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The central square of Diocletian's Palace in Split is home to his one-time tomb, now a cathedral, reportedly the world's smallest.

SHARON MATTHEWS-STEVENS

Mark Stevens

Special to the Star

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SPLIT, CROATIA—I'm trudging up a cobblestone alleyway that climbs a hill pin-cushioned by pines, past a steep slope splattered with flowering shrubs.

Their rainbow-coloured blossoms are a dramatic contrast to the blue-green tint of nearby islands that float on the Adriatic like sun-seekers on air mattresses. Orange roofs in the city 200 metres down are foreground for the lavender hues of the surrounding Dinaric Alps.

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Split is Croatia's second-biggest city, but here on Marjan Hill, it's just my wife and I, and two joggers. It's a strange feeling, being so close to so many people and yet so alone.

Or not. We've discovered a city with a split personality.

We stop for water at St. Nicolaus, a tiny stone 13th-century church. Hermits and religious fanatics once inhabited the caves on the far side of this hill.

Next door is a Jewish cemetery with 700 graves, one of the largest and oldest in Europe. There are graves here from the 1500s.

Split boasts one of the world's oldest houses of Christian worship, as well as the world's second-oldest continually functioning Sephardic synagogue.

I determine to gather more evidence for my provisional diagnosis.

I explore the rabbit's warren of buildings comprising the old city. Walls enclose much of it, the former palace of a third-century Roman emperor named Diocletian. Many of the original structures remain intact.

But this is no desiccated museum. During the earliest years of the Middle Ages following Diocletian's death, locals cannibalized parts of the palace, building within its walls a hodgepodge of houses and villas and apartments, of medieval, Baroque and Romanesque architecture. A thousand people still live inside the walls.

Peristyle Square boasts gorgeous Roman columns fronting an octagonal building that was Diocletian's tomb. But the café across this square is called Luxor (its architecture is Baroque) and when you look over at the huge mausoleum, you notice an unexpected anomaly: a Sphinx.

We walk through a passageway said to be the narrowest street in Europe, called Let Me Pass. Another sphinx guards the entrance to the Temple of Jupiter. But in another display of Splicani ambivalence, this ancient structure is now the venue for baptisms of Catholic faithful.

Diocletian's former tomb houses St. Domius — the world's smallest cathedral.

That couldn't have pleased his ghost. Considered a strong administrator, and a local boy made really good, he was nonetheless no fan of Christians.

We venture to nearby Solin and discover excellent Roman ruins. City walls and gates are still extant here, the remains of a huge amphitheatre. But there are also the ruins of two churches and one of the oldest Christian cemeteries in Europe. Its first tenant was a bishop who refused to repudiate his faith under Diocletian's orders. Diocletian had him executed in the amphitheatre.

Yet more evidence to support my diagnosis.

I stroll through the Silver Gate, a remarkably intact Roman artifact. I go past the Church of St. Catherine of Alexandria just outside the gate. It was built on the foundations of a 6th-century monastery and church in the 17th century. Allied bombing partially destroyed it in 1944.

I encounter a row of vendor's tents.

I turn the corner and come upon widows in black dresses and kerchiefs, their faces as wrinkled as the nearby mountains, standing guard over piles of cherries, mounds of potatoes, beans and green peppers, all heaped on long tables. People stream between the stalls, haggling in loud voices as vendors calculate the cost with worn brass weights.

Next I make my way through the narrow cobblestone alleys toward the fish market. Here, too, commerce thrives.



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I notice, though, that the cafes and bistros I pass are still packed with people, that the cups of espresso have been replaced by cans of Karlovacko beer. I wonder idly if the whole city's on vacation.

Last night my waiter shared some insightful observations about both the city's dense history and its impact on its inhabitants.

"Croatia's unemployment rate is about same as Split's population," he said. "And I think they all live here. The Splicani (residents of Split) just don't like to work."

I looked at the waiter, and then I surveyed this Baroque square dominated by an arched eggplant-painted building, situated at the opening to the harbour next to a promenade called the Riva.

We'd strolled the Riva during our first evening in Split, a broad seaside thoroughfare in the lee of the palace walls. Benches litter the shore, next to mega yachts and tour boats, sheltered by rows of palm trees. More of those ubiquitous bistros here, gelateria every 20 feet. Splicani spill across this walkway, not a care in the world.

I studied the waiter for a moment. I shook my head. These people didn't suffer from a personality disorder — they'd found the meaning of life.

"One more Karlovacko," I said.

Those observations came back to me while I was lounging on a crowded and pebbly, but gorgeous, beach just outside town a couple of days later.

It was Friday at 11 a.m. More pretty bikini-clad girls than a Florida Spring Break strolled the shore; middle-aged men sipped Karlovackos in beach huts. School-aged children splashed in the waves. Who was playing hooky? Who just didn't want a job?

That's when I remembered the waiter's last words: "It's all part of the Split personality."

Personality plus.

Mark Stevens is a freelance writer from Palgrave, Ont. His trip was subsidized by the Croatia National Tourist Office.

JUST THE FACTS

ARRIVING The easiest way from Toronto is probably to book flights through KLM via Amsterdam right to your destination, even though you fly Croatian Airlines for the last two legs via Zagreb. klm.com

SLEEPING Hotel Vestibul Palace is a five-star property located right where the emperor's private chambers used to be. Suites feature modern décor but incorporate cool elements like the original Roman walls of the palace. Rates start at roughly \$170 a night and they book early, but get in touch and they can also help you arrange villa stays. vestibulpalace.com

The perfect antidote if you're prone to claustrophobia is an almost-new Radisson Blu resort. It's all glass and sea-themed furnishings, and boasts its own pool and three restaurants. Suites are gorgeous with great sea views and the hotel owns its own swath of seashore with a beachside bar thrown in for good measure. It's a 10-minute taxi from the Old City. Standard guestroom with breakfast around \$325. radissonblu.com/resort-split

DINING Sperun is a delightful restaurant in the medieval section of the city, boasting a rustic interior, sidewalk tables, traditional Dalmatian dishes and really friendly staff. You can get a three-course meal with the requisite Karlovacko beer for two for about \$50.



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The courtyard café at Hotel Vestibul, inside the palace walls, offers a romantic candle-lit setting for dinner and is Split's answer to haute cuisine. It's not cheap — dinner with wine is more than \$100 — but it's gourmet fare with a great selection of wines.

DOING You can't experience the Split personality until you sample rakija, Croatia's version of grappa. They call the nearby coast the Croatian Riviera. It is unspeakably beautiful between the view of outlying islands, the mountains and the Adriatic itself. Give yourself a couple of days to experience Croatia's sun-seekers' getaway destination.

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