin has an ensuite and while most are equipped with double beds, some

**RIGHT** Preparing for another odyssey across an island. The eBikes performed faultlessly, even if their batteries sighed with exhaustion at the end of each day.

**OPPOSITE** Views, history, great food – Croatia has it all. And it's all wonderfully clean and free of graffiti and litter.



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## VOLVO PENTA NEW D4 & D6 PROPULSION PACKAGES



**RIGHT** Roads are quiet, well-maintained and sealed – and while the climbs are challenging, you'll regain your dignity on the downhills.

**BELOW & OPPOSITE** *Harmonia* is spacious and very comfortable, with expansive decks and accommodation catering for singles or couples.



are configured for up to four singles sharing a cabin. Believe me, in the middle of a sweltering Mediterranean summer, that air-conditioning was a life-saver.

All cabins have 240-volt outlets with free Wi-Fi available throughout the vessel (some areas have better reception than others). Meals are included and served in a large communal saloon with eight-seater tables and a dedicated bar.

Buffet breakfasts and served dinners are included in the fare – though there is some flexibility around meals. If you want a quiet venue for a romantic celebration, for example, you're welcome to eat ashore in any of the overnight ports. Lunches (not included) are typically at small villages along the way.

Ship food is excellent and the pastry chef's creations were particularly good. Drinks, too, aren't included in the fare. You open a running tab and settle the score at the end of the voyage. The fare also doesn't include gratuities.

Daily sailing schedules and bike departure times vary (depending on the distance to be covered on each day) but it's all reasonably flexible. If you fancy a break from the cycling to give your nether regions a reprieve you can stay on board for the day and meet the rest of the gang at the next port.

*Harmonia* is a very spacious vessel and the best place to absorb the passing seascapes (with a beer or two for company) is on a recliner on the vast sundecks (hats, sunnies and sunscreen are imperative). At the ship's stern is a swimming platform providing easy access into/out of the water – a feature we all made use of when anchored in a secluded bay.

### THE GUESTS

Our charter comprised 25 cyclists ranging in age from 12 to 78 (mostly mid-to-late 60s). It featured a remarkably fit Swiss professor (the septuagenarian), Canadians, Americans, a British family (the young 'uns) – and 12 New Zealanders.

What are the odds of 12 Kiwis joining the same voyage – at a random moment in time – on the other side of the world?

*Harmonia* is a very spacious vessel and the best place to absorb the passing seascapes...



## CROATIAN TRIVIA

The roots of New Zealand's vibrant wine industry reach back to the Dalmatian immigrants who, in the late 1800s began establishing vineyards around West Auckland and in the Hawkes Bay.

The walled city of Dubrovnik is one of Croatia's most iconic landmarks – and a walk along those ramparts (a must-do) offers sublime views of the city and the sea. Its gloriously-preserved antiquity has seen the town used as the backdrop for numerous historical movies and TV shows, including the mega-hit TV series *Game of Thrones*.

Despite its diminutive size some 10% of Croatia's land area is allocated to preserving its natural features – eight national parks, 11 nature parks and two nature reserves. The oldest and best-known – the Plitvice Lakes National Park – is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

A small town in eastern Croatia – Vinkovci – is widely-acknowledged as the oldest continuously inhabited town in Europe. It dates back 8,300 years.

Croatia once supported one of the region's largest shipbuilding sectors, servicing the traders plying the Adriatic and wider Mediterranean. Very little of that remains, but one of the world's oldest maritime guilds – the Brotherhood of Shipbuilders – still operates today. It's based in Korčula.

Bizarre. It turned out to be a fun group with a happy dynamic and the communal meals at the large tables proved to be a natural icebreaker.

Island Hopping's operational manifesto stresses safety and the group was chaperoned by two guides – one leading the pack, the other bringing up the rear, carrying spare batteries for anyone with less-than-fundamental power-management skills.

Ivan and Mathias were ideal companions – very knowledgeable and informed, patient and good-humoured. They delivered a detailed brief prior to each day's activities, explaining the route (elevation changes!), identifying the scenic highlights and providing the context to appreciate the cultural/historical significance of the areas we cycled through. And there is plenty of the latter.



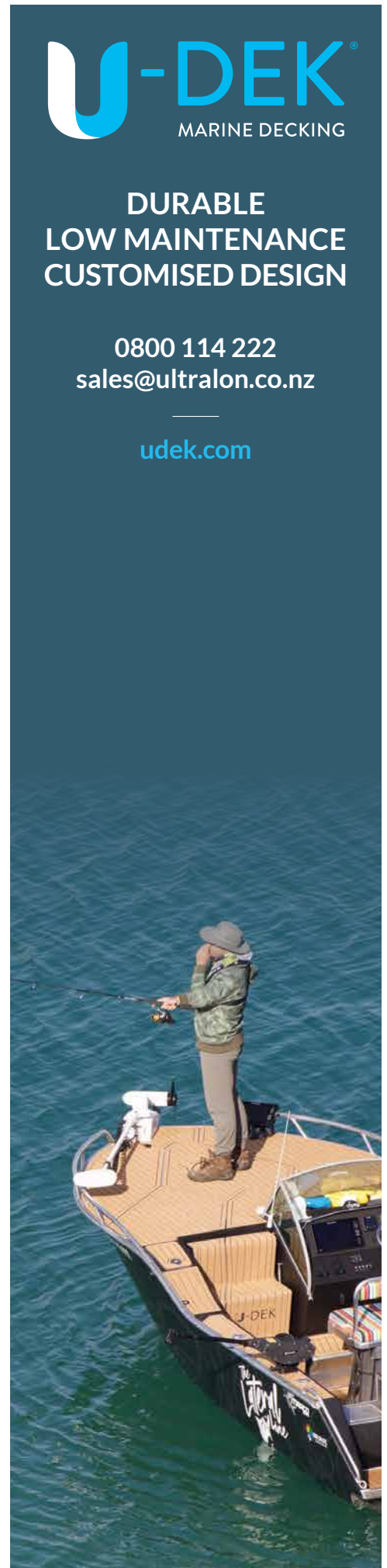
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## HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

With around four million inhabitants Croatia is even less-populated than New Zealand and a little research reveals that it's been a kind of regional punch-bag over the centuries.

It's survived multiple invaders and occupiers – the Greeks, Romans, Ottomans and the Austro-Hungarians – all of whom left reminders of their presence. A welcome calm descended following the most recent major conflict – the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995) with Yugoslavia.

Remarkably, despite it all, Croatia has managed to preserve most of its cultural and historical treasures. The sense of antiquity is palpable and towns such as Trogir, Split, Korčula, Hvar and Dubrovnik are all UNESCO World Heritage Sites – and yet they are all seamlessly integrated into daily life. Wonderful examples of Romanesque, Renaissance and Baroque art and architecture are evident throughout the towns.

Split – the voyage's starting point – gives a vibrant taste of what to expect. The old town's dominated by the remains of the lavish holiday 'bach' belonging to the Roman emperor Diocletian (284–305 AD) – commonly known as Diocletian's Palace.

He probably wanted to be remembered as the hero who returned the Roman Empire to a semblance of stability after the dysfunctional chaos of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, but he's perhaps more notorious for his bloodthirsty persecution of Christians (Christianity was still a fledgling religion and outlawed by Rome).

It also seems he had a thing for Egyptian art and architecture and ransacked that country for its antiquities, including some impressive statues and granite columns from Luxor which were shipped across the sea and incorporated into his palace. They still stand today.

Another of history's famous personalities who enjoyed Split's sunshine was Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) – the Austrian-born 'Father of Psychoanalysis'. As the tour guides like to tell it, the main reason he visited was because he'd ensconced his mistress – his wife's younger sister – in an apartment in Split. They also suggest the dalliance spawned Freud's famous 'split personality' theories.

**BELOW** Gorgeous vistas abound. The coastline is breathtakingly stunning when viewed from the sea.



While the island of Brač is famous for its olive oil (very pure) – it's perhaps better known for the purity and colour of its limestone (there are still large, working quarries on the island). The limestone's evident in scores of ancient edifices throughout the islands, but over the centuries it has also been used in numerous iconic buildings scattered around the planet. They include Berlin's Reichstag, the Capitol in Washington, Budapest's Houses of Parliament, Paris' Sacre Coeur cathedral and Istanbul's ancient Hagia Sophia mosque.

Locals in Korčula insist the town is the birthplace of legendary traveller Marco Polo (1254–1324), although across the Adriatic the Venetians swear with equal conviction that he was born there. Korčula is an architectural gem.

The town's particularly interesting for the layout of its streets – reflecting an early attempt to manage the region's suffocating heat. The main thoroughfares are oriented to take advantage of the prevailing winds. Today, because global climate change has twisted traditional wind patterns, the winds don't always blow as they're supposed to. It's bloody hot!

A hybrid Boat & Bike cruise is a fun, energetic and interesting way to experience countries with diverse attractions – and you don't have to be super-fit to tackle it. One caveat: the Med is stifling in July/August.

I personally enjoyed the sunshine – a welcome escape from the ceaseless rain and wind back home. But cycling in 36°C heat won't appeal to everyone and, as our guides suggested, doing the trip in the cooler 'shoulder' months (April/May or September/October) – would be safer for preserving your cycling outfit and dignity.

One final observation: the Croatians look after their heritage (I guess they have to – tourism is the dominant player in the country's modest GDP). But we flew into Split from Rome, and it's impossible to ignore the contrast.

Rome's antiquity is swamped by graffiti and litter (it's heart-breaking). Croatia's antiquity is crisp and pristine – there's a sense that Diocletian himself might step through one of Split's majestic portals at any moment. **BNZ**



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