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# TRAVEL

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## Your Adriatic adventure starts here

*Sanjha Guha* gets a bird's-eye view of one of Europe's most enticing coastlines;  
plus our guide to the highlights of the region and its hottest hotels pages 2-4

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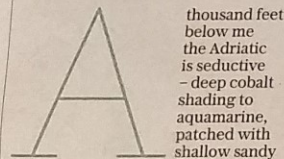
COVER STORY



Picturesque coves line the Istrian coastline, main; the amphitheatre in Pula, left, which the writer saw from above in a seaplane, right

# Let your spirits soar over the sparkling sea

The Adriatic has some of Europe's most beautiful stretches of coast – and nothing quite beats exploring them by seaplane, finds *Sankha Guha*



spits that glow iridescent turquoise. Flashes of light are flickering off the white caps. I nudge the pilot to take us closer and the Twin Otter seaplane banks to the left obligingly. The Istrian peninsula is revealed as a broad neolithic spearhead pointing due south from Trieste. And for the moment it's all mine.

Not far offshore I can see the Brijuni Islands where Marshal Josip Broz Tito, the first President of

Yugoslavia, built his summer retreat. We pass over the historic citadel of Rovinj ribboned by resorts to south and north. We hop over the Limski "fjord", which cuts a gash into the west coast. We plot a wide arc across country to Cape Kamenjak national park, the southernmost tip of the peninsula. I am the only passenger on the European Coastal Airlines charter flight – one of just two airlines in Europe to operate seaplanes. Within limits, the plane goes where I want it to go. And I want to loop around the Porer lighthouse and then weave



Villa St Vincent in Svetvincenat

around dozens of coves, bays and islands in the park. It is an exhilarating grown up fairground ride. Both pilot and co-pilot are foreigners – an American and a Canadian. On the way back to Pula I ask why this is so. They point out that seaplanes require niche flying skills and there aren't many suitably qualified pilots. What kind of niche skills? "Well, for one thing," deadpans the captain, "when we come in to land we have to take extra care to avoid swimmers." Pula harbour is mercifully free of bathers as we land with a gentle splash and skim towards our berth on the Riva, the main waterfront promenade. A short stroll up the Riva, hang a right and you find Pula's principal attraction – the first century AD amphitheatre, one of the six largest surviving Roman arenas in the world. It is in remarkable nick for its years, and continues to be a venue for mass entertainment – headliners this year include Sir Tom Jones, performing in August, a month after British Airways begins direct flights to Pula from Heathrow. There's only birdsong in the air as I tramp around the near empty amphitheatre trying to reimagine the brutish spectacle for which it was built by Emperor Vespasian. A couple of "professional gladiators" are on duty as photo props. Pula's old town is rich in casually strewn Roman gems, chief among them



GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY; SANKHA GUHA

Treasures of the Adriatic: the experts' view

**Anne Hanley, Venice expert:** "The Adriatic's greatest port, Venice has never lost its capacity to enchant. Even at peak visitor times, you are never more than a bridge away from a more secluded city, full of secret streets, handsome Gothic palazzi and lively neighbourhood wine bars."

**Adrian Bridge, Balkans expert:** "With its mountainous backdrops, clear, blue waters and mix of medieval and Venetian-era architecture, the stretch of the Adriatic that aligns with Montenegro has a rugged, raw beauty and points of exquisite delight such as the butterfly-



Star turn: Sveti Stefan in Montenegro

shaped bay of Rotor and the oft-photographed outcrop of Sveti

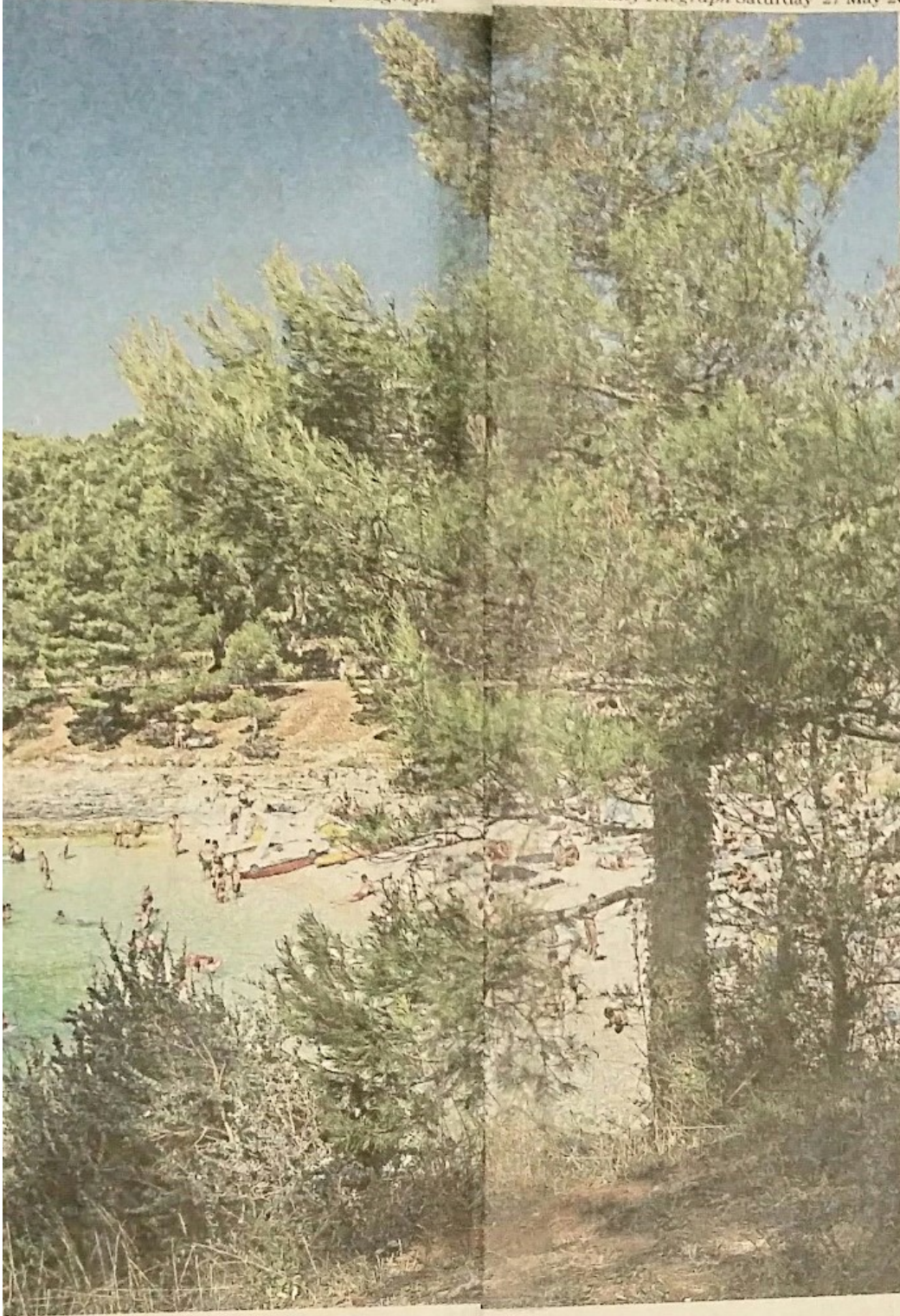
Stefan (now an Aman hotel), host in its time to Marilyn Monroe,

Sophia Loren, Kirk Douglas and Princess Margaret."

**Jane Foster, Croatia expert:** "The coast and islands of Croatia couple timeless unspoilt nature with beautifully preserved centuries-old architecture, summer music festivals and a

vibrant contemporary cultural scene."

**Tim Jepson, Italy expert:** "Italy's Adriatic coast combines fine beaches and pockets of beautiful scenery with easy-going family resorts and the great historic cities of Venice, Ravenna, Trieste and Lecce."



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is the elegant Corinthian columned Temple of Augustus in a corner of what used to be the Forum. Ulica Sergijevaca ducks and dives from there, through the old town, until it collides with the 27 BC Arch of the Sergii. The triumphal monument is, somewhat bathetically, flanked by the Triumph lingerie shop and the tables of Café Uliks (Ulysses in Croatian).

The café occupies the ground floor of the building James Joyce lived in for six months while writing *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. There is a life-size seated statue in tribute to the great writer on the terrace of the café. Joyce, however, wasn't feeling the love when he described Istria as "a long boring place wedged into the Adriatic", and Pula as "a naval Siberia" in his letters. Ouch.

I am staying about half an hour's drive to the north in the village of Svetvincenat – it sounds somewhat less greasy in the Italian iteration "San Vincenti". The Venetian piazza with its Renaissance castle, church, central well and loggia is implausibly cute – it could double as a stage set, possibly for a Goldoni comedy. It is quiet and timeless – if you're looking for action you've come to the wrong place.

My villa has a touch of exotica about it – the owner's travel souvenirs from Africa and Asia are a recurrent theme of the interior design. The most luxurious feature for me though, is the choice of three terraces on different floors, including one on the roof, from which to admire the bucolic views. The world seems to slow down perceptibly of an evening, sitting poolside equipped with a cold beer, watching the red-gold sun



setting behind the medieval skyline of the village. The mood music is coming from the fir trees rattling with cicadas, and the occasional clanging bell of a goat being grazed in the adjacent meadow by a shepherd.

Svetvincenat is centrally positioned in the peninsula, which makes it a perfect base for exploring all points of the compass. To the west is the fishing port of Rovinj, built on what was once an island just offshore. It's geared for tourism and rings with all the cadences of Euro-babel during the summer season. The cafés off Ulica Sveti Kriza seem cantilevered over the sea – much closer to the water and you'd be paddling. These are the best seats in the house to catch the drama of an Adriatic sunset.

For a lower key meal I drive east to the delightful Martin Pescador restaurant in Trget. The corrugated tin roof above the dining porch is propped up by rough-hewn saplings. The little marina in front is conspicuously lacking oligarch-style super yachts. The food is unpretentious taverna fare – fresh barbecued fish and mussels farmed locally – accompanied by crisp native Malvasia wine. The feast is complemented by the view from

*Continued on page 4*

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

the terrace across the wide, gently lapping Mediterranean fjord.

The stand out excursion is a day trip to the Brijuni Islands - easily accessed on a cruise from Rovinj. There are 14 islets, the biggest of which is Veli Brijun. It has history - the ruins of a Roman villa - and prehistory - dino footprints from the Cretaceous period. But it is the more recent history that captivates me. This is where President Tito chose to build his summer playground - a sort of communist riposte to William Randolph Hearst's grand folly, San Simeon, in California. Tito died in 1980 but his legacy still reverberates around the Balkans and the odd little museum here bears witness to his time, his power and his unabashed taste for luxury.

The ground floor is properly bizarre - with a series of wildlife tableaux featuring mangy beasts from all over the world stuffed by an evidently drunk taxidermist. It is the

imbecile grinning lions I feel most sorry for. No dignity, no pride here.

The photo collection upstairs continues the animal theme. "On Brioni Tito was constantly taking care of the animals" says the caption, without any discernible irony, while the accompanying pictures show the President brandishing a hunting rifle and posing with a very dead wild sheep. The faded black and white pictures are evocative of another era when diplomacy involved the gifting of livestock between world leaders - which explains why leopards, lions, giraffes, camels and llamas ended up on this island. Film stars of the calibre of Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor and Sophia Loren all came to party. The leaders and heads of state also came - Khrushchev, Castro, Arafat, Ho Chi Minh, Brezhnev, Gaddafi and the Queen among them. Famously in 1956 Prime Minister Nehru from India and President Nasser from Egypt came at Tito's invitation to sign the declaration that led to the Non-Aligned Movement.

ESSENTIALS

Getting there

From July 1, British Airways (ba.com) will fly twice a week to Pula from Heathrow. Easyjet (easyjet.com) and Ryanair (ryanair.com) offer direct flights to Pula from Gatwick and Stansted respectively.

Staying there

The four-bedroom Villa St Vincencat in Svetvincenat in which the writer stayed costs from £1,500 per week through Croatian Villas

(0208 888 6655; croatianvillas.com; Ref ISI22)

Seaplanes

A charter flight for a destination within 30 minutes flying time (about 100km) costs from €1,500 (£1,300) or 78 euros (£68) per passenger with a full load of 19 passengers. Bookable through EC-Air (00385 (0) 21 444 888; ec-air.eu/en/).

Further information croatia.hr/en-GB; istra.hr/en



The Venetian piazza in Svetvincenat is 'implausibly cute'

On a hired bike I go looking for Tito's White Villa where history was made but it seems to have vanished. It is still here apparently but I cannot find any signage pointing the way - and when I ask for directions at the Jurina Hotel my query is met with baffled shrugs from the staff. I find myself

cycling along a path between a golf course and the sea accompanied by squabbling gulls.

The path comes to an abrupt end at a high wire mesh gate across the road - flanked by imposing fences on both sides. Surveillance cameras seem to be trained on me. It's all very

*Jurassic Park.* I am about to turn the bike around when the gates glide open silently. I guide my bike through expecting to be savaged by a flock of Velociraptors. The strong sense of having strayed into a movie is only reinforced when I see ostriches in a paddock to my right. In reality I have stumbled into the island's safari park through a back entrance. The surviving descendants of Tito's menagerie live here.

In the north west corner of the safari park there is indeed a "dinosaur" compound. A forested path leads down to a stony shore where a seven-metre high concrete theropod stands snarling at the sea surrounded by dozens of real saurian fossil footprints clearly embossed in the rock. A tranquil pebbly bay curves away from the headland. The water is clear and sparkling. It is the perfect spot to go swimming with dinosaurs - and to reflect on the passing glory of the political beasts who ruled the earth more recently.