

Empires have fought over Croatia's picturesque Dalmatian region. Today, its lesser-known islands are still free of mass tourism, writes **Kathryn Tomasetti**

# Forever and a bay

**W**edged between rugged Balkan peaks and the Adriatic Sea, Croatia's southern region of Dalmatia has a history of capturing visitors' hearts. Roman, Venetian, French and Austrian empires have laid claim to these alluring lands. Roman emperor Diocletian built his shimmering marble retirement mansion in Split, one of central Dalmatia's most sheltered bays.

So desirable was Dubrovnik that the city has been ringed by defensive stone walls since the eighth century – fortifications that are still in place today.

Croatia's most popular Unesco World Heritage site, Dubrovnik continues to lure visitors by the boatload. Each summer, passengers from up to 10 daily cruise ships crowd the city's smooth marble streets.

Travellers flock to Korcula, whose inhabitants claim it is Marco Polo's birthplace. There's hip Hvar, too: its A-list guests include Brad Pitt, George Clooney and Prince Harry, and it is frequently voted one of the world's most gorgeous islands.

Yet Dalmatia possesses countless islands that most people have never heard of. More than 1,000 lesser-known islands lie off Croatia's coastline, joining to create an emerald necklace floating its way out into the Adriatic Sea. This summer, I set out to explore a few of Dalmatia's most secret gems.

Keen on losing Dubrovnik's crowds, my husband and I started at the southernmost tip of Croatia, opting to stay 12 kilometres north of the atmospheric Old Town.

Clinging to the rocky coastline, Dubrovnik Sun Gardens boasts three large swimming pools, an OCCO Spa and a sprinkling of international restaurants. But the view is the most enticing thing. The

resort's panoramic vistas sweep over the Elaphite Islands opposite.

Just three of this nearby cluster of 14 islands are inhabited – Koločep, Lopud and Sipan. Their permanent residents number a meagre 850. Koločep is the closest, Sipan is the largest and Lopud, say the locals, is the loveliest.

Tiny Lopud is entirely car-free. As the ferry from Dubrovnik's Gruz harbour putters into Lopud's only settlement, the sleepy island instantly enchants.

Pale stone facades and an ancient monastery dot the seafront promenade, backed by towering palms that rustle in the breeze. Children splash in the shallows, while a few tourists dine on traditional *buzgara*, a dish of mussels doused in a tomato, garlic and white wine sauce. Two elders linger in the shade, sipping *Ozujsko* beer.

We hike through citrus orchards, pine and carob trees, reaching the tawny cove of Sunj after little more than half an hour.

Croatia isn't known for its sandy beaches. In fact, tiny pebbles and irregular seams of chunky rock line most of this country's shores.

But Sunj's bay is fringed by soft puffs of sand. It's said that if you swim here with your loved one, the two of you are bound together for eternity. Romantics at heart, we spend the rest of the afternoon dipping in and out of the sea.

The following day we hop aboard a ferry to Mljet. A long, skinny shard of an island, Mljet is close to 40 kilometres in length, although it rarely measures more than three kilometres across. Mljet National Park is home to two saltwater lakes, an island monastery and hectares of forest.

Passing the town of Polaae's tumbledown Roman fort, a magical marker that we've entered the park

itself, we make our way to the Hotel Odisej. As the only hotel situated within the park, the Odisej's location makes it perfect for trekkers and cyclists, with easy access to the nearby trails.

For the low-key adventurer, smooth paved walkways loop around much of Veliko Jezero and Malo Jezero, the park's two lakes. More ambitious athletes can hire colourful kayaks at Mali Most, the slim bridge that separates the two bodies of water.



Lopud, known as the loveliest island, is entirely car-free. The sleepy settlement instantly enchants

Much of our time on Mljet is spent hiking. A canopy of pine provides shade from the summer sun. Entrance to the park includes a return boat ride to Sveta Marija, a 12th-century Benedictine monastery perched on a petite island in Veliko Jezero, where we spend a lazy afternoon scrambling among the ruins. Come nightfall, the friendly tavern *Konoba Kiko* dishes up octopus salad served with slivers of onions, smoky grilled squid and piles of garlic-infused chard.

Legend has it that Calypso imprisoned Odysseus on Mljet for seven years. I can't imagine a more idyllic place to be kept captive.

Back on the mainland, we zip northwards to Split and set sail for Vis. A naval base off-limits to foreigners until 1989, Vis is a 2½-hour ferry ride straight out into the Adriatic blue.

The waters that lap Vis' 40 or so bays are arguably the clearest in the region. Its unspoiled shores bask in more than 2,700 hours of sunshine each year, making it the sunniest place in Croatia. So far, mass tourism has passed by this delightful little island.

Vis town is wrapped around a natural harbour, spliced by the picturesque *Prirovo* peninsula. We consider renting bicycles to explore the shores.

But we soon find that Vis town and the fishing village of *Komiza*, the settlements that bookend this 10-kilometre island, are linked by two very different roads.

The first, built by the Austrians 200 years ago, snakes along Vis' southern belly, running flat through vineyards. The second road was constructed by Yugoslav engineers five decades ago. It bumps up and down across the steep mountains at the centre of the island. Wanting to see both these routes we hire a zippy 50cc scooter instead.

Cutting through Vis' interior, we pass olive groves and fruit orchards. Panoramic vistas spill out onto *Komiza*, before curling inland.

We end the day at *Pojoda*, voted the region's best restaurant at the Dalmatia Wine Expo last year.

The island's historical lack of tourists translates into a traditional cuisine that has remained undiluted for many decades.

On *Pojoda's* stone terrace, we sample *pojorski bronzinic* (lentil, barley and squid stew, an island speciality) and tiny "grandfather's shrimp" with black pepper.

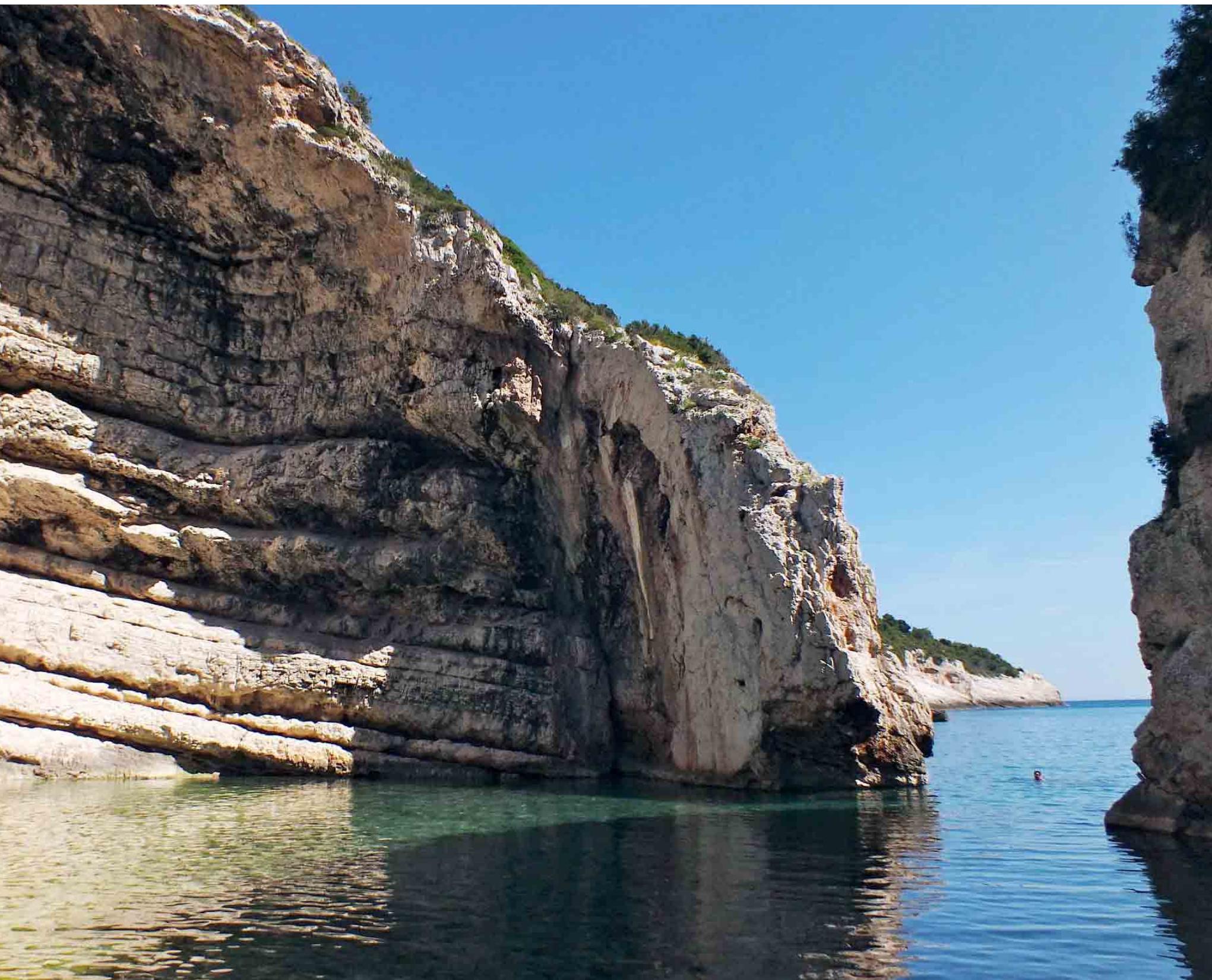
Sitting under citrus blossoms, sipping limoncello made from the lemons above, I empathise with the empires that battled for possession of these lands.

After a week on these shores, giving them up doesn't come easy. [lifestyle@scmp.com](mailto:lifestyle@scmp.com)



Clockwise from main photo: Stiniva Cove, Vis Island; Sun Gardens Hotel in Dubrovnik; stone houses on the waterfront on Vis. Photos: Kathryn Tomasetti





### IN CHARM'S WAY

#### Eating

- Konoba Kiko Pomena 9, Govedari, Mljet; tel: +385 (0) 20 744 074
- Pojoda Don Cvjetka Marasoviæa 8, Kut, Vis; tel: +385 (0) 21 711 575

#### Staying there

- Dubrovnik Sun Gardens Na Moru 1, Orašac; dubrovniksungardens.com. Doubles from €180 (HK\$1,750).
- Hotel Odisej Pomena bb, Govedari, Mljet; alh.hr. Doubles from €67
- Navigator Apartments Vladimira Nazora 48, Vis; apartmani-navigator.com. One-bedroom apartments from €45

#### Getting around

- Jadrolinija (jadrolinija.hr) is Dalmatia's major ferry operator
- G&V Line (gv-line.hr) has faster connections between Dubrovnik and Mljet
- Dubrovnik Sun Gardens also organises day cruises to the Elaphiti Islands. Prices start at 290 kuna/HK\$376 per person
- On Vis, Navigator Tourist Agency (navigator.hr) rents 50cc scooters from 120 kuna for six hours

