

GOING PLACES

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DUBROVNIK MEDIEVAL MAGIC



Dubrovnik. Not so long ago, I'd never heard of the place. I wouldn't have bothered to go there if we hadn't dropped anchor in those vivid blue waters one Wednesday. And I would've been the loser. Because the massive, walled, sea-battered city of Dubrovnik, trust me, is pure, sensational, medieval magic!

I caught my first glimpse of this fortress-from-the-Middle-Ages as our Mediterranean cruise-ship crept along the Croatian coast. And I was instantly won over. The old city is an architectural marvel, jutting out on a peninsula into the Adriatic Sea, and encircled by ancient fortifications that rise a solid 25 metres from the water's edge.

*"Grad Dubrovnik smješten je na krajnjem jugu Republike Hrvatske. Proteže se u duljini od 20.5 km od rta Orsula na istoku do Brsečina na zapadu,"**



said one website I looked at. And, as you can imagine, I was none the wiser. But, fortunately, the Croatian guide who welcomed us ashore spoke English. And as she led us across a wooden bridge and through huge arched gates into the Old Town, I fell under Dubrovnik's spell.

Before us lay the *Stradun* – the gleaming limestone street that runs straight through the heart of town to a second set of gates at the other end. Quaint shops and cafes line the route, and narrow alleys lead off steeply from either side.

***Translation:** "The City of Dubrovnik is situated at the far south of the Republic of Croatia. It stretches along 20.5 km from Cape Orsula in the east to Brsečine in the west.

Just inside the gate is a domed fountain (dated 1444) in which ancient visitors to this hygiene-conscious city had to wash themselves before they were allowed any further. We'd showered that morning, thankfully, so were allowed to board a coach and head up into the surrounding suburbs for a birds-eye view of the Old Town.

Dubrovnik, from that height, is a patchwork sea of terra-cotta roofs, punctured here and there by a sculpted dome or tower, and surrounded by those ever-present honey-coloured walls – first erected way back in the ninth century.

Croatia's long and colourful history is littered with foreign influences – from the Romans (as early as 395AD) ... to the Venetians (who were jealous of the region's sea-power) ... the Hapsburgs (who plonked castles everywhere) ... the Turks (who came conquering in the name of Islam) ... and the Nazis (who invaded during World War II).





Worried by Serbian nationalism, Croatia declared its independence from the former communist Yugoslavia in 1991 – which, in turn, led to some bloody ‘ethnic cleansing’ plus an eight-month siege of poor old Dubrovnik. I later saw a map near the Old Town walls, pinpointing which of the city’s structures (more than half of them) got clobbered



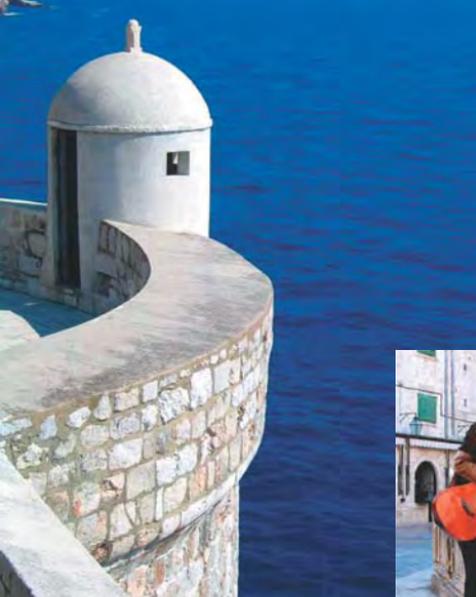
during that awful bombardment. And from up above the city it was easy to see which roofs had been replaced in the massive repair effort following the ceasefire.

Before heading back into the Old Town, we sat in rows in this tiny outdoor theatre and enjoyed a lively folklore show – traditional Croatian song and dance. These attractive young entertainers in their colourful costumes and hats were so full of life and fun and music and hope, I found it hard to believe they’d only recently survived a brutal, hateful war.

Down on the Stradun we wandered through a maze of squashed-up side-streets ... climbed countless flights of ancient stone steps ... poked around inside the ornate Sponza Palace ... explored a 14th-century Franciscan monastery (where Napoleon’s troops were once billeted) ... checked out one of the oldest apothecaries (chemist shops) in the world ... and saw enough architectural and artistic treasures to give a man a serious headache.

That left one more thing to do: a highly-recommended route-march around the top of Dubrovnik’s multi-towered, six-metre-thick, two-kilometre-long wall





... with the restored Old Town below us on one side, the shimmering harbour on the other.

If Croatia is rated one of the most beautiful parts of Europe, then Dubrovnik must be its icing-on-the-cake. But no visit to somewhere this atmospheric is complete without a coffee. So that afternoon, under the beady eye of



St Blaise (the city's patron saint, whose statue stands by the city wall), we did what bearded, black-robed nobles and their gorgeously decked-out wives used to do once-upon-a-time. We sat on that same marbled Stradun ... discussing the city's charms ... sampling its strong cappuccinos ... watching locals rush hither and yon ... and listening while a skinny minstrel with a guitar sang a slightly-out-of-tune Croatian ballad.

Magic? You bet!

Dubrovnik? You gotta go there! ❁

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