



Finding Refuge in Istria

Kristy Alpert debates dropping it all and purchasing her own slice of Croatian real estate

Soon after landing at Pula airport, on Croatia's Istrian peninsula, I put the keys in the somewhat-less-than-mid-sized rental car that would carry me north along the Adriatic coast to the town of Rovinj. Once under the domain of the Republic of Venice, which fortified it with elaborate gates and protective walls, Rovinj today is a popular seaside vacation spot with one of the last authentic fishing ports in the Mediterranean. It's also one of the only places where a small group of locals still speak the historic Romance language of Istriot, in addition to Croatian and Italian.

The drive from Pula to Rovinj isn't long, but it's enough to wind through a varied, scenic portion of the peninsula. I zipped past olive orchards and lush gardens, working vineyards and small stands selling unlabeled bottles of wine. But it wasn't until I cracked my window to let the salty breeze flow through the car that I decided to slow down...and retrace my tracks.

I hadn't even made it to the city center and I was already tasting local wines and dipping warm bread into pools of fresh olive oil. I wasn't even on the beach and the warm Mediterranean sun was already tanning my newly-exposed skin. I wasn't off the plane more than 30 minutes before I debated calling the number listed on the

"For Sale" sign sticking out of the ground of the vineyard near where I had pulled over. Rovinj had already melted its way into my being with its fresh scents, warm and inviting people, and incredible cuisine ... and the stench of airplane fuel hadn't even begun to wear off my clothes yet. The city is just that powerful.

LEAVING THE CAR BEHIND

I managed to resist my land purchase and instead bought a bottle of freshly-pressed olive oil from a local farmer, before heading into town. Glancing only briefly at the weathered walls of the "downtown" strip of the city, I continued on toward the Monte Mulini Hotel, not realizing this

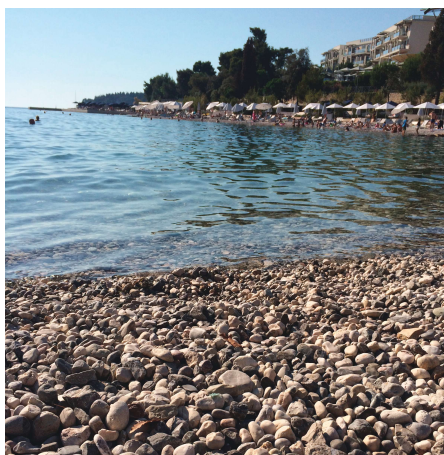


would be the last time I drove during my stint in the pedestrian friendly destination.

The Monte Mulini greeted me with the intense aroma of fresh-cut flowers. A member of the Leading Hotels of the World, the resort boasts 113 luxury rooms and suites (each offering incredible balcony views over the hotel's pools and the sea), and a prime location that's along a protected nature park and serene bay, but



also just a 10-minute walk from the town center. I could have easily spent my entire time in Rovinj soaking in the sun and sipping local wines at the Mulini Beach Bar by the bay, where the overstuffed beanbag beds, low lounge tables and traditional sun loungers are all serviced by beach butlers and smiling waitresses. And in fact, after eavesdropping on conversations in languages ranging from Italian to Spanish to German, I made the call to stay in on my first night and try what my fellow sojourners were calling the best restaurant in town—if not the whole peninsula.



THE PERFECT SETTING

As I took my seat at the on-site Wine Vault restaurant, several things happened as if right on cue: the sun began to set behind the azure waters, the in-house sommelier poured my first glass of Istrian sparkling wine, and a band by the shore began singing, “Wise men say, only fools rush in.” I had to laugh: the instantly-dreamy setting was too perfect to be true—and prompted me to once again debate selling everything I had and buying that vineyard I had passed earlier in the day.

The Wine Vault is run by the talented Chef Andrew Gaskin and his team, who lead diners on a journey through the flavors of the region. Gaskin pairs all his tasting menu with wines selected from a 550 label-strong cellar of both local and top international names, but he saves his best tricks for those who book his unforgettable Chef’s Table experience. Sashimi scallops served with sour apple and keta caviar, buttery lobster topped with shavings from local black truffles, and tender pillows of cuttlefish ink ravioli stuffed with crab veloute are just a few of the delights served on his decadent menus.

Chef Gaskin has worked around the world, and likes to note that in Rovinj, it’s not a trend to source local—it’s a way of life. Chefs here cook what’s fresh that day because there is such a rich bounty to choose from in the area; as a result, each smell and bite brings you closer to discovering the essence of the destination. Another example of this cooking philosophy can be found in the town center at Kantinon Tavern, where Chef Tomislav Gretic changes his menu daily based on what came off the fishing boats that morning.

HUNTING FOR MY NEXT MEAL

Spend just a few minutes chatting with Chef Gretic and, in addition to stoking your appetite, you’ll also have the names of the best fishermen and boat rental companies in town. Rovinj is swarming with waterfront recreation, from sunset sailings and remote island rendezvous to paddleboarding, fishing, and just swimming in the warm waters of the Adriatic. For land based adventures, simply walking around the old town and meandering through the windy, steep, and slippery steps to reach the cathedral of St. Euphemia is a great way to spend an afternoon.

Natural pursuits aside, there’s no denying that foodie activities are the main draw in this region—though sometimes the two can be enjoyed together. Travelers with an appetite for the outdoors need look no further than Zigante Tartufi, the famous truffle house located just outside the city border. The restaurant and artisan product company still hunts for their



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signature fungus the old fashioned way—with a certified truffle hunter and official truffle hunting dogs—and for a small fee, visitors can tag along with this motley crew to search for their own black gold nuggets deep in the Motovun forest. It was here that on November 2, 1999, Giancarlo



Zigante earned a Guinness World Record by uncovering a white truffle that weighed in at a whopping 1.31 kilograms. A bronze version of the prized find is on display at the Restaurant Zigante, tempting truffle hungry tourists to savor the precious ingredient found in most of dishes on the menu—even dessert.

Though ultimately I didn’t bid on that piece of vineyard property, there’s no denying that Rovinj won me over with its laid-back charm. Make the trek and I can almost guarantee you that the city will earn a special place in your heart, too. And if not, feel free to stop by my little stand on the side of the road from the Pula airport to tell me how wrong I was—the first round of wine and olive oil is on me.