

Istria: It's Italy without the price

Western Croatia a little-known gem on the Adriatic

By **KAREN TORME OLSON**
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ISTRIA, Croatia — Most of my friends drew a blank when I told them that autumn is when Istria does a dead-on imitation of Italy. First, they had never heard of Istria; second, they couldn't understand why I would choose ersatz Italy over the real thing; and third, they were surprised when I explained that this little triangle of land at the north end of the Adriatic was Italy from 1918 to the end of World War II. And, like the Italians, Istria's residents spend their autumns harvesting grapes for wine and olives for oil and making pasta dishes with the truffles they and their dogs sniff out in the woods during September and October.

My skeptical friends finally understood when I showed them photos of the Venetian-style towns along the coast, walled medieval cities in the interior and an amphitheater in better shape than the one in Rome. They were ready to book a hotel when they found out that in autumn, a week of eating, drinking and exploring Roman temples and Venetian bell towers while sampling some of the best Italian food anywhere can be had for half the cost of the same thing in Venice, just two hours across the Adriatic.

Istria is one of Europe's best-kept secrets. It has been called "Tuscany's twin at half the price" more than once. Recently, it has become the epicenter of Croatia's food and wine scene, and it is coming into its own as a sophisticated destination.

Istria is the westernmost county in Croatia, but it is Italy too. That became clear to me when my husband and I drove into Istria from the three-mile tunnel that cuts through the Ucka mountains between mainland Croatia and Istria. Radio chatter had switched from Croatian to Italian; road signs were posted in both languages; and the landscape was painted in Tuscan hues.

Our planned destination was Savudrija (Salvore in Italian), a seaside town in the far northwest corner of the peninsula, but first we had to drive across Istria's interior to get there. Half an hour after exiting the Ucka Tunnel, we arrived at the walled city of Motovun (Montona), a village that clings to a steep hill spilling down from the walled old town. Only town residents are allowed to drive into the village, so we parked at the foot of the hill and hiked up a steep brick road to get to Motovun's center, where we walked the ramparts and gaped at the changing colors of the Mirna Valley.

Motovun hadn't been in our plans for the day, but we couldn't resist exploring what looked like a castle in the sky from the highway, and now we were late for our truffle hunt. We were on a mission to find the elusive fungus, but not the kind that requires baying dogs and digging. Our intention was to overload on truffle everything at Zigante Restaurant in Livade (Levade) less than two miles north of Motovun. The award-winning restaurant is owned by Giancarlo Zigante, who made his way into "Guinness World Records" in 1999 when he and his dog Diana found a rare, 2.9-pound white truffle in the forest near Livade. Rather than sell it, Zigante used the truffle to make dinner for 100 friends, a move that started his truffle empire.

Everything on Zigante's menu, including dessert, has a touch of truffle, and we indulged in a truffle marathon of ravioli filled with shrimp in white truffle sauce, pumpkin soup with scallops and black truffles, pear and black truffle panna cotta with shaved white truffles and chocolate sauce, and a bottle of Istrian sparkling wine (no truffles in that).

Nothing in Istria is more than half an hour from anything else, and 30 minutes after dessert, we rolled into Savudrija, home to one of just two 18-hole golf courses in Croatia and our "splurge" hotel, the Kempinski Adriatic Resort, a great base for explorations to Istria's olive oil and wine roads.

The next day's research into the olive and wine roads turned into a celebration of Istrian hospitality. While my husband tried out the Kempinski's golf course, I followed signs to Oma Jola, whose ads tout it as an eco-friendly olive oil producer. The signs lead visitors up a long entry road that cuts through rows of olive trees and ends at what looks like an Italian villa.

The road is gravel, so the approach isn't silent, and before I turned off the engine, an elegant, petite woman emerged from the



HRVOJE POLAN/GETTY-AFP PHOTO

No time to visit Rome? Try the old Roman amphitheater in Pula. You will find that it's in better shape than the Colosseum anyway.



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As in Italy, it's harvest season. Olive growers in Istria process their extra-virgin oil in Vodnjan.



HRVOJE POLAN/GETTY-AFP PHOTO

A truffle hunter shows one of the region's delicacies, rooted out by his truffle-hunting dog at the walled city of Motovun.

pink stucco house to greet me. She introduced herself as Jolanta Pavlovic, founder and proprietor of Oma Jola, which she runs from her home set in the middle of 28 acres of olive and fruit trees and bordered by fields of lavender.

Pavlovic graciously spent two hours telling me about her business, letting me taste her olive oils, and serving me her special olive leaf tea. She said there were only six olive trees on the property when she and her husband moved there from Germany 10 years ago; now there are 2,000, all of which are tended by hand and without pesticides. Pavlovic presses, markets and sells almost 1,000 liters of organic olive oil annually with the help of son Michael.

I left the farm loaded with bottles of olive oil and bags of tea that I purchased in her factory store, then picked up my husband and some friends to hit the area's wine road in search of the DeGrassi Winery, whose brochure had caught my eye in Pavlovic's office. We found DeGrassi easily, but it seemed deserted until one of the workers stuck her head out the door and beckoned us inside. She showed us the winemaking area, the cave full of barrels awaiting the new vintage and invited us to taste a few of the DeGrassi wines in the tasting room.

We spent the afternoon sipping and comparing, and as our enthusiasm for the wines became more obvious, Istrian hospitality shifted

into full gear. Winemaker Moreno DeGrassi joined us, chatting about what he was trying to accomplish with the various wines. He commented that the wine needed food, and he retreated to the kitchen to make us a lunch of grilled fish, which we washed down with more wine while he talked about his vineyards and their Italian roots.

He said DeGrassi winery was started by an Italian family 100 years ago, but the vineyards were taken over and replanted as co-ops during Tito's reign. Moreno DeGrassi took over in 1990 and now produces 100,000 liters of wine a year, some from French cabernet grapes planted more than 30 years ago by the co-op. The wine from those mature vines is remarkable, so remarkable that we ordered five cases for shipment to the U.S.

The day after our sojourn at DeGrassi, we left Savudrija for Brtonigla (Verteneglio), where we had reservations at the San Rocco, a family-run boutique hotel set in a renovated Istrian stone house. San Rocco is a romantic spot where guests can lounge around the flower-bedecked pool, watch olive oil being made from backyard trees and revel in a six-course degustation feast prepared from local, seasonal ingredients and matched with Croatian wines. The beauty of this experience was that the room and our exceptional dinner cost less than \$300 for two and included a

sumptuous breakfast the next day.

We left Brtonigla and followed the coast to the Venetian-style town of Novigrad (Cittanova), past the Limski Fjord, and to Rovinj (Rovigno), the most photographed town in Croatia. Rovinj is Venetian through and through, with its Balbi Arch and Grisia Street, a narrow, winding brick path lined with art studios all the way up to the imposing St. Euphemia Church at the top of the hill. There are several food-forward restaurants in Rovinj, and we paused for lunch at one of them, Mediterraneo, in the sleek Hotel Monte Mulini.

Mediterraneo is on a terrace overlooking the sea, and as we took in the view and the menu hoavy with Italian touches, we mused over Istria's obvious Italian genes and its similarity to Tuscany. But while Tuscany is purebred Italian, Istria is a mutt. It has been ruled by four countries and two military regimes in the last 100 years. Despite the government upheaval, Istrians have adopted the best of each experience, with food and wine Istrian-style the most obvious. Through it all, they are fiercely proud of their Istrian heritage.

We drove down the coast to Porec (Parenzo) to see Europe's second-oldest basilica, the sixth century St. Euphrasius, and its collection of gem-studded, gilded mosaics. That night we stayed in the Grand Palazzo, a hotel built in 1910 for aristocratic Italian vaca-

If you go

Author's note: Istria is a foodie's paradise, but it's also great for families with kids. Nothing is more than half an hour from anything else, so you won't hear "Are we there yet?" Besides miles of beach, castles with creepy histories, haunted caves, campgrounds, ancient ruins and museums, Istria is home to numerous, reasonably priced Disney-sized resorts with sports facilities and organized activities for kids.

When to visit: Autumn is the most interesting season to experience Istria's charms even though most Europeans visit in summer. In the fall, the sea is still warm, and almost every town and village is busy with wine and olive harvests and festivals celebrating the land's bounty.

Getting there/getting around: The drive to Istria from Venice in Italy or Zagreb in Croatia is two hours or less. Pula has an airport served by Croatia Air and discount airline RyanAir, and ferries run regular routes between Venice and Pula, Porec, Rovinj and Umag. Once in Istria, a car is the best way to see the sites efficiently, and rental cars are readily available at the Zagreb and Venice airports and at the Trieste train station. Buses make frequent runs between coastal towns but often stop half a mile or more from a town's center. Go to autotrans.hr for bus schedules and prices.

Lodging: The Kempinski Adriatic in Savudrija (kempinski-adriatic.com), the San Rocco in Brtonigla (san-rocco.hr), and the Grand Palazzo in Porec differ in size and style, but all are comfortable and beautifully situated. Doubles at the Kempinski start at \$375. Rooms at the San Rocco start at \$125 and Grand Palazzo doubles go for \$175. All include breakfast.

Eating: There are no bad meals in Istria. We were on a food and wine pilgrimage so most of our meals were at full-service restaurants rather than tiny konobas (inns). Foodies won't go wrong at Zigante in Livade (zigantetartufi.com), San Rocco in Brtonigla (san-rocco.hr), Mediterraneo in Rovinj (maistra.com/destinazioni/rovinj), and Val Sabbion in Pula (valsabbion.net), but there are hundreds of places serving excellent pizza, seafood and pasta all over Istria.

More information: The Istrian Tourism Bureau has an extensive website: istra.hr/en/home.

tioners, who have flocked to Istria on vacation for a century. The hotel has been faithfully restored.

The next day was our last in this region with dual cultures, and because no trip to Istria is complete without a visit to Pula (Pola) to see its spectacular first and second century Roman ruins, we drove half an hour south from Porec. Pula is a port city, but its mostly intact amphitheater and Temple of Augustus are don't-miss sights.

From Pula, we backtracked through Istria's center, the Ucka Tunnel, mainland Croatia, to our flight home.

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PHOTO BY KAREN TORME OLSON

The Temple of Augustus is a don't-miss sight in Pula.