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Adriatic journey

Island sail opens up area's charm

By Verena Dobnik

ABOARD THE DODI -- The Dodi. That was the whimsical name of the sailboat we boarded. We were four friends exploring the islands off the coast of a country once called Yugoslavia. They seem paradise, these hundreds of islands in the crystal-clear waters of the Adriatic Sea, perfumed in lavender, sage, rosemary and thyme, with sea gulls crying in the breeze. You'd never guess these islands off the coast of Dalmatia -- now in Croatia -- had survived thousands of years of bloody battles, the latest the Balkan war of the 1990s. At the crossroads of East and West, once marked by the Iron Curtain, this sea has borne ancient Greeks and Romans - - and U.S. aircraft carriers on bombing missions to Bosnia. The four of us, all with roots in the former Yugoslavia, spent 10 days far from urban stress, reclaiming the sights, sounds and smells of our childhoods.

Our Italian-based shipmate, Patrizia Stekar, leased the sailboat, a 43-foot French-made Dufour Gib'Sea. She packed supplies for the boat that could have jump-started a Manhattan gourmet food shop -- from olive spread, green peppercorns and puff-pastry dough to a dozen kinds of pasta and espresso coffee, and on and on.

A friend gave us a crate of small tomatoes still on the vine, which would go into many on-board pasta sauces.

We sailed from the island of Pag after buying rounds of sheep cheese made by a fisherman's wife. (Pag is now part of Croatia, a Yugoslav republic that broke away in 1991, followed by war against the Serbs.)

At sea, Patrizia would call out in Croatian to the fishermen we spotted: "Ima ribe?" (pronounced EE-mah REE-beh), meaning, "Do you have fish?"

Their faces weathered by the sun, these old men of the sea -- and a few young ones -- waited hours to trap even a modest catch. It's a challenge to make a living in waters overfished in recent years by industrial vessels equipped with freezers.

These old-fashioned Dalmatians inherited their traditional ways from centuries of rule by the Venetian Republic that governed the Adriatic. Modern pressures didn't dampen their uproarious laughter as they greeted us on the water, flirting from afar.

We watched as they pulled up the catch, then invited us onto their larger "cargo" boat for our own catch: plunging our hands into barrels of flopping fish. Then we took turns sitting at the back of our boat, feet in the water and armed with knives to clean the fish, dumping the remains into the sea.

Twice a day, we had divine dishes, from risotto made of baby cuttlefish and calamari to raw shrimp sprinkled with olive oil, plus a bit of orange juice and rind.

Cooking was a challenge -- on semi-rough seas while the stove was swinging on a lever, against the movement of the boat, with a pot full of stuffed peppers. But not a drop came out!

Improvising also meant fishing in the wild. One morning, as we jumped into the water for a swim, we noticed lots of round black spots on the seabed: urchins.

The daily decision was: Should we eat on the deck or down in the cabin?

From the two-burner cabin stove, we'd bring the food up the wooden steps to the rear deck, where a white table emerged when flaps were raised on the central locker. Patrizia insisted that meals be served properly -- on a flowery tablecloth. We often ate watching the setting sun spilling like liquid gold into the sea as the moon rose. Some meals were capped with wild sage tea, a few drops of lemon added.

At night, we dropped anchor in some small bay sheltered from the winds and the open sea. Or we docked in fishing villages, and went out "on the town."

That meant joining the local "passeggiata" (pronounced pahsseh-JAH-tah), as the locals still call it in Italian, meaning the evening walk by the sea. For this, Dalmatians dress to the hilt; this is their courtship ritual, a time for men to observe their possible future brides and vice versa.

On the island of Vis, we hit the shops for basics like fresh fruit and vegetables, and special fare like aromatic lavender oil. There was an exotic touch: communicating with the natives of Vis, whose language is Croatian infused with the Italian dialect of Venice that had ruled the coast. The Dalmatian Islands are bathed in sheep's milk, honey, almonds, grapes, wheat, olives, dates and pomegranates, and the land is fragrant with herbs. Over our cabin stove, we hung a garland of figs and laurel, and we planted basil in a small pot as soon as we sailed. In the cupboard were jars of Dalmatian capers.

By contrast to the simple but refined food, our accommodations were rough: Each morning, I watched that my head didn't hit the wooden ceiling as I sat up in the small cabin, which had about 9 square feet of walking space between the door and the bed.

It was a room with a view. Each morning from my pillow, if I rolled over and faced the porthole, I could see the vibrant Adriatic waves at eye level.

For three days, we were "stuck" on Vis, because of strong, dangerous winds out at sea.

We explored an island of stark beauty that was off-limits to tourists until a half-dozen years ago.

Vis was for decades a strategic defense point, a Yugoslav military base whose nature remains almost untouched. The island also supplied fishermen immigrants to San Pedro and to Alaska.

We were led by a local guide, Zoran Franicevic, a journalist who shows visitors the island as part of his philosophy of tourism: Don't spoil what God has created.

His agency, Alternatura, also offers adventures on Vis: parasailing, rock climbing, horseback riding and exploration of everything from sea caves to the ruins of ancient Roman thermal baths and a Greek amphitheater. Zoran knew every stone in a historic fortress once used as a trading post for Chinese rum and Cuban cigars -- and later by the British to fight Napoleon, who conquered Vis in 1805.