



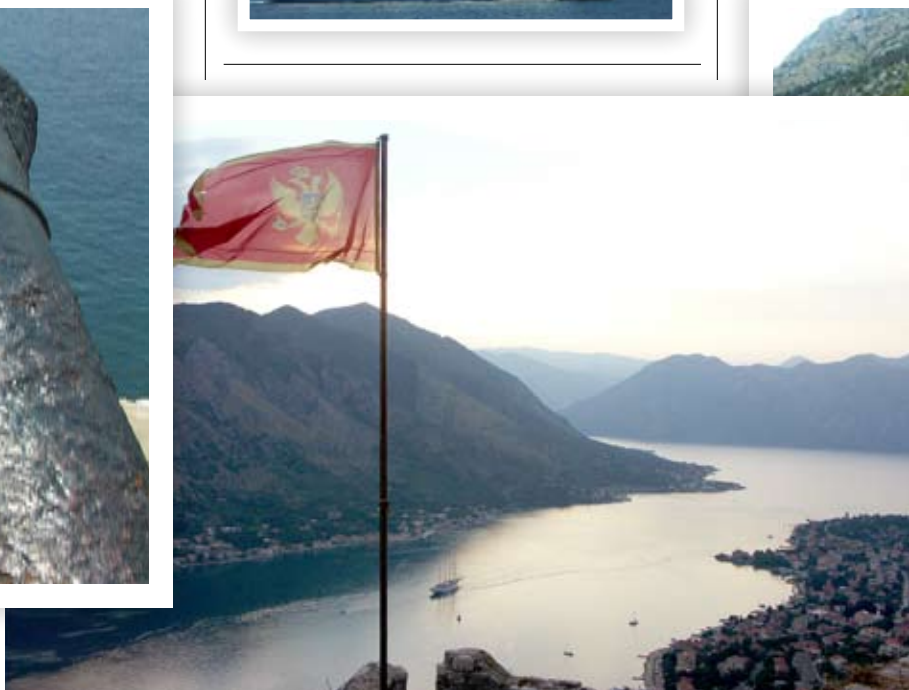
After communism, then conflict, the Riviera of Eastern Europe is awakening. Few symbols of that rebirth are more atmospheric and inspiring than the walled cities of Croatia and Montenegro.

protected *by the* past

(clockwise from mid-left) Dubrovnik palm; Stradun main street; overlooking Kotor; Korčula church; Dubrovnik wall photographers; and wall walker vista; Kotor tiles; Croatia sailing; and ferry; climbing Kotor; Star Clipper in Kotor Bay; Dubrovnik "gunbathing"; Korčula aglow; Dubrovnik's St. Blaise & friend

Text & Photography by Randy Johnson





On a gloomy day in the early 1990s, I sat in a small, boarded-up, even gloomier music club in **Dubrovnik**, a walled medieval city on the Adriatic coast at the southern end of what was again being called Croatia.

Shelling of the historic city had stopped months earlier, but Marko Brešković's little nightclub was a shambles, just like the shell-pocked streets and decimated tile roofs outside. Brešković himself was alive with hope and youthful memories of his time as a European music star, the winner of a 1968 Eurovision Contest with his group, the Dubrovački Trubaduri (the Dubrovnik Troubadours). A vision of the future danced in his eyes, of warm summer evenings where street lamps would glow on limestone streets buffed by centuries of passing feet. He saw a town buzzing

Like a few of Croatia's best coastal destinations, more southerly Montenegro's main attraction, the city of Kotor, is wrapped in ancient walls that have preserved a distant past and ushered in a more appealing present. The new country, independent from Serbia in June 2006, displays world-leading growth in travel, with a 31 percent increase in international visitor arrivals every year since 2000, according to the World Travel & Tourism Council.

Dubrovnik's airport is a prime starting point for trips to Kotor by car, but organized excursions are a fixture of Croatia's coastal mass-tourism scene (www.croatia.hr). Bus tours to Kotor from Dubrovnik started in 1998 and from Kotor to Dubrovnik in 2001. But this type of group travel is being eclipsed by more-upscale options.



► A late-night stroll down a Dubrovnik side street



◀ Dubrovnik's multilevels of walled-city dining

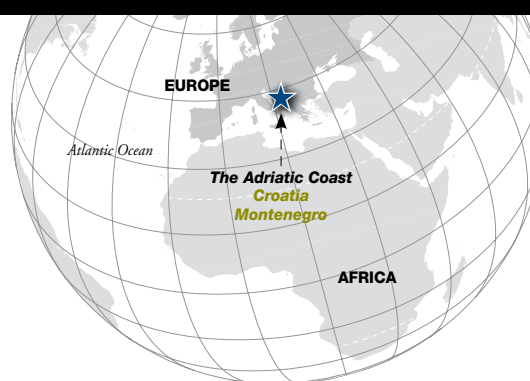
anew with tourists and the echo of music that he and others would make when all this was over.

I confess: I thought his wonderful dream would be overwhelmed by the ongoing nightmare of hostilities (which didn't end until 1995). He gave me a Dubrovnik Troubadours cassette tape and I went home.

Thankfully, I was wrong. Praise to Saint Blaise, Dubrovnik's patron, and visionaries like Brešković. After years of political, even military, storm clouds, the skies have cleared to brighter-than-ever sunshine.

Croatia's Dalmatian coast and Dubrovnik are just the beginning. The Riviera of Eastern Europe—the entire scintillating coastline from Croatia's Istrian peninsula down the coast to Montenegro and Albania—is awakening.

The Riviera of Eastern Europe



FYI

Sailing through the portals of Montenegro's great Boka Kotorska Bay is one of the Adriatic's most memorable experiences. From the deck of a Star Clippers ship, the treeless slopes soar above a labyrinthine fjord—Europe's southernmost—that ends at a stunningly exotic sight. **Kotor's** monumental, Middle-earthlike city walls arc dramatically up adjacent cliffs to dizzying heights.

The nearly five-kilometer complex is registered on the UNESCO World Heritage List as "one of the most important examples of the Venetian military architecture style." It was fortified during 300 years of Venetian rule and used by Napoleon. The walls encircle the crags atop St. John's Hill and include five city gates, 20 bastions, and numerous towers (visit-montenegro.com).

In the next five years or so, hydrofoil ferries are expected to replace the more conventional ships in use now.

All that is attracting travelers to Croatia's more than 1,000 islands. Offshore, north of Dubrovnik, **Korčula** (pronounced Kor-cha-la) is another medieval jewel, but without most of its old walls. The house believed to be Marco Polo's birthplace is a museum dedicated to the great explorer.

An amble through these streets imparts a perfect calm. Sitting at the outdoor café Konoba Marco Polo, bathed in breezes funneled up the limestone alleyway from the sea, it's easy to feel suspended in time. A window opens, and a resident reels out laundry on a clothesline while window shoppers below browse an art store display.

◀ A wall walker's glimpse from a Dubrovnik bastion



▶ Marco Polo house museum in Korčula, Croatia



It's a striking transition to pass through an archway from the claustrophobic ancient streets of Kotor, up a sloping side street, over steps, and into the airy open of the ramparts. A plaque commemorates action by the Clinton Administration that remedied damage from a 1979 earthquake. This is a hike worthy of any outdoor enthusiast—a mountain with a maze of staircases and ramps to fortified picnic sites and glimpses through embrasures of the awesome bay below.

Coastal cruise travel is a booming way to see the Riviera of Eastern Europe. Yacht companies cruise on gulet-style sailing ships. International luxury brands such as Star Clippers have entered the market, with an expanding schedule of itineraries planned for 2008 (starclippers.com).

But nowhere is that Mediterranean walled-city atmosphere more moving and memorable than in **Dubrovnik**. Along the main street—called the Placa, or Stradun—it's amazing to remember that the now-flawless honeycolored stone street was cratered in 45 places during a rain of ordnance that killed 193 Dubrovnik residents between December 1991 and July 1992.

The war lingers in some ways. The War Photo Limited gallery covers the Croatian War and other conflicts. At another venue, an artist shows paintings inspired by the bombings. It's all the more poignant during the summertime Dubrovnik Festival, which takes its theme "Libertas" from the town's motto: "Liberty cannot be sold for all the gold in the world."

The city's military past comes to mind on the not-to-be-missed walk of the walls (take the audio tour, available at the main entrance). From these ramparts, the fortress rears up mighty and defiant. There's a wall-top parade of people stopping at cafés or descending to step through the walls to Buža, a bar perched above the sea. Not far beyond, swimmers dive from the rocks outside the harbor.

Eddies of everyday life swirl below the flow of wall walkers. Grassy spots are shared by locals. So are the walls, before they open to visitors, when resident Durdica Ričko steps out of her family's home of five generations to have some coffee. "It's normal for us," she says. "We live with this vista." The iridescent Adriatic glistens all around.

She points out a square of new paving stone in the older

Atlas Club Nautika seafood restaurant, one of the best eateries in the city—and in Croatia. Overlooking a cliff- and rampart-ringed emerald cove with a sea kayak rental shop, we caught up on the country's travel scene since our first meeting during the post-bombardment early days of the Rebuild Dubrovnik Fund.

"High-quality travel is now the best option for Croatia's future," says Župan-Rusković. "We no longer need mass tourism. The war stopped the trend toward big, concrete, communist-style tourist hotels." Spas, maybe a little golf, private villas, apartment-style rentals, and boutique accommodations are the wave of the future, she says.

She means places like the new **Pucić Palace** hotel in Dubrovnik, decorated with priceless artifacts on loan from



► Kotor, Montenegro's wildly romantic ramparts



◀ A breezy pebble-beach play day in Korčula

rock where a shell struck in 1992, killing her grandmother, Dubrovnik's final casualty.

People surge by on the busy Stradun, but up tiny side streets, dead ends look much like they must have centuries ago. I pause at such a place, where a collie lazily wags its tail and a scratchy opera recording fills the tiny nook. Overhead, the shrill keening and careening of swifts fills the sky.

Dubrovnik makes you want to remember this past even if it isn't yours. I notice myself taking the same steps as thousands before me, walking in footfalls that I deepen and polish in passing. Historic structures—the Franciscan Cloister, Rector's Palace—are well-signed and interpreted.

On a recent trip to Dubrovnik, I had lunch with former Croatian tourism minister Pave Župan-Rusković, at the

the city's Rector's Palace and overlooking the Gundulićeva Poljana square and market (www.thepucicpalace.com).

The resurgent production of wine (Croatia's full-bodied Dingač, from the nearby Pelješac Peninsula toward

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Traveling in and around Croatia just got easier: United recently signed a codeshare agreement with Croatia Airlines, enhancing service with codeshare flights to Zagreb and cities along the Dalmatian Coast. Access Croatia Airlines' network via United service to European gateways such as Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, Frankfurt, London, Munich, or Zürich.



Korčula), olive oil, and Paški sir (Pag cheese) is part of the coastal appeal. “And adventure travel—sea kayaking, rafting, hiking, and climbing—is up 300 percent in the last few years,” says Župan-Rusković. Hike through the forest preserve on Lokrum Island just offshore from Dubrovnik for a taste of the outdoor experience (www.huck-finn.hr).

But Župan-Rusković is cautious. “A four-lane highway reaches along the **Dalmatian coast** to Split, and one is expected by 2008 to Ploče. But that will likely be the end,” she says. “Just part-way to Dubrovnik, to protect it.”

“With only 15 percent of the Croatian coast developed,” she says, “compared with as much as 85 percent for Italy, Spain, and France, that’s to our advantage, and we should keep it that way.”

and a half ago in the dilapidated club where he shared his dream with me. I once again found myself outside his place, **Jazz Caffè Troubadour**, on one of those warm summer evenings that he had imagined, abuzz with people and rich with the seaside atmosphere of the Croatian coast.

I recognized Brešković standing off to the side. His tiny prewar club was now an outdoor nightspot where rows of seats spill into the space between Dubrovnik’s cathedral and the Bunićeva Poljana square. I watched his eyes playing over the crowd (which often includes the famous—Willem Dafoe had dropped in the week before).

He glanced at the band with a gaze that only the sight of his sons could inspire. The talented Brešković Brothers are the toast of Croatia and the pop-music pride of their father.



► Below the walls, Kotor’s tumble of alleys

► Montenegro’s Boka Kotorska Bay leading to Kotor



Indeed, the eastern Adriatic coast is Europe as it used to be, from the pebble beaches of the Croatian north to sandier beaches farther south: “Paradise, if you like sandy beaches,” says Župan-Rusković with a twinkle in her eye.

She sees **Albania’s** travel fortunes freshening in five to 10 years. For the Croatian coast, the close-in trend is increasing cruise traffic, with smaller ships, better itineraries, and less crowding where it has occasionally occurred.

I thought back to our talks those years ago, when the return of cruise traffic to Dubrovnik was still a dream—and an unlikely one. Today, Croatia deservedly finds itself among the world’s top 20 travel destinations.

That evening, after my lunch with Župan-Rusković, I remembered Marko Brešković and our meeting a decade

They recently helped represent Dubrovnik in a Sister City visit to Bad Homburg, Germany.

It was a busy night of loud, lively music, and I was tired, so I thought better of trying to reconnect with my old acquaintance. I sipped a drink, delighted in his sons’ infectious sound, watched the women watching them (both handsome), and this time, bought one of their CDs.

Observing Marko Brešković overseeing the scene, it was as if he were a laser projector, beaming his dream onto a big screen. Happily, his vision and determination, and that of others, is building a bright future for a once-troubled, refreshingly unspoiled, lovely part of the world. ■

Randy Johnson is the editor of HEMISPHERES.