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THE MOST SPECTACULAR ROAD IN THE WORLD

(They said)

Lonely Planet said Croatia's Adriatic highway was one of the most exciting drives in the world. Could it possibly live up to the hype? **Words and pictures by Simon Hardeman**

“Split is a staging post on my way to Dubrovnik and the road between them is the best I’ve ridden so far”



Last year I took my own bike abroad for the first time. In the past I’ve flown out and rented: an Enfield in India; a Yamaha trail bike in Cambodia; a death trap 250 in Ibiza and so on. The trip on my Moto Guzzi California – a kind of L-shaped loop across northern Spain and Portugal – was exhilarating. This year I want to do something similar and when I discover that, according to the Lonely Planet website, ‘the spectacular Adriatic highway from Italy to Albania is one of the most exciting drives in the world’, I know where I want to go: Dubrovnik.

A two-day blast across Belgium, Germany, Austria and Slovenia should get me to the Promised Road quickly, but the roads are tedious in the extreme. I get lost in Brussels, sit anxiously on badly surfaced German roads praying for petrol stations – it might be okay if you’re in a Merc, but my fuel light comes on at 115 miles. By Stuttgart I’m soaked and frozen, but a maze of one-way lanes, barriers and kerbs separates me from the Ibis hotel just 100 yards away. I decide I hate Germany. Next morning I find a 2ft-

diameter puddle of oil under the bike. I am ready to cry.

I pull myself together and, after checking it, I’m sure there’s enough oil in the bike. I can’t see any obvious breach but can see two wet breather-pipes. I deduce that I’ve ridden at high speed for so long oil had collected in the air filter and drained overnight. So it’s back to heads-down, no-nonsense biking, past Augsburg, Munich, Berchtesgarden, and Salzburg... and by teatime I am in Opatije, Croatia, and the beginning of the fabled 500 miles down the eastern side of the Adriatic, along the Dalmatian Coast.

At the top of this coast is Istria, a peninsula resembling the sleeve of a T-shirt: Opatije is in the armpit. Despite this inauspicious location, my guidebook - the latest Lonely Planet - says that Opatije has the most stunning coastal views in all Croatia. This is not true. Yes, it sits on a pretty bay, but there’s a smoking chimneystack across the bay.

What Opatije does have is huge number of German couples in campervans and on BMWs. They don’t acknowledge me and I begin to realise why. For them, motorcycling is not about romance or freedom or camaraderie – it is simply the most efficient way for two people to travel.

A little way down the coast at Uvala Plomin, on a circular observation platform thrusting precariously from a rocky outcrop, I do find a good panorama. The shoreline plunges into fabulously



It may not be immaculately surfaced by at least the Adriatic highway's quiet



With just a rucksack and a spare lid, Simon packs the Guzzi light



Contemplating Lonely Planet exaggeration



Beavers had not only dammed the river but also fashioned a town

clean turquoise water that reaches across to the scrub-green island of Cres. At Uvala Plomin I also discover that asking for tea with milk in Croatia is not the way to get, well, tea with milk. But strawberry fruit tea with milk is surprisingly palatable.

Curiously refreshed, I rejoin the coast road to pass through the industrial town of Rijeka and the huge lagoon-like Bakar bay, where companies have painted their names on the opposing rocky hill-faces. If there were any justice, one of them would be called Blot. The countryside is scrub and the road hardly exhilarating, unless your idea of fun is dicing with middle-aged oil tankers on a series of undulating patches of mismatched tarmac.

After the town of Senj, the landscape becomes barrenly beautiful and the road clears and smooths out. Off the coast now there's an eerie sight: the island of Pag rising out of the water like an iceberg made of a meteor from Mars: pink, empty and with not a tree, bush or blade of grass. I take the short ferry ride to it. The only other bike aboard is a cliché – a black BMW with a standoffish, podgy middle-aged couple on it. They're equipped with grey BMW T-shirts, black BMW neckerchiefs, BMW hand luggage and the radio in their fairing is playing BMW-pop.

“On Pag I ride up a pink ravine that makes me feel like a Lilliputian sliding up Gulliver’s butt-crack”

From the ferry I ride up a pink ravine that makes me feel like a Lilliputian sliding up Gulliver's butt-crack. What vegetation there is clings to the land like moths to a net-curtain. The lace-making town at the centre of the island is pretty, its alleys full with women sitting fashioning doilies, but its beach, like 99 per cent of those in Croatia, is sole-scouring rocks. After sunset, at a quayside bar in Pag town, I watch cars come down the slope on the hill opposite, their lights in the blackness making them look like little aircraft swooping in. I want to be one of those little planes.

The next day I'm back on the mainland coast road. I'm aiming for Split but after just 50 miles I'm seduced by the town of Zadar. Its old town sits on a rectangular peninsula and, as I watch the tide of gorgeous women streaming into it across the footbridge from the new town, I know I'm going to stay a while. The next day, on the rocky 50m strand that serves as the town's beach, I begin my own seducing. I meet the beautiful Zoja, who gives me her number and says she's keen to go out on the bike and have a drink. Suddenly, punctures, lost credit cards, oil slicks and Germany are all forgotten. Let's rock! Back at my room, I pick up my phone and realise Zoja's number hasn't saved in its memory. My cry of anguish includes a

“The shoreline plunges into fabulously clean turquoise water that reaches across to the scrub-green island of Cres”



final acceptance that this trip is truly ill starred.

Despite the hangover of a drunken night with Davor the lawyer, I split for for Split. The road's dull until I reach a kind of Croatian Canvey Island called Sibenik, after which it begins to hug the shoreline, passing through the picturesque white-walled and terracotta-roofed towns stud the coast.

Rounding a corner, over a rise, laid out on my right is an enormous expanse of water dotted with white yachts, a necklace of islands on its far side. To the left of the road is the spine of mountains that runs down the edge of the country.

As I approach Split, a serrated slab of white cliffs rises – massive, Gormenghast-like protective walls and ramparts. Then as I get closer I realise they're huge, bleak blocks of flats – dozens of them entirely surrounding the landward side of the ancient city.

Most Croatian towns are full of rooms for tourists, often advertised with the sign 'apartman', which sounds like an existential superhero. The one I find is in a two-bed flat and belongs to 20-ish single mother Ivana and her three-year-old son, who relocate to their mother's room next door as I make myself comfortable amid the grotesquery of someone else's cuddly toys.

Diocletian's Palace is an area of a square mile or so that's been built and rebuilt for 1700 hundred years, a warren of alleys spidering between picturesque squares and piazzas where open-

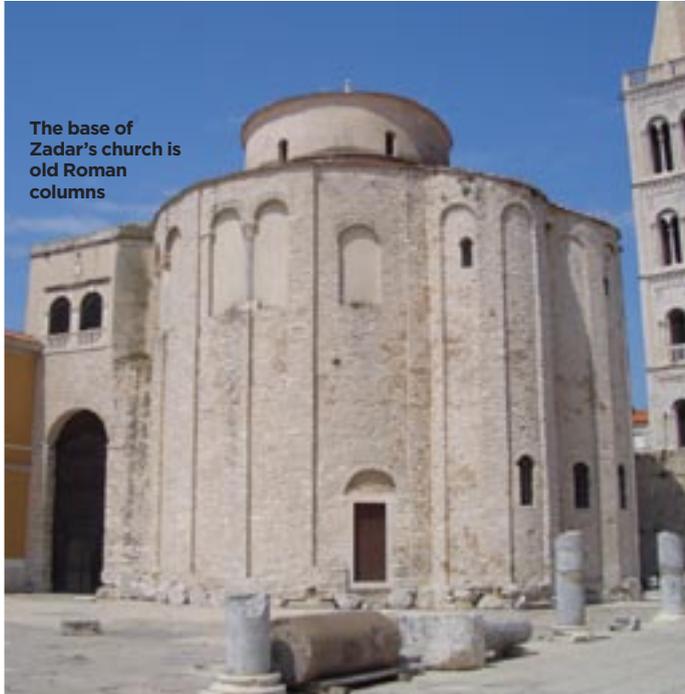
air cafes lie beneath Italianate, medieval and Roman architecture. The town also has a totally unexpected side, a hedonistic architectural tumour called Bacvice: a concrete clubland set across a noise-cancelling headland from the old city and around which, nightly, scores of drunken Croatian teenagers collapse, puking and groaning, or smash bottles on the rocky town beach and urinate in gutters and shrubbery while singing loudly. It's a shock to the system if you think the Mediterranean culture has little in common with boozed-up, Friday-night urban Britain.

Split is just a staging post on my way to Dubrovnik, 'the pearl of the Adriatic'. The road between the two is the best I've ridden so far, especially along the self-proclaimed Makarska Riviera – 40 miles of S-bends bordering turquoise water, with a pretty fishing village in every cove. Yet the most impressive landscape is also the most unexpected. South of Ploce, halfway along the 150 miles between Split and Dubrovnik, I could be in China. What look like flooded paddy fields link conical hills in the delta of the River Neretva. It's freshness and fertility is a refreshing change from the dusty dryness of the rest of the country.

As I ride deeper into Croatia, there's the sense of a gradually disappearing country: it tapers away and the mountains press you closer and closer to its rocky edge, giving Dubrovnik a kind of 'heart of Croatian darkness' quality, something heightened by the



There may be speed limits but where are the cameras?



The base of Zadar's church is old Roman columns



Dusk in Split's main square

A MOTO CALIFORNIA WHAT?

Sure it's a cruiser but it isn't a Harley and it is quite nice

The bike

It's a 2001 Moto Guzzi California Stone with 26,500 miles on the clock. I bought it for £2,900 in 2003. I wanted something with character and reliability - Guzzis are legendary for their bulletproof engines. And I like it - I tried a variety of other bikes, from Fazers to 'modern' Bonnies before plumping for the Guzzi.

Modifications

A straight-through pipe gave a little more power and made an already good sound better. It also means I can reach the oil drain plug without removing part of the exhaust. I've also added a small rack and an aftermarket screen.

Comfort

It's versatile - I use it for getting around London as well as long trips. The riding position is cruiser-ish without being cruiser, as indeed is the bike - it comes with heel-and-toe gear change but I refuse to use my heel. Pillions remark on how comfy it is and the addition of a small fly screen pushed the bike's comfortable cruising into three figures.

That oil issue

The oil breather thing wasn't really a problem, more an emotional shock: the bike doesn't drink oil. In fact, as a Bonnie owner, being able to trust it to retain oil is wonderful. It does about 45mpg, though this obviously slumps with urban riding.

Luggage

A rucksack bunged to the bike. I prefer this to panniers because a rucksack is much more portable than bike luggage.



Current state

An off on the return leg left a the bike with a dented front mudguard and a piece of engine fin missing, but mechanically it's fine. Most of the damage was to the front; the switchgear and headlamp. I plan to keep it, even if I buy something else. I fancy a Speed Triple or a new Guzzi Griso. I've tried a Thruxton but they don't sound quite right.

fact that, 40 miles from Dubrovnik, the country temporarily disappears between border checkpoints where a 12-mile-wide corridor of Bosnia extends to the sea.

The day is so hot my jacket and shirt are wide open, and suddenly I become aware of a stabbing pain near my left armpit. I screech to a halt and rip off my clothing to free the Balkan wasp that has taken exception to my hijacking of its flightpath.

The last time Dubrovnik was attacked was 1992, when hundreds of shells shattered its signature terracotta roofs. But the most recent invasion is of coach-loads of intercontinental package tourists. They pursue their amplified Pied Pipers along the Placa ('the most beautiful main street in the world'), under the city walls ('the most complete examples anywhere'), and through the cloister of the Franciscan monastery (home to 'the third oldest public pharmacy in the world' - easy on the superlatives).

My 1500-mile journey ends with a walking tour of the fabulously intact walls. But I've reached a dead city - beautiful and perfectly preserved or rebuilt, but so lifeless that the most exciting place after dark is the local Irish pub. I give myself one final destination: a sandy beach. Two days later, on the island of Korcula, I find it, unsignposted, through vineyard lanes. I walk into Adriatic water, finally and triumphantly, my feet cushioned as if by velvet. It's the end of the road.



RIDING THE ADRIATIC COAST TO DUBROVNIK

You'll need to cross the channel. Call 08705 202020 and quote reference V560 for a cheap Dover to Calais sailing with P&O ferries. The quickest way to northern Italy is then a two-day motorway blast southeast through France, Belgium, Germany and Austria. You'll need Euros for the French tolls, balls for the absent German speed limits and a vignette - a kind of sticker pass to use the motorways - for Austria, which you can buy in petrol stations.