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Croatia interest on the rise

By Felicity Long



Fans of Croatia know that the destination has been teetering on the verge of A-list status for a while. Could 2013 be the year?

Looking at last year's numbers, Croatia ranked as the fastest-growing Mediterranean tourism destination, according to the Croatian National Tourist Office in New York. The country saw 12.3 million visitor arrivals and 70.3 million overnight stays, an increase of 5% and 6.4%, respectively,

over 2011.

"The sharp surge in traveler interest in discovering Croatia ... has been keeping us engaged to full capacity," said Wanda Radetti of Tasteful Croatian Journeys in New York, noting that bookings to Croatia spiked during the months of January and February by a whopping 80% compared with the same time last year.

One interesting twist Radetti has noticed is that clients who typically don't use retailers are reaching out to her travel agency after trying to research the destination online. "The online resources are plentiful but still a bit confusing ... and they are finding Croatia a challenge to navigate on their own," she said.

Another trend is an increased interest in villa and house stays, Radetti said, usually for multigenerational family travel, including parents traveling with their adult children.

Travel suppliers also clearly have the country on their radar, as evidenced by a surge in product.

Select Italy, for example, launched SelectCroatia.com at New York Times Travel Show last month, calling it one of the hottest vacation spots in Europe.

"We have been working on the destination for a few years after noting the proximity and the analogies between the two Mediterranean countries, and we finally decided to develop a branch dedicated to Croatia," said Maja Gudelj, Select Croatia travel expert.



Felicity Long

The company is offering a range of tours themed around everything from food and wine to culture and history.

Rail Europe is including Croatia in a recently unveiled Eurail Global Pass Free Days Promotion, good for an additional two, three or five days of rail travel for free with the purchase of the 15-day, 21-day or one-month passes.

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Because Croatia comprises more than 1,000 islands, it makes sense that the destination would appeal to cruise lines. This year, for example, Seabourn Spirit is offering five departures of a 21-day Venice & Adriatic Charms voyage that includes a Marina Day, where passengers can participate in water sports at Triluke Bay in Croatia. The itinerary, which begins and ends in Venice, is priced from \$7,499 per person. Departures are set for June through September.

Oceania Cruises' 2014 summer collection includes the return of the Insignia to the fleet in May 2014 after a two-year charter, with cruises throughout the Mediterranean and Dalmatian Coast, including an Adriatic Medley sailing, with calls in Croatia as well as Albania, Montenegro and Slovenia.

"We have noted the increased in interest in cruising in the Adriatic, but most of our clients come to us for private motor yacht and sail yacht charters," said Radetti, adding that requests for ship-to-shore services have dramatically increased.

Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, is making news in the art world with the upcoming exhibition of works by Pablo Picasso this spring, the largest such exhibit in this part of Europe. "Picasso: Masterpieces of the Musee National Picasso in Paris" will open March 23 and run until July 7 in the Klovicevi Dvori Gallery and will include 56 paintings and sculptures and 40 photographs.

"Other exhibitions [in Eastern Europe] did not cover his entire opus, from his earliest works when he was just 14 to those created just prior to his death," said Marina Viculin, the gallery director. "This will be the last time these works ever leave the Paris museum, which gives the exhibition a touch of exclusivity, and it will be difficult to surpass it with any other exhibition."

Finally, the Travel Channel has taken notice of Croatia with a one-hour special, called "Trip of a Lifetime," that features a vacation that combines Croatia and Italy, focusing on the country's coastline, luxury hotels and food and wine.

For more information on Croatia, go to www.croatia.hr.

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