

Beyond these walls

STEPHANIE DRAX ENJOYS A SHORT BREAK IN AND AROUND PICTURESQUE DUBROVNIK, TAKING IN THE CROATIAN CITY'S MEDIEVAL FORTIFICATIONS, EXPLORING THE TOWNS AND VILLAGES OF THE ADRIATIC COAST AND WANDERING THROUGH THE DALMATIAN COUNTRYSIDE

THIS PAGE Known as the Pearl of the Adriatic, Dubrovnik is surrounded by monumental walls. **OPPOSITE FROM TOP** Ploce Gate, the city's eastern entrance. Mali Ston on the Peljesac Peninsula is known for oysters. The Dubrovnik waterfront. A deluxe room at the Hotel Bellevue

The sensory feast begins with the Croatian crême caramel at the summit of Mount Srd. Also served at the Panorama Restaurant & Bar: a vista of the azure Adriatic, scattered with the verdant island

of Lokrum, the distant Elaphiti Islands and a bijou walled city vivid with red rooftops. To the east looms Bosnia-Herzegovina, while Montenegro salutes from the south. It is serene here, 412 metres above sea level, and the air is scented with wild sage and rosemary. This mountain was once an oak forest, *dubrava* in Croatian, and the word from which this city derives its name: Dubrovnik.

There is plenty to do in the surrounding area: zip up the coast for oysters in Mali Ston, snoop the shores of nearby islands by kayak or escape to the cool rivers of Konavle. But the biggest draw is the medieval city itself: the Pearl of the Adriatic. Seen from this angle, it is so photogenic that my guide, Ivana Radic, cannot resist taking her own snap.

A caravan route leads us down to the fortifications on foot, and we enter the Old Town via the grand bridge at Ploce Gate. With monumental walls, up to six metres thick and supported by forts, fortresses and towers, it looks like the set of an epic fantasy (which, of course, it is: namely King's Landing in TV's *Game of Thrones*). These walls were 450 years in the making, a two-kilometre protective barrier around the city that prevented any breach. 'Napoleon asked politely in 1806, so we let him in,' says Ivana.

More recently, in 1991, during the war of Croatian independence from Yugoslavia, country folk from Konavle fled to the old city, expecting to remain safe within its defences. During the eight-month Siege of Dubrovnik, this Unesco World Heritage Site was shelled badly by the Yugoslav People's Army. Walking along the top of the walls gives an extraordinary perspective, especially when you consider that every rooftop with red tiles (as opposed to cream) is one that had to be replaced.

Today, hot summers in the city are a sea of selfie sticks and ice creams, the immaculate lattice of limestone streets buffed to a shine by tourists' shoes. You might see one of only 1,500 residents at the open-air market in Gundulic Square, buying soap, dried figs or *arancini* (traditional candied orange peel);

or spot them with a spoonful of *skorup*, a traditional cake of cream and almonds, at Gradska Kavana Arsenal, a pretty café that (rather greedily) has terraces on both the port side and inner promenade. At sunset, there is nowhere dreamier to dine than at the Michelin-starred restaurant 360, where tables under the stars line the ramparts.

Dubrovnik's are not the only defences in Dalmatia. An hour's drive up the coast is the Peljesac Peninsula, home to more than 50 small wineries, and a 5.5-kilometre medieval wall that protects the historic salt flats of Ston. A 40-minute amble across these fortifications will bring you to its sister village Mali Ston. Here, Tomislav Sare, the scion of his family's restaurant Bota Sare, scoops me up by boat and deposits me at the quirky floating bar in the bay. I am poured herbal grappa and fed succulent oysters pulled up from the water and grilled on site. Oysters have been cultivated here since Roman times and I would be willing to while away another few thousand years on this glorious pontoon.

But Ante Bjelancic is waiting for me; his restaurant, Gastro Mare, is tucked away in an adjacent bay, where his dock is often thrumming with private yacht tenders. Ante was guest chef at London's River Café for six years and his rustic, open-kitchen restaurant has a touch of that laidback magic. He is an ebullient fellow and, from behind his counter, he dishes up fresh focaccia with homemade olive oil, bluefin tuna, octopus and sea bass 'from my own fisherman', and decidedly no music 'so that we can hear the sea'.

If you base yourself in Dubrovnik (and the newly spruced up Hotel Bellevue has an enviable location on the water with its own beach), you can easily nip to Konavle, too. It is a lush valley of vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees, where rivers once powered ancient watermills. Traditions here are tightly held, with distinctive crafts and costumes. You can buy these silk embroidered collars and other accessories at Antonia Ruskovic's AR Atelier in Gruda. Like centuries of Konavle women before her, she keeps her own live silkworms and uses their thread.

Hidden in a forest is Konavoski Dvori, an enchanting spot by the Ljuta River, where I lunched on baked lamb and tasted the local *makvasija* wine. It is hard to improve upon, at least until the road back to Dubrovnik reveals Dalmatia's disarming citadel once more.

Ways and Means

Stephanie Drax visited Croatia as a guest of Original Travel (020-3582 4990; originaltravel.co.uk), which offers a three-night trip to Dubrovnik staying at Hotel Bellevue from £2,420, B&B, including a city tour, kayaking, an oyster and wine experience in Mali Ston and a visit to AR Atelier in Konavle, plus flights and transfers, a fast track through security and lounge access at the UK airport □

