

Croatia

Along the Dalmatian Coast

> By Dominick A. Merle

Pssst! Want to go celebrity sighting? Try Dalmatia.

Where's Dalmatia?

In Croatia.

Where's Croatia?

Now you've got it...if everybody knew, the celebrities wouldn't come.

"I think we owe it all to our own John Malkovich," said Mirjana Darrer, public relations manager of the Dubrovnik Tourist Board where we went to pick up our usual batch of maps and brochures. By the wry smile on her face, I wasn't sure if she was pleased or fearing the worst.

The renowned actor Malkovich of Croatian descent, has reportedly been spending summers unnoticed and undisturbed here for years. "He mentioned it to some other movie stars like Sharon Stone and Clint Eastwood and Tom Cruise and then, well...you know how that goes," Mirjana said. Then she knocked on the wooden table, "But so far, no paparazzi."

The Republic of Croatia, population about 4.5-million, was once part of the former Yugoslavia and lies on the east coast of the Adriatic Sea just across from Italy. Dalmatia occupies the southern half of the republic, roughly between the cities of Zadar and Dubrovnik. This stretch of Croatia is known as the Dalmatian Coast. And this is where the rich and famous come to relax, play and not be seen.

Bill Gates occasionally arrives in his yacht and no one notices. So does Steven Spielberg. Actors Steve Buschemi, Lisa Kudrow and even James Bond himself (Roger Moore) stroll and sip cappuchinos on sidewalk cafes, and nobody pushes a pen and paper in their faces.

And talk about secluded hideaways: There are over 1,000 tiny islands off Croatia and only about 10 percent are inhabited. Do the maths---that comes out to more than enough room for 900 celebrities, one to an isle.

"Most of the uninhabited islands are ▶ Diocletian Palace/ Split



قصر ديوكليتيا

owned by the government, and they are for sale," Mirjana said. "Of course, certain construction regulations must be followed to protect the natural beauty of our coast."

The inhabited islands that attract the most celebrities are Hvar, Mljet and Korcula, the birthplace of Marco Polo. Allegedly, of course, because Venice would have a lot to say about that. All three have romantic little hideaways with hidden coves and a spectacular view of the Adriatic Sea with its brilliant shades of blue, green and hues of both.

But will Dalmatia remain a secret little celebrity hideaway? Hit-and-run cruise ships, most of them docking in Dubrovnik, now unload more than 12,000 tourists a day during high-season, already hailing the area as "the new Nice and Monte Carlo" or even more dramatically, "the next Italy."

Well, that last one might be a little over the top, but Croatia is definitely on the fast track to becoming one of the new hot spots on the tourist trail, so celebs like

Richard Gere (yes, him, too) may not be able to stroll unnoticed under their baseball caps and shades much longer.

Also, the government has recently launched a series of tourism ads on TV and in print. Sooner or later, the shark-like paparazzi are bound to surface on some of those private islands.

We began our tour in the northern capital city of Zagreb, the hub of business and finance. There is a definite Germanic influence here, as compared to the Mediterranean lifestyle on the Dalmatian Coast.

While we didn't spot any stars during our 10-day tour, we did see a number of look-alikes, starting in the Regent Hotel where a dead ringer for singer Mariah Carey led us to our room. Then we began our walking tour of this medieval city that traces its roots back to 1094

As in most European cities, there is an "old town" and a "new town" and they often intermingle. The pivotal point of the city is the magnificent Gothic cathedral with its distinctive filigree spires. The cathedral is in the center of St. Mark's

Square in the old town, with the palace and parliament building across the way.

But rain came, so we ducked into a museum and later into a restaurant called Baltazar for a seafood feast. It was delicious, but pricey (the bill for six of us came out to almost \$500, with two huge fish costing roughly \$100 each.)

After Zagreb, we drove to Croatia's largest national park, Plitvice Lakes, but not before running into our second celebrity look-alike in a coffee shop in the beautiful baroque village of Samobar. This time it was the ghost of Peter Sellers in his role as Dr. Strangelove. In real life, he was the owner of a curio shop.

Plitvice Lakes, halfway between Zagreb and the coasts, has been selected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The beauty of the national park lies in its 16 lakes interconnected by a series of waterfalls set in deep woodland. It is one of nature's most majestic water shows.

Then it was on to Zadar and the beginning of the Dalmatian Coast. The 3,000-year-old Zadar is a quiet city for six months but



Church and tourists in Walled City
كنيسة في المدينة المسوّرة



Ruins in Split Old Town
أنقاض في الحي القديم في سبليت



Walled City at night
المدينة المسوّرة في المساء

becomes alive with tourists from May to October, most of them arriving from Italy just across the Adriatic. It has a number of Romanesque churches and nearby Nin boasts the smallest cathedral in the world, the Church of the Holy Cross. How small? Time was against us so we took them at their word.

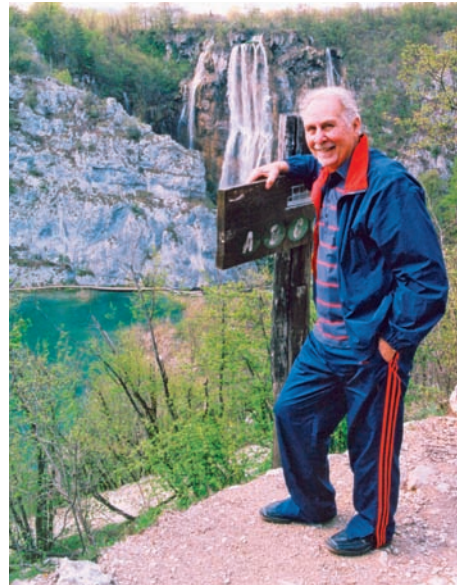
The next stop was the city of Split where we discovered our third celebrity look-alike, singer Tony Bennett posing as a waiter in a small seafood restaurant. But the real superstar of Split is its sprawling Diocletian Palace, also a UNESCO site.

Built by the emperor Diocletia upon his retirement in the 4th Century, the palace is marvelously preserved and is generally regarded as the most famous and complete architectural structure on the Croatian coast. Encircled by walls, the palace grounds were once home to 9000 people.

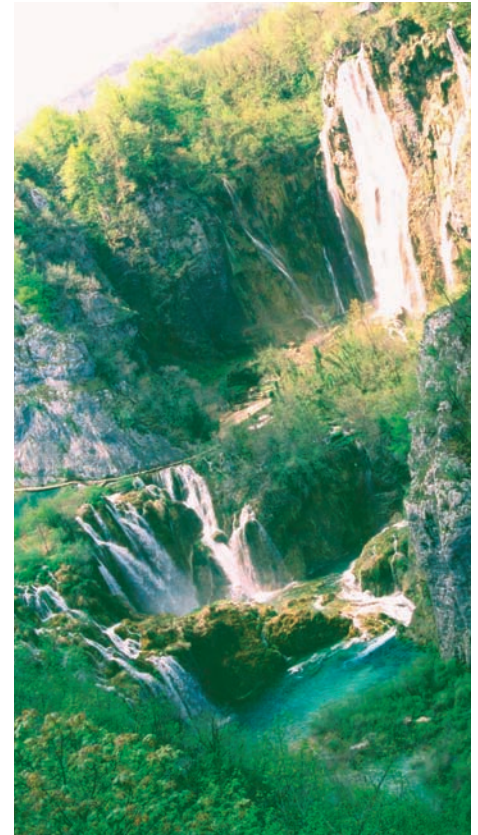
But despite the history and preservation of the palace, the city government allowed 20 new building permits on the site, including shops and a garage complex, and so today it appears half-

new, half-old and somewhat half-baked. It is a very controversial issue in Split and I didn't find one resident who was pleased with this mix.

Dubrovnik was our final stop and along the way we had an unexpected surprise, passing through the Bosnia border for ▶

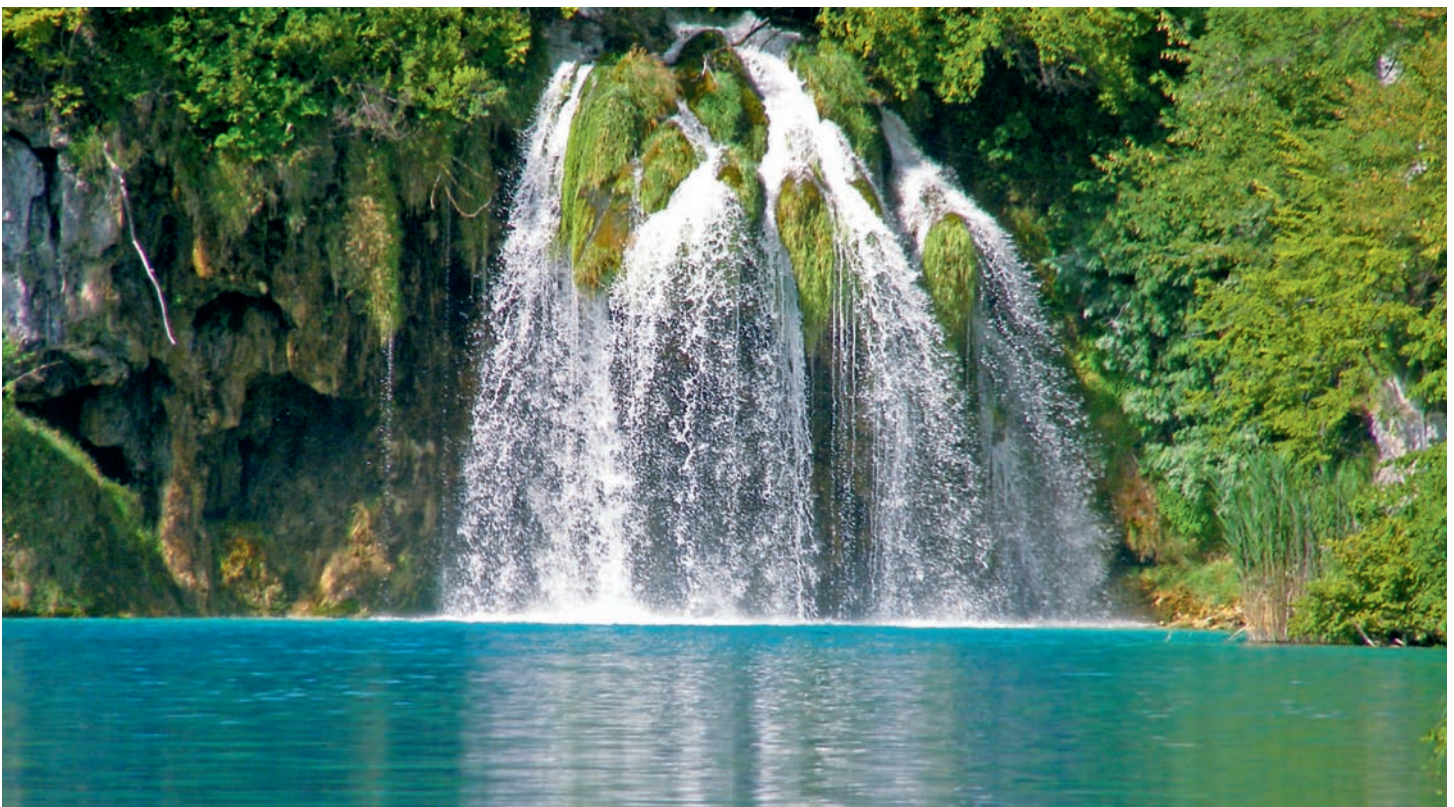


Author at waterfall الكاتب يقف عند أحد الشلالات



Spectacular waterfalls

شلال رائع



Plitvice Lake

بحيرة بليتفيتش



Zagreb centre

زاغرب

about 20 kilometers before re-entering Croatia. It was the only way to get from here to there, our driver said.

To most people Dubrovnik is synonymous with its fabled walled city, without question Croatia's biggest tourist attraction and one of the world's great treasures. "Those who wish to see heaven on earth," George Bernard Shaw wrote, "should come to Dubrovnik."

During the 1991-1995 War of Independence known here as the "Homeland War," most of the walled city was struck by bombs. But it has been meticulously restored, although it is no longer the thriving "village" it once was with about 7,000 residents, outdoor markets and small general shops and restaurants.

Today, there are upscale boutiques where neighborhood markets once stood, and many of the upstairs apartments overlooking the cobbled streets are being turned into condos. Consequently, all but about 1,500 residents have been priced out. The narrow alleys that lead to

steep steps are often going nowhere, as many of the neighborhoods high above no longer exist.

One can stroll leisurely through the old city in less than an hour, in one gate and out the next, or choose to spend an entire day there, visiting museums, churches, shops and exploring the alleyways. But you'd have to look long and hard to distinguish the few residents from the tourists.

However, the painstaking restoration is remarkable; the structures look the same as they did when I first visited here 20 years ago. The only thing missing was the natural hustle and bustle of village life. Frankly, the old walled city looks more majestic from afar than within.

Our guide, Sandra, said she grew up within the walls and remembers the bombing. I asked her how life was like before the war.

"Which war?" she asked. ■

(Dominick A. Merle is Canadian Director of the International Travel Writers Assn. He is based in Montreal, Quebec)

IF YOU GO:

There are no direct flights from North America to Croatia. We flew Lufthansa Airlines from Montreal via Frankfurt, continuing to Zagreb. The airline was offering a special fare at the time, and fortunately for us, we were upgraded since it was overbooked in economy.

The official language is Croatian, the official script is Latin and the currency is the Kuna. There was no talk of adopting to the Euro in the near future.

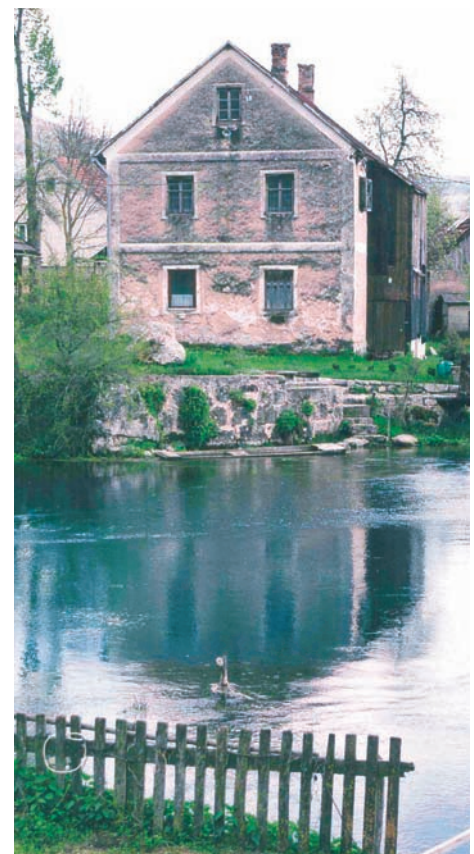
The best buys are olive oil and hand-made crafts.

Trains and buses connect the republic, but trains stop often and buses are usually faster and cheaper.

Discussing politics is a no-no; the republic has been invaded too many times.

For further information on Croatia, try the website www.croatia.hr.

For Dubrovnik www.visitdubrovnik.hr.



Picturesque rural scene

منظر ريفي