



On the water in Croatia & Montenegro

Lee Jackson - August 2014

Croatia is a very popular choice for sailing holidays, its crystal clear seas, idyllic islands and fashionable ports make it an attractive proposition for a summer break on the water. With this in mind our first visit to the country since the breakup of the former Yugoslavia was well and truly centred around the water and water related activities.

Our base for the week was Cavtat (pronounced "Savtat"), just 10 minutes' drive from Dubrovnik airport and a popular overnight stop for many yachts and cruisers. The small resort has two bays and our hotel offered stunning views of the harbour and town, and easy access to the rock based beach areas. Our hotel,

named exactly as the country "The Croatia" had been described in trip advisor reports as more deserving of four star status than five, functional in design and lacking in pool space for such a large residence. With these views in mind we were generally pleased with our accommodation, clean and spacious rooms, attentive service, great beach access and good food choice in the restaurants. Its functional design born from its former Yugoslavian heritage is not necessarily unpleasant and as a child of the seventies reminded me of how we thought all buildings would look by the 21st century.

Also on the agenda for the stay was to gain some insight into the Croatian

identity. Having spent recent summers in Spain, Italy and Greece where the characteristics of our hosts were much understood, we had no real experience of the Croatian character and were keen to gain some insight into life in the region given Croatia's relatively short time of independence.

The summer temperatures in Cavtat literally force an association with the water and in the first few days we use kayaks to explore the coast and the nearby islands of Supetar and Bobara. Whilst Bobara looks inviting its jagged rocks limit the visit to viewing from the kayak, whereas a more hospitable Supetar allows tender of the kayaks and a simple but delicious lunch of local chargrilled Sardines and Mackerel with salad and grilled vegetables. As we work hard to make our way back to the Cavtat harbour in the afternoon sun we watch the stream of yachts and cruisers heading for the Marina for the evening and are suitably inspired to make arrangements for our own sailing experience later in the week.

That evening we gain our first insight into the Croatian mood as we talk to our waiter "Tony" about how life has changed under the Croatian Flag. Surprisingly, Tony tells us that life in the new country is far more challenging than under the Yugoslavian regime where he personally enjoyed a good income and the freedom to travel to the west. While he acknowledged that the Croatian independence and freedom was both important and hard fought he also made clear the struggles of a making a living as part of the new democracy.

Our day under the power of sail required a taxi to Dubrovnik from where the charter had been arranged. We elected to take the road transfer having visited Dubrovnik earlier in the stay through one of the many local boat services which offer a more relaxed and scenic journey but take an hour versus thirty minutes.

Dubrovnik is a perfectly preserved medieval city with completely preserved stone ramparts surrounding the Venetian architecture of its interior. We had been forewarned of the level of visitor numbers in high season and in the extreme heat the stroll around the walls and streets was far from relaxing! That said it should be noted that the historic centre really is a magnificent spectacle and well worth closer attention outside of peak season.

For our sailing day we join the boat and skipper "Niko" at the Sailing Dubrovnik base in Lapad Bay. As we set sail from the Marina we head past the P&O Ventura cruise ship which would be contributing much to that day's visitor numbers in the city. We move beyond the confines of the city and into the bay first under motor power, and then as some breeze emerges under the power of sail. After discussion with Niko we agree to a day's itinerary to include swimming and snorkelling stops and a visit to the Elafiti Islands for lunch. Where necessary we lend a hand in hoisting and adjusting the sails to steer our course through the winds and manage to do in ten seconds what a sailing crew would do in one!

As we sail into Sudurad harbour we enjoy the thrill of mooring our own boat just as we had watched others do (though much larger vessels) in Cavtat over recent days. Though we would have hoped for much better wind conditions the time that we were able to experience the movement of the boat under sail was sufficiently exhilarating to warrant consideration of a week's charter along the Croatian Coast. As I talk with Niko over the course of the day his comments on life in the new found Croatia are not so different from that of Tony's though he was much too young to make any financial comparison. What Niko did share was a concern as to the extent to which his home town had been surrendered to souvenir shops and to which the wider Croatia had been willing to relinquish its assets to foreign investment.

After a lunch of freshly cooked Calamari

the Trisestre restaurant in Sipan, and snorkelling in a completely isolated bay, Our day finished as it had begun with return to port under motor power just as the Ventura pulled out of port, a true David and Goliath comparison of sailing vessels!

Back in Cavtat we enjoy a further experience of the water in the form of a local water polo match between Cavtat and local rivals Mlini. The match, played under floodlight attracts the attention of the local sports TV channel and also three boats of visiting supporters keen to make their presence known with drums and flares. The "wild" league as it is known includes many towns and villages along the Dalmatian coast and the game proves a real spectacle with Mlini just edging out Cavtat by two goals. Through conversation with locals who are pleased to see our interest we learn that the game is really popular in the region and that many dirty tricks are employed beneath the water, at which point my own preference for lane swimming is reaffirmed.

Our final experience of the "water" is very different and requires a testing journey of over four hours by small mini coach. After a 6am start our journey to Montenegro via Bosnia will take us to the world's second largest canyon and a unique white water rafting experience along a 17 kilometre course. As we set out on our last day we are not particularly looking forward to the long journey but once we ascend from the coast and travel through the green mountains of Bosnia, via the Salt Lakes of Montenegro and into the canyons and lakes of our destination our senses take over and time soon passes by. Helped along the way is superb narrative from our guide Milkja who provides an overview of the political history of the region and how the present countries emerged from the war of the 90's.

On the final approach to the rafting centre we travel through over 50 tunnels carved into the rock as the road weaves

its way amongst the crystal clear blue of the lakes and rivers. From the rafting centre it is a hair-raising 20 minute Land rover journey along unsurfaced mountain roads and mainly at breakneck speed and without an English speaking guide to provide any assurance of the journey coming to an early, and safe! end. The Tara Canyon is the world's second largest canyon and given its depth it is not surprising to be warned that the inviting blue water does not get any warmer than 7 degrees. Our wet suit trousers and vests are extremely hot and uncomfortable in the 30 degree heat but once we are on the river, and at occasionally swimming in the river, the cold of the water is very evident. During the height of summer the river is relatively calm and though the trip offers some excitement in parts the experience is certainly more about the captivating location, the translucent water with a little paddling effort and excitement along the way. Our course steers us right back to the rafting centre and a short walk uphill brings us to a lunch of lamb and potato cooked in the traditional Montenegrin way under an iron bell that is covered in hot coals. The meat is tender and as we sit in a perfect dining spot overlooking the river we agree over a glass of local wine that the experience was worth the long journey.

The only disappointing aspect to the experience is the lack of interest or effort from the guides whose English is limited to "Stop" and "Row". I discuss this with Milkja on the return journey to Dubrovnik and we agree that given its short experience of tourism Montenegro is still learning the demands of mass tourism (at the time of our arrival two large coaches were also being hosted by the rafting centre). Milkja also commented on my conversations with her fellow countrymen and she offered that maybe life as a fledgling democracy, finding its way amongst the superpowers of the European Union is proving a test for its people.

I offered that maybe the arrival of so many English yachts only helps to

underline some of the disparity versus the larger European nations though I am sure that the Pounds, Euros and Rubles of the visitors remain very welcome and our group is certainly intent on a return.