

GRAND TOUR
Croatia

Total distance
678 miles

DETHLEFFS
Sunlight T69

Duration
14 DAYS

Croatia's long coastline is dotted with
ancient trading towns and lovely islands

Treasure islands

Croatia's archipelago and stunning Adriatic coastline have little trouble in working their magic on the artistic eye of Gary Blake



GARY & WENDY took up motorcaravanning after spending years sailing in cruising yachts. Today they enjoy touring across Europe, and further afield

We finally arrived at the top of Croatia, descended from the A7 motorway to the port in Rijeka and backed the Dethleff Sunlight T69 into the bowels of the Liburnija, a 50-year-old ship run by the state-owned company, Jadrolinija.

We were making the journey down to the southern tip of Croatia by sea through some of the 718 islands that make up the Croatian archipelago. We would return via the coast road from Dubrovnik to Rijeka, a 700-mile drive.

On our first evening aboard the Libernija we enjoyed dinner with black-tie service in its restaurant bedecked with cut-glass mirrors, gleaming brass and old-fashioned Bakelite switches. What a privilege it was to be travelling as in the 'days of old' - with prices to match.

The elderly ship proved a relaxing way to watch the world go by. The islands were strung out like a long stone necklace. Our first "wish we could stop off here" was the island of Korcula, which looked idyllic with its cream-coloured stone houses. Its town of the same name is one of the best-preserved medieval towns in the

Mediterranean. A few motorhomes and cars disembarked using a side rear door specially provided for these small ports.

Passing more green islands in an azure-blue sea we stopped at Hvar - known as the party island - and Mljet, very quiet but with a National Park (another good stop we reckoned), until we finally docked in Dubrovnik.

We had been the last to board the ship and were the first off. After 10 minutes' drive we were settled in a peaceful spot at Camping Solitudo, the only campsite in Dubrovnik. A well-organised site with nearly 400 pitches, it has plenty of welcome shade, plus good swimming at nearby Copacabana beach. It is also just a 20-minute bus ride to the historical city centre.

A PEARL OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

At reception we bought tickets for the bus, which took us to Pile Gate, the main entrance to Dubrovnik's walled city, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

We took the cable car to the summit of Mount Srđ for a commanding view over the city with its fortified town jutting out to sea and the striking limestone escarpment stretching off to Montenegro and Albania. Incidentally, our vehicle's insurance would not allow us to travel that far, the two countries being outside the EU.

Adjacent to the cable car is Fort Imperial, a Napoleonic fort containing a museum of the 1990s' conflict that broke up Yugoslavia. For 450 years Dubrovnik was an independent republic. It has been part of Croatia since 1993, but even today a 15km

coastal strip of Bosnia Herzegovina separates it from the rest of Croatia. It was here also in 1990-91 that Serbia and Montenegro fought for this high ground as they attacked Dubrovnik city below by land, sea and air.

With our 24-hour Dubrovnik tourist cards and guidebooks we entered the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the top attraction in Croatia. The city suffered much damage during the war but the impressive old city walls have been restored to their former glory.

An exhibition in the Maritime Museum gave us an insight as to how the Dubrovnik Republic became so wealthy, rivalling that of the seafaring Venetians in the 16th century.

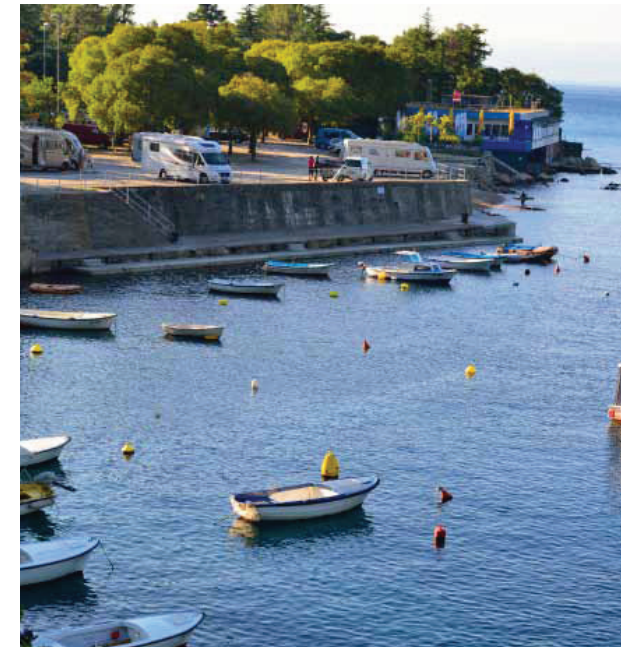
If fortifying the town was paramount, then supplying drinkable water was second in importance. Rainwater collected in cisterns and a complex aqueduct system brought the water to Dubrovnik by free fall from an altitude of 106m and a distance of seven miles. You can still top up water bottles from several of the city's fountains.

We entered Dubrovnik Cathedral. According to legend, Richard the Lionheart, returning from the Crusades in 1192, pledged to build this great church on the spot where his life was

"If fortifying the town was paramount, then supplying drinkable water was second in importance"



Main pic Dubrovnik's pavements are polished with centuries of wear
Below, left to right Looking down on Dubrovnik old town; disembarking from the Libernija ; motorhome parking at Rijeka





The fascinating salt pans at Ston, on the Pelješac peninsula



Produce grown at Neretva. This oasis is fed by rivers and springs popping up from under the limestone mountains of the eastern part of the Adriatic basin



Gary and Wendy's waterside pitch at Camping Rožac, Trogir



Right Salt was once a very valuable commodity
Left A soldier at Diocletian's Palace, Split



Left to right In the grounds of Diocletian's Palace, Split; catching the ferry from Split to Trogir; stocking up on produce at Neretva

saved. We moved on to the Rector's Palace, a Gothic and Renaissance edifice with Baroque additions. Today, it is a museum, and that evening we went to a jazz concert in its open-air entrance hall. The city looks wonderful at night with many illuminated buildings.

The pièce de résistance in the afternoon sunshine was the walk around the top of Dubrovnik's city walls - an uninterrupted run of over a mile. The view from the wall, looking down into the narrow cobbled streets with their attractive stone buildings and the fortified ramparts rising above the red-tiled rooftops, is paradise for a photographer.

The main boulevard through the city, called Placa or Stradun, is made of limestone polished by many feet over the centuries and now shining



bright with its mirror-like surface. High up on the rocks outside the rampart walls are 'watering holes', with tables and chairs and sun umbrellas where you can sip a wine and watch the sunset or the super yachts dropping anchor.

Our evening meal at Buffet Kamenice was squid ink risotto and mussels fresh from the seabeds at Mali Ston — a place we would discover more about as we journeyed homewards.

HEADING NORTHWARDS

The next day, after taking a picture of the impressive cable-stayed Franjo Tuđman Bridge, we drove along the D8 coastal road. This runs alongside mountains with summits at 1800m, with the sea in almost constant view, offering spectacular panoramas. We noticed lots of 'bikers welcome' signs as we continued on our journey and realised it was also a perfect road for two wheels.

Our first stop was Ston on the Pelješac peninsula and a visit to the Solan salt pans. So important was salt in ancient times that it was worth its weight in gold and was used to trade with the Venetians. We walked the 'European wall of China', a three-mile defensive barrier built in the 15th century to protect the valuable salt pans.

Camping can be had 3km away at Prapatno. On a pleasant bay, it would be a good base for wine trails around the villages of Orebic, Potomje Donja

"Our evening meal at Buffet Kamenice was squid ink risotto and mussels fresh from the seabeds at Mali Ston"

Banda and Prizdrina or even a bike 'n' wine tour of Pelješac.

Mali Ston had an equally valuable commodity to protect – oysters and shellfish fed by both sea and fresh waters. It has become famous as the place to eat oysters and drink Pelješac wine, so we visited the canteen-type restaurant Vila Koruna right on the water's edge. After oysters, sea eggs, oyster soup, mussels and langoustines we were finally full and set off on the two- to four-hour (depending on who you spoke to) drive to Split.

SPLITTING FOR SPLIT

We were waved through the Bosnia Herzegovina customs and as we tried to find the A1 motorway we came across Neretva, Croatia's 'California Valley', known for orange growing. Blessed with fertile ground this oasis is fed by rivers and springs popping up from beneath the limestone Dinarides Mountains.

The sat nav provided no help, so, resorting to the map, we found we had

"After oysters, sea eggs, oyster soup, mussels and langoustines we were finally full"

missed the correct road at Ploče and on the map were travelling along a small yellow road that in reality was about the same width as our 'van. After climbing up a very steep hillside, testing the low gears and how much power the Fiat 2.8 turbo engine would transmit on the hairpin bends, we found ourselves on the A1, a fantastic motorway with, it seemed to us, no-one else on it.

It was dark by the time we approached Split and again over-riding the sat nav we eventually found our way to Camping Rozac, adjacent to the town of Trogir.

Dawn revealed our true location – a water's edge pitch with a man-

made beach, on the island of Ciovo. Better still, the bus service to Trogir stopped outside the site, so with the 'van left under the shade of the trees we set off to explore.

Trogir, another UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a small, walled town of white stone buildings, with a history dating back to Roman times. Visit the Cathedral of St Lawrence and climb its bell tower, but choose a time when the bells aren't ringing if you want to avoid being rendered deaf. And the 15th-century Kamerlengo castle, built by the Venetians, should not be missed.

Trogir lies 6km from Split airport so family or friends could fly down to join you for a few days. This year the site is opening a hotel right next door; it also has comfortable cabins to rent on site.

We caught the No 37 bus to Split and made a bee line for the popular Konobo Varos restaurant, 'Konobo' meaning good local food. After lunch we went to the Diocletian's Palace, entering through the Iron Gate – the other three being Gold, Silver and Brass.



The Dalmatian Islands are great stops for touring. The Jadrolinija ferry from Rijeka to Dubrovnik stops at Split, Hvar Korcula and Mljet en route

Šibenik is the oldest Croatian city on the Adriatic coast



Left to right Facing the coastal escarpment of the island of Krk; a night view of Trogir; the Golden Cape beach on the island of Brač

LEGACY OF A ROMAN EMPEROR
The Roman Emperor Diocletian, one of the few to survive until retirement, built his enormous palace, the greatest Roman ruin in Eastern Europe, in preparation for his retirement in 305AD. He chose Split as it was close to where he was born in Salona and for the healing powers of its sulphurous waters, an odour that still hangs in the air today. In the Middle Ages a town was built within the palace and many of the Roman buildings have been incorporated into houses and shops.

Our final stroll was along the waterfront and through the lovely old town to view the Renaissance Town Hall on People's Square.

For quickness we opted to return on the 'long-distance bus' whose first stop was Trogir. At Trogir we decided to get off and walk back to the site. An enormous thunderstorm (Supercell thunderstorms are typical of the area)

appeared from nowhere, turning the roads into rivers. When we arrived at our 'van we found we had left the rooflights ajar and had wet bedding, fused electrics and other problems!
Leaving the motorhome behind we took a trip to the island of Brač, taking the ferry from Trogir to Split, another to Supetar on Brač and then onwards by bus to Bol at the far side of the island, where we stopped at the famous Golden Cape beach for a swim. The island also has several olive trail walks and restaurants with local wine. Visit the tourist office in Supetar as

"Šibenik is a lovely place for meandering around small streets and lunching at a waterside restaurant"

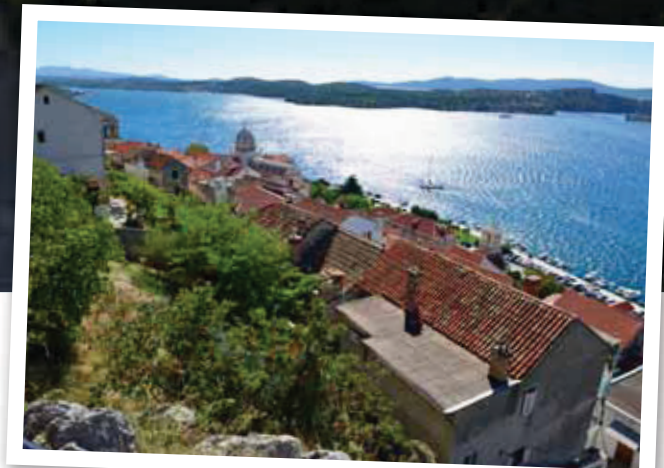
soon as you arrive for suggestions, maps and walking trails.

A VENERABLE CITY BUILT BY CROATS
The town of Šibenik was a 45-minute drive from our site but first we couldn't resist a stop at Primosten. During the Turkish invasions the town was on an islet connected to the mainland by a drawbridge; when the Ottomans left its drawbridge was replaced by a causeway. It's a lovely place to spend the day meandering around small streets and lunching at one of the waterside restaurants.

Unlike other cities along the Adriatic coast, which were established by Greeks, Illyrians and Romans, Šibenik was founded by Croats and is the oldest Croatian city on the Adriatic coast. Everywhere in the city is within walking distance although parking is difficult and we ended up on the docks with the coaches at a huge cost of € 20.



Wander through the gorgeous medieval monastery garden of St Laurence, Šibenik



"The Pillar of Shame still stands, where disorderly people were chained and pilloried"

St James' Cathedral is the main attraction here. It's on the UNESCO World Heritage list and is the only monumental structure of this type built entirely of a dry assembly of custom-carved stone. Visit also the Bunari, Pališ omladinaca 2 (down the steps from the Cathedral) and the lovely medieval monastery garden of St Laurence. It has a café where you can enjoy the peaceful small garden with views of the port.

Šibenik derived its wealth from salt and wine, and from the mills on the River Krka, which flows down from the Krka National Park.

It took us 30 minutes to get to the park, which is home to wolves, wild boar, deer and otters. A coach took us down to the river where we set off on a 1.5km walk around the waterfalls on

easy-to-navigate boardwalks and paths, and finally to the ancient mill, blacksmith's shop and small museum of traditional costumes. If we'd arrived earlier we could have taken the boat trip to Skrandinski buk to see the high waterfalls at one end and the cascades at the other.
There's a site nearby, Camping Marina at Lozovac, a five-minute drive from the park, which made a convenient pit stop. The site also provides guided tours by mini-bus of the park and surrounding area.

MORE THAN ONE PREVIOUS OWNER
Next day we moved on to Zadar on its narrow coastal peninsula. Its layout of straight roads and forum harks back to the Romans. It was also an important maritime port for the Byzantines, trading timber and wine. To one side of the forum, the 'Pillar of Shame' still stands, where disorderly people were chained and pilloried.

View of the rooftops of Šibenik with the Cathedral of St James in the distance

During its history Zadar has been fought over by the Austrians, Hungarians and Venetians. After the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire at the end of World War I, it was sold to Italy and became prosperous. Despite bombing by the Allies in World War II it remains a lovely part-fortified town to walk around.

The Bora wind, coming from the north, arrived as we were leaving Zadar. Its speed rises at times to above 150mph but it clears the air and dries the curing hams. The road out of the peninsula is closed at times of very high wind.

The Bora gave us some concern as we set off on the E65/A8 coast road to the island of Krk. With windsocks blowing horizontal, it hit us on the high bridge



Fort Imperial in Dubrovnik is a Napoleonic Fort that today houses a museum and the Homelands War exhibition – the 1990s conflict that broke up Yugoslavia

over the Most Maslenica and care was needed along the sparsely populated 80-mile stretch of winding road. It was slow going in the strong winds blowing down from the mountains. Dusk forced us to stop at a roadside site close to Senj, 48km short of Krk.

In the morning, two hours saw us over the high bridge to Krk and driving along the wide, straight roads to the far end of the island and the five-star Camping Krk, formerly known as naturist Camping Politin. It is part of the same group as the site we used in Dubrovnik.

The new resort caters for all needs, with a restaurant, large heated swimming pool, beauty spa, beach and other amenities. It's another resort where friends and family can fly into

"Stopping off at Gospoja Vrbnik wine shop and bar we enjoyed Pršut, goats cheese and local wine"

the island on Ryanair and rent one of the holiday homes on site. All that is missing is a sandy beach but attempts to bring in sand have not worked. The continental shelf pitches too steeply – one of the reasons why the Venetian vessels hugged the Croatian coastline rather than using the shallow water off Italy.

We visited Vrbnik, a lovely old town sited on a hill and with dramatic views of the coast we had just driven along. Stopping off at Gospoja Vrbnik wine shop and bar we enjoyed Pršut – dry-cured ham – goats cheese and good local wines.

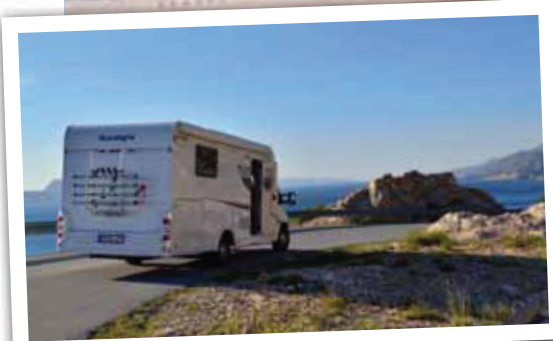
From the site it is a 35-minute walk to the town along a rather rough coastal path or a 15-minute bike ride.

The Adriatic highway is a good road to drive, though very twisty and narrow at times. It's a route with dramatic karst scenery one side and clear blue water the other and with views of the islands in the distance. It is just two lanes for almost its entire length and takes a lot longer than the tolled motorway, particularly in the summer when it gets very busy.

At Rijeka, a seemingly unsupported spiral road to the A7 completed our trip around the coast of Croatia. It had given us an insight to this incredible country, and endorsed our route as 'perfect', as was our Sunlight T69 luxury home on wheels.



Main Zadar's architecture has many influences Left Taking the narrow coast road



A demonstration of folk dancing in the traditional costume of the island of Krk



1 Camping Solitudo
Ulica Vatroslava Lisinskog 17, 20000, Dubrovnik, Croatia
Tel 00 385 (0)20 448 249
Web www.camping-adriatic.com/solitudo-camp-dubrovnik
Email camping-dubrovnik@valamar.com
Open 1 April- 31 October
Dubrovnik's only campsite is a spacious and leafy three-star affair with 393 pitches, a well-stocked shop and a restaurant and beach close by. Wi-Fi is available throughout the site and you can get tickets for the bus into Dubrovnik from reception. Charges €32.90-€48.10 per unit with electric hook-up



2 Camping Rožac
Šetalište Stjepana Radića 56 21223 Okrug Gornji
Tel 00 385 (0)21 806 105
Web www.camp-rozac.hr
Email info@camp-rozac.hr
Open 30 March- 2 November
This shady site is located on the island of Ciovo. It has a man-made beach, a bread shop and a pizza restaurant. There are also mobile homes for hire. The beautiful old town of Trogir, with its UNESCO World Heritage site cathedral, is 20 minutes by foot, or 10 minutes by bus. From here you can get onward bus and ferry connections to Split. Charges €32-€40 per unit with electric hook-up



3 Camp Marina
Skočiči 6, 22221 Lozovac
Tel 00 385 (0)22 778 503/00 385 (0)91 368 3323
Web www.camp-marina.hr
Email predrag.skocic@gmail.com
Open 1 April- 1 November
The site lies at the entrance to the Krka National Park and is basic but nice. Half the site's 30 pitches have tree cover and subsequently good shade. Facilities include showers, toilets and a restaurant. The site runs excursions to Krka National Park and the Dalmatian cities of Zadar, Sibenik, Trogir and Split. Charges €14-€17 per unit with electric hook-up



4 Camping Krk
Skocici 21, HR 22221 Lozovac
Tel 00 385 (0)22 778 495/ 00 385 (0)98 848 012
Email goran.skocic@si.t-com.hr
Open 1 March- 31 October
Croatia's newest family-friendly eco campsite is the result of extensive upgrades and exciting additions to the former naturist Camping Politin. This four-star site is located on the island of Krk and offers 347 pitches, a 170m beach, heated pool with panoramic view and a wellness centre. It's a 40-minute walk from the historic centre of Krk. Charges €13.40-€16 per unit with electric hook-up

Food and drink

We travelled through Dalmatia and Istria, both regions serving fish and seafood from the Adriatic, lakes and rivers. The most popular dishes were risottos, pizza and pasta, with mussels, clams, oysters, octopus, squid and shrimp, plus various meat dishes.

In Dalmatia and Istria cooking in a 'peka', a lidded pot buried in hot ashes, is very popular but must be ordered in advance as the cooking takes more than two hours. Cured hams and tasty cheeses are complemented by wine from Krka – Zlahtina (white) from Vrbnik – Grk from Korcula (white), Plavac (red) from Brač, the highly rated Dingac from Pelješac (Ston peninsula) and Malmsey from Dubrovnik.

Slivovitz or plum brandy is very popular all over the region and in Zadar we tasted 'Maraskino' a liqueur flavoured with maraschino cherries.



Way to go

From Rijeka we took the Jadrolinija overnight ferry (cabins available) to Dubrovnik to save driving the same route twice. Returning from Dubrovnik we took the E65 Adriatic coastal road 'Jadranska magistrala' which runs via Split, Šibenik, Zadar, Krk and Rijeka.

For Croatia and Slovenia you will need Eastern European maps on your sat nav. Also take a large map of the area as sat-nav tends to take the quickest route, which is sometimes unsuitable for motorhomes. We took Marco Polo Croatia Central and Coast and Slovenia together with a magnifying glass to find our route.

Take the original vehicle registration document. Slovenia and Croatia both require this and Croatia will decline entry at the border without it.

Ferries

Jadrolinija, Croatia's national shipping line, serves international routes from Dubrovnik to Bari (Italy) and from Split to Ancona (Italy), plus coastal Croatia and the islands. The ships can take motorhomes, with cabins for the passengers. Our route from Rijeka to Dubrovnik took us through the Dalmatian Islands, which offered several stops to disembark with a 'van'.
Web www.jadrolinija.hr
Tel +385 51 666 111

The motorhome

Dethleffs Sunlight T69
This has an island bed layout with an extra double bed, lowered from the ceiling above the dining area, and a large through garage for storage. Engine: Fiat 2.3 JTD, 115bhp. Total weight: 3495kg. Price £42,890
Web www.sunlight-caravanning.co.uk
Hired from McRent; web www.mcrent.co.uk

Find out more

- Dubrovnik and Neretva County www.visitdubrovnik.hr and www.dubrovnikcard.com
- Ston Tourist Board www.ston.hr
- Split Tourist Board www.visitsplit.com
- Bol Tourist Board www.bol.hr
- Supetar Tourist Board www.supetar.hr
- Kvarner Tourist Board www.kvarner.hr
- Zadar Tourist Board www.tzzadar.hr
- Sibenik Tourist Board www.sibenik-tourism.hr

For information on what's happening in Croatia, please go to www.croatia.hr

The costs

Fuel cost	€146 (£121.05)
(678 miles, economy 28mpg)	
Site fees	€420 (£348.25)
Food and drink	€420 (£348.25)
Attractions	€180 (£149.26)
Ferry costs	€333 (£276.13)
TOTAL TOUR COST	€1499 (£1242.94)