



Beautiful Stiniva Bay on the island of Vis, one of Croatia's more laid-back — and ruggedly beautiful — islands. GETTY IMAGES

EXPLORING THE BEST OF CENTRAL DALMATIA

From historic cities to blissful beaches, this Croatian region is a delight

FRANK THOMAE

While Dubrovnik has long been touted as the “Pearl of the Adriatic,” Croatia's most spectacular region is Central Dalmatia. It has it all.

Those looking for history have Split and Trogir, two UNESCO cities packed with relics from Roman and Venetian times.

There are islands and beaches, including party-island Hvar, relaxing Vis, and Brač, where you'll find Croatia's most famous beach. Central Dalmatia also boasts Croatia's most stunning coastline, featuring great hiking and dramatic viewpoints (including a drive up the country's highest road).

SPLIT

The unofficial capital of Central Dalmatia, Split is Croatia's second largest city. A very pretty city ringed by mountains and sea, it is famous for Diocletian's Palace. Built by Roman Emperor Diocletian in the fourth century AD, the palace is a walled city accessed through four huge gates. Within the walls you'll find churches, palaces and squares including the Peristyle; the main square which features an arcaded courtyard and looks out over St. Domnius Cathedral and its magnificent bell tower (which you can climb).

Split also has the Riva, the promenade along the harbour, and Marjan Hill, a large park with great views over the city.

The city has many bays and beaches, the most famous being Bačvice beach. But the best and most family-friendly beach is Bene beach at the tip of Marjan Park.

For those wanting to hike, Mosor Mountain has many trails, the most challenging being to the peaks of Veli Kabal and Vickov Stup. Kozjak Mountain is less challenging and easier to access with the same incredible views over Split.

Split makes for the best base if you're looking to explore Central Dalmatia. It is centrally located in the region and has ferry connections to all the islands.

Where to Stay:

Heritage Hotel Antique Split is a luxury option, well situated in the old town. Hostel Flamingo is recommended for those on a budget. But the best option for those looking to spend more than a few days in Split is Airbnb — there are many apartment options. Expect to pay in the \$40/night range off season and about \$120/night June to August.

Restaurants: Bokeria Kitchen & Wine Bar for a fine dining experience. Villa Spiza has excellent, good value cuisine.

TROGIR

A UNESCO town 45 minutes up the coast from Split, Trogir was



Above: The harbour and seafront promenade in Bol.



Left: The Cetina River in southern Croatia as viewed from Omiš.



Bottom left: The town of Omiš seen from Stari Grad on the northern side of Hvar.

PHOTOS: FRANK THOMAE

atia's longest ziplines in Omiš), canyoning, climbing, white water rafting and hiking.

Right above town, looking straight down is the Starigrad Fortress. It's a 45 minute hike and is worth it for the incredible views. A second fortress, the Mirabella Fortress, is in town and is also worth exploring. Omiš has a pretty main square, some Roman ruins, and one of the nicest beaches in Croatia.

If you have a car, drive up the canyon to the Mila Gojsalić statue. It's a 10 minute drive from Omiš. It will give you a taste of the dramatic interior that lies behind the coastal mountain range.

Where to Stay: Hotel Plaza is next to the beach and steps from the main square.

MAKARSKA

Makarska has the most spectacular coastal geography in Croatia. It is a small town known mostly for its beaches and for its location at the foot of Mt. Biokovo, Croatia's second highest mountain. Makarska is all about nature: lying on the beach, enjoying the scenery, and hiking and biking along the trails around town. Drive up Mt. Biokovo — it's a Nature Park with a 23 km road that takes you past incredible viewpoints, educational trails, and historical attractions. The road ends at Sv. Jure peak. At 1,792 m it is the third highest peak in Croatia (and the highest accessible by road).

Where to Stay: Hotel Makarska. A Large modern hotel by the beach with excellent facilities.

first settled by the Greeks, then conquered by the Romans. Most of its highlights today date from Venetian rule (13th to 15th centuries). It is a small town with a huge concentration of attractions. See the St. Lawrence Cathedral and climb the bell tower.

Trogir can be seen as a day trip from Split but it's worth more than that. Stay a night and walk down the small alleys in the evening — more than any other place in Croatia you'll feel like you've stepped back to Venetian times.

Where to Stay:

The Bifora Heritage Hotel is in a convenient location across from the old town and close to beaches.

OMIT

The town of Omit is unknown to most visitors. Thirty minutes down the coast from Split it is a small town situated at the meeting point of the Cetina River and the sea. Omit is dwarfed by huge cliffs and a canyon leading upriver to the mountains of the interior.

The town is known as the “Adventure Capital of Croatia.” You can do ziplining (you'll find Cro-

THE ISLANDS

Central Dalmatia has three popular islands. Each is defined by a main town. They're all beautiful but very different.

HVAR TOWN (ISLAND OF HVAR)

Croatia's party town. Celebrities like Tom Cruise, Beyonce, Jay-Z and Eva Longoria come here. But you'll mostly see young wannabe celebrities getting drunk and behaving badly. That's what Hvar is known for, but the reality is that Hvar Town is gorgeous.

It had a pretty harbour, the largest square in Dalmatia, and some Venetian-era churches. There's a fortress overlooking the town and harbour.

Where to Stay: You can't beat the location of the Riva Hvar Yacht Harbour Hotel for a taste of Hvar.

BOL (ISLAND OF BRAČ)

Brač is a beautiful island with a couple of nature spots that have made it famous. Both are near the small and charming town of Bol.

The first is Zlatni Rat beach, the most famous beach in Croatia. The beach is an almost-triangular spit of smooth white pebbles that extend out into the sea, the water on either side — crystal clear.

The second natural attraction is Vidova Gora, the highest peak (780 m) in the Adriatic Islands. You can hike up in 2 hours and enjoy perfect views looking straight down at Zlatni Rat.

Bol itself is a little town and many visitors come for the relaxed lifestyle. There's a 2 km path leading from Bol to Zlatni Rat lined with hotels, resorts and other beaches. There's a fantastic winery in the centre of Bol called Stina. Go there for some wine tasting.

Where to Stay: The Bluesun Hotel Elaphusa is a beautiful resort between Bol and Zlatni Rat.

VIS TOWN (ISLAND OF VIS)

If you ask a Croatian which is their favourite island many will say Vis. Compared to both Hvar and Brač, Vis is very laid back. Vis town extends along a shoreline protected by large hills. You'll find little bays with beautiful beaches. If you're looking for a relaxing Croatian island then this is the best destination.

Where to Stay: People coming to Vis generally rent apartments or villas.