

## All at sea

By Claire Wrathall

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The talk of the town in Sipanska Luka, the main settlement on the small, southern Dalmatian island of Sipan, was that the Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich was buying a house there. The skipper of the yacht we'd sailed in on had told us this as we glided into the fjord-like harbour, home to a pod of 20 dolphins, past a series of once splendid stone mansions, once the summer homes of Dubrovnik's nobility.

Only about 200 people live permanently on the island now but almost everyone seemed to know about Abramovich. Oh yes, he had dined at the Pjat restaurant, a waiter there told me, and had paid, he'd heard, €8m for a house. (A figure that seems far too large, though Croatia is no longer the bargain holiday destination it was a decade ago.) This waiter's opposite number at the quayside More restaurant, where we dined on grilled sea bass and skrpina, a succulent if fearsome-looking scarlet-skinned fish, was more circumspect. The oligarch was trying to buy a house – he pointed it out to us – but he'd heard there were problems with the deeds. Then, to confuse things, an old boy working on a house adjacent to the one in question assured us that a Mr Abramovich had been here – a man from Rijeka, Croatia's largest port, as he understood it.

### An ideal itinerary from Dubrovnik to Split:

**Lokrum:** If the wind allows, spend the night moored between Dubrovnik's Old Town, a Unesco World Heritage site, and the island of Lokrum, 15 minutes' sail away, site of a botanical garden with the biggest collection of eucalypts in Europe; a ruined Benedictine monastery; the remains of the Habsburg summer palace; and the world's smallest officially classified sea.

**Lopud:** These islands were part of the Austro-Hungarian empire so it's appropriate that the Olafur Eliasson installation, "Your Black Horizon", is here thanks to the efforts of Francesca von Habsburg. Just 4.5km by 2km, Lopud also has one of this area's finest sand beaches, Plaza Sunj.

**Mljet:** It's said that this was the island of Calypso on which Odysseus spent eight years en route to Ithaca and also where a snake bit St Paul. It's an alluring island, cloaked in fragrant pine forest, with two small salt lakes and an exquisite 12th-century Romanesque monastery.

**Korcula:** Dubrovnik writ small, Korcula Town is a little bastion fortified against marauders, and now for the

Still, they all agreed that he'd come on a yacht too big to moor in the harbour, and that the smaller boat he'd arrived on was apparently longer than the 27m twin-masted schooner on which I was staying.

In the late 1990s, I began to go regularly on holiday to Croatia. There seemed to me no more perfect part of the Mediterranean, with its 1,185 islands, many of them deserted, most with secluded coves from which to swim in clean clear water. But there were snags. Pending the opening next year of an Amanresort at Cavtat, south of Dubrovnik, there still isn't a hotel I'd choose to make the focus of a holiday. There are scarcely any sand beaches, and the sharp karst and sea urchins can make getting into the water off the rocky shore excruciating unless you're wearing shoes. And in order to island hop, you must get to grips with the vagaries and timetable irregularities, not to mention the dawn departures, of the local Jadrolinija ferries. Charter a yacht, however, and these downsides are negated at a stroke: you can sleep on board, go where you please and swim off the boat.

We joined our schooner, Andjeo, at Dubrovnik. It belongs to and is skippered by a 28-year-old Croat, Niksa Gluncic, who bought the hull and engine in Turkey and built the rest himself. The result is as beautifully crafted and maintained a boat as I have ever seen: the hull and decks are teak, the interiors mahogany. There are six cabins, each with an en suite shower/WC, and four of them with beds 1.6m wide. Though the actual footprint of my cabin was diminutive, it was so cleverly designed that there really was a place for everything: a wardrobe, shelf, drawers, somewhere to sit. The bathroom was another miracle of compactness, though I found the showerhead, which extends from the basin tap, a challenge to use.

However you're unlikely to spend much time in your cabin. Though there's a saloon with a table that seats 10, you live on deck, where there's a further table under an awning so that, weather-permitting, you eat outside.

yachts that jostle for a berth in its marina. The altarpiece in its fine cathedral is said to be by Tintoretto and there's a townhouse that claims to be Marco Polo's birthplace but Korcula's charms lie in its narrow streets and little squares rather than its monuments.

**Vis:** Architecturally, the Venetians made less of an impression on Vis than they did on the popular island of Hvar, the Portofino of Croatia. But here you'll find Baroque piazzas and white stone palazzi as well as a fine Franciscan monastery. More remarkable still are the classical remains. On the main road out of town, there are Roman baths with an almost intact monochrome mosaic floor. Behind the tennis courts stands the site of a Greek necropolis.

**Trogir:** This little walled medieval city sits on an island linked to the land by a bridge. With four Gothic *campanile*, a magnificent 13th-century cathedral and numerous Renaissance palaces, it looks like Venice in miniature.

Our party had chartered Andjeo through the UK specialists Dalmatian Destinations, a small operator started by Michael Bird, a British-based former investment banker who happened upon the island of Vis, the westernmost of the larger Dalmatian islands, on a sailing holiday and bought a house there in 2002.

Despite its very real charms, Vis seems reluctant to develop a tourist industry. You won't find much in the way of hotels, so in order to experience its glorious Mediterranean landscape – a fragrant maquis of holm oak, elder, laurel, rosemary and thyme; of olive groves and vines (the island produces some of Croatia's best wines), and almost deserted beaches – you need a house or a boat. Bird's business began finding charters and villa rentals for friends but the more knowledge he amassed, the more he felt he might as well make a second career out of it. As he puts it: "In terms of service, Croatia can still seem a bit like the Wild West." Bird represents only boats he has stayed on – he reckons he has inspected almost every yacht available to charter in the Adriatic – and is confident that those he offers all have comfortable cabins and exemplary crews. "You don't want a captain who thinks he's part of your party," he says. But neither do you want a crew who are uncommunicative or surly.

Certainly Niksa's colleagues on our boat, first mate Petar and cook Sanel, could not be faulted. Their diligence when it came to keeping the boat shipshape was awe-inspiring, so immaculately was every surface polished and swabbed. And they seemed to strike a perfect balance between friendliness and unobtrusiveness, happy to talk me through the controls on the bridge; to show me our route on marine charts; or to tell me the best place for krafne – the doughnuts filled with apricot jam that we had for breakfast.

A week at sea is exhilarating and quite unlike a holiday on land. It isn't conventionally luxurious: we made our own beds; the cabin portholes are uncurtained; towels are small and toiletries basic. The food onboard – salads, risotti, fish and the prosciutto-like ham they call prsut – was good but robust and plentiful rather than refined. And one has to cede control of the route if not to the weather, then at least to your captain. But if it is occasionally uncomfortable (at least when there's a swell), it also affords a real sense of freedom and adventure that you find only on water. And there is no better way to explore Dalmatia.

## Details

Claire Wrathall was a guest of [Dalmatian Destinations](#), tel: +44 (0)20-7730 8007 . Yacht charters start at €5,200 a week for a three-cabin sailing yacht. A week on Andjeo costs €18,730 including meals and drinks

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