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36 Hours in Dubrovnik, Croatia



Clockwise from top left: entrance to Modni Kantun, War Photo Limited, Nishta and views of the Old Town. Center: D'Vino. More Photos »

By CHARLY WILDER
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FIRST, the bad news: Dubrovnik is no longer anyone's best-kept secret. Some 17 years after the end of Croatia's war of independence, the city's medieval walled Old Town is gridlocked with tourists during the summer. Yet go in the fall and you'll quickly see what the fuss is about. Jutting out on a peninsular chunk of the Dalmatian coastline, the former Republic of Ragusa is a Venetian Gothic marvel. Columned porticoes and loggias rim marble-paved Renaissance squares buffed to a sheen by centuries of foot traffic. Yes, many businesses unabashedly cater to cruise ship passengers and other mainstream tourists, but there are plenty of creative local standouts.

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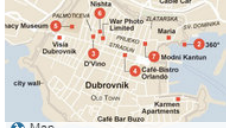
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Friday

3 p.m.
1. VIEW FROM ABOVE

A great place to get the lay of the land is the summit of Mount Srđ, which looks out across the Old Town to the sea and back over the mountains of Herzegovina, a situation that made it a strategic vantage point in defending against the Turks, the Venetians and countless other covetous foreign powers. Zip to the top in the bright orange Cable Car (Petra Kresimira 4; 385-20-325-393; dubrovnikcablecar.com), which reopened in the summer of 2010 after being destroyed when the summit was the site of heavy fighting against invading Serbs and Montenegrins in 1991. This history is explored through artifacts and documentary material at the Homeland War Museum, set within a Napoleonic fort at the base of the cable car station. (A round-trip ticket costs 87 kuna, or \$16 at 5.46 kuna to the dollar.)

8 p.m.
2. DALMATIAN DINING

Since Dubrovnik's arguably most esteemed restaurant, Gils, reopened in May under the name 360° (Svetog Dominika; 385-20-322-222; 360dubrovnik.com), the food has gone from French fusion to, in the words of the new chef, Jeffrey Vella, "Croatian with a pinch of salt." This translates to an unusual mix of regional and imaginative, as in dishes like the Garden: raw Adriatic langoustine, Istrian summer truffle, buttery lemon grass biscuit and a grassy-tasting South American herb known as a Szechuan button, or "electric flower," which contains an analgesic that causes the mouth to tingle and alters taste receptors. Set into the old city walls in a medieval arsenal, the appropriately renamed 360° offers a sweeping view of the Old Town. Dinner for two with appetizers and wine: around 1,700 kuna.

10 p.m.
3. THE TRUE VINE

A site of viticulture at least as far back as the fifth century B.C., Croatia is edging onto the international wine scene. Get a crash course at D'Vino (Palmoticeva 4A; 385-20-321-130; dvino.net), a genial wine bar tucked into a tiny alleyway and popular with Anglophones. The easygoing staff will coach you through the Dalmatian reds, from a nice light Matusko Postup to a more robust Dingac (both 56 kuna per glass), or set you up with a tasting flight starting at 50 kuna.

Saturday

10 a.m.
4. PEOPLE WATCHING

Café-Bistro Orlando opened in April 2011 along the Old Town's wide, limestone, pedestrian-only main drag of Stradun, and it's an ideal spot for people-watching over a morning espresso (esculaprestaurants.com). Italian models teeter past German families, EasyJetters in swimsuits and muscle-ripped Balkan men while local businessmen make deals over fig-filled croissants. Excellent coffee notwithstanding, the fare is a bit of a letdown. Still, you'll want to come back for the view.

11 a.m.
5. HISTORY, THREE WAYS

Nearly all of Dubrovnik's most notable historical sites are clustered within the old city walls. Set within the cloisters of the 14th-century Franciscan monastery, the Old Pharmacy Museum (Stradun 2; 385-20-321-410) houses ceramic medicine jars, ancient doctors' logs, a collection of Byzantine icons and a still-functioning drugstore that bills itself as the third oldest operating pharmacy in the world. For a dose of harder medicine, the city's fraught recent history is on display at War Photo Limited (Antuninska 6; 385-20-322-166; warphoto.td.com), a gallery that is curated by the New Zealand-bred photojournalist Wade Goddard, who covered the Yugoslav Wars in the early 1990s. Probably the oddest historical approach can be found at Visia Dubrovnik (5D Theatrum St. Claire's Convent; Poljana Paska Milicevica 4; 385-20-324-714; visiadubrovnik.com). Opened in 2010, the 35-minute "3-D Time Travel" attraction incorporates an 18th-century holographic time-traveling scientist projected onto an actual waterfall. There are lasers, music and bloody 3-D battle scenes with wind machines and rumble seats.



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2 p.m.

6. A MEATLESS MEAL

Long filled with meat-and-seafood-focused restaurants, Dubrovnik saw its first vegetarian restaurant open in 2006. At Nishta (Prijeko 30; 385-20-322-088; nishtarestaurant.com), a small, New Agey purple-hued restaurant on tourist-clogged Prijeko street, flavor dominates in dishes like barley risotto with hijiki and arame seaweed and mascarpone (68 kuna) or grilled vegetables, buckwheat, quinoa and dried fig with mint yogurt (65 kuna).

4 p.m.

7. FIGS TO FENDI

Dubrovnik isn't exactly a shopper's paradise. But there are a few recent additions worth checking out. Opened in 2006, Modni Kantun (Zlatarska 3; 385-20-321-241) is a hole-in-the-wall boutique selling pieces by local designers, from grunge-camp chain necklaces emblazoned with photos of Karl Lagerfeld to Ivana Bacura's chic custom-wrought silver jewelry. On the upscale end of the spectrum, the couture boutique Maria (Svetog Dominika; 385-20-321-330; maria-dubrovnik.com) sells clothing and accessories by headliners like Alexander Wang, Givenchy and Lanvin. Or keep it classic and head to the old market at the Baroque Gunduliceva Poljana square, where you can buy everything from homemade wine to bronze door knockers.

8 p.m.

8. THE SUNDOWNER

In a city seemingly built to catch the nuance of an Adriatic sunset, finding the right early evening perch is serious business. Take a cab to the Sunset Lounge (Hotel Dubrovnik Palace; Masarykov put 20; 385-20-430-000; dubrovnikpalace.hr), an elegant hotel bar where panoramic windows show the light receding over the Elaphite Islands. Or dress down and grab a bottle of local Ozujsko (37 kuna) at Café Bar Buza, also known as Buza I (Crijeviceva ulica 9; cafebuza.com). The name translates to "hole" in the local dialect, and it's set on a cliff at the southern edge of the Old Town reachable through an actual hole in the city's southern rampart.

11 p.m.

9. LOCAL SOUNDS

For a taste of Dubrovnik's indigenous night life, descend precipitous stone steps into a sunken former quarantine barracks along the coast just east of the main port. There you'll find Lazareti (Frana Supila 8; 385-20-324-633; lazareti.com), an independent culture center devoted to theater, music, arts workshops and exhibitions. The venue's concert and club program is the most interesting in town, Ping-Ponging from jazz to black metal to minimal techno and drawing Dubrovnik's nocturnal youth, who bus in from outer Dubrovnik to drink plum brandy, or rakia in Lazareti's timeworn atrium.

Sunday

11 a.m.

10. MODERN ART

Works by virtually every significant modern and contemporary Croatian artist have taken up residence in an elegant mansion that was once the home of the local shipping magnate Bozo Banac. Established in 1945, the Museum of Modern Art Dubrovnik (Frana Supila 23; 385-20-426-590; ugdubrovnik.hr) includes nearly 2,500 works, mostly tied to the region, from the transfixing oil portraits by Vlaho Bukovac, a sort of Croatian Manet, to an installation involving a faucet and a plastic elephant nose by the contemporary Split-bred artist Zlatan Dumanic (entry, 30 kuna).

2 p.m.

11. LUNCH AND A SWIM

One of the Dalmatian coast's greatest assets may be the proliferation of seaside konobas, or taverns (literally, "cellars"), where diners swim and sun while their food cooks. A 12-minute cab ride from the Old Town, the lovely Gverovic-Orsan (Stilkovika 43; Zaton Mali, 385-20-891-267; gverovic-orsan.hr) is housed in an old boathouse cut into the hillside on a quiet bay in the fishing village of Zaton Mali. Start with a glass of crisp white Posip (35 kuna) and octopus salad drizzled in vinegar and house-made olive oil (95 kuna). While you're waiting for your main course — like black risotto "Orsan," a rich stew of mussels, clams, langoustine and cuttlefish (140 kuna) — forget what your mother told you about swimming after eating and dive right in.

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IF YOU GO

Budget travelers will find no shortage of guesthouse options or apartment rentals near the Old Town or in the nearby Lapad district.

Just within the old city walls, **Karmen Apartments** (Bandureva 1; 385-20-323-433; karmendu.com) offers four artfully outfitted units, starting at 70 euros, or about \$90 at \$1.28 to the euro, a night for a studio. (Rates are often given in euros.)

Adriatic Luxury Hotels fueled Dubrovnik's five-star boom when the company opened the modern-rustic 91-room **Hotel Bellevue** (Pera Cingrije 7; 385-20-330-000; alh.hr) on a sea-facing cliff in 2006. Featuring two restaurants, a spa, a fitness center and a private stretch of beach, Bellevue starts at about 280 euros for a double with a sea view.

Another Adriatic Luxury property, the **Hotel Excelsior** (Frana Supila 12; 385-20-430-830; alh.hr), housed in a former royal villa, had a much-anticipated reopening in 2008 after a \$28 million renovation. Doubles from about 198 euros.

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