

# Hidden gems of the Dalmatian Coast

travel

Stunning scenery, rich culture make these Adriatic ports worth a stop

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Mention the Dalmatian Coast and many travelers think of Dubrovnik, that popular tourist city heavily shelled following the breakup of Yugoslavia and since restored.

But while this big sister steals the spotlight — and the drama — other ports continue to display their quiet charm through historic old towns, lovely landscapes and colorful folklore.

The ancient Roman province of Dalmatia stretched along the Adriatic from what is now Croatia south into Montenegro. Today cruise ships and chartered boats ply the shoreline, dropping anchor in secluded coves or docking alongside old cities to allow visitors to go ashore and explore.

Three stops not to miss:

## Split, Croatia

Where is Diocletian's Palace? It must be here somewhere. But I have been walking for half an hour and still can't find this ancient structure though it covers more than seven acres. Then it dawns on me: I am in it, have been in it, the entire time.

When marauders chased the people of nearby Salona from their homes in the 7th century, they fled to the coast and took refuge inside the palace walls. And never left. They built homes, set up shops and constructed churches, the spires rising inside the roofless fortifications. Centuries passed and the city grew, spilling outside the four palace gates until visitors, like me, can no longer tell where the old town of Split ends and the ruins of the palace begin.

No matter. Both are fine places to get lost on a sunny afternoon.

The palace began as a retirement home for Diocletian, an ordinary soldier in the Roman army who rose to become emperor. All Roman emperors died in office — often at the hand of an enemy — except Diocletian, who abdicated. He moved to his homeland in Dalmatia and took up residence in his palace in the year 305. And what a retirement he had. Hedonistic banquets were

held in the imperial residence, diners inserting peacock feathers into their throats until they vomited, allowing them to eat more. Every August, the Days of Diocletian festival re-creates such feasts — minus the vomiting — with diners donning togas for a food fair.

Diocletian convinced his subjects he was the son of Jupiter by singing loudly inside a round stone vestibule, the sound echoing like the voice of the god. When he emerged onto the adjacent portico, all gathered in the palace courtyard below prostrated before him. No one is paying homage today. The courtyard is filled with tourists, street performers, hawkers offering guided tours and men dressed as Roman soldiers posing for tips. Music still reverberates in the vestibule where klapa singers dressed in native costumes sing a cappella and sell their CDs.

Diocletian persecuted Christians mercilessly, putting some 5,000 to death, including nearly a third of all Catholic saints. History has a way of getting revenge, though. When the people of Salona occupied the palace, they made Diocletian's mausoleum a Christian church. His body was moved; no one knows where. Today a reliquary in the church, the Cathedral of St. Dominus, holds the bones of martyrs. Tourists enter the cathedral through massive wooden doors carved with scenes from the life of Christ, file past stone altars and climb the bell tower.

I wander into the shops built onto and around the palace walls. A

silversmith sells delicate filigree jewelry and silver buttons that adorn Croatian costumes. Another shop is devoted to men's neckwear. Ties, the clerk tells me, were invented in Croatia. Croat mercenaries wore scarves as part of their uniforms when they fought for French King Louis XIV, he says, and these cravats, as the French called them, became the latest fashion.

## Korcula, Croatia

Sitting on a waterfront terrace, sipping the local white wine and digging into a grilled fish caught from these very waters, I watch a sailboat glide slowly past. A woman in a bikini and a shirtless guy with an amazing tan recline on the deck, their laughter floating up to me. Life is good on this island about a mile off the mainland: simple, relaxed, unhurried.

Ancient Greeks colonized Korcula around 400 B.C. calling it "Black Corfu" for the dark forests on its flanks. The Greeks, and later the Romans and the Venetians who ruled it, harvested the wood and made Korcula a center for shipbuilding. Those ships carried limestone from island quarries as far away as Istanbul and Stockholm.

Honey-colored stone walls surround the old town of Korcula, glowing in the late afternoon light. The rosy hue deepens to orange on the tile roofs of one of the best preserved medieval towns on the Dalmatian Coast. Visitors climb a staircase over what once was a drawbridge and enter the walled city through the 14th-century Revelin Tower. A statue of a winged lion, symbol of Venice, looks down on all who pass under the arch.

Stone streets form a herringbone

pattern on the oval peninsula on which the old town rests with St. Mark's Cathedral perched at the top. Begun in the 15th century and finished 150 years later, it's a blend of late Gothic and Renaissance styles. Inside, an altar painting is attributed to 16th-century Italian painter Tintoretto and a pieta to Croatia's famous 20th century sculptor Ivan Mestrovic.

With luck, visitors strolling through the old town will happen upon a festive procession by one of the local confraternities that date back to the Middle Ages. Males join as children, often as soon as they are able to walk, pledging themselves to honor one of the saints on his or her feast day. Every Good Friday the groups band together in one massive religious procession.

Another bit of folklore makes quite a spectacle in performances throughout the tourist season. The moreska, a highly choreographed sword dance, originated in Spain in the 13th century and migrated here. Using real swords, knights in red or black costumes that have been handed down for generations, fight for the honor of a damsel in distress. The good guys, in red, always win.

Legend has it that the famous explorer Marco Polo was born in Korcula Town, though many historians dispute it. In 1298, he supposedly led the Republic of Venice in a naval battle against the city-state of Genoa, lost and was imprisoned in the town jail. Again, the story is disputed, but tell that to the scuba divers who explore the depths off the island's resort town of Lumbarda and come across the wreck of a wooden ship. Chartered sailboats anchor here, their passengers dive into clear waters for a swim or an afternoon of sunbathing on a sandy beach.

Lumbarda is known for vineyards producing Korcula's white wine, Grk. A dry, golden wine, it rivals the island's famous wine, Posip, grown in the appellation-controlled vineyards around the village of Cara. With a deeper color and flavor hints of apricot and figs, it's the ideal match for Korcula's fresh catches of the day.

## Kotor, Montenegro

Like a baby cradled in the crook of its mother's arm, a cruise ship lies at the head of a steep gorge



Roman columns flank the courtyard of Diocletian's Palace in Split, Croatia.

dwarfed by the rock walls around it. I'm slumbering on deck when church bells chime in the old town next to the dock and I open my eyes to see ancient ramparts snaking up a mountainside like the Great Wall of China. Am I dreaming? I'm not in China, nor am I in Norway, though the deep fjord around me certainly looks Scandinavian.

The narrow Bay of Kotor is one of the most deeply indented inlets along the Dalmatian Coast, a crooked finger of sea running 17 miles inland. But it's not a fjord. It's a ria, a submerged river canyon. Villages of stone buildings with red roofs spill down its slopes, church steeples punctuating their skylines. Tiny islands seem to float on mirror-like waters. On one, a church with a blue dome is the only sign of life.

The walled town of Kotor at the head of the gorge dates from the 12th century, though it was the Venetians who ruled from 1420 to 1797 who left the most lasting mark. Inside the walls, visitors are picking their way through a maze of cobblestone streets that open onto plazas ringed with restaurants and cafes. Free of cars, it might be Venice if it weren't for the absence of canals.

The naval history of the bay is recorded in the 18th-century

## Dalmatian Coast

Croatian National Tourist Office, (800) 829-4416, Croatia.hr

National Tourism Organisation of Montenegro, Montenegro.travel

## Hotels

Sample hotel rates for June, two persons, double occupancy.

**Split:** Hotel Park, Hatzeov perivoj 3, hotelpark-split.hr/, from \$143

**Korcula:** Hotel Marko Polo, Put od luke, korcula-hotels.com/en/hotels/hotel-marko-polo.php, from \$116

**Kotor:** Hotel Astoria, Stari grad, astori-amontenegro.com, from \$211

## Dining

**Split:** Konoba Atlantida, Trumbiceva obala 13; terrace overlooks the busy harbor; fish, pasta, chicken, octopus salad.

**Korcula:** Cupido, Setaliste P. Kanaveluca; on the waterfront promenade; fresh fish, prawns, risotto.

**Kotor:** Galion, Suranj bb; near Old Town with a deck overlooking the bay; meats and seafood.

Grgurina Palace where three floors of displays in the Maritime Museum hold models of ships, uniforms and weapons. At the Cathedral of St. Tryphon, the bones of its namesake, the patron saint of Kotor, lie in a chapel reliquary. Built in 1166, the cathedral was damaged several times by earthquakes. Its bell towers were added after the 1667 tremor, though one remains unfinished.

Visitors walking through Kotor can't help but look up. Fortifications built by the Venetians run nearly three miles straight up the side of the gorge, an ascent of 1,200 feet and a mesmerizing sight from any angle. In places the walls measure nearly 50 feet wide and 65 feet high with a chapel, built in 1572 by survivors of the plague, breaking the chain of rock about halfway to the top. Those who make it all the way to the summit, 1,350 steps, are rewarded with a stunning view of the old town and the Bay of Kotor.

• Some information was gathered during research trips sponsored by the Croatian National Tourist Office.



The Cathedral of St. Dominus in Split, Croatia, was built on the mausoleum of a Roman emperor who persecuted Christians. The Bay of Kotor in Montenegro, above, is one of the longest inlets on the Dalmatian Coast. Villages of stone buildings with red roofs dot the shoreline. The Revelin Tower, above right, marks one of the entrances into the walled town of Kotor, Croatia.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER