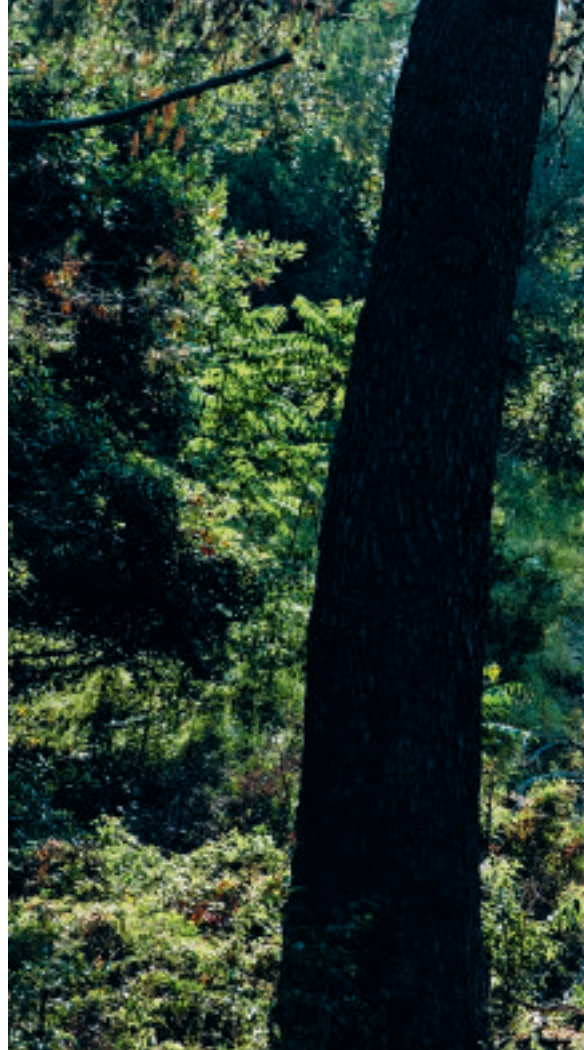


Wild blue yonder



Unspoilt, authentic and full of good-looking birds (real ones), the islands of the North Adriatic, near Pula, are the perfect alternative to the usual Croatian party circuit. Local writer **Isabel Putinja** has the lowdown on Lošinj, Rab, Cres and Brijuni

Photography by **Mónica R Goya**



Clockwise from above
Lunch always tastes
better by the sea; pine
trees offer shade along
250km of trails; walking
the promenade
between the towns of
Mali and Veli Lošinj; the
island has bays for
days; Mali Lošinj is a
pretty stop-off; the
harbour's a dream in
pastel; Corsican salad
at the Punta restaurant



Take a hike on Lošinj

What's the vibe?

Lošinj is the place to be healthy – it's known as the 'island of vitality' – but don't let that put you off. A few of the refurbished resorts on Čikat cove have styled themselves as luxury wellness destinations, but the real treat here is ambling through the island's astonishingly beautiful, mountainous terrain, crisscrossed by more than 250km of pine-lined trails for walkers and cyclists. Feel free to take it easy.

What should I do?

Check out the twin harbour towns of Mali Lošinj and Veli Lošinj. Though *mali* means little and *veli* big, Mali Lošinj is the larger of the twins, set along a hairpin-shaped harbour lined with brightly painted villas. Here, The Apoxyomenos Museum tells the story of the discovery, recovery and restoration of a Greek statue of an athlete that spent 2,000 years on the ocean floor just off Lošinj. You get to meet Apoxy himself at the end, but there are no selfies allowed.

Who should I meet?

Click with the 180-strong bottlenosed community based around Lošinj's archipelago on one of the daily three-hour-long dolphin-spotting tours.

Need to know...

The balconies overlooking Mali Lošinj's harbour are transformed into miniature stages for classical concerts during the Lošinj Balconies Festival, taking place this year at 8pm on 24 and 25 August.

How do I get there?

Drive across the short bridge from Cres island. Or, more romantically, glide into Mali Lošinj harbour on the seasonal passenger ferry from Pula (running June to December), the direct car ferry from Zadar or the passenger service from Rijeka on the mainland.



Get back to nature on Rab

What's the vibe?

Rab's beaches are covered in glorious golden sand, rather than the usual Croatian pebbles. It still has a refreshingly low-key, chilled feel, with family campsites outnumbering upmarket hotels.

What should I do?

Squeezed onto a narrow peninsula and discoverable only on foot, Rab town is an absolute stunner. Use the spires of the four medieval churches to plot your route through the narrow streets, then climb the 26m-high bell tower of St Mary's to be rewarded with a heart-stopping 360-degree view over terracotta rooftops, with the sea beyond painted in two tones of brilliant turquoise. Serious sunbathers head to the northerly Lopar peninsula for the best beaches, especially the crescent-shaped Paradise Beach. The clue's in the name: Paradise offers fine sand and is wading distance away from a tiny island, perfect for when you want heaven to yourself.

Who should I meet?

Renting a room in a local home has been the best way to enjoy Rab since long before Airbnb arrived. Sanja, the host at Apartments Sanja, will give you a taste of Croatian life and a big slug of *rakija* – lethally strong brandy. A few glasses in and she'll even share her recipe for the island's traditional *rapška torta* cake (almond cake baked in a spiral shape).

Need to know...

Anyone nakedly ambitious enough to investigate will find plenty of quiet beaches on the north-western edge of the Lopar peninsula, where the shrubbery's thick enough to shield you from view. *Ciganka* (gypsy) and Sahara beach in particular are 'clothing optional'.

How do I get there?

Sailing into Rab town is the most spectacular introduction to the island. A car ferry runs from Merag on Cres to Valbiska on Krk island, from where you can take a ferry to Lopar on Rab. Also, passenger ferries make quick trips to Rab from Novalja and Lun on nearby Pag island (accessible from Zadar).



From the top Rab town has four medieval churches; if things get hot, just take a (skinny) dip; go for cocktails and music at Rab's Vanova Vila Beach Bar

Get wild and woolly on Cres

What's the vibe?

No luxury resorts. No tourist traps. No souvenir shops. Instead, Cres has... sheep. Happy ones, that gallivant across the 66km-long island's rugged terrain. Think weather-beaten mountains, winding roads through forests of pine and ancient oak, and rocky footpaths zigzagging between dry stone walls.

What should I do?

Cres is a popular summer sailing destination, with most boats dropping anchor in Cres town, a busy port dotted with pastel-coloured houses. The unhurried fishing village of Valun has simpler charms. From here you can kayak across crystal-clear waters to hidden coves and beaches, or hike up to the ghostly quiet cliffside village of Lubenice and enjoy its panoramic views of the Istrian peninsula.

Who should I meet?

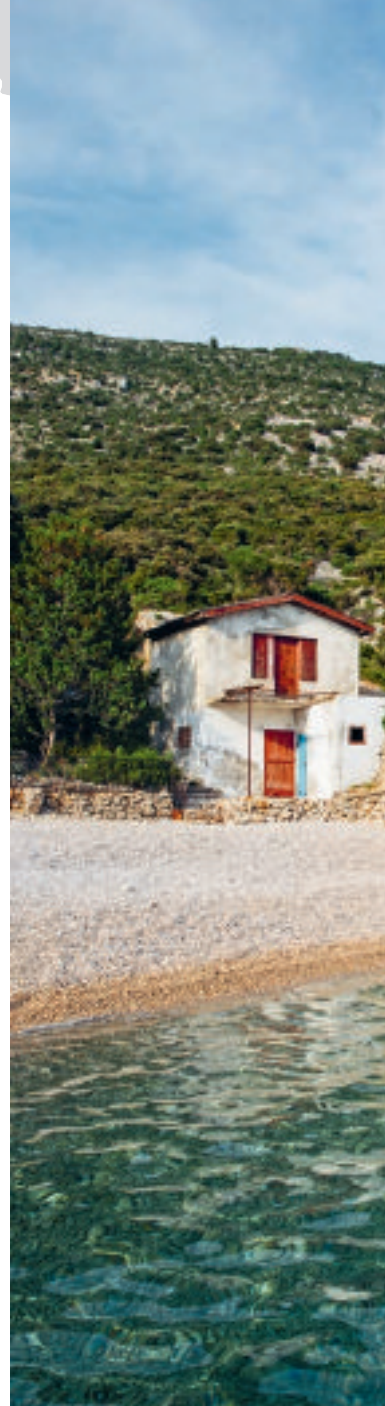
Artist Tea de Both offers a warm welcome to visitors at her quirky little sheep museum in Lubenice. It pays homage to the island's ovine population, with videos on cheese-making and sheep shearing, and toasty-warm wool slippers for sale.

Need to know...

Konoba Adria is a gem of a restaurant in the quaint town of Osor, by the bridge that links Cres to Lošinj. Seafood is caught fresh by the owner every morning and their vegan dishes – gnocchi zucchini and thyme sauce, beetroot and potato ravioli filled with spinach and sage – are some of the best in Croatia.

How do I get there?

Punctual car ferries make the scenic run from Brestova on the Istrian mainland to Porozina on Cres's north-western tip. It's a 20-minute ride.



Clockwise from top left
One of Cres's many happy sheep; Lubenice Beach; sculptures in Osor town include this one by Croatian artist Ivan Meštrović; an afternoon's fishing; Tea de Both with some items from her sheep museum; Cres town; fresh seafood from Konoba Adria; on the ferry to Cres; exploring the sidestreets







Chat up the birds on Brijuni

What's the vibe?

The Brijuni islands were the summer residence of Josip Broz Tito, president of Yugoslavia until 1980 (a local museum exhibits photos of him with visitors, including Sophia Loren and Elizabeth Taylor). Today, the largest of the islands, Veliki Brijun, is one of Croatia's eight national parks. Day-trippers are drawn by the history – the island was also a hotspot for the Romans, who built villas and planted olive trees here – the exotic flora and the wild, rocky beaches.

What should I do?

The animals gifted to Tito during his reign – or rather their descendants – now inhabit a nine-hectare safari park. Zebras from Guinea, sheep from Somalia, llamas from South America and holy cows from India keep the locally bred long-horned Boškarin oxen company. You won't spy any brachiosaurs, but you can follow in their clearly visible footprints in the limestone along the four rocky beaches dubbed the 'Promenade of Dinosaurs'.

Who should I meet?

The island's most famous resident is Koki, Tito's yellow-crested cockatoo. On good days, he'll tell you his name and maybe even ask, "*Kako si? Kako se zoveš?*" (How are you? What is your name?).

Need to know...

The park has an interactive guide you can download onto your mobile using the free wi-fi. Also, Brijuni is car-less, so rent a bicycle or hire a golf cart on arrival.

How do I get there?

It's a 15-minute ferry from Fažana, a tiny port town of colourful façades and sea-facing cafés on Istria's south-west coast, to Veliki Brijun. Show up early to buy your entry (210HRK/€30), which doubles as a ferry ticket, at the park's office next to the pier.



Clockwise from top The zebras in the Brijuni Safari Park were a gift from Guinea to President Tito in the 1960s; the view from the ruins of the Roman *castrum* (military fort) on the island; there have been ostriches on Brijuni since 1910



DESTINATION PULA



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