



The steep, lush coast of
Istria, near Lovran.



CAUGHT in the *Idyll*

With its crystal-clear waters and charming coastal towns, the Istrian coastline is unsurprisingly a magnet for sun-seekers.

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To find the best beach in Istria – Croatia’s westernmost region – you have to ask a local. Everyone has a favourite, and details of “their spot” will be happily shared. But be prepared for an adventure well off the signposted roads and along meandering paths that can only be negotiated on foot: when friends took me to their favourite swimming spot last summer, it entailed descending a rocky embankment and sliding down a slippery rock into the sea. But clear waters and an almost empty beach were my reward.

Wherever you are in Istria, the sea is never far away. After all, this is a peninsula bordered by the Adriatic Sea on all three sides, and the length of its coastline is 539 kilometres, with all islands and islets included. Even from the hilltop village I live in, in central Istria, I can see a sliver of the sea on a clear day if I look towards the east.

Not surprisingly, the region’s history and local culture are intrinsically tied to the sea. Many parts of Istria belonged to the Venetian Republic’s vast sea empire from the 11th to the 18th century that had spread along the Adriatic coast. Its vestiges are seen in the architectural details found in many Istrian towns and villages: the winged lion of St Mark, symbol of the Republic of Venice, smiles down at visitors from arched gateways, and many towns have a *loggia*, a covered gallery, which was once the town’s meeting place and centre of its public and political life. During the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Istria’s maritime importance grew when the southernmost city of Pula became its main port and naval base in 1866.

Today, the sea is what draws visitors to Istria’s many scenic coastal towns and neat expanses of white pebble beaches. Waters here are warm enough for swimming from early June until the end of September and, although you won’t

Crystal clear – the turquoise waters of Rabac, a small fishing port below the medieval town of Labin on the eastern coastline, are ripe for a dip.

find wide expanses of fine sand, the water is remarkably crystal-clear. Public beaches are also impeccably well maintained: in 2015, 38 of Istria’s beaches and three marinas were awarded Blue Flag status, meaning they meet international standards for water quality, cleanliness and safety.

Istria’s best-known seaside destination is picturesque **Rovinj**, a charming circular-shaped town of colourful lime-plastered buildings jutting out into the sea off the west coast. The best way to explore it is to get lost in the small, centuries-old cobblestone lanes of the old town that wind up to the 18th-century **Church of St Euphemia** (the city’s patron saint). Its 60-metre-high bell tower dominates the skyline and resembles that of St Mark’s Basilica in Venice. The climb up 200 rickety steps is worth it for the fabulous views from the top.

It was on the door of an art gallery that I spotted a hastily written note that said: “I go fishing. Back in one hour”, reminding



SLEEP AT ...

SLEEK Named after the bay it's located on, **Hotel Lone**, right, is a chic, contemporary five-star – and Croatia's first Design Hotel, created by Croatian designers. The complex includes indoor and outdoor pools, a spa, sunbathing terrace, a seafront promenade and a swanky pebble beach. Double rooms from €105 per night. (Luje Adamovica 31, Rovinj, +385 52 800 250; lonehotel.com)

POSH Built in 1884 during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, historic **Hotel Kvarner** was Istria's first luxury seaside hotel. This fully restored, four-star property still has an atmosphere of old world charm, with a neo-classical facade and large ballroom. Other notable

amenities are its indoor and outdoor pools, large sea-facing terrace and private beach. Double rooms from €92 per night. (Pava Tomašica 2, Opatija, +385 51 710 444; remisens.com/en/hotel-kvarner)

SELF-CATERING **Casa Bura** is a four-bedroom, contemporary-style villa with floor-to-ceiling windows and a large outdoor terrace offering scenic views of the sea and nearby islands. A path leads to the beachfront and it's only a four-minute drive to Ravni beach from here. From €270 per night – minimum five nights. (Istarska Županija, Drenje, +385 99 675 9119; casabura.eu)



me that fishing is still very much a way of life here. Stroll along the harbour in the mornings and you'll see local fishermen arriving with their catch as seagulls hover overhead expectantly. The *batana*, a traditional, flat-bottomed wooden fishing boat and symbol of the city's fishing community and maritime heritage, has been preserved in a small, unique museum dedicated to this modest fishing vessel (see



Batana Museum under 'Don't Miss', page 84.

Of course, Rovinj is also a popular beach destination. South of the harbour lies swanky Lone Bay catering to guests staying at the adjacent high-end hotels Lone (see 'Sleep at', *opposite*), Monte Mulini and Eden. For those who prefer a quieter scene in a natural setting, it's worth exploring a bit further south to the rocky shoreline and well-maintained public beach of **Zlatni Rt** (Golden Cape), part of a forest reserve with imported trees from Mexico, America and Japan.

Further north along Istria's west coast is **Poreč**, another picturesque seaside town whose best-known attraction is the **Euphrasian Basilica** (see 'Don't Miss', page 84) and its fabulously preserved Byzantine mosaics dating back to the fourth and fifth centuries, a

UNESCO World Heritage Site. Poreč is also Istria's busiest tourist centre where some of the largest beachside hotels and resorts are located, such as **Zelena Laguna**, popular with families because of the many water sports and activities on offer.

While the west coast is overrun with tourists in summer months, locals head to the beaches of the rocky and picturesque east coast. It was in **Opatija** that the peninsula's first luxury seaside hotel, Hotel Kvarner (see 'Sleep at', *opposite*) opened in 1884, under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Today Opatija still has a fashionable feel to it and is full of Austrian-style cafés, palatial hotels and upscale shops. Just eight kilometres south is **Lovran**, a lush and laid-back town of 19th-century Italian-style villas. This is where the 12-kilometre-long **Franz Joseph I** 

Opposite, historical and colourful Rovinj and, below, clean lines at Hotel Lone. This page, clockwise from top left, green shutters in Rovinj; romantic restaurant Monte; espresso at one of Lovran's Austrian-style cafés; going for gold at the Euphrasian Basilica.

EAT AT ...

BIJOU Hidden on a narrow street in coastal Novigrad, **Damir & Ornella** has just six tables and no menu. On offer is an Istrian take on *sashimi*: fresh raw seafood prepared at the table in front of you and served with local ingredients like olive oil and white truffles. Their innovative fare has not gone unnoticed – they're in the *Gault & Millau* guide and on France's *La Liste*. (Zidine 5, Novigrad, +385 52 758 134; damirornella.com)

TASTINGS Another of the three Croatian entries on *La Liste*'s outstanding restaurants of 2015, **Monte** in Rovinj's old town is known for its creative five- or seven-course tasting menus made with seasonal local ingredients. Vegetarian options are also available. (Montalbano 75, Rovinj, +385 52 830 203; monte.hr)

VISTAS A table with a view is guaranteed at **Villa Ariston**, thanks to its romantic sea-facing terrace. This fine-dining restaurant gets rave reviews for setting, service and quality. Seafood dominates, but vegetarians will be surprised by the many plant-based options. (Maršala Tita 179, Opatija, +385 51 271 379; villa-ariston.hr)

FRESH CATCH **Martin Pescador**, in the tiny charming port of Trget, is a small, unassuming restaurant and popular destination for lovers of seafood, which is caught fresh here each morning. Dine alfresco on the terrace overlooking the water. (Trget 20, Trget, +385 52 544 976)





DON'T MISS ...

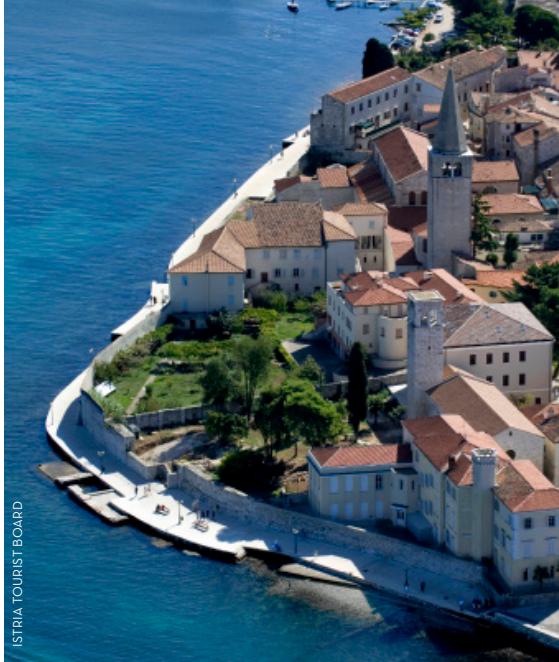
1 MARITIME Occupying a small, two-storey sea-facing house, the **Batana Museum** in Rovinj contains a permanent multimedia exhibition dedicated to the *batana*, Rovinj's traditional fishing boat. The museum showcases maritime and fishing objects donated by local residents and features a slideshow of the two-month process to build a vessel. (Obala Pina Budicina 2, Rovinj, +385 52 812 593; batana.org)

2 ANCIENT ARCHITECTURE The **Euphrasian Basilica** in Poreč is the most complete surviving complex of early Byzantine architecture, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its fabulously preserved mosaics date back to fourth and fifth century BC, and are considered to be some of the finest examples of Byzantine art in the world. (Eufrazijeva ulica 22, Poreč, +385 52 451 784)

3 COASTAL WALK The official name of the Seaside Promenade from Lovran to Volosko is the **Franz Joseph I Promenade** – named after the Austrian emperor who used to holiday here – but this 12-kilometre pathway, pictured, is known locally by its Italian appellation, the *Lungomare*. The shady walkway winds along the coast, past handsome bays and beaches, enchanting gardens and many beautiful examples of Italian-style villas.

SMART TIPS

- AER LINGUS** flies from Dublin to **PULA** three times per week from May 19.
- GNAM-GNAM ASPARAGUS FESTIVAL** April 30, Novigrad Asparagus is a local speciality in Istria where it grows in the wild from mid-March until late April. One of the region's many gastronomic festivals is dedicated to this wild plant and culinary speciality, offering the chance to sample dishes made with young asparagus shoots and other local specialities.
- VINISTRA** May 13-15, Poreč The 23rd edition of this international wine exhibition showcases the many high-quality wines produced in the Istrian region and beyond. The three-day event includes wine tastings, presentations and a competition. vinistra.hr
- LIGHTHOUSE FESTIVAL** May 25-29, Poreč This underground electronic music festival is organised by the people from a popular Vienna nightclub, Pratersauna, in collaboration with a host of local and European partners. The venue will be the pebble beaches of Poreč. lighthousefestival.tv



Clockwise from top left, the curved coastline at Poreč; rocking out in Rovinj; Grožnjan grooves; cyclists follow the Labin-Rabac route. Left, a boat awaiting its sea legs in Volosko, on the Kvarner Gulf.

promenade (see “Don’t Miss”, previous) – named after the Austrian emperor and completed in 1911 – follows the coastline up to Opatija and then on to the harbour of **Volosko**, passing scenic bays, rambling villas, a marina full of luxury yachts and palazzo-style hotels.

Forty-five kilometres south of Lovran, just below the beautiful medieval hilltop town of **Labin**, is the beach resort town of **Rabac**, which also gets its fair share of sun worshippers but fewer than the west coast. The well-maintained, man-made pebble beaches of **Girandella** and **Golubjera** are popular swimming spots, but explore the

area on foot and you’re sure to find one of the many quiet and secluded coves. Further south (13 kilometres from Labin) is the lovely stretch of beach at **Ravni**, a spot popular with windsurfers.

Istria’s many picturesque coastal towns, family-friendly beach resorts, luxury seaside hotels, Blue Flag beaches and scenic rocky coves have a lot to offer sea and sun worshippers. But to find that perfect stretch of beach, be prepared to veer off the beaten track. Or just ask a local – but be warned that everyone insists that “theirs” is the most scenic, with the clearest water and, most importantly, the furthest away from the tourist crowds. 