

# A vine line

A wine-themed cruise along the Croatian coast is a great chance for agents to sell the benefits of a small-scale sailing, finds **Jane Archer**

I've tasted wine in vineyards, caves and even in a field on a hike just outside the Slovakian capital of Bratislava – but this is the first time I've imbibed the noble grape in a set of army tunnels.

"It's a perfect place to make wine, as it stays about 19C year-round down here," says winemaker Nadia, as she leads us into a gloomy underworld some 60 metres below ground.

We're on Vis, the most westerly island in Croatia, which was a military base closed to all but the armed forces when the country was part of the

former state of Yugoslavia. When Croatia declared independence in 1991, fuelling the collapse of Yugoslavia, Vis was opened up to visitors.

Boutique hotels sprang up, tourists flocked in, wineries opened – and the island even stood in for Skopelos in Greece for the 2018 film *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*.

These dank tunnels combine a slice of Croatia's history with a taste of its viticulture, although this excursion comes with a warning. "Be careful – it's only a year old but heavy," says Nadia as ➤

Vis waterfront

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ABOVE AND INSET: *Queen Jelena* drops anchor for a swimming stop PICTURES: Sail Croatia

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### ELEGANCE FLEET

Sail Croatia's Elegance fleet consists of five sleek, modern vessels – *Esperanza*, *Katarina*, *Olimp*, *Queen Jelena* and *Romantic Star* – that can carry either 36 or 38 passengers. The vessels have many design features in common, with a sun deck and hot tub on top, a dining room, bar and shaded alfresco seating on the main deck, and cabins on the upper and lower decks (the latter with small fixed windows). Accommodation is clean and functional, as befits the outdoorsy lifestyle on these cruises. *Romantic Star* is unusual in featuring a sizeable indoor lounge, suited to shoulder-season sailings, while *Queen Jelena* stands out as it is adorned with two masts.

she pours us a white vugava with a hefty 15.2% alcohol content.

It comes on the heels of a 13% rosé and is the prelude to a two-year-old 16.9% red called plavac mali crni, which refers to the small blue grapes used to create this tipples. It's heady stuff – and not just because of the subterranean setting.

### AGENT OPPORTUNITY

We're here with Sail Croatia, a Surrey-based company with a portfolio of locally owned motorboats that can accommodate anything from 24 to 40 passengers. They sail one-week cruises, mostly from Dubrovnik to Split or vice-versa. A handful of departures are round-trip from either city or head north from Split.

Vessels are sold under three brands. Navigator and Explorer boats are for partygoers and young adventurers, and are sold direct; Elegance boats, like the one we're on, are for an older crowd. They are more comfortable – although not luxurious – more expensive and are sold through the trade.

"Our Elegance cruises are aimed at more-affluent guests interested in combining a relaxing holiday with learning about Croatian culture and history," says co-founder and director Helle Seuren. "A large percentage [of guests] have never cruised, but love the intimate, relaxed style of our product and see it as a great way to explore this region of Croatia in style."

That neatly sums up the 33 passengers on our cruise, comprising a mix of Brits, Americans, Australians and New Zealanders, mostly aged 50-plus. There are also

a few young professionals who have never cruised but liked the idea of an easy way to see Croatia – with the added bonus of tasting wine along the way.

Although the higher value of the Elegance cruises makes them well suited to selling through the trade, Seuren says UK agents account for only a "small proportion" of bookings. But with the booming popularity of Croatia cruising, and the 36-passenger *Romantic Star* and *Katarina* joining Sail Croatia's Elegance range this summer to facilitate a 60% rise in the number of departures this year, there's clearly appetite for more.

"This style of holiday is very different from traditional big-ship cruising," adds Seuren. "Little specialist knowledge is needed and there are also only two types of cabin, making it an easier sales process for agents."

### SALES SURGE

Ours is one of five wine-themed cruises Sail Croatia tested in 2024. They sold out so quickly that the company has scheduled 16 this year – and 10 are already on sale for 2026.

"They have proved a great hit, so we will review these on an ongoing basis to determine whether more departures are needed," says Seuren.

We're sailing from Split to Dubrovnik on 38-passenger *Esperanza*, by way of Milna, Hvar, Vis, Vela Luka, Korčula town and Mljet. It's the same route as taken by Sail Croatia's regular voyages and, like those sailings, we have daily swimming stops, when the vessel anchors and guests descend a ladder to cool off in the Adriatic. ➤



# DESTINATIONS

## CRUISE | CROATIA



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Lamb peka at a family-run winery; a 4x4 wine 'safari' in Brač; Hora winery, Hvar; Mljet

PICTURES: Sail Croatia; Niko Goga



However, where other Elegance cruises include only breakfast, lunch and two dinners (one ashore, the other a captain's dinner), and excursions cost extra, we've got six included wine tours, one of which involves an extra dinner on land.

The rest of the time, we hop ashore and find a restaurant we fancy, since boats stay in port every night, offering passengers a chance to sample the local food and nightlife.

### POPPING THE CORK

We don't have to wait long for our first wine tasting. Embarkation in Split is between 11 am and midday, and at 1 pm, we set off on the short cruise to Milna on the island of Brač, where we're going on a 4x4 wine 'safari' (to be clear, we are doing the drinking, not the driving).

One of the great things about this itinerary is that all the wine-tasting venues are so different. In Hvar, we're wined and dined at a family-run farm in the hills outside town, where everything is either made or grown on-site, including the olive oil and salami; while in Vis, we delve into the aforementioned military tunnels.

On the island of Korčula, we compare a modern winery in Smokvica – 20 minutes from the port at Vela Luka, where the tasting is accompanied by an accordion and guitar playing duo – with one in a steep alleyway in Korčula town, where we sip and swirl while the owner runs up and down filling our glasses. In Mljet, sommelier Matko brings it full circle as he joins us on *Esperanza* for a wine-tasting-turned-captain's dinner.

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We're exceedingly well wined and dined at each venue. Plates of Dalmatian ham, cheese, olives and bread are provided to nibble alongside the four or five wines we taste at each stop. Our 'small blue' variety turns up each time in various guises and we're introduced to some delicious whites, including a sparkling number from Zagreb, and grk, which is easier to drink than it is to say.

“The more you have, the better you pronounce it,” guide Andrea tells us on a tour of Korčula.

The town looks like a mini Dubrovnik and is reputed to be the birthplace of the 13th-century Italian explorer Marco Polo – fitting since the Venetians ruled this area at the time – and has a bar located atop the city walls to which the drinks are winched up in a basket.

It seems like a lot of effort to go to for a glass of the good stuff – better to sit back on the sun deck to sip and sail as the beautiful Croatian coast slips by. **TW**

### BOOK IT

**Sail Croatia's** seven-night Wines of Croatia cruise, sailing from Split to Dubrovnik on *Queen Jelena* and departing October 5, costs from £1,879 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes transfers, breakfast and three-course lunch daily, three dinners and wine tours with tastings. Other drinks on board cost extra and must be paid for at the end of the cruise in cash. [sail-croatia.com](http://sail-croatia.com)