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The Dalmatian Coast by Bike and Boat

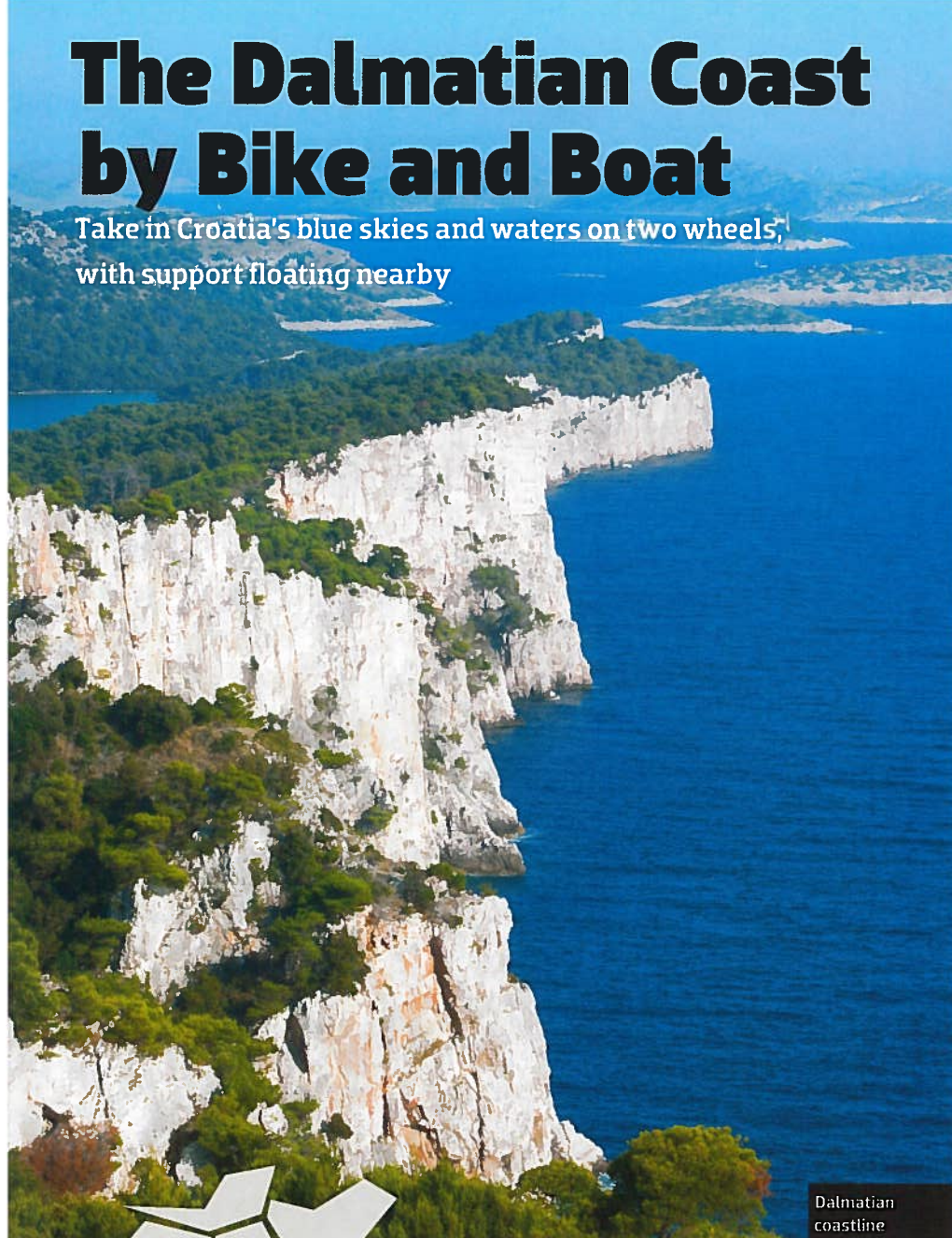
Take in Croatia's blue skies and waters on two wheels, with support floating nearby

by Maryam Siddiqi

I don't know how many in our group of 23 cyclists were religious, but I'm certain we were all thanking the heavens when we took a short break outside a tiny church in a tiny town on the Adriatic coast. We were halfway through our first ride of a weeklong trip through Croatia's north and central Dalmatia regions. The day's distance, just shy of 50 km, wasn't notable. But we had just completed our first major climb of the week, several hundred metres on an incline of 12.5 per cent. In a week, I would want to take on the hill again, certain I could conquer it with a smile on my face. But after that first run, as the Sunday-morning church service was broadcast via loud-speaker to the vacant town – we were the only people milling about; everyone must have already been in the church, or at home still in bed – all I wanted was water, and a scoop of *sladoled* (Croatian for ice cream).

Croatia in the summertime is a lovely place to be: the skies are a clear, crisp blue, the water along its coast even clearer and crisper, and the sun high and hot (the average temperature in July is 30 C). The country has long been a destination for Europeans visiting from neighbouring countries such as Germany, Austria and Italy, but has only recently become a hot spot for North Americans. It's still possible to find many secluded spots and quiet stretches. A low volume of car traffic on secondary roads means it's easy and awfully enjoyable to cycle from town to town and island to island.

The country has a little more than 1,200 islands dotting the Adriatic (the exact number is in dispute), of which fewer than 70 are inhabited. I wanted to see as many as I could during the course of a week, but I didn't want to face the logistics involved in organizing the trip myself. I signed up for eight days of island hopping with UTracks, specialists in active holidays in Europe. The company offers several cycle-and-sail tours in Croatia, from Istria in the north to Dubrovnik in the south. I chose to stay central, visiting islands, coastal towns and parks between Trogir and Zadar.



Dalmatian coastline



Istrian hills

Photos: uncredited, GruberImages



DESTINATION

CROATIA

With the exception of that day hiking in Krka National Park, we rode twice a day, distances varying from 15 to 60 km. Between rides, we were on the boat. Named the Harmonia, summer 2013 was its first season on the water. The rooms, both above and below deck, were large and bright, and it was a treat to be able to plant our luggage in our rooms on the first day and not have to worry about it for the week, carrying only a day's necessities in our panniers.

Joining me on boat and bike were South Africans, Australians, a couple from Norway, two women from England and many Germans, a group of which quickly emerged as our peloton. While riders are invited to bring their own bikes, no one in this group did, opting to travel light and ride the terrain bikes made specially for the tour operator. Personalized gear on the other hand? That was plentiful – from saddles to GPS trackers. The trip may have been a holiday for everyone, but not one kilometre would go unrecorded.

Cycling along the Dalmatian coast is not unlike taking the best bits of Canada's landscape and lining them all up along one shoreline – during the course of the week we took in mountains and sea, rivers and salt-water lakes, vineyards and ... minefields. While many parts the country did remind me of home, Croatia's not-so-distant political history – the regional war that saw the breakup of Yugoslavia – is still visible. Along with the one stretch of tarmac that has do-not-cross signs warning people not to go off-road, many of the towns we visited still have houses and buildings in various states of disrepair thanks to bombings. But for every roofless house, there is a stunning centuries-old relic or modern public art piece. We toured port towns and fishing villages and got a closer, slower look at the country.

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Šibenik, a city that dates as far back as the 11th century, is home to the largest historic old town in Dalmatia. Its limestone walkways are so smooth from hundreds of years of people walking on them that they are almost like skating rinks. The main church, St. James Cathedral, which has UNESCO designation, took 100 years to build. By its completion in 1536, it was adorned with 72 portraits – little stone heads displaying every emotion possible and said to be portraits of the locals.

Farther north in Zadar, after our first day of riding and that lengthy hill now a fading memory, we spent an evening enjoying Greeting to the Sun

TOP
The historic town of Šibenik

RIGHT
The Harmonia docked in Trogir



and the Sea Organ, two public art pieces by Nikola Bašić. The first work features hundreds of solar glass plates covering the ground along the waterfront. In the day, they soak up rays. At night, they come to life colourfully. The second work is a series of holes at water level along the waterfront that act as air pumps. They produce a melody that matches the power of the waves. It's musical and magical and a tourist draw.

The peak of Croatia's high season is July and August, when places such as Diocletian's Palace in Split and the walled city in Dubrovnik are heaving with travellers and cruise-ship day trippers. Fortunately those places were far – in terms of both geography and density – from what we were experiencing on our saddles.

While cycling is becoming more popular in Croatia, and northern regions such as Istria and Kvarner have positioned themselves as destinations for all-terrain, forest and mountain circuits, there is not yet a national network of trails. The majority of our rides were on paved roads, the only notable traffic coming when we had to carve our way through towns, which never took more than a minute or two. On islands such as Dugi Otok, which in Croatian means Long Island, there is one quiet main road that crests the island. The 40-km undulating, but not overexerting, ride had us soaking in views of the shimmering sea, little white boats dotting the shorelines on both sides of the island.

On some days, although the sun had been up for a couple hours, the heat intensified suddenly, as if someone had flipped a switch from hot to scorching. On those days, rides were broken up with stops, some at tiny cafés, like one on the island of Molat, whose owner definitely wasn't expecting any business. He happily stopped his conversation with a friend, but didn't bother to put on a shirt before serving up cool lemonade for a few of us. There was a second ride on Dugi Otok, before we departed by boat for our next island, a short but hilly jaunt under the beating sun that ended at the edge of Mir, a salt lake in Telašćica Nature Park. Most of us were dressed with our destination in mind, and stripped our bike gear down to just bikinis and swim trunks then ran into the lake.

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