

■ THE BIG CITY GUIDE { Split }

Back to the future

Diocletian's Palace in Split offers a journey down memory lane as well as a glimpse of where the city is heading next, says **Isabel Putinja**



PHOTO: ALAMY

Split

CROATIA, FLY TO SPLIT AIRPORT ↗ +385 25°C ⚡ CROATIAN KUNA (HRK)



“The palace is linked with stone courtyards, narrow lanes and passageways”



My favourite way to arrive in Split is by boat. This is, after all, how the Roman emperor Diocletian would have arrived at his grand palace on the Dalmatian coast over 1,700 years before, entering its fortified walls via the south-facing Brass Gate.

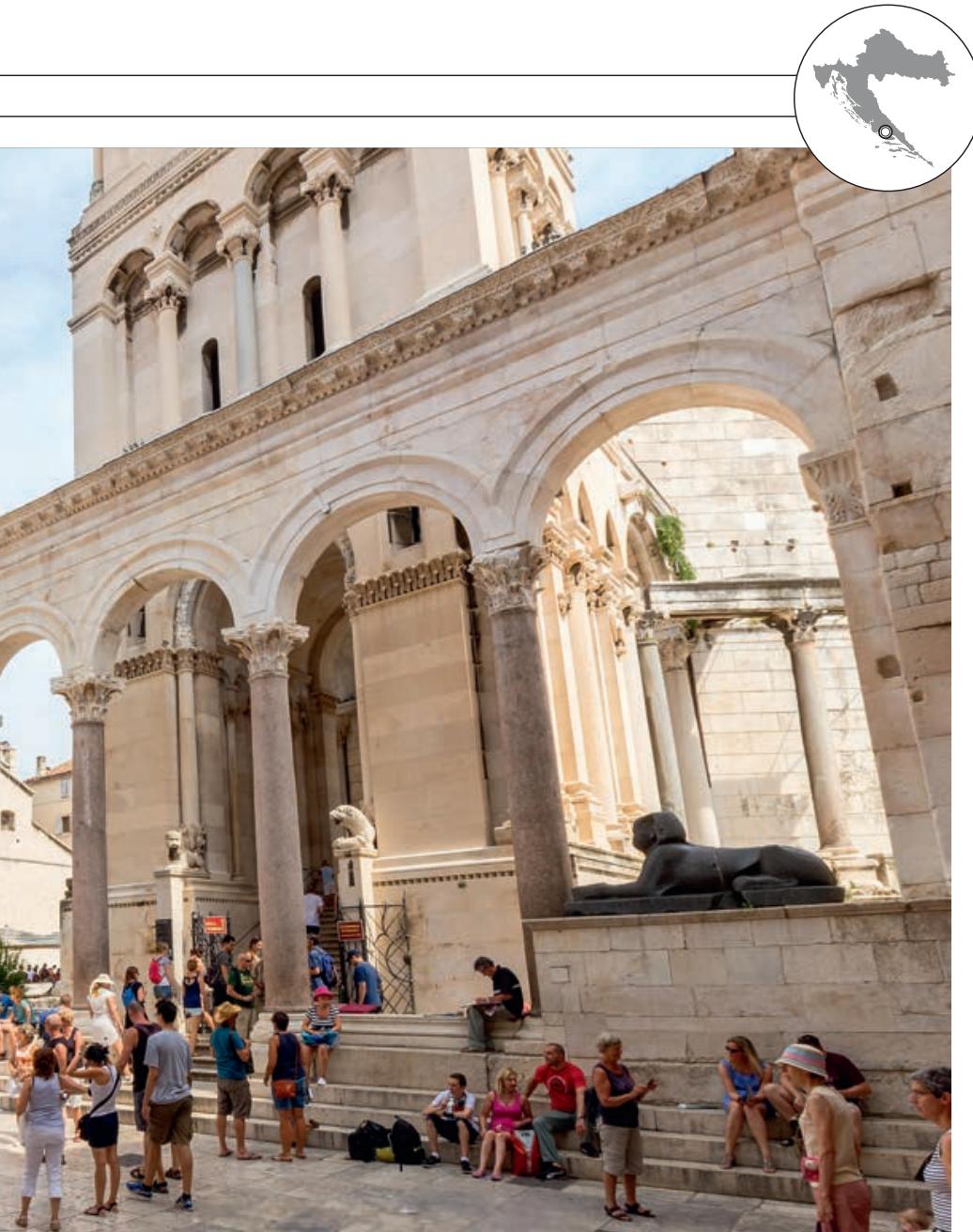
If it was good enough for him, it's good enough for me.

So, with my back to the brilliant blue Adriatic Sea, I step through the gate. Recognised as the world's best-preserved Roman palace, Diocletian's 4th-century, fortress-like complex has benefitted from UNESCO World Heritage status since 1979. Today, the site has not only become the city's most popular tourist attraction, but also an important public space. It's why I'm here: what better way to get to know a city than to explore the place that was both its foundation and is its future?

Covering a rectangular-shaped area of 38,700 square metres, Diocletian's Palace is actually a mini Roman city that's been continuously inhabited since the days of its namesake. While walking its lanes, I only have to look up to be reminded of this, to the clotheslines of neat rows of laundry strung between the buildings of centuries-old limestone and flower pots in orderly lines on windowsills.

As I stroll through the labyrinth of cobbled lanes, I notice many of these ancient buildings have been transformed into businesses by its enterprising residents, who are often inspired by the history of the spaces they occupy. Even those who don't live or work in between the palace's two-metre-thick walls pass through it on an almost daily basis. The well-trodden lane of Krešimirova is the route taken by locals from Pazar, the green market outside the palace's eastern Silver Gate, to the Peškarija or fish market on its western limits. For the people of Split, the pulse of their city lies within these walls.

Clockwise from above: The Peristyle is the heart of Roman emperor Diocletian's Palace; restaurant Kinoteka serves up cocktails by star mixologist Julian Bolenz; The Riva seaside promenade runs along the palace's south-side wall



But for visitors like me, the palace is a living museum with no entry fee. Inside awaits a collection of over 200 three- and four-storey stone buildings, churches, chapels and Venetian palaces, linked by courtyards and a network of narrow lanes and passageways. The colonnaded Peristyle, or Roman courtyard, is at the heart of the palace and clustered around it, other important sights: the domed Vestibule where professional Klapa singers demonstrate their traditional a cappella style; the black granite sphinx the emperor had imported from Egypt; the St Domnius Cathedral, which was built as his mausoleum. A climb up the narrow steps of its bell tower awards with panoramic views over the entire complex, the Adriatic to the south, and the Dinaric Alps to the north.

On Papalićeva street I come across the 15th-century Marulić Palace, where Croatian poet Marko Marulić was born. Today, it houses a cosy café with bookshelves lining the stone walls and painted literary quotes on the ceiling. Tin Bojanić, a Buenos Aires native of part-Croatian origin, opened Marvlvs Library Jazz Bar here five years ago. "I was looking to start a business in the palace because it's such a special place," he says. "When I found this space it was a complete ruin but I knew it was perfect." Once he learned that Marulić was born here in 1450, Bojanić, a poet and writer himself, decided that he would create a tribute to his legacy. "I wasn't going to open a kebab shop in the birthplace of the Victor Hugo of Croatian literature. So it became a library bar where we play jazz."

I continue down the same lane which becomes Dominisova street, just a block north from the imperial section. This was the residential area that once housed Diocletian's servants and soldiers. Tucked inside a



Three must-do activities in Split

There is much more to the city than Diocletian's former home

Ivan Meštrović Gallery

The works of Ivan Meštrović, Croatia's most famous modern sculptor, are showcased in his former home and gardens, which now houses an exhibition of his sculptures and drawings spread over two floors and an open air sculpture park. mestrovic.hr

Marjan Forest Park

The 20-minute walk up Marjan Hill to the stone-balustraded observation point is worth the hike for the sweeping views over the city and nearby Adriatic islands. Explore further and you'll find chapels, caves and some of the city's best beaches at Bene and Kašuni.

City beaches

Split has two sandy beaches: Bačvice, only a 15-minute walk from the centre of town, and the quieter Firule Beach, 10 minutes further east. Sun beds and parasols can be rented for a small fee and there are plenty of cafés and bars where you can mingle with the locals.



From top to bottom: The Riva promenade is always a hub of activity; D16 Speciality Coffee has cashed in on its location in a former no-go area

narrow stone building is D16 Speciality Coffee, a tiny café serving artisan roasted brews in what was once a no-go area. "This area was called the ghetto in more recent times," divulges co-owner Mila Hvilstøj. "We actually like that because it suits our alternative image." As regulars queue for their morning fix, I sip on their signature blend, Dominis, inspired by the namesake of its address: a medieval archbishop and scientist.

Later, I have lunch in between Corinthian columns in the atmospheric courtyard of a late-Gothic palace, steps from the Golden Gate. Since April, this is home to Kinoteka Food and Bar – an Asian-Mediterranean fusion eatery with over a dozen signature cocktails crafted by Julian Bolenz, named London's best bartender in 2017.

My self-guided tour ends where it started. I pass through the Brass Gate and arrive on the Riva. Stretching along the palace's south-facing wall is the city's beloved seaside promenade, lined with palm trees and cafés. "We call the Riva a winter coat," shares Vedran Matošić, a playwright and tour guide. "It's sheltered by the palace walls and warmed throughout the day by the sun. Twenty years ago we fought hard to close the Riva to traffic and succeeded. Locals love to come here any time of year."

In Diocletian's time, there was no Riva: the Adriatic's waters had lapped the palace's south-facing walls. But what hasn't changed over the centuries is the view of the nearby islands of Brač and Šolta. It's the same view Diocletian would see from the shelter of his grand palace.

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My Split Josip Čulić, Manager, Hotel Luxe Split



"Split is my hometown and I love everything about it. People should come here if they want to see a city with great history.

"A good thing about Split is that you can explore the whole city in one day, because it's a peninsula. My favourite thing to do on my days off is to cycle along the seaside promenade and explore Marjan Nature Park.

"One must-visit place is Bačvice beach. You'll see men standing in the water and playing a ball game called *picigin* (in which they stand in shallow water and hit a ball to each other, keeping it from falling down), at any time of year, rain or shine – or even when it snows, which happens rarely.

"Split is also the gateway to the Dalmatian islands. Brač and Šolta islands are less than a one-hour ferry ride away and you can even explore them on a day trip. I also love the town of Omis, it's only a 20-minute drive from here and can be easily reached by bus."

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