



# ROMANS, WINE & TRUFFLES

ISTRIA

*Croatia's northernmost province is one of the  
Mediterranean's lesser-known gems and  
a place with a character all of its own*

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Miner attraction: Labin, above, was once a mining town. Today its narrow streets are filled with small stores, galleries and bars while some of its Venetian-style palazzos sell for a fortune. The rugged coast of Rabac, below left, is popular for swimming, diving and dolphin-spotting



Istria is tucked away in the farthest corner of the Mediterranean, just a stone's throw from Central Europe. Arriving at our hotel in Rabac on Kvarnar Bay we find it is filled with families from former communist republics for whom the peninsula was always a window to the world with its lush landscapes and coastlines that seem to go on forever.

Rabac is nestled at the foot of towering slopes some 40km from Pula, Istria's administrative center since Roman times. The resort is known for its small beaches with bars, restaurants and stands that sell anything from souvenirs and ice cream to local specialties. There are couples and families everywhere, some lying lazily on the beach wrapped in towels to stay warm in the brisk spring weather or snorkeling along the shore. Many come just for the day to visit the island of Cres to see dolphins or go to the blue grottoes. In the old port a man is harpooning squid with his red Serbian-made Fiat 750 parked next to him.

**A FORMER FISHING TOWN,** Rabac's many vacation homes were constructed during the Sixties and Seventies when Croatia was part of communist Yugoslavia and ruled by Marshal Tito. The houses were originally made for the miners who worked at the old mining town of Labin, which is situated some 320 meters above Rabac. Today, they are filled with tourists from all over Europe while some of the larger properties have been transformed by entrepreneurial companies such as Croatia's biggest hotel chain, Valamar.

One of Valamar's biggest projects is a resort on the island of St. Nikola, a five-minute boat ride from the medieval town of Porec, which has been a tourist destination since the 1840s. Apart from a hotel there's also a castle that used to belong to one of Istria's leading families, the Polisinis. The sandstone building dates from the 19th century and is partly hidden by cypresses and pine trees. Prominent guests from all over Europe have stayed here to visit the Basilica of St. Euphrasius in Porec, considered one of the finest examples of Byzantine architecture in the Mediterranean. Next year the castle will reopen as a luxury hotel with a view of the snow-covered Italian Alps.

**ISTRIA'S HISTORY IS** as kaleidoscopic as its scenery. The Romans ruled the peninsula for centuries and the many ancient ruins scattered around the country are a testament to their presence. The most important monument is a Roman arena in Pula, one of only six surviving Roman amphitheaters in the world. Traces of Istria's Venetian period can be seen in towns such as Labin and Porec, where pastel-colored palazzos go for a fortune. Back when Croatia was part of the Austrian Empire the coastline was known as the Austrian Riviera. In the 1880s the Austrians built Istria's first hotel in Kvarnar Bay along with the Hapsburg townhouses you can still see today.

Istrians are a cosmopolitan tribe who speak Italian as well as English, Croatian and a local



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Harbor lights: Late afternoon sun strikes the water in Fazana. Right, Dragutin Galasasevic, a local who hails from Labin, and a view of the Cattunar vineyard



dialect that is incomprehensible to anyone else. A third of the workforce is employed in the tourism sector and the potential is huge as seasoned travelers liken Istria to how the Mediterranean used to be – an inexpensive, unspoiled haven where modernization hasn't yet set in.

**WE ARE ONLY HERE FOR AN** extended weekend so we want to cover as much ground as possible. After a day in Rabac, we decide to explore the area by car, accompanied by our local friend, Asja Misetic, a tall, blond 21-year-old who works in tourism. As we drive into the countryside, the landscape is a revelation with rolling hills and medieval villages, many with bell towers that can be seen from afar.

Food is a passion wherever we go. Freshly made pasta is for sale at even the most humble stores. Locals pick wild asparagus in the hills and go truffle hunting with dogs from May until November. The biggest known truffle in the world came from the Livade area in the River Mirna Valley. It weighed 1.31kg and was found in 1999 by a local farmer, Giancarlo Zigante, who now has a restaurant and hotel named for him in the village. In an adjoining shop there are truffles in all shapes and sizes – as well as pastes, pasta, olive oil, marmalade and sauces. We try some with a glass of local sparkling wine before heading out to discover Groznanj's art galleries and shops selling handicrafts, corals and lavender.

Istria's many vineyards invite comparisons with Tuscany. That may not have been the case during the era of Yugoslavia, when agricultural businesses were state-owned and it was only possible to make modest table wines. But now

winemakers are reviving old traditions to make superior vintages that can rival those of Italy and France. One advantage they have is that Istria's vines grow on four different types of soil.

**THERE'S ONE VINEYARD** in Istria that has all four soils – the family owned Cattunar estate in Nova Vas near Brtonigla, one of the most scenic landscapes of the Mirna River Valley. Here, you can see the different soils: rusty red, ivory white, muddy gray, and one that is coffee brown, almost black. Each soil has a distinct impact on the wine, explains Roberto Jurman, a wine expert at Cattunar who greets us at the gate. His best-selling wine is the Istrian malvasia made from vines grown on all four soils.

After a tour of the cellars we are invited to taste the wine and the difference in the soils.

The black soil – Jurman considers it the caviar of soils as it is rich in minerals and holds water the best – results in a more complex taste than the others. The gray soil is full of clay that makes the wine more fruity and flowery, while the red contains a lot of iron that makes it slightly salty with an intense, yellow color. The same soil is also used for Istrian muscat grapes. The white, chalky soil makes a light and elegant wine that is also used to produce a dry merlot.

For red wine, Istria's teran grapes are the most popular. During Roman times they were said to have healing powers. The oldest bottle of teran is 20 years old and marks the end of the Bosnian war. For the Cattunars, that was when they could finally begin to improve and refine the wines that they had made for decades according to the diktats of the communist regime.

*From above the hills the canal looks like a canyon with turquoise waters that run between the steep, green slopes*

**TODAY THERE ARE SO MANY** vineyards that British and German visitors come for wine tours. In fertile Buje one road has 23 winemakers. The market is so saturated that two brothers, Simon and Goran Grbac, have launched their own beer, San Servolo, named for the town's patron saint.

From 500-year-old recipes that the brothers found in old books they have created three different brews. In the brewery, Simon pours us a glass of each while he studies their color. All are made with springwater from the Mirna Valley. As the beer is natural and without chemicals, it must be consumed within 10 months, he explains. Less than a year after the company was founded the Grbac brothers are exporting to other European countries. Above the brewery they have opened one of the region's most popular restaurants, Beer House, which serves Bosnian specialties such as soup, sausage and meatballs with a hint of beer.

We're soon on the road again, driving up and down hills, and taking in the scenery. The canals, in particular, are not to be missed. The most famous is the Lim Canal that marks the border of two ancient Roman provinces between Pula and Porec. From an observation platform above the hills it looks like a canyon with turquoise waters that run between the steep, green slopes. Further down the winding roads there are a few restaurants with open terraces that serve seafood that comes straight from the canal – oysters, shrimp, St. Jacob's scallops and silver bream.

**WHILE COMMUNISM MAY** have lowered economic standards, Istria was left miraculously untouched by the war that ravaged Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and resulted in Croatia's independence. The battles mainly centered around the borders of Serbia, Slovakia and Kosovo. Nevertheless many families lost loved ones as men had to join the army. Interestingly, Tito is still widely considered as the father of the nation.

"He was kind, handsome and he did a lot for the country," says our guide, who grew up hearing about him. Yugoslavia was never a member of the Warsaw Pact and Tito ruled the country with a soft version of communism without the stifling five-year plans of the Eastern Bloc. Everyone had a job in stark contrast to the soaring unemployment of today. The borders were open and Tito formed a trade union with Africa and India in an agreement signed on Veli Brijun, the biggest of the 14 islands in the Brijuni archipelago. In the Austrian era, Veli Brijun was a retreat for artists and European aristocracy but today ferries take you there from Fazana.



Idleness and activity: Velo Kafe in Labin, above, is an ideal spot to enjoy a quiet break, meanwhile in Porec, below, a group of locals limbers up and gets some early morning exercise on the waterfront





The medieval village of Grozjan attracts artists and it is also where you can find the largest variety of truffles to eat

A small electric train takes visitors around the island but the best way to explore it is on foot. There are several archaeological treasures, including the ruins of a Roman home in front of a turquoise bay where nobody ever swims as the currents are so strong, and a botanical garden with a beautiful 1,700-year-old olive tree. The 18-hole golf course dates from 1922. Peacocks and deer roam the island but the most exotic animals are descendants of gifts that Tito received from his African friends. They include zebras and antelopes that graze in fenced paddocks. The lions, giraffes and apes were transferred to a Zagreb zoo when Veli Brijun was opened to the public in 1983. Some of the first African animals to arrive are now stuffed and displayed in a museum dedicated to Tito. There are also photos of people who visited the island as his guests. Almost a hundred heads of state came, as well as film stars such as Sophia Loren and Elizabeth Taylor.

Before we take the boat back to Fazana we go for drinks in one of the old, slightly dusty hotels on the quay. The Neptun-Istra has the best vantage point for watching the sun set. It is here, over a chilled white malvasia, that we realize we have missed what might be Veli Brijun's most peculiar sight. Not the zebras, or the life-size sculpture of a white elephant behind the old chapel, but the footprints of dinosaurs. Some 200 prints were discovered in the 1930s along the shore, our waiter tells us. That adds to our impression of Istria as a place that is unlike anywhere else in the Mediterranean. It is a gem with its own unique sparkle.

WHEN IN ISTRIA

**DO RABAC**

A former fishing settlement in Kvarnar Bay, Rabac has grown to become one of Istria's premier tourist resorts with several hotels and all sorts of activities on offer, such as sailing, diving and tennis.

**POREC**

Framed by the Adriatic Sea, this ancient city is spread over a small peninsula with a beautiful waterfront promenade. There is an old town with cultural monuments including the Basilica of St. Euphrasius. The oldest hotel, The Palazzo, dates back to 1910.

**LIM**

The scenic area of Lim is found near Rovinj and Vrsar on the western coast of Istria, south of Porec. Visitors go hiking on the slopes or enjoy seafood by the canal, which is a natural breeding ground for oysters, mussels and many different types of fish.

**VELI BRIJUN**

Boats for the biggest of the Brijuni islands depart Fazana from 6.45am onward. The last boat leaves the island at 11pm. See the website for timetables. [www.brijuni.hr](http://www.brijuni.hr)

**STAY FORTUNA**

A five-minute boat ride from Porec, the three-star hotel Fortuna sits on the lush island of St. Nikola. You can relax by the pool or on the beach, with all

kinds of watersports on offer. You can even get a haircut. Next year sees the hotel become part of the sprawling Isabella Island Resort. Rooms from €124. St. Nikola, Porec. Tel: +385 52 465 000. [www.valamar.com](http://www.valamar.com)

**NEPTUN-ISTRA**

With 87 rooms and suites that have balconies facing the sea, including a large terraced restaurant, the three-star Neptun-Istra is the best place to stay on Veli Brijun. [www.brijuni.hr](http://www.brijuni.hr)

**EAT BUJSKA PIVOVARA**

A foodie heaven, the choice of restaurants in Istria is huge. The food and drinks at the San Servolo beer house are excellent (as is the design of the place). Prices are reasonable and an extra bonus is a shop that sells culinary specialties from the area. Momjanska 7, Buje. Tel: +385 91 128 5766. [bujaska-pivovara.com](http://bujaska-pivovara.com)

**THE VIKING**

Seafood is the calling card of this restaurant overlooking the Lim Canal, where the catch of the day has been served to guests feasting on the glorious view from the terrace for 40 years. Limsky Kanal 1, Sveti Lovrec. [www.istrabiz.hr/viking](http://www.istrabiz.hr/viking)

**THE RIVIERA**

Right on Porec promenade, the Valamar Riviera Hotel is the place to sample local dishes such as pasta with truffles

and wild asparagus. The wine card features the best Istrian malvasias and terans. Most impressive of all perhaps is the maître d' who is a walking encyclopedia of Istrian food and wine. Obala Marsala Tita 15, Porec. [www.valamar.com](http://www.valamar.com)

**WINE TOURS**

Wine tours in Istria are still a niche market. Travelers should book their own visits to vineyards.

**VINA DRAGAR**

The only estate with wine made from vines grown on all four of Istria's soils enjoys scenic surroundings with several top restaurants close by. Visitors are welcome here year-round for wine tastings and more. Brtonigla, Nova Vas. [www.vina-cattunar.hr](http://www.vina-cattunar.hr)

**CORONICA**

Coronica is reputed to produce the best Istrian teran wine and is run by the youngest member of the Coronica family whose ancestors founded Koreniki village, where they have lived for some 600 years. Coronica, Koreniki. [www.pactaconnect.com](http://www.pactaconnect.com)

**DEGRASSI**

For 20 years, restaurateur turned winemaker Moreno Degrassi has been pouring his passion for wine into vineyards in the hills above Buje, first through malvasia and teran then chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon. Podrumska 3, Savudrija. [www.degrassi.hr](http://www.degrassi.hr)

**BOOK A TRIP TO ISTRIA**

SAS has seasonal service to Pula from Copenhagen, Oslo and Stockholm, and offers connecting flights from elsewhere in Scandinavia. Earn points every time you fly by becoming a member of SAS EuroBonus. **A return trip to Pula from Scandinavia will earn you at least 3 500 points.** The easiest way to book flights is through [Flysas.com](http://Flysas.com). Choose from SAS Go or SAS Plus.

