

blackBOOK

A GUIDE FOR THE SOPHISTICATED TRAVELER HERE & ABROAD | Edited by Andrew Sessa

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So Hvar, So Good

How one little island in the Adriatic Sea is starting to give the Mediterranean a run for its euros.

For drinks before or after dinner, it's BB Club patio bar at Sunčani group's Riva hotel.

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The last few years have seen Croatia's Dalmatian islands emerge as the hippest upmarket destination in post-Tito Yugoslavia. And today this Adriatic archipelago—a ferry ride away from the port city of Split, itself only an hour's flight from Rome—has become a favorite of yachting Mediterranean cognoscenti, those looking beyond, say, Mykonos and Capri. Now they're coming to islands such as Vis and Korčula for the transparent waters, rugged

landscapes, historic towns, simple food, surprisingly refined local wine, and a welcome that combines Italian warmth, Slavic directness, and a sprinkling of Teutonic efficiency. Hvar, a long turkey leg of an island, has all these attractions plus one more: a buzzing social scene.

It's not yet an Ibiza, or even a Mykonos—with their techno-beat brashness—but that's a good thing. Hvar's vibe is more laid-back and less club-oriented. And while it may lack the suavity of an established player like Capri, the island

is more of a serious sailing destination. Mooring rates in purpose-built marinas such as Vrboska are on par with those of other harbors in the eastern Mediterranean, but in between these major ports of call are more than a thousand little islands to anchor off of, making for practically endless boating opportunities.

Hvar Town is the island's remarkably handsome hub, the Old City, all in shades of cream marble, rising up the hill from the port and the main square. (If the architecture seems more Italian than Slavic, that's because the Venetian republic ruled here for almost four centuries, from 1420 to 1797.) There's a sophisticated bar and restaurant scene and, most importantly, several very good hotels—by no means a given on this side of the Adriatic.

STAYING PUT

Sunčani Hvar Hotels has a near monopoly on the higher end. **Riva** (\$390–\$845; 385-21/750-100; suncanihvar.com), in a century-old building, looks soberly local on the outside, with a red-tile roof and a stone façade. But on the inside it's been redone in a sleek, contemporary idiom by British design studio Jestico + Whiles, the firm behind the recent facelift of London's Fortnum & Mason.

On the other side of the harbor, the Communist-era concrete-and-glass design of **Adriana** (\$570–\$820; 385-21/750-200; suncanihvar.com) has also undergone changes. The hotel now feels a bit like a blend of the Café Costes and a refuge for Tito's party faithful.



There's a 15,000-square-foot spa and a heated rooftop pool at Adriana, both of which the more urbane Riva lacks. But the latter is better for those who like to be at the heart of the action, right on the main wharf, where the hotel's BB Club patio bar has become the second most popular spot in town to sip an *aperitivo*.

WINING AND DINING

Number one for drinks is still **Carpe Diem** (carpe-diem-hvar.com), at the wharf's far end, where getting up to the bar in high season is akin to completing an army assault course. This party pavilion keeps its punters (Hooray Henrys, Australian yachties, local girls on the make) jigging on the flagstones, drinks in hand, until the small hours.

The steep lanes that lead from the waterfront toward the Spanish fortress are packed with tourist-oriented restaurants. Most lack oomph and are surprisingly expensive, but not all are to be avoided. **Zlatna Skoljka** (dinner, \$100; 385-98/168-8797) prides itself on its Slow Food approach and makes good use of such local ingredients as lamb, olives, and goat cheese. And **Yakša**



How to Do Hvar

The island's location increases its exclusivity but not its accessibility. Since it doesn't have an airport, visitors fly Croatia Airlines into Split from, say, Rome or Munich. (Lufthansa also flies there from New York, via Munich and Frankfurt.) Then it's an hour-long trip on a public ferry across the Adriatic to Hvar (go to jadrolinija.hr for schedules). A private motorboat from Split is the better way to go, though. **Calvados Club** (385-21/494-949; calvadosclub.com) is a high-end fixer in Croatia that organizes this and everything else for visitors. The company sets up private tastings at Hvar's acclaimed vineyards, dinner on the beaches of the neighboring Pakleni Otoci archipelago, insider tours of the UNESCO town of Trogir, and weeklong yacht rentals. For those looking for a private villa experience, Calvados books guests into Dvor Sv. Juraj (\$8,600 a week), the island's most exclusive rental residence. The four-bedroom complex of stone houses has a pool, an outdoor fireplace, and sea views (it's about a 15-minute drive from the water); a chef and butler can be arranged.

A view of Hvar Town, the island's showpiece, from the harbor





The Cathedral of St. Stephen overlooks Hvar Town's harbor; lounging at Bonj "les bains."



Cafés along Hvar's promenade and the Spanish fortress beyond

Until now, things have been rather sleepy outside Hvar Town, but this is changing.

(dinner, \$172; 385-91/277-0772; yaksa.hvar.com) offers something different from the local tavern act. The restaurant gets the tasty Mediterranean-fusion menu, the contempo ambient music, and the selective wine list just right—it only needs to iron out the prickly service.

For the eatery with the best views, head to **Bonj "les bains"** (dinner, \$180; 385-21/750-750; suncanihvar.com), a thirties seaside establishment refurbished as a luxury club, with individual changing rooms under a cool marble colonnade and tables on a teak-decked terrace.

GETTING AROUND

The perfect day in Hvar begins with breakfast at Riva or the elegant **Cafe Pjaca** (\$9; 385-21/741-868), on a corner of the main square, followed by a short boat ride to the Pakleni Otoci archipelago. On the island of Jerolim naturists work on their allover tans, and half of the verdant St. Klement is owned by the Meneghello family, which runs the place as an arty, high-class holiday camp called Palmizana. There's a botanical garden surrounding a couple of restaurants, the best of which is **Dagmar's**

Place (dinner, \$220; 385-21/717-270; palmizana.hr), housed in an eccentric strawberry-pink pavilion and full of naive artwork. Despite these aesthetic oversights, the food is good and unpretentious, based on fresh, homegrown ingredients. St. Klement also has a newly expanded, 190-berth marina, one of the 21 in the region run by the **Adriatic Croatia International Club** (aci-club.hr).

Until now things have been rather sleepy outside Hvar Town, but this is changing. In the pretty port of Jelsa, about 15 miles beyond town, the prim harborside houses look almost Bavarian or Swiss, though the backstreets have an older, more authentic feel. Just north of there, British entrepreneur Neil Lewis, who once owned Jelsa's Mykonos-style nightclub Vertigo, is renovating a hilltop farm to create **Stonehouse** (stonehousehvar.com), a ten-suite luxury hotel with its own restaurant and private beach. In high season (Easter through October) Lewis will rent it as a private villa, and the rest of the year each suite will be available individually. The property's planned 2007 opening turned out to be wildly optimistic because of what

Lewis refers to as "punishing Croatian bureaucracy." He's now talking 2009.

For our money, though, Stari Grad, about ten miles from the main town, is the most up-and-coming area. One of its main attractions has long been **Jurin Podrum** (dinner, \$65; 385-21/765-448), the best of Hvar's restaurants, but its chef and proprietor, Damir Cavić, recently sold it and opened a new culinary venture there called **Stari Mlin** (dinner, \$70; 385-21/765-804) in December. Jurin Podrum, meanwhile, opened under new ownership in May, and both restaurants warrant further investigation.

Two more British scene-setters are also making plans in Stari Grad. Amanda Blanch and her husband, Chris Edwardes, the duo behind Brighton's Hanbury Club and Blanch House hotel, restaurant, and bar, have bought an old stone townhouse and are working to turn it into a six-room boutique hotel with the possibility of an attached cocktail bar. When it opens—perhaps sometime in 2009—Stari Grad will become an alternative to the town of Hvar for those who are too old, or too cool, for that pounding Carpe Diem beat. —LEE MARSHALL