

HVAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

Sue Carpenter visits the Croatian island of Hvar and enjoys the culture and beauty beyond its hard-partying port

Hvar's reputation as a party island goes before it: the St Tropez of Croatia; the Ibiza of the Adriatic. In high summer, sleek yachts line up in the picturesque port of Hvar Town, their blaring music and barely clad guests vying with the discos and rowdy nightlife on terra firma. Out of season, however, the locals heave a collective sigh of relief as the noise and crowds abate, and the island reverts to being a place of natural and architectural beauty.

When I visited in May, the hillsides burgeoned with wild sage and broom, vibrant yellow against a clear blue sky, while the main *pjaca* (square) and the waterfront of Hvar Town had the mellow hum of cafe life. Little has changed in the old town since its days under Venetian rule (1420-1797), when it was the main port on the eastern Adriatic. It is a delight to stroll the medieval streets where the nobility lived, their limestone buildings and arched windows reminiscent of Italy.

While many visitors stay on private yachts or at a villa in the Bohemian enclave of Palmizana on the tiny island of Sveti Klement, a 10-minute boat hop from Hvar, you can dine and sleep in style in Hvar Town itself. The fashion-conscious Riva hotel, right on the quayside, is considered the island's most glamorous address, and convenient it is, too, for restaurants such as Gariful - the best seafood restaurant in town - and chic diVino, run by Croatian *Masterchef* finalist Marko Gajski. Or, on the more tranquil far side of the harbour, there is the sleek and cosmopolitan Adriana Marina Hotel & Spa, with views across the water to the ancient citadel.

A long tradition of wine production - the Greeks brought vines to Hvar in 385BC - and regular

sunshine result in some deliciously quaffable local whites, Parc and Bogdanusa, and a medal-winning Bordeaux-style red, Plavac Mali from the Tomic winery, which also produces a heavenly honeyed dessert wine, Prosek Hectorovich. Wine tastings are offered at Tomic, in the pretty port of Jelsa, and at the smaller family-run business of Pinjata, in Vrboska.

Sinisa Matkovic-Mikulcic, manager of Secret Hvar travel agency, is passionate about showing visitors a different face of the island. Breathing in the warm scent of pine, we hiked up St Nikola Hill, the highest point on the island at 626 metres, and gazed at the panorama of amoeba-like islands amid a sea that shimmered like beaten silver: Korcula to the left, Vis to the right and, visible on a clear day, Italy beyond.

We hurtled along the old road between Brusje and Croatia's oldest town, Stari Grad, looking at the drystone walls criss-crossing the craggy hillside, demarcating centuries-old fields. Smallholders planted vineyards and lavender here - there is a lavender festival in June in Velo Grablje - but these days fields and villages have largely been abandoned, as people have moved to the more lucrative coast.

Hope is at hand, though, for these beautiful, derelict villages. Hvar has been targeted for regeneration in an EU scheme to celebrate the joint cultural heritage of the lands on either side of the Adriatic. First up for restoration is the picturesque shepherds' hamlet of Humac, where you can stay in rustic solitude and dine at the local tavern on *peka*, a peasant dish of lamb or veal and potatoes slow-roasted over an open fire. Such simplicity is the perfect contrast to the hedonism of life in town □



WAYS AND MEANS

Sue Carpenter travelled as a guest of the Adristorical Lands project (www.adristorical-lands.eu), which encourages more sustainable tourism through the promotion of the cultural heritage of the region. The Hotel Riva has double rooms from €120; the Adriana, from €170. Both can be booked through www.suncanihvar.com. Villas, bungalows and apartments at Palmizana Meneghello (www.palmizana.hr) cost €60-€440 a night. Secret Hvar (www.secrethvar.com) can arrange individual jeep tours of the island.



THIS PICTURE In summer, yachts line up along the waterfront in Hvar Town. ABOVE Lavender fields near Stari Grad