

## PEARLS OF DALMATIA

With Dubrovnik & the Island of Hvar  
(October 12-28, 2021)

As our small group traveled from historic Zagreb and beautiful Lake Bled to the Habsburg resort of Opatija, the island of Hvar, and beloved Dubrovnik, we saw why this cherished region lays such a claim on the hearts of all who visit.

After several cancelations because of Covid-19 we finally got to go on this tour with Odyssey Unlimited. It was a small group of 14, all women except 2 men, Mike and another guest John. Everyone was fully vaccinated and seasoned travelers. This year we traveled business class which made all the difference. Mike booked with Odyssey for land only which means we made our own flight arrangements and transfers. We made our plans to arrive in Zagreb, Croatia two days before the group. I studied up on things to visit in Zagreb that was not on Odyssey's itinerary. We stayed at the Amadria Park Hotel Capital which was located within walking distance of the sites.

After a good rest after we arrived we set off to explore the Old Town of Zagreb. We walked to the city center 'Jelacia Square' which is dominated by a stature of the 19th-century governor of Croatia, Ban Josip Jelacic on his horse. Tents were set up on one end of the square filled with people selling their wares of honey, meats, cheeses, cannabis products, breads, fruits and vegetables, cookies and handmade crafts. I purchased some handmade embroidery items from a lady that was very friendly and told me about her work. The square was busy with people at this popular meeting spot. We stopped to take a photo of the Zagreb Cathedral, a Roman Catholic cathedral-church the most monumental sacral building in Gothic style southeast of the Alps. You can see it from afar because of its twin, 354 ft spires. It was not open to the public when we were there. One of its spires was damaged in the earthquake that took place on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020. In front of the cathedral is the Holy Mary column circ 1865 with gold angels and a fountain. We walked the city streets and passed street vendors selling roasted corn-on-the-cob and roasted chestnuts.

We went to where the shortest funicular in the world took us to Upper Town with its many cobblestone streets stretching between two hills – Kaptol and Gradec. It is easy to get from Lower Town to Upper Town but we wanted the experience of riding the funicular with nice views at the top. Once at the top we went inside one of the oldest buildings in Zagreb: Lotrščak Tower. The name is derived from Latin *campana latruncolorum*, meaning "thieves' bell", referring to a bell hung in the tower in 1646 to signal the closing of the town gates. It was a part of the southern gate and town defenses, dating back to the 13th century one of the last remaining fortifications in the city. On the fourth floor is a cannon that is fired from the tower to mark midday. It was not in use at this time. We enjoyed even more elaborate views of Zagreb from the tower. We left the tower and strolled the Strossmeger Promenade filled with many chestnut trees and multi-colored benches. We passed by Gric Park –green spot in Upper Town. This charming park features part of the old medieval defense wall of Zagreb, a wall that is now restored. We entered one of the entrances to the Gric Tunnel that was built during World War II,

with its primary purpose to shelter civilians from bombings during WWII and the Croatian War of Independence towards the end of the 20th century. We exited the tunnel and arrived in Upper Town. First settled in the 11th century, it is the oldest part of Zagreb with 17th and 18th-century buildings lining narrow, winding streets. We stopped so Mike could have a brew. We passed many pubs, restaurants and stores, one of interest was the Kravata tie shop. Croatia is the homeland of the first necktie as it originates from cravat worn by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Croat soldiers. You could get your fill of quirky museums such as the Museum of Broken Relationship, Museum of Illusions, Zagreb 80's Museum, Museum of Torture or the Mushroom Museum. We skipped the museums and went for a walk through Stone Gate from Radiceva Street that contains a shrine to the Virgin Mary that is believed to possess magical powers. On 31st of May 1731 a fire destroyed much of Gradec, burning all the houses to the ground. At that time the Gates displayed a painting of the Mother of God, which was miraculously undamaged by that fire. To commemorate the event, grateful citizens built a chapel within the arch of the old Stone Gate. The chapel, which still houses the painting of the Mother of God, has since become Zagreb's biggest shrine and is regularly visited by people who come to light a candle and thank the Lady for protecting them.

As you exit the Stone Gate you will arrive at one of the oldest Europe's pharmacies called "K Crnom Orlu". The name translates to "at the Black Eagle," and the oldest pharmacy in Zagreb. It was built between 1242 and 1266 and got its present look in the 18th century. I took a peek inside the pharmacy that is still used today to distribute medicines for the public. Shelves and drawers line two walls with empty old medicine bottles, crocks and drawers labeled with names of drugs and potions once used in the pharmacy. We peeked inside a quirky café with modern art on the walls and weird sculptures amid the black and white tables where you could order sweets, coffee or tea. We continued to walk to admire St. Mark's Church with its colorful tiled roof, constructed in 1880, the medieval coat of arms of Croatia, Dalmatia and Slavonia on the left side, and the emblem of Zagreb on the right. The Gothic portal, composed of 15 figures in shallow niches, was sculpted in the 14th century. The interior is open only at Mass times. The historical building on the west side of St. Mark's Square is Ban's Court a long, two-story baroque building that was built by ban Ignaz Gyulai in first half of 19th century. The building was the residence of Croatian bans from 1809 until 1918. On the east side are the Croatian Parliament buildings.

We continued to stroll down Tkalciceva St. full of restaurants and small shops and colorful houses. We stopped to look at the statue of Mary Juric Zagorka, a famous Zagreb journalist standing straight and tall with her umbrella by her side. Behind her mounted on an old house was an unusual sundial. This street used to be the first real red-light street in all of Europe, and almost every house here used to be a brothel. We passed a building with a sign: 'City Assembly of the City of Zagreb' the lawmaking body of the Croatian capital of Zagreb. On the other side of this sign was the likeness of Nikola Tesla. He was a Serbian-American inventor, electrical engineer, mechanical engineer, and futurist best known for his contributions to the design of the modern alternating current electricity supply system. We went to check out Dolac Market, the fruit and vegetable market that we would later visit with the group. Walking up the stairs to the

market looking at the murals painted on one side of the steps with apples stenciled on the steps you get to the top and standing there is the bronze statue of 'Kumica Barica' which translates to "outdoor market selling lady" work by the sculptor Stjepan Gracan. It has been reported that Kumica Barica was modeled after a real life woman, Kumica Đurđica, who has been a Dolac selling lady for many, many years, selling fruit and vegetables. On a little square next to Dolac was a usual sculpture of Petrica Kerempuh, Croatia's National Jester. A literary figure that travels the world and outsmarts his opponents with his wit and intelligence. He playing the mandolin with a noose around his neck and joined with prisoners tied and chained around a pole. Hungry we hunted for a place to have lunch. Down one of the alley streets tables were set up in the middle of the street serving several different restaurants. We went inside of the Leonardo-L Trattoria Pizzeria and shared a large ham and cheese pizza, Chicken Cordon Bleu and a rice dish. The food was very affordable and average in taste, but filling.

New day we went exploring more in Zabreg on our own. After a nice filling breakfast at our hotel we walked to Zagreb Botanical Gardens. Founded in 1889 by Antun Heinz, Professor of the University of Zagreb, and opened to public in 1891. It is home to over 10,000 plant species from around the world, including 1,800 exotic ones. It has large ponds for aquatic plants. On our way we walked through Zrinski Park. Its centerpiece is the music pavilion, donated in 1890 by Eduard Prister, a wealthy trader. There are three fountains in the part the most interesting on is called 'The Mushroom'. The fountain was designed by Hermann Bollé and made by students of School of Crafts out of stone. It was placed in 1893 and citizens immediately nicknamed it "Bolle's mushroom" out of mockery and laughter. On the northern part of the park the Meteorological column was a donation from known army doctor Adolf Holzer in 1884. Herman Bolle made blueprints for it and it was made from Istrian marble. The Meteorological column still works today and people often stop at it and check on the temperature and air humidity. Due to a fact that column doesn't meet today's standard measurement by World Meteorological Organization, data isn't considered as official.

It was a sunny day and we walked through Zagreb Botanical Gardens. The quiet gardens looking at the trees, plants, flowers, birds and trying to get a good shot of the hummingbird hawk-moth hovering in the air and dipping in the flowers. That was a challenge. We headed off to the train station and on our way passed the Hotel Esplanade Zagreb built in 1925 for the passengers of the old Orient Express and renovated in 2004. We arrived in King Tomislav Square a public area with an art pavilion museum & a towering statue of King Tomislav the first King of Croatia. The art pavilion was closed due to repairs caused by the earthquake of 2020. The Zabreg main train station is a throwback to the days when Zagreb was a stop on the Orient Express. The building itself has a neoclassical style. It is easily recognizable by large pillars and sculptures placed at the entrance. We went inside to see the trains and grab a snack. Walking back we stopped at the entrance of the art pavilion with an interesting ambiental installation called 'The Big Muntius' named after Professor *Muntius*, a minor figure in Stanisław Lem's SF novel Solaris. The scene might perhaps recall the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale and the wall of briars that prevents entry into the castle. This is an oversized modular work composed of segments of polymer joined together with valves and spikes that tend towards an

endless monochrome structure. I went inside the Hemingway Bar & Bistro to use the ladies room a photo of Martha Gellhorn, Hemingway's 3<sup>rd</sup> wife in front of the women's toilets. Ernest Hemingway in front of the men's toilet. Many other photos of Hemingway lined the walls of the inside seating. Across the street was the Croatian National Theatre, a theatre, opera and ballet house. In the square in front of the theatre was a sculpture called the 'Well of Life' by the Croatian sculptor and architect Ivan Meštrović. The sculpture is circular with relief of ten naked figures, a child, love couple and the old man, life-size, that crouch and twist their bodies around a well which contains water. Strong facial expressions of the figures show the joy of life which alternating rhythmically makes the life cycle. The figures are watching their reflections in the water, while their bodies appear to have been frozen in motion. The figures are arranged so that they show to viewer the purpose of the well, i.e., desire for life and joy, which can be seen best in young characters who are hugging and kissing as opposed to the old man who is at the end of his life and looks with grief into the well, a symbol of life. The sculpture depicts man's natural cycle, from birth to death. We went inside the 'Church Parish of St. Blaza/Blaise' a Catholic church. It is notable for its cupola, made out of reinforced concrete, first of its kind in the region. It is dedicated to the Saint Blaise the patron saint of wool combers and throat disease. While imprisoned, he miraculously cured a boy from fatally choking. After being torn with wool combers' irons, Blaise was beheaded. Begun in the 16th century, the blessing of St. Blaise is a ceremony still practiced and celebrated on his feast day in many places. Two candles are consecrated and crossed before the congregation; or a wick, consecrated in oil, is touched to the throats of the faithful. Mike knew about this saint because he was bought up Catholic. So many bakeries and cafes to try and shops to visit, my favorite the jewelry stores. Time for an early dinner at Nokturno on Skalinska St. across from the pizzeria we ate at the day before. Good food & cocktails.

It's Saturday and we are going for a tour of the Croatian Capital by coach and on foot with our Odyssey group with Irena from Slovenia as our guide. Our first stop was to visit Mirogoj Park Cemetery, known for its arcades and sculpture founded in 1876. Mirogoj is an excellent place to indulge in a spot of taphophilia, or tombstone tourism. I could call myself a cemeterian, a lover of grave yards. They are a quiet comforting place for eternal rest. The abundance of crosses, angels, monuments, tombstones and markers full of secrets and symbolism are interesting. Reading epitaphs that serve as an everlasting tribute to a departed one can be sad or amusing. Finding your ancestor's grave gives you a deeper insight into your family in past generations, gives you a place to go to honor your ancestor, and puts you as close to them physically as you will ever be. We left and our coach took us to Upper Town where we walked as a group down the cobblestone streets passing historic building and hidden alleys. For 150 years, the streets of Zagreb's Upper Town have been illuminated by gas lanterns. Just like in the olden times, they are manually turned on and off by gas lamp men. The romantic lights of the gas lanterns have been lighting the streets of Upper Town continuously ever since 1863, the only exception being a short period during WWII when there were airstrikes and it was too risky to spend 2-3 hours turning the lanterns on and switching them off in the morning. The remainder of the day was free so Mike and I went back to the Dolac Market that was open with a bustling crowd shopping. The market was full of life and color, a feast for

the senses. On the upper outdoor level, zigzag between the iconic red umbrellas, stalls overflowing with fresh fruit and vegetables, and head-scarved village women peddling free-range eggs and handmade corn bread. Then, head downstairs to the covered market section, where you'll find butcher stalls, dried fruit stands, and artisanal sheep cheeses from Pag. Flower venues were laden with assorted pots of mums, pansies and fall flowers and orchids. Many flower vendors had made up beautiful creative arrangements with a fall theme. Some arrangements had a combination of fruits and pepper tucked among flowers. It was exciting to just walk around among the locals and tourist and take photos and have sometime a friendly conversation with a vendor if they spoke English. The smell of lavender was always in the air. We stopped for lunch at Pivovara Medvedgrad that opened on December 22, 1994 on the corner of Savska and Vukovarska Streets as the first mini brewery and brewery in Zagreb. Mike had a hamburger and fries and a big glass of brew I had a bowl of goulash with thick slices of homemade bread. We walked along back alley walkways covered with amusing graffiti lit by gas lanterns. Passing unusual pubs we would stop to take a look, Mike with the look of desire on his face or another special beer? One place was called Valhalla from Norse mythology, the door covered with art of Vikings on longships. Another place was called Mio Corazon Tapas Bar with a colorful inside dining area. Dried flowers covered the ceiling, knickknacks on the shelves; a heavy bosomed Mona Lisa smiling painted on the wall. A life-sized Santa Claus sits by the window reading a book; outside in the widow a skeleton is playing his guitar.

This Sunday morning we set off for Ljubljana, capital city and cultural center of Slovenia. We settled in at our hotel, uHotel Ljubljana. After a wonderful lunch of wine, cheese, sausages and breads at our guide Irena's apartment with a lovely view of the canals and bridges we went for our afternoon walking tour of Ljubljana. You will see dragons as a symbol and protector of Ljubljana as you walk around. The dragon was originally present on the medieval coat of arms as a decoration, but later assumed a more central position. From its initial portrayal as a monster, the dragon gradually transformed into a symbolic protector of the city, embodying power, courage and wisdom. We walked to Prešeren Square the central square in Ljubljana. It is part of the old town's pedestrian zone and a major meeting point where festivals, concerts, sports, political events, and protests take place. The Franciscan Church of the Annunciation is a Franciscan church located on Prešeren Square that shines bright pink. From the square you can see the Triple Bridge, the historic buildings, the canals, the pedestrian-only Old Town, and more.

Our guide gave us our tickets to visit Ljubljana Castle, a castle complex standing on Castle Hill above downtown Ljubljana. Originally a medieval fortress, it was constructed in the 11th century and rebuilt in the 12th century. We took the cable car up to the top to enter the castle. At the top we got a nice panoramic view of Ljubljana and went exploring the castle. After taking the cable car back down we walked around town and peeked inside the Cathedral of St. Nicholas then went to see three of the beautiful and architecturally interesting bridges. The pedestrian Triple Bridge is a group of three bridges that cross the Ljubljanica River. It connects historical medieval town on one bank and the modern city of Ljubljana on the other. The Dragon Bridge is a road bridge

to the north of the Central Market at Vodnick Square (1900-1901) by architect, Jurij Zaninovic. Large sheet-copper dragons guard each end of the bridge. The chief attractions of the bridge are these four dragon statues standing on pedestals at its four corners. There is a legend that Jason was the founder of Ljubljana, and he and his Argonauts killed a dragon. According to local legends, when a virgin crosses the bridge, the dragons will wag their tails. The last bridge we visited was the Butcher's Bridge which also happens to be the city's love lock bridge with thousand of love locks. Called the Butcher's Bridge because it occupies the site in the midst of the former butchers' booths. It is adorned with statues and sculptures of deformed little creatures by the renowned Slovenian sculptor Jakov Brdar. The sides of the deck are made of see through glass so you can see the Ljubljanica River below. He had dinner that night with the group at a local restaurant and was served mushroom soup and assorted grilled meats and sea bass with roasted peppers. I really liked Ljubljana with its usual art sculptures, fountains and churches with usual doors and beautiful interior designs.

It's Monday, our excursion this morning took us northwest to the town of Bled, Slovenia, whose namesake lake is the stuff of fairytales. Surrounded by the Julian Alps and deep forests, and with a medieval castle perched on its shore, the almost mile-wide lake ranks as a popular tourist destination. We toured the Bled castle with striking views of the crystalline lake below, and enjoy a boat ride on glacial Lake Bled. Along our ride, we disembarked to visit the St. Marie Church, also called "the church on the island," as it occupies one of Lake Bled's small isles. This fairytale church dates to the end of the 17th century, and features a soaring 170 foot tall red and white tower visible from most of the lake and its surrounds. After our touring here, we returned to Ljubljana, where the rest of the day was at leisure. The scenery on our way to Bled was magnificent with the views of the Julian Alps and towns. Our ride to St. Marie Church was by a traditional boat called Pletna. Pletna boats are made by locals and are typical of Bled. Their origins date back to 1590. It is equipped with a colorful awning which protects the passengers. Operated by a single rower with two long oars who sure gets a work out. In winter when the temperatures are low enough, you can walk across the frozen Lake Bled to the island and visit the church. Once our boat docked we headed to the church to take a look. Inside the church is a bell of wishes, made by Francesco Patavino from Padova way back in 1534. The legend says that those who ring the bell and make a wish will see their wish come true. But there's one rule: you can make only one wish. Mike and I together pulled the rope and made our wishes and headed out to climb the 99 steps up the bell tower for a good view of the lake. Our group continued to visit Bled Castle a medieval castle built on a precipice above the city of Bled used for defense purposes. Nowadays, the castle is employed as a historical museum with a collection that represents the lake's history. In one of the rooms was the castles master printer would operate a reconstructed Gutenberg's wooden printing press which the master printer used to demonstrate printing on hand-made paper with historical blocks and lead letters. Mike really liked watching the printer in operation. The Gutenberg press was invented by goldsmith Johannes Gutenberg (1397-1468). The printing press made it possible to manufacture large numbers of books for relatively little cost for the first time. Once back in town we were on our own for lunch and looking around. We headed to St. Martin's Parish Church built from 1903 until 1905. The church contains a number of frescoes painted in 1930 by the

Prešeren Award-winning artist Slavko Pengov, including one portraying Vladimir Lenin as Judas Iscariot in a depiction of the Last Supper. It also hosts a number of statues by Ivan Vurnik. Mike and I had lunch at Costilna Murka Inn keeping the tradition since 1909. I ordered for an appetizer grilled cheese with pumpkin oil and shredded red cabbage. And my main dish was chicken fillet with mushrooms, roasted potatoes and vegetables. Mike orders the Sea Bass on top of rice and a mug of Lasko beer. For dessert we stopped off at the Slascicarna Zima Bakery for a big slice of Bled cream cake one of the most famous Slovenian traditional dishes. It combines a crisp crust with a blend of heavenly light custard and whipped cream, making it quite difficult to eat it elegantly. Also a couple of delish Linzer cookies with jam filling that originated in the Austrian city of Linz.

It's Tuesday and we head off to Opatija to stay at the Amadria Park Hotel Milenij. We stop to explore Postojna Cave, the almost 15-mile long karst cave system where an electric train takes us deeper than is possible in any other cave in the world. On this subterranean journey, we take in the wondrous natural rock formations created over millions of years by the underground Pivka River. The cave's stalagmites, stalactites, and curtain-like outcroppings are otherworldly – and beautiful. We then continued on to Opatija, the Croatian seaside resort where princes once vacationed. A fashionable resort in the 19th century, it's dotted with Habsburg-era villas. The Lungomare is a promenade that snakes along the coastline, offering views of the town and neighboring islands.

It's Wednesday and we embarked this morning on a daylong tour of the Istrian Peninsula, a scenic region that still reflects its diverse cultural roots. At various times throughout its history belonging to Venice, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Fascist Italy, the Yugoslav Federation, and now Croatia, Istra, as it is known, boasts an interesting history, a mild Mediterranean climate, lovely scenery, and good wines. We stopped in the ancient port of Pula to visit the well-preserved remains of a Roman amphitheater (circa 177 BCE), once a site of gladiator spectacles. We continued on to Rovinj, the "blue pearl" of the Adriatic and a charming old Venetian port, where we had free time to explore on our own. Mike and I went exploring in Old town that stands on a headland, with houses tightly crowded down to the seafront. A tangle of cobbled streets lead to the hilltop church of St. Euphemia, whose towering steeple dominates the skyline where we went to climb the tower of the church for a fantastic view. This three-nave church was built from 1725–36, over the remains of older, early Christian structures. After returning to Opatija late this afternoon, we dined together at a local restraint where I had the best meal of the trip of a nice fresh salad, slow roasted veal served with potatoes and a trio of small desserts.

It's Thursday, today we traveled along the "Opatija Riviera," as this stretch of striking Adriatic coastline is known, to nearby Moscenicka, a onetime fishing village that now draws visitors for its tranquil port atmosphere and lovely pebbled beaches. This tiny town is steeped in history: the Roman Empire conquered this region in 177BC, and evidence of settlement in the area reaches back even further, to the Liburnian tribe who lived in this region in the 4th century BCE. The town's tightly packed, red-tiled homes date from medieval times, and present a stunning contrast with the dark green forested

hillside and blue Mediterranean water. While in Moscenicka, we visit the Ethnographic Museum, which shows how the people of this hilltop town lived several hundred years ago. After touring and lunch together at Al Pote Konoba and had a delicious dumpling dessert with plum filling. We returned to Opatija mid-afternoon and had the remainder of the afternoon free amid the Belle Époque architecture and atmosphere.

It's Friday, today travel south for a full-day excursion to Plitvice Lakes National Park, a string of 16 turquoise-colored lakes connected by a series of waterfalls and cascades; surrounded by dense forests, karst formations, dolomite reliefs, limestone canyons, lagoons and underground watercourses and abundant wildlife; and separated by distinctive travertine deposits. We enjoy a tour of this UNESCO World Heritage site, and then continue traveling south to our next destination, Trogir. This coastal town traces its origins back to 3rd-century BCE Greek traders, and its historic town center is a UNESCO site. Enclosed within medieval walls and flanked by a seaside promenade, this ancient town presents an impressive architectural mélange of grand Romanesque churches and Renaissance and Baroque buildings built during the Venetians' reign. A boxed lunch was included today, and we arrive in Trogir this evening in time to enjoy dinner together at our Hotel Trogir Palace. The highlight of my trip was Plitvice Lakes National Park. It was a sunny charming day to hike the park. The Long wooden footbridges were easy to maneuver and the lakes, water falls, trees, birds and scenery was pleasing and alluring.

It's Saturday, This morning we traveled by motorcoach to Split, the main city of the central Dalmatian Coast and home of Diocletian's Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage site. As we see on our guided tour, the palace, and eventually its ruins, formed the historic heart of picturesque Split. Construction began in 295 CE and continued for 10 years; the Emperor's extravagance resulted in a massive structure sprawling over seven acres, with walls as high as 72 feet. Here we had time for lunch on our own before we boarded our ferry for the two-hour cruise to the beautiful Mediterranean island of Hvar, "queen" of the Dalmatians and one of several islands forming "The Hvar Group." Strategically located in the midst of several major Adriatic sea routes, Hvar boasts cultural influences left behind by centuries of invaders including Greek, Roman, Venetian, Turkish, Austrian, and French. Today Hvar is both a popular holiday spot and well known for its wine, lavender, and honey. Upon arrival we traveled by coach to lively Hvar town, where we spend the next two nights at Adriana Hvar Spa Hotel. We dine tonight at a local restaurant just a short walk from our hotel.

It's Sunday and we discovered some of Venetian-tinged Hvar town this morning, first on a walking tour then with a walking tour of nearby Stari Grad, one of Croatia's oldest cities. Nestled between fragrant fields of lavender and the sea, Stari Grad dates to 385 BCE when it was founded by Greeks from the island of Paros. We visit a local winery to sample their delicious wines and enjoyed lunch together, then returned to Hvar town for some time at leisure. We took the time to relax in our room and Mike had a brew of Gricka Vjestica beer and I ate a box of Linzer cookies while looking at the wonderful view out our window. We headed out later at night for dinner on our own at Mediterraneo Dine & Wine Restaurant. We ate outside on the patio. I had the seafood

risotto and Mike ordered a combo seafood platter. They gave us complementary desserts of chocolate cake pieces topped with chocolate sauce. We walked back to admire the lights on the water and buildings at night.

It's Monday, we continued our journey south today, leaving Hvar for the mainland via ferry then traveling via coach along the scenic Dalmatian coast to popular and beloved Dubrovnik. Perched on the edge of the Adriatic Sea, Dubrovnik's walled, red-roofed Old City is one of the most recognizable downtowns in all of Europe, a UNESCO site, and one of the main filming locations for HBO's popular series 'Game of Thrones'. We stopped along the way at Sućuraj for good lunch before reaching our hotel late this afternoon. During our ferry cruise we passed the pretty Sućuraj lighthouse at the easternmost point Sućuraj, Hvar Island.

It's Tuesday, today's exploration is to visit Dubrovnik's historic Old Town starting with a walking tour, beginning with the ancient city walls. Dating to the 12th and 13th centuries, the stone walls and ramparts have protected Dubrovnik from both invaders and the sea for hundreds of years. We stop to visit the Minceta Tower; this highest point in the city's impressive wall system was completed in 1464 is seen as a symbol of the unconquerable city of Dubrovnik. The large fort has a massive base with a great Gothic crown on top to instill a sense of power – and today, a sense of living history. After the fall of Constantinople, the city reinforced the walls so they were a full 6 meters thick. Then we continued to the Franciscan monastery with a 14th-century pharmacy. Our local guide took us for a walk through Old Town as he was familiar with the area as he lived in Dubrovnik. He took us through a labyrinth of tiny lanes and to locations where the series 'Game of Thrones' was filmed. I sat on the steps of the 'Jesuit Staircase' where the 'Walk of Shame' started where Queen Cersei Lannister was forced to walk naked through the streets of King's Landing. We went inside the Church of St. Blaise a Baroque church identified by medieval Slavs with the pagan god Veles the patron saint of the city of Dubrovnik and formerly the protector of the independent Republic of Ragusa. It was lunch time so we decided to eat at Restaurant Proto, established in 1886, is located in the heart of *Dubrovnik's* historical core, at the intersection of the Široka and Vara streets. We had a leisurely lunch, I had the scallops and Mike ordered white fish. Our guide Irena gave us our tickets to walk the ancient city walls to be used today or tomorrow. We decided to walk today and glad we did as the next day cruise ships came in and Old Town was crowded with people. There are three entrances to the Dubrovnik city walls. We picked the entrance that was told to us by our guide that was easier to maneuver. You must walk counterclockwise around the walls, starting with views of the sea first. There are 4-5 cafes serving snacks, coffee, ice creams and drinks along the route of the walls. The views of city and the Adriatic Sea were awesome. After exiting the wall route we investigated more of Dubrovnik. We ran into a courtyard that was the home of cats. Someone had set up statuary for the local cats with photos of some of them asking for a donation for food. Lots of plants were in pots and empty bird cages. Plates and bowl of dried cat food was about. I bit more exploring and then catch the bus back to Dubrovnik Palace Hotel where we are staying for the remainder of our tour.

It's Wednesday and we have the day on our own and will meet back with the group for dinner tonight. I suggested that we take a boat ride to Lokrum Island that leaves from Dubrovnik Old Town pier. This fascinating place dates back to 1023 and legend holds that Richard the Lionheart sheltered here, after his ship was wrecked when he was returning from the Crusades. Lokrum has a botanical garden, a monastery, and old military fort, rocky beaches and a little lake fed by an underwater canal from the sea called the Dead Sea. The botanical gardens were planted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The gardens have a few hundred different kinds of trees and plants as well as some peacocks which were also brought on the island more than a hundred years ago. While there we checked out the ruins of the Benedictine Monastery that was built there in medieval times (remains of the old walls are still there, hidden among the vegetation). We had a quiet relaxing lunch in one of the café facing the Adriatic Sea. We liked the bruschetta appetizer so much we ordered it twice with glasses of prosecco as we watched the peacocks run around. The first mention of Lokrum in writing came in 1023, in connection with the founding of the Benedictine abbey and monastery. That night we gathered with the group to take our coach to a local family's farm outside of Dubrovnic for our farewell dinner. The menu featured produce from their garden, grilled meats, homemade olive oil, cheeses and local wine. For dessert a large special flan made by the lady of the house was served.

All things must end. We tried to get all packed for our trip back home and get a bit of rest before our early departure of 4:30 a.m. the next day. We were able to join some of the group leaving the same time as us for a transfer to the airport. We said our goodbyes to the travelers in our group and our fantastic guide Irena and took our souvenirs, visions and memories of Croatia and Slovenia back home. Glad we made the trip. Every time we go on a vacation things change like this time having to deal with showing vaccination cards at airports and borders, negative test results of Covid before being able to enter into the USA. A little more security at the airport and wearing masks. But it is all for the safety of ourselves and others and our country and the counties we visited.

Hopefully our 2022 planned trips will happen and we can continue to enjoy the world its people, lands and its global plan to conserve nature and its creatures.

Happy Trails,

Audrey & Mike 2021