



Pearl of the Adriatic hasn't lost its lustre

Robin McKelvie's spirit soars as he returns to one of his favourite destinations and discovers that liberty lives on in Dalmatia and Montenegro

The year is 1993. I've made it to Karlovac, the front line of Croatia's war of independence from Yugoslavia in the hope more than expectation of reaching the Dalmatian coast. My target is Dubrovnik, Lord Byron's "Pearl of the Adriatic", whose motto Libertas has been in mortal danger. Fast forward two decades and I'm in Dubrovnik as the author of six guidebooks on Croatia among a wave of visitors, many of whom know nothing of that brutal war, and tourism is propelling Croatia's recovery as this Adriatic nation emerges as one of Europe's most popular destinations.

My intimacy with Croatia may have been forged in war, but I was also instantly beguiled – as most visitors are – by this epic oasis of mountain, sea and islands (1,244 in total), where the ghosts of the Romans and the Venetians drift in on the balmy Adriatic breeze. Their architecture and culture lives on too in some of Europe's most picturesque towns and cities.

I begin in Korcula Town. Local legend insists that legendary explorer Marco Polo was born here (you can visit his old house), but whether he was or not is a moot point. What is more certain is that after seeing the world he chose to return to his beloved Dalmatia. The appeal

of towns like Korcula is as obvious as it was then, neatly summed up the tourist office's favourite strapline: "The Mediterranean as it once was." Think Italy, just less spoiled, less developed.

Things have moved on, of course, since the war across this whole coast. It is not just a case of the Socialist-era hotels being refurbished, but an opportunity taken, an opportunity to develop a new kind of tourism that works with the historic rather than destroying it. A prime example of this is Korcula Town's Lesic Palace, a member of Relais & Chateaux. Its quintet of lavish residences recline in a former bishop's palace in the heart of the old town. Here I'm impressed by the new face of Croatian gastronomy too, with creative local chef Toni Erceg entertaining during my visit guest chefs from Villa Meneghetti further up the coast and the Hotel Bevanda's Croatian celebrity TV chef Andrej Barbieri.

From Korcula I ease across to the mainland and the Peljesac Peninsula, which was ravaged by Serb and Montenegrin forces in the 1990s. Here too tourism is leading the recovery. It's a foodie recovery with the mighty local Dingac wines starting at slick new vineyards like Saints Hills. I head out to pluck the famed local oysters from

the sparklingly clear waters to find they are also experimenting with ageing Croatian sparkling wines underwater too at Blazevu.

I push on down the coast until she rears into view. I've arrived in Dubrovnik countless times, but I still feel a surge in my spirit on sighting this most dramatic of cities. On one flank the cleanest seas in the Mediterranean sparkle, while on the other rugged limestone crags rear. In between lies a perfectly preserved baroque city-state, a pedestrianised oasis that reclines within mighty stone walls that have never been breached in anger.

Tourism has now breached them, but I think of the empty streets I found on my first visit in 1997, as a local journalist interviewing me complains about the cruise ship passengers now parading down the lifeblood Stradun. I manage to keep counsel with a quiet smile as I admire the restored buildings and businesses which have been propelled by tourist revenue.

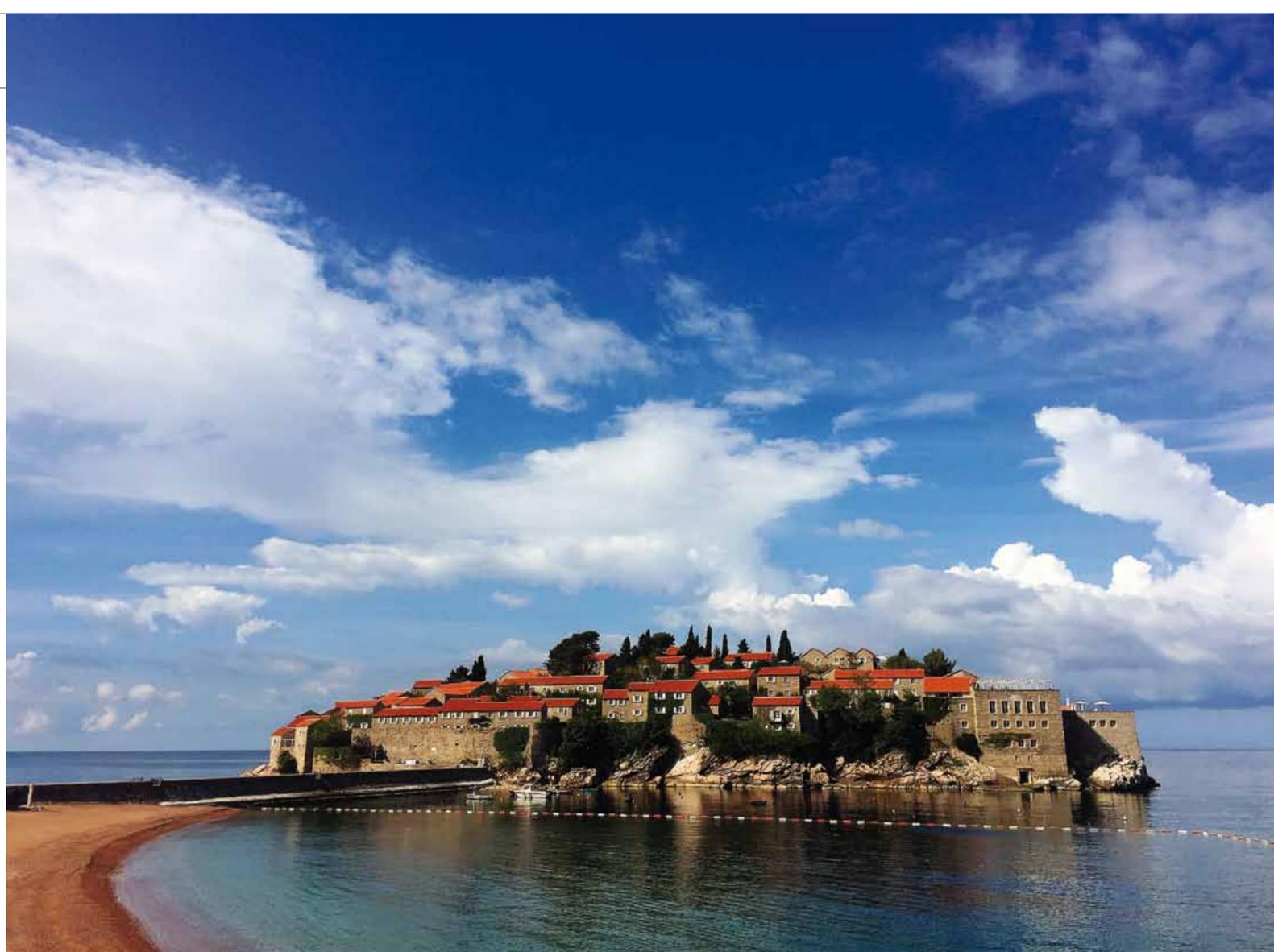
I spend a night at my favourite hotel, the Excelsior. Even when it was rough around the edges post-war I still loved the views it affords of the Unesco-listed old town. Today it boasts one of my favourite restaurants in Dubrovnik and a superb spa. I stay too at its sister hotel,

the Bellevue, a brilliant transformation of an old socialist era hotel into a stylish boutique that has a private beach, plus another acclaimed restaurant and spa.

On this visit I am determined to bury my personal hatchet and venture across the border into Montenegro too. Montenegrin volunteers inexplicably waded in alongside the Serbs attacking Dubrovnik during the 1990s, but an apology has been made and I witness a new determination to leave the past behind, perhaps not least in an effort to enjoy some of Dubrovnik's tourist success.

Montenegro is a country whose landscapes – which beguiled both Lord Byron and Tennyson – deserve visitors. I embark on a week with Headwater Holidays on their new hiking adventure in the Durmitor Mountains. Many of the peaks are higher than Ben Nevis and wolves and bears roam this wilderness. This is world-class hiking on well-marked trails, but our group only meets a trickle of local hikers.

Then it is on to the coast and the sleepy village of Perast on the Bay of Kotor, a jaw-dropping natural amphitheatre and the nearest the Mediterranean has to a fjord. We enjoy more epic hikes and discover the town of Kotor, which echoes Dubrovnik. We hike up its ancient walls



to appreciate its perfectly preserved old town and a bay that millionaires' super yachts and cruise ships are now discovering. The glitzy new Porto Montenegro marina is proving a major draw and easyJet just started flying into the bay's Tivat airport from London in June.

I end my latest Balkan adventure at perhaps what is now this whole coastline's most glamorous hotel. Last time I visited the private island of Sveti Stefan it was a mess. Today it has been reinvented as an Aman resort. I spend a few days enjoying proper luxury, revelling in the fine wine and seafood that this whole coastline has long produced, but not really been credited

for until recently. I gaze back up towards Dubrovnik, glad that the all too recent dogs of war seem to be becoming just another chapter in a coastline whose story is so rich with the ghosts of the Romans, Venetians and Marco Polo.

FACT FILE

easyJet (www.easyjet.com) fly to Dubrovnik from Edinburgh from £130 return.
Holiday Autos (www.holidayautos.co.uk) offer car rental in Croatia and Montenegro, with border crossings allowed.
Headwater Holidays (www.headwater.com) have a range of walking holidays to Montenegro and Croatia.
Croatia Tourist Office (www.croatia.hr)

Do Not Disturb

Z City Hotel, London

Chic, calm and convenient

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The number of hotel rooms in London is apparently set to edge close to 150,000 this year, but trying to find even one that's a reasonable price, in a convenient location and not resembling the set of a horror film can prove challenging.

I therefore welcome boutique chain Z Hotel's bid to broaden this part of the market, focusing on "affordable compact luxury in prime locations".

Z City, its seventh branch and fifth in London, is on Fleet Street and could hardly be any handier. In a day where I criss-cross London, stopping off at lunchtime to leave luggage and returning later to get ready to go out, every time it's a straightforward journey that doesn't drive me to despair as the city's public transport often can.

A few minutes' walk from Temple tube station, the entrance is discreet but easy to find, in what is a converted office building, and they have me at "free cheese and wine" which takes place in its cafe every day between 5pm and 7pm.

Room Service

The hotel has 109 bedrooms, including double, queen, accessible and windowless "inside" rooms, spread over five floors.

My queen room is compact, to the extent that opening my suitcase considerably shrinks the floorspace. But as the chain says: "You're not intending to hold conferences in your room or throw parties either."

However, it doesn't feel cramped, with large windows offering stunning widescreen views across the city.

All rooms also have a 48-in TV with a full selection of Sky channels, including free films, and the space would be fine for a quiet night in after a busy day in the city, especially on the super-comfy bed with luxury linen.

The colour scheme is monochrome, with hooks on a wall to hang clothing from, and the en-suite's glass walls give a modern look and don't take away any sense of space from the room. That said,



the glass may be frosted but the limited level of privacy means it's best to share with someone you know very well, because if you don't, you will by the end of your stay.

Worth getting out of bed for The immediate area, between Aldwych and Ludgate Circus, includes several historic sites including Temple Church, built by the Knights Templar and made famous by *Da Vinci Code* author Dan Brown.

I am even more excited to find the biggest Pret A Manger I've ever seen a few doors down from the hotel. It's opposite the Royal Courts of Justice, with a camera crew outside when I pass, although thankfully they don't spot me and I keep on walking.

The hotel's also a stone's throw from the Strand, and it's a nice walk along there into, say Covent Garden or Piccadilly, or in the other direction over Waterloo Bridge, one of my favourite views in London. It would also be convenient for the theatre, with several of the biggest names in walking distance.

In the other direction, St Paul's and the City are also within a quick walk. Looking at the map, there isn't much of central London that couldn't be reached quickly on foot or public transport.

Wining and dining The hotel has the group's largest café space, with capacity for up to 80 people, and I can see why the free cheese and wine is described

as "much loved". Every evening should start this way.

Breakfast in the informal but elegant Scandi-style café was a highlight of the stay, with the combination of mini croissants, coffee and a magazine, against a backdrop of blissfully tranquil solitude, making for a relaxing start to the day and good preparation for hitting the city streets. I also had a healthy juice to balance things out and also on offer are cereals, fresh fruit salad and natural yoghurt.

Budget or boutique?

A happy balance between both, although it seems best to book in advance as prices can creep up to beyond the affordable. However, it's worth remembering that it saves you the additional expense of, say, a cab fare home after dinner or multi-zone all-day travel ticket.

Little extras

Did I mention the free cheese and wine?

Guestbook comments

A compact but convenient and chic oasis of calm in a hard-to-beat location in the centre of London, Z City lives up to its aim of "urban luxury at an affordable price".

Emma Newlands

Prices begin at £100 per night for a double room. Breakfast £9.50 when booked in advance, £12.50 on the day. Z City Hotel, 24 Fleet St, London EC4Y 1AA. (020 3551 3718, www.thezhotels.com/z-city)