

18.98x26.62	31	40 עמוד	HAARETZ - ESSENCE	14/12/2009	20682554-2
26120 - תיירות קרוואטיה וטלובוני					

Travel

Cavtat's
seafront



The commercials advertising Croatia on CNN use the slogan "The Mediterranean as it once was." Not that there is anything wrong with the Mediterranean as it is now, but that message somehow gets it just right

/ From the travel diaries of Anglo-Israeli author Jeffrey Geri

CROATIAN CHRONICLES



Outskirts of Dubrovnik

After picking up a car at the Split airport, we started our holiday at Trogir, a medium-sized coastal town just north of Split which is a world heritage site boasting a medieval walled city and sprawling seaside suburbs and beaches. We entered the town by crossing bridges, skirting the centuries-old walls of the fortified city and passing a large harbor packed with sea faring craft of all kinds, and set about finding the B&B where we had booked a three-night stay.

After trying our best to find Villa PaPe, the B&B, we finally called them, and Boris, the owner, came to fetch us. We drove behind him up an almost vertical narrow road bordered by white-walled two and three story houses, all with the same bright terracotta colored pitched tiled roofs. At the top stood Villa PaPe, a charming large triple-story house with an annex, fronted by a broad balcony with a spectacular view of the sea, nearby islands, the surrounding hillside neighborhoods and verdant mountain scenery. We had a small, comfortably furnished and equipped apartment and half the balcony to ourselves. Boris, in the construction industry, and his wife Ira, an artist, ceramicist and Croatian cooking instructress, turned out to be delightful.

Although exhausted, after settling in we ventured out for our first Croatian dinner at a family restaurant further down the coast where we ate grilled octopus for the first time - slightly overcooked, as we learned from subsequent experience, but nevertheless delicious.

Breakfast in the family dining room was generous, temptingly presented and delicious, including orange juice, fresh fruit salad, yoghurt, prosciutto, salami, cheeses, home-made

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Dubrovnik's old port

Photos by Wendy and Jeffrey Geri



Makaroska



The fish market in Split



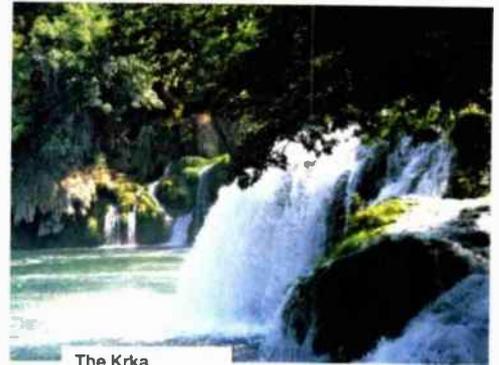
Dubrovnik's old port

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Travel



View of Trogir from Vill PaPe



The Krka National Reserve

THERE WERE STEEP WALKS DOWN TO CASCADING WATERFALLS ON THE ONE SIDE AND AN EMBARKATION POINT FOR SCENIC BOAT TRIPS ON THE OTHER

jams, eggs to order, crepes or apple cake, coffee, tea and our hostess's home-made bread. We roamed the streets and alleys of the walled city, visited the Romanesque Cathedral of St. Lawrence, famous for its unique and magnificent portal, and the town museum, where in a small room we were touched by a memorial to the enlisted youth of Trogir who were killed during the Serbo-Croatian War of the 1990's.

We visited other recommended sites and sipped endless coffees in the squares, marveled at the symmetry of the old stone buildings and the beautiful perspectives, and enjoyed watching the strollers, striders, coffee sippers and ice-cream eaters.

Wooded hills and waterfalls

We spent the next day in the Krka National Park, north of Trogir. Driving there, we enjoyed the breathtaking scenery, full of white-walled terracotta-roofed villages sloping down the mountain to the shores below and boats everywhere. On arrival at the Park, we were taken by bus through beech and pine wooded hills with views down to glistening blue interconnecting lakes. From where the bus dropped us there were steep walks down to cascading waterfalls on the one side and an embarkation point for scenic boat trips on the other.

My wife, more energetic than me, set off to the waterfalls and returned an hour later happily sweating and panting but claiming it had been well worth it. I preferred to enjoy the view from where I was. For the first time, we encountered the rather Middle Eastern local tendency of responding to questions regarding time and distance with answers the questioners want to hear, as opposed to the truth. Question: "How far down are the falls?" Answer: "About a ten minute walk." Fact: half an hour's walk. Question: "Where is the toilet?" Answer: "About 400 meters in that direction," and then seeing the questioner's despair, corrected by a placatory: "About 300 meters." Fact: 600 meters.

Back in Trogir, we lazed on the long narrow café-dotted beach below our B&B, not as white and sandy as Israel's, and Wendy swam in the seasonally cool clear blue Adriatic. On our last night in Trogir, Ira prepared us a mouth-watering Croatian seafood risotto. We promised to stay in touch.

The route from Trogir down to Cavtat, our next stay over, a short distance south of Dubrovnik, is a four-hour

breathtaking mountainside coastal drive. The jigsaw indented coastline with coves, deep inlets and broad estuaries is punctuated every few curves by new views of white and terracotta villages sloping down through the greenery to the sea, each with a boat-packed harbor, some with their own small medieval fortified promontories and some with umbrella-shaded narrow beaches. We stopped for coffee at one of them.

Large and small green islands dot the seascape. There are more than 1,000 islands off the coast of Croatia, of which 67 are inhabited. When the road temporarily moves inland, one looks down at small aquamarine jewel-like lakes and passes through a richly cultivated valley laced with rivers and canals with road-side orange colored canvas stalls selling fruit of all kinds.

We stopped for lunch at Mali Ston, reputedly the home of mussels and oysters, a somewhat isolated picturesque spot on the shore. When Wendy drew the waiter's attention to the fact that about half the mussels - those with stony, oyster-like shells and never seen by us before - hadn't opened, he responded, "And so?" Wendy explained, "I've been taught that one should not eat unopened mussels." The waiter replied, "I'll teach you something new, Madam. These special mussels, you open yourself." We did and they were unusually delicious.

The best grilled octopus

We chose Cavtat as our next destination because, as Croatia's southernmost point, it would enable us to explore Montenegro the following day. However, on the way down we decided that we would rather spend the time just relaxing. We had booked two nights at the Villa Markov on a hill a short distance from the beach and were given the keys to a spacious, fully furnished studio apartment with a large balcony overlooking the spectacular bay and just above a beautiful garden.

The charming shady Cavtat waterfront, lined with old stone buildings, many offering rooms for rent, as well as cafés, restaurants, stores and a narrow beach all adjoining a packed harbor, was a delightful place to spend the day. We strolled around, sipping coffee at the cafés, watching the vacationing couples and the ferry boats gliding in and out, taking passengers to and from Dubrovnik and nearby islands. It was there under the trees next to the beach, at a taverna called Poseidon, that we had the best grilled octopus of our entire Croatian stay, lovingly prepared, beautifully presented, succulent and tender. In short, well worth a detour.

In Dubrovnik, we booked a small two-room luxury apartment in the heart of the old city. We had arranged with the owner, Branka, that upon arrival we would stop outside the Placo Gate, one of the city's two main gates, and phone her. While we waited in the car she would send "wheels" to help us with our luggage. There are no vehicles of any kind in the walled city, save for simple flat carts with handles for pushing or pulling at the back, no

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Jeffrey Geri rides on a "taxi" in Dubrovnik's old city



The "Riva" promenade in Split

IN DUBROVNIK, WE WANDERED THROUGH THE SQUARES AND HAD TWO SUPERB FISH LUNCHES AT KANENICE, A BUSY OUTDOOR RESTAURANT

sides and tiny wheels, used to transport luggage, boxes and the like. I could then go and park the car in a public parking area. The whole transaction, she had assured me, would take about ten minutes. Wrong!

Branka had given us her wrong phone number and Wendy had to go to the apartment to look for her. It wasn't two minutes from the gate as Branka had told us, but on the other side of the city. I sat in the car for an hour, partially blocking the road and the pedestrian bridge into the city, with tour buses, taxis, cars and large organized groups having to squeeze past me. Fortunately, Wendy, Branka and the porter arrived before the police did!

It was worth it. The apartment, on the first floor of a three story 16th century mansion, had recently been renovated, its white walls patched with the smooth grey stone of the city, and was furnished with black leather chairs and stools as well as parquet flooring. A cherubic baby face with its pursed lips spurting water into a leafy bowl below had been sculpted into the wall alongside the dinette. The location was perfect - steps from the Cathedral, the main square, the Rector's Palace, adjoining squares replete with outdoor cafés and restaurants, the open market and most important, the port.

Our first morning, passing the beautiful part-Gothic part-Renaissance Cathedral, we entered the bright, sunlit interior and found ourselves in the middle of a service with the rich sounds of a full choir compelling us to linger and listen. We stood behind the congregants, transfixed. As in Trogir, we were captivated by the symmetry and perspectives, and the shiny brightness of all that we saw around us.

We wandered through the squares, and had two superb fish lunches at Kanenice, a busy outdoor restaurant in the Gandulik Square. We also located the ancient synagogue. Dating back to 1652, built on the second floor of one of four houses in a small street allocated for Jews in 1546, the Dubrovnik synagogue is the third oldest in Europe. Designed with Baroque-style arches, a central podium and a blue ceiling to which silver stars were later added, we found it most moving.

The port is the epicenter of the walled city, with boats of all kinds leaving and entering in an ongoing flow, including a huge cruise ship anchored out in the bay, ferries from other coastal villages and nearby islands, yachts, sailboats and motorized vessels of all kinds. Restaurants cover the quay, and at one of them, the Lokanda, we enjoyed a delicious dinner of steamed seafood brought to

the table in large iron pots.

We joined a delightful boat excursion around the walls of the city, passing close by a small lavender covered uninhabited island and the southern coastline leading up to the ancient city, with mansions and glamorous looking hotels perched above their own coves and beaches. After bidding a reluctant farewell to our chic little apartment and the stunningly special city, we departed for our next destination.

Full of history

Travelling along the coastal road to the Meridien Hotel complex just south of Split, we were able to enjoy the stunning views to the north. On the way we looked for lamb on the spit, a traditional local dish, but the hill-side restaurants featuring it were all rather uninviting, so we pressed on and settled for plump and juicy lamb chops at the Buza restaurant, in another beautiful historic coastal town, Makaroska.

Le Meridien Lav in Split, although on the coast, is in a sense another island, offering a full range of deluxe amenities and services. We booked to stay there a week. After a 20 minute drive through burgeoning Split suburbs, the hotel shuttle bus dropped us off at what the locals call the Riva, a long promenade with the sea on one side, the walls of the historic city center on the other and, in the middle, ultra modern street lighting, two rows of palm trees and one attractive café after another. This is where the people gather.

Built into the historic walls facing the sea are shops, bakeries and ice-cream parlors. The Riva's interior consists of fashionable pedestrian streets, galleries (in one of which an Israeli artist, Basil Colin Frank, a former South African, was exhibiting), cobbled lanes, squares, a fish market, alongside of which we had a fabulous fish lunch, and the remains of the Roman Emperor Diocletian's huge 3rd century palace. Walls, columns and arches still stand and below is a vast cellar, once a granary and now a market. Ironically, since the emperor was fiercely opposed to Christianity, the City Cathedral was built right there alongside the ruins. At one end of the Riva is a large private yacht basin and at the other is the Split harbor with large ferries and cruise ships constantly gliding in and out.

In Split we noticed a shopping mall and a group of high-rise residential buildings. The only other high-rises we had seen in Croatia were luxury hotels built away from the towns and below the level of the coastal road. We saw no other malls. Moreover, there were none of the water sports that one finds on other Mediterranean beaches and, other than in the larger towns, no billboards. The roads were in good condition but narrow. We found the drivers courteous and patient. They had to be, with me driving along the coastal road and seven cars behind me waiting for an opportunity to pass!

The Croatia we saw was spotlessly clean and the people warm, friendly and straightforward. You might want to visit now before it catches up.

Jeffrey Geri lives in Tel Aviv and is the author of the recently published "Culture Smart Israel," available at Sternatzky's, as well as four novels: "Oh, Henry", "The Year of Her Second Husband", "The Burial" and "The Trouble with Francis," available through Amazon and other leading internet book retailers.