

When in Dubrovnik, do as we would ...

Chris Presland and Dubravka Vukic-Presland

Some of you may be aware that my wife's family are from Dubrovnik. I've been there many times and thought it might be useful to provide some tips for our retired SPC members.



The Mediaeval city of Dubrovnik, still surrounded by its original city walls

Zagreb to Dubrovnik

If you've got plenty of time then why not fly into Zagreb? Zagreb is the capital of Croatia and it's lovely. It has a very Austrian feel and it's a little like Vienna. Make sure you stay somewhere near the old city and certainly for just a short visit that is the place to be. Full of outdoor eating, wonderful quirky shops and galleries and the cathedral is beautiful. Then hire a car and drive down the remarkable Dalmatian coast heading for Dubrovnik.

It wouldn't matter where you stopped going down the coast because all the little and big towns are interesting. Some we've been to are Rijeka, Zadar, Sibenik and Split (Diocletian's Palace in Split is a must-see). The whole of Croatia is very like Italy, as is their culture and heritage. There was a point in time when the Roman Emperor Diocletian established the capital of Rome in Split – thus the building there of his palace.



A section of Diocletian's Palace in Split

The islands off the Dalmatian coast are great too, e.g. Hvar (famous for its lavender), Pag (famous gold medal cheese) and Korcula (home of Marco Polo). Inland from the coast there is the Plitvice Lakes National Park which is NOT TO BE MISSED – we walked for five hours and still didn't see it all. Waterfalls and interconnecting lakes at many different levels. It has been described as the real-world location for the novel *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

There is only limited train travel in Croatia and this is only in the north around Zagreb. It's bus, car, boat or plane going down the coast. Taking a car down the coast is best, but after that, some of the big ferries that also take cars are also a great way to go.



The pretty little harbourside town of Hvar with its fortress in the background

Dubrovnik and the Old City: Where do I begin?

- The first must-do is the walk around the city walls. It is spectacular and there are lots of fantastic photo spots. It only takes a couple of hours and there are a few cafes along the walk to keep you rested and refreshed (an easy walk really – a few stairs but all OK). You'll go past my wife's cousin's house on the walls! Those of you who are Game of Thrones fans will recognise so many locations!
- The main street in the Old City is called the Stradun and all the streets mostly run off it. It's made for romantic strolling at night/shopping by day/eating all the time, and at the eastern end is a clock tower. There are lots of galleries, small boutiques, cafes, restaurants, bars and pubs to discover. Unfortunately, the number of souvenir shops are increasing and some of the magical places are gone, but don't be afraid to wander – you can't really get lost (the city walls will always contain you and protect you ... as they have done for thousands of years) and almost everyone speaks English.
- If you are standing at the eastern end of the Stradun facing the clock tower, to your left is the Sponza Palace and a very interesting museum. There are two exhibition spaces and I think one may be free to enter where it shows the devastation of the last war through photographs – small, intimate, very moving.
- If you walk through the archways under the clock tower and stay left (i.e. don't go outside to the water) it slopes up and there is a wonderful little gallery on your right as well as an exclusive restaurant with purple cushions and tables on the old city walls. Very expensive but very indulgent.



Dubrovnik's city walls



Stradun with the clock tower at the far end

- If you're facing the clock tower and turn right, go past the Gradska Kafana (the large restaurant/café) on your left and then there is the Rector's Palace also on your left – also very interesting and filled with lots of Dubrovnik history.
- If you go through under the clock tower and outside to the water of the Old Port, immediately in front of you are the ferries. These can take you to different locations and islands. They are always advertised and easy to book.
- One of the first ferry trips you might consider is to the island of Lokrum. This is about a kilometre offshore from the Old Port. It's a short ferry ride across and a lovely place to walk around and swim.
- Another must-do ferry ride (or you can take a bus but it's much nicer by sea) is to Cavtat. This is a small town about 20 minutes down the coast. Just a lovely place day or night! A must see! This is one of my favourite places to hang out – it's very picturesque. It's home to most of the larger hotels and so there is a lot to see. The small harbour is frequently visited by glamorous cruisers and movie/sports stars.
- There is also a three-island tour you can do in one day. They provide wonderfully freshly cooked food on board. It's just three close islands and just a delight. Ask at the ferry stands just outside under the clock tower, or even from Cavtat if you stay there.
- From the ferries, if you turn right and walk past the first restaurant on your right with the three big arches, the second restaurant on your right, which is largely outside under big umbrellas, has wonderful seafood. Quite a large place – great fresh food!
- There is also a very special café called Café Buza that almost hangs on the rocks outside the old city walls. If you walk about halfway down the Stradun (heading towards the clock tower), take a right somewhere and keep going until you find a small doorway or arch in the old walls that will take you outside to the open sea. You might have to zigzag a bit but you'll get there. Better still just keep asking about it (it's shown as 'Buza 2' on your map). It's very interesting and relaxing in beautiful weather. WARNING: The rocks are not like ours. They are very sharp and jagged so just be careful. Grippy flat shoes are a must – unless you were born there, then bare feet or high heels are easy!
- There are classical concerts on galleon ship replicas – champagne, light supper, magical cruise of the small harbour – we did this – it was amazing!



The Rector's Palace



Dubrovnik's Old Port



Café Buza, perched on the cliff face

- The new sky car (cable car) up to the top of Mt Srd (pronounced Mt Serge) above Dubrovnik is well worth it. Amazing views and a lovely restaurant and shops at the top. I say this is also a 'must do' – the photos from the top of the hill are amazing.



View of Dubrovnik from the top of Mt Srd, showing the Old City and the Old Port surrounded by the city wall. Lokrum Island is in the distance.

- If you would like to see an authentic folklore show on a Sunday morning, catch a local bus to the little village of Cilipi. Dubravka's uncle plays in the band and her mum and dad were baptised in the church there. Very beautiful. It's a perfect cultural event but make sure you get picked to dance in the last waltz of the show (you only get one chance) so sit close to the front or sides and catch the eye of one of the dancers you fancy.
- If you're anywhere near the Hotel Lapad, they have the best dessert in the world called a Krempita. Just trust me! If your fork doesn't glide through the pastry, it's not the real thing! (but any Krempita is still yummy!)
- And don't forget the Game of Thrones tour which must include a trip outside the city to a place called Trsteno and its Arboretum that you'll find there. If you go there, go all the way down to the water and check out the ruins on your left – just keep walking through arches until you see the terrace on the sea where Jamie (in Game of Thrones) was being taught to fight with his left hand (after he lost his right hand - ouch!). There's a secret swimming pool just a little further up that we discovered. Don't be afraid to wander and explore. Amazing.



Discovering the backstreets of the Old City

- For sandy beaches, there are two places you mustn't miss. These are the two magnificent islands of Koločep and Lopud, two of the islands on the three-island ferry tour I spoke about earlier (both are also serviced by local ferries as well).
- For the island of Lopud, there is a direct ferry from Dubrovnik's main port of Gruz (not to be confused with the 'Old Port' on the edge of the Old City). It's a very cheap ferry ride (it's counted as public transport) but the main ferry terminal in Gruz is about 3km from the Old City. Just ask in a tourist place how to get to the ferry terminal – someone will tell you. When you get to Lopud ask someone to tell you where the sandy beach is. You'll have to walk a little way through the town and over a part of the island but it's well worth it and not difficult. Don't just stay in the harbour.
- In relation to swimming, I strongly suggest taking (or buying there) a pair of aqua shoes. You will be very grateful. The pebbles can be difficult to traverse and the sea urchins very painful to stand on! Just ask me!
- One really unique place to eat out is Konavoski Dvori. It's a little way outside the old city but anyone can tell you how to get there. It's worth the trip for authentic food and culture.
- If you're there in the summer, one major attraction is the Summer Festival that starts on the 10th July. It has an amazing opening ceremony with opera, dance etc in the middle of the old city. You will need tickets, otherwise you can walk around anyway. There are free concerts, theatre, film festivals etc.
- If you have time to spare at Dubrovnik Airport while waiting for your flight out, another interesting tourist attraction is the Đurovića Cave. This is a huge limestone cave that actually runs underneath the runway. Maybe ask at the airport for directions.
- Dubrovnik is also well known for its wine tasting and food cruises
- One final adventure is kayaking around the waters in front of the old city – stunning!



Gundulić Square in the middle of the Old City with its many cafes and narrow winding lanes



Kayakers making their way back to the beach just below the Pile Gate after paddling around the city walls

There's so much more we could tell you but in short:

1. **Get lost in the old city** – just explore. The light from the lamps on the old polished marble streets are just magical at dusk and at night and there are musical events too, plus cheap beer, cheap pizza, ice cream, beautiful jewellery and art works (How much can you carry back?!)
2. **Visit Cavtat**, the beautiful little town about 15km south of Dubrovnik, either by ferry or bus. When there, the best cevapi (traditional grilled mincemeat dish) is in the restaurant on the water just in front of the Hotel Albatros. Swimming is great in Cavtat too.
3. **Walk the old city walls.**
4. **Catch the Sky car to the top of Mount Srd**, immediately above the Old City. On a clear sunny day you can see for up to 60 kms, and at dusk there is the spectacular sunset over the sea.

Almost everyone speaks some English and certainly the people working in tourism speak it very well, so you shouldn't have too much trouble.

It is a very safe city. There's virtually no crime at all and the locals are very proud of that.

Dubrovnik is a truly unique place. One of the few lived-in walled cities and almost certainly the largest of its kind. It is spectacular, described by Lord Byron as "the pearl of the Adriatic".

Contributor details

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Chris was Principal at Airids High School (2001-2005) before becoming a Principal Liaison Officer (2006-2008) and then his final Principalship at St Clair High School (2008-2019). He has a long history of service to the NSW SPC including as President from 2016-2019. He also made significant contributions to other professional learning organisations, including as a National Director and NSW President of ACEL and NSW Chair of Principals Australia Institute.

He and his wife Dubravka have travelled extensively, especially to Dubrovnik which is like a home away from home.

Chris continues to serve the SPC post-retirement as a Professional Learning Project Officer, writing and delivering programs for school leaders for the SPC.