

# A Croatian odyssey

The diverse regions of Croatia offer plenty for wine tourists to enjoy. Join Amanda Barnes as she tours the Croatian Uplands, Slavonia and Danube in the north of the country, then head to the coast with Anthony Rose as he travels south, from Istria to Dalmatia

## Exploring the Croatian Uplands

While the coast beckons summer tourists, Zagreb is Croatia's most visited winter destination. The city is renowned for its markets and winter skiing, but the capital of Croatia is not just for Christmas.

With a compelling disregard for uniformity, Zagreb has a colourful chaos

Below: Croatia's colourful capital of Zagreb is ideal to explore by foot

of architecture, ideal to explore by foot. Austro-Hungarian palaces, medieval cottages, bell-bottomed church spires, and brutalist housing blocks all populate different corners of the city, and Zagreb claims to have more museums per square metre than any other city. There's even a museum dedicated to heartache ([www.brokenships.com](http://www.brokenships.com)). For more on Zagreb's dining scene, see p24.

Zagreb's intellectual nourishment is overflowing but, as a thirsty traveller, I'm using the capital as a gateway to discover

the wine lands of continental Croatia.

Just 20 minutes from the city vineyards emerge, folded into the foothills of the Croatian Uplands. Field blends grown in nests of wooden stakes mark the oldest vines, although these native varieties aren't why Plešivica is known as 'Croatia's Champagne'. Instead, it's the cool-climate Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Riesling vines grown on the limestone-rich hillsides.

'We've only been exploring our potential for traditional-method sparkling wine in the past decade,' explains

Photograph: Davor Rostuhar, property of the Zagreb Tourist Board







Old cellar in Iločki Podrumi, Ilok, Croatian Danube

fifth-generation producer Velimir **Korak**, whose sons now run the winery and its restaurant (**see box, p9**). While a decade is only the blink of an eye for a region that's been making wine since the Middle Ages, Plešivica is already considered the grand cru of Balkan bubbles. But producers are experimenting beyond the classics with red – and even orange – sparkling wine.

An amphora-aged bubbly doesn't come as much of a surprise when you meet the innovative face behind it – Tomica **Tomac** ([www.tomac.hr](http://www.tomac.hr)) – who, along with Zdenko **Šember** ([www.sember.hr](http://www.sember.hr)) is one of Croatia's leading qevri producers. Made in traditional clay pots, these structured and yet refreshing wines sit wonderfully with the local speciality, black pig. The thick forests of the Croatian Uplands are a hotspot for game, as well as hiking and skiing.

Although it's mid-springtime when I visit, the apres-ski mood is in full swing at **Petrač** winery ([www.petrac.hr](http://www.petrac.hr)). It's here, as lunch rolls into dinner, that I learn my first Croatian colloquialism: *putna*. This term loosely translates as 'one for the road', but in reality it equates to imbibing for hours more. As a platter

of roast duck and another bottle appear, I heartily agree to my first *putna*.

### Tucking into Slavonia

Deeper into continental Croatian wine country, and further off the main tourist beat, lies Slavonia, where villages are quaint, folklore is rich and life is simple. The slopes of Slavonia are prime territory for Croatia's most planted variety, Graševina, and its heartland is in Kutjevo. There's a plethora of cellar doors to knock on: ranging from ultra-modern **Galić** (**see box, p9**) to the oldest – and largest – cellar in town, **Kutjevo** ([www.kutjevo.com](http://www.kutjevo.com)), founded by Cistercian monks in 1232. The historic cellar offers an excellent opportunity to taste old vintages, from around €50.

As night falls, I head to another cellar – and my bed for the night – **Sontacchi** (**see box, right**), run by brothers Kruno and Anton. 'Slavonia is hipster now,' says Kruno sardonically, while serving a barrel sample of his 2018 Superslav, a delicious skin-contact blend of native varieties.

I ask what the trademarks are of being Slav. 'Well, making your own meat for a start,' he replies, as Anton comes in with yet another plate of homemade



Above: Tomislav Tomac making wine in an amphora, at Tomac winery in Plešivica, Croatian Uplands

### Getting there

British Airways flies direct from London Heathrow to Zagreb airport, which is 16km from Zagreb centre. Ilok is a 3.5hr drive from Zagreb.

Traditional *kulen*, smoked and cired pork sausage, at Sontacchi's



charcuterie. Famed for its hospitality, your glass is never dry in Slavonia and local tradition is rubbing off on me now. 'Putna?' I volunteer, and Kruno doesn't hesitate in taking samples from another Slavonian oak barrel.

### Delights of the Danube

In the upper corner of Slavonia lies the Croatian Danube, where picturesque villages overlook the river and Serbian border. The jewel in its crown is the medieval fortress town of Ilok, where more than a dozen wineries take advantage of the river's microclimate.

The largest is **Iločki Podrumi** (**see box, right**), its 15th-century cellar offering another engaging opportunity to

taste library vintages, including the local speciality of Traminac.

Another local delicacy is paprika fish stew, which I enjoy at the river-beach bar and terrace restaurant of **Hotel Dunav** (**see box, right**). Sitting by the riverside with a glass of wine, my host shares his last Croatian word of wisdom: *jaka* – the art of doing nothing.



Amanda Barnes is a wine and travel writer who has been based in South America since 2009

### Where to sleep and eat in the Croatian Uplands, Slavonia and Danube

#### SLEEP

Zagreb is a great base from which to explore the Croatian Uplands, only half an hour's drive from the city centre. For options in Slavonia's wine hub of Kutjevo, try the homely apartments at **Sontacchi** ([www.sontacchi-vinarija.hr](http://www.sontacchi-vinarija.hr)), which is also home to Kutjevo's liveliest bar, or book in at the **Graševina Academy** ([www.akademija-grasevine.com](http://www.akademija-grasevine.com)). One of the best wines in the Danube wine region of Ilok is from the aparthotel and restaurant of **Iločki Podrumi** ([www.ilocki-podrumi.hr](http://www.ilocki-podrumi.hr)).

#### EAT

Lunch is best enjoyed at one of the many local wineries: try the brand-new restaurant at **Korak** (+385 1 6293 088) with a panoramic view over the Croatian Uplands; the contemporary tasting menu of **Galić** ([www.galic-vina.hr](http://www.galic-vina.hr)) in Kutjevo; or the relaxed riverside restaurant of **Hotel Dunav** ([www.hoteldunavilok.com](http://www.hoteldunavilok.com)) in the Danube region.



## A coastal tour: Istria and Dalmatia

When William Wordsworth wrote 'Earth has not anything to show more fair' than the view from Westminster Bridge, it seems more than likely that he hadn't visited Croatia's Adriatic coastline of Istria and Dalmatia.

In my view, there is little 'so touching in its majesty' than this astonishingly picturesque part of the world. From the Istrian peninsula opposite Venice in the north, Croatia's western coastline is a mirror image of Italy's eastern shores, running more than 1,000km past 1,246 islands of varying shapes and sizes until it becomes wafer-thin in the southeast, squeezed between the Adriatic and the Bosnia & Herzegovina border across the sea from Puglia.

Jutting out into the Adriatic in Croatia's north, the Istrian peninsula's proximity to



Miroslav Plišo of Meneghetti winery

Italy, Slovenia and Austria, and its Venetian architecture and medieval castles, make it a gastronomic melting pot for tourists. There's a good concentration of *konobas* here – small local restaurants where both Croatian and Italian are spoken, and which focus on rustic, seasonal dishes. They also showcase the dry white wines of Malvazija Istriana, along with reds made from the former jug wine variety of Teran, its reputation now on the rise thanks to the pioneering Istrian winemaker Moreno

**Coronica** ([www.coronica.eu/en](http://www.coronica.eu/en)).

Once a vinous haven covering some 50,000 hectares, Istria today is one-tenth of that size due to the 19th-century devastation of phylloxera, the post-war decimation of the Austro-Hungarian empire's vinous heritage and, more recently, 'des res' syndrome as Istrian vineyards are converted for housing.

To accommodate the growing numbers of tourists who come in search

### Getting there

British Airways flies direct from London Gatwick to Dubrovnik airport, which is 20km from the city centre and serves the southern Dalmatian coast, Pelješac peninsula and islands of Mljet, Korčula, Hvar, Vis and Brač.

of Istria's fine Malvazija, Gianfranco **Kozlović** and his wife Antonella are planning to upgrade the Zeljko Buric-designed family winery ([www.kozlovic.hr](http://www.kozlovic.hr)), an elongated cube of glass, iron and steel located in the old wine region of Momjan outside Buje. Kozlović's Moscato di Momiano is an added attraction, along with Istria's famous white truffles and activities such as bike riding and boating.

On a grander scale, the seaside resort of **Meneghetti** (*see box, right*) near Bale in southern Istria, close to the old Roman settlement of Castrum Vallis, is both a luxurious Relais & Châteaux hotel and restaurant, as well as winery making sleek, modern wines under the stewardship of the famous Italian wine consultant Walter Filiputti.

### Island wines

Heading south, the coastal E65 is the route from which to check out Croatia's island winescape. Croatia's biggest island, Cres, is easily accessible from the mainland and connected by bridge to verdant Lošinj, which is popular for its high-end hotels. The island of Krk is also connected to the mainland by road and boasts its own wine, whose blandness fails to live up to the name of its grape variety, Zlahtina (meaning noble grape), but the town of Vrbnik hosts a number of wineries for the thirsty traveller.

Popular with families, the island of Rab signals the beginning of the Dalmatian coast, and further south lies the beautiful island of Pag, to be enjoyed for its ancient olive trees, its sheep's cheese, and, for wine lovers, the gorgeous winery of **Boškinac** (*see box, right*). Make sure to visit outside the July and August tourist peaks when clubbers throng to Pag's Ibiza-esque Zrće Beach.

### Dalmatian destinations

If Pag is Croatia's Ibiza, Brač's famous Zlatni Rat, close to Split, is its Bondi



Truffle dish, Meneghetti winery restaurant

### Where to eat and drink in Istria and Dalmatia

#### Alla Beccaccia, Valbandon

Dominated by a large central fireplace, this friendly, unpretentious restaurant specialises in local dishes, including homemade pasta and slow-cooked, melt-in-the-mouth snipe. [www.beccaccia.hr](http://www.beccaccia.hr)

#### Bibich, Plastovo nr Šibenik

In addition to the shop that sells local wines, spirits, vinegars and olive oils, Bibich offers inspired cooking from Alen Bibić's wife Vesna, using local produce such as sea bream and cuttlefish, cheese-wrapped olives, paprika, marinated prawns and a rich beef stew. **+385 91 323 5729**

#### Boškinac, Novalja, Pag

On the picturesque island of Pag, Boškinac's superb restaurant (a member of the Jeunes Restaurateurs d'Europe group) offers local delicacies, such as the famous Paški sir

cheese and lamb, with its wines. [www.boskinac.com](http://www.boskinac.com)

#### Meneghetti, Bale

Meneghetti prides itself on its modern interpretation of traditional Istrian cuisine by chefs Danijela Pifar and Bojan Vuković. Breakfast on the terrace is a delight. [www.meneghetti.hr](http://www.meneghetti.hr)

#### Porat, Dubrovnik

This casual waterfront restaurant and bar with a terrace serves delicious seafood and wines – and pizza to go if you prefer to stay in your hotel room. [www.porat-dubrovnik.com](http://www.porat-dubrovnik.com)

#### Saints Hills Restaurant, Pelješac

Housed in a traditional Croatian stone building in the village of Oskorušno, Saints Hills' spacious, modern restaurant offers impressive five- and six-course tasting menus accompanied by its wines. [www.saintshills.com](http://www.saintshills.com)

Beach, a hot destination near the town of Bol, with its excellent restaurants, hotels and camping facilities. For wine lovers, the excellent winery of **Baković** on Brač is worth the detour (**+385 91 509 5891**). Neighbouring Hvar is the Dalmatian coast's best-known island, appreciated for its historic city and UNESCO-protected archaeological sites. Hvar boasts such excellent wineries as **Duboković** ([www.dubokovic.hr](http://www.dubokovic.hr)) and **Zlatan Otok** ([www.zlatanotok.hr](http://www.zlatanotok.hr)). Ex-Marks & Spencer buyer Jo Ahearne MW is also resident here, making her own wine from the indigenous Pošip, Bogdanuša and Kuč grapes (**Ahearne Wines**, [www.thewineandmore.com](http://www.thewineandmore.com)).

To the west, Vis is undeveloped, authentically Croatian and an isolated, independent traveller's paradise,



Photographs: Damir Fabijanić; Morana Popovićić. Map: Filip Kelava



A starter dish at  
Boškinac restaurant  
and winery



between Ston, close to the mainland, and Orebić on Pelješac's southwestern shores.

The dark reds made from Plavac Mali – not to be confused with Zinfandel but in fact a cross between Tribidrag and Dobričić – reach their apogee in the two appellations of Postup and Dingač, whose powerful, rich, intense wines make this area a paradise for red wine lovers. There's a cluster of small family wineries inland from Dingač, and among the best to visit here are the Tolj family's **Saints Hills** (see box, page 11), and Lee and Penny Anderson's **Korta Katarina** ([www.kortakatarina.com/winery](http://www.kortakatarina.com/winery)).

More recently, a juicier, modern style of Plavac Mali is emerging from the mainland region of Komarna, overlooking the Pelješac peninsula.



*Anthony Rose is a widely published and awarded wine critic and author, and a regular contributor to Decanter*

while further south, Korčula, with its stunning walled town and Venetian architecture, is home to some of Croatia's best gastronomic destinations and wineries, the latter including that of poet-winemaker and master of the Pošip grape **Luka Krajančić** (see Facebook).

The mainland coastal road takes you on to the Pelješac peninsula, close to Dubrovnik, one of the best growing areas for the dark-skinned Plavac Mali. This is down to its warm, sunny Mediterranean climate and the steep, terraced vineyards overlooking the shimmering Adriatic



Rovinj, Istria

*The Istrian peninsula's proximity to Italy, Slovenia and Austria make it gastronomic melting pot for tourists'*

Below: beautiful vistas from the vineyards at Saints Hills

