

Tidal wave of tourism threatens the island jewel of the Adriatic

Fishermen in one of Europe's last paradises have seen off the threat of a tuna farm. But can they keep holidaymakers at bay?

Ian Traynor in Komiza

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Every June since 1952 Ivo Kuljis has loaded his 80 lobster pots on to his modest fishing boat and pointed its prow due south to Palagruza, a rocky islet in the the Adriatic halfway between Croatia and Italy.

To the 1,600 people of the ancient fishing village of Komiza on the island of Vis Palagruza is a sacred place, the source of their lifeblood. The waters around it teemed with sardine and lobster, making it the most fertile fishing ground in the Adriatic.

In 1971 Mr Kuljis and his mate netted six tonnes of lobster in one season, a record which still stands. The phenomenal catch made him a wealthy local legend: the Lobster King of the Adriatic.

These days the grizzled 68-year-old and Komiza's other 200 fishermen are lucky to catch a tenth of the 1971 record. "It's miserable now," he says. "Too many boats, not enough fish. You do well to get five kilos a day."

Tourism is slowly becoming the main earner in this gorgeous village sitting in a natural amphitheatre around a bay at the base of rugged pine-clad hills.

But it is posing a grave threat not just to Mr Kuljis but to an island officially regarded as a rare, unspoiled jewel. The WWF, the conservation organisation, has declared Vis, the most outlying inhabited island in the archipelago south of Split, and its neighbours Mljet and Lastovo, among the last patches of paradise in the Mediterranean region.

"Vis is a jewel that has to be preserved. It's a miracle," says Paolo Guglielmi, head of the marine unit at the WWF Mediterranean office in Rome. "You just need to look at the Italian side of the Adriatic. The entire length from Venice to Puglia is basically destroyed."

Vis has orchards of 1,000-year-old carob trees, rare orchids, plants and herbs that are dying out elsewhere in the Mediterranean, the most densely developed and visited tourist region in the world.

Under the pristine turquoise waters off the island are perfectly conserved seagrass meadows. Dolphins, rare turtles and other endangered species are a not unusual sight.

"It's a biodiversity hotspot," says Marina Radic of the environmental lobby group Sunce in Split, the Dalmatian capital on the mainland and the gateway to the Adriatic islands.

Mass tourism in the Mediterranean is a colossal industry generating more than \$150bn a year, and more than half its 28,600 miles of coastline is already concreted over.

Experts reckon that within 20 years the Adriatic islands could be among the region's biggest tourist attractions.

That spells trouble in Vis.

"We'll be like the partisans, we'll fight tourism and the developers," says Zoran Franicevic, a former journalist who came to Komiza 15 years ago and now helps to run a small "**Alternatura**" tourist agency offering scuba diving, paragliding, boat excursions, and island hikes with food served in village cottages.

He is not the only fighter, and the people of Komiza have just scored a remarkable and unusual victory. A few months ago, when local promoters backed by outside money unveiled plans to start a tuna farm in the bay to serve the Japanese sushi market, the villagers discovered the power of the ballot box.

They organised a referendum on the plan: 86 said yes to putting big tuna cages close to the shore in the shallow waters of the bay, 893 said no. "We all voted against. The bay would stink like a rubbish dump," says the lobster king.

"We don't need these megalomaniac plans," says Pierino Ivcevic, the fish trader who led the no campaign. "The vote was the voice of reason. We don't want fish farms, big hotels, or lots of new buildings. We need tourism, but not that kind of mass tourism. Now we've formed a League of Komiza and we'll fight on other issues."

Democracy is not a common practice on Vis, which owes its paradisaical status to paradox, paranoia and dictatorship. Its seaward position gives it great strategic value: a kind of Gibraltar at the mouth of the upper Adriatic.

That was recognised by the British, first when the navy occupied the island during the Napoleonic wars, and again during the second world war when Fitzroy Maclean, Churchill's envoy to the communist guerrillas, made it Yugoslavia's last bastion against the German occupiers.

Josip Broz Tito, the guerrilla leader who became the Yugoslav dictator, kept Vis a closed military island for 45 years.

No foreigners could visit. The military outnumbered the inhabitants. Their caves, concrete bunkers and derelict barracks still pepper the island. The

locals had no contact with the outside world while the rest of Dalmatia developed a modern tourism industry.

During those years, says Darko Zanki, a Komiza fisherman, the talk in the harbour every morning was of which family had managed to sail away to Italy overnight. So calling it a Mediterranean heaven leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of the locals.

"I lived inside that prison. It's paradise now if you're wealthy, come in summer, eat lobster, drink the fine wines, and leave.

"But where's the paradise for the people during the winter?" says Josko Bozanic, a Komiza man who is the dean of humanities at Split University.

For 35 years Mr Bozanic has been researching the local dialect, publishing anthologies of folk tales, and rescuing the collective memory. He admits that Tito's paranoia in keeping the island sealed for so long gives it a unique opportunity.

"Vis is isolated, but profoundly connected to the Mediterranean universe through culture and history. And now we have a chance.

"We're starting from zero because we didn't have a chance to develop tourism. Now we can do it differently, something new and modern."