

# Heart of the matter

New flights are making the Venetian towns and winding coastline of Croatia's Istrian peninsula even easier to reach, writes **Mary Novakovich**

Istria's popularity shows no sign of fading. This heart-shaped peninsula, tucked away in the northernmost stretch of Croatia's Adriatic coast, has long been a favourite destination for European travellers arriving by car – mainly from Slovenia, Germany and Austria.

But new Jet2.com flights to Pula from Manchester and (from next May) East Midlands, plus Tui flights from Birmingham, show how eager British holidaymakers are to spend time in Croatia's largest peninsula.

The appeal is obvious. Foodies come for the wine and Italian-influenced cuisine; families love the large beach resorts with water parks and children's activities; while holidaymakers want to be wowed by architecture in Venetian-style towns, where serene natural beauty and a deep sense of history go hand in hand.

#### PULA AND BEYOND

Istria's only airport is in its main city, Pula. Some holidaymakers might be tempted to skip straight out of ➤

Rovinj, Istria

PICTURE: Shutterstock/xbrchx



## WHERE TO *stay*



### Park Plaza Histria Pula

(above) is on the Verudela peninsula south of Pula's city centre, with an outdoor pool and nearby beach. B&B doubles from €210. [arenahotels.com](http://arenahotels.com)

**Hotel Neptun** on Veliki Brijun faces the harbour and is built in traditional 19th-century Austrian style. Doubles from €162 B&B, including ferry transfer and one free return crossing a day per stay. [np-brijuni.hr/en/accommodation](http://np-brijuni.hr/en/accommodation)

**Valamar Riviera Hotel & Residence** is on the seafront in Poreč old town, with free access to the sister hotel's facilities on nearby Sveti Nikola island. B&B doubles from €169. [valamar.com](http://valamar.com)

**Maistra Select Island Hotel Katarina** (below) is a 10-minute boat ride from Rovinj and has an outdoor pool and beach access. All boat journeys are included in the room rate. Room-only doubles from €169. [maistra.com](http://maistra.com)



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Pula amphitheatre; restaurant at Meneghetti Wine Hotel & Winery; aerial view of the Old Town of Motovun; Rovinj and harbour **PICTURES:** Matej Paluh; Shutterstock/Mazur Travel; Adam Batterbee; SGFd.o.o

the city in favour of the coastal resorts, but that would mean missing out on one of Croatia's greatest ancient Roman sites, the 1st-century AD Pula Arena. Built around the same time as Rome's Colosseum, it's one of the best-preserved amphitheatres in the world and definitely worth a visit.

From Pula, buses run to the most popular resorts, Rovinj and Poreč, but there's much more to see along the coast and inland for clients who hire a car. South of Pula, past the lively resort of Medulin, the landscape gets more rugged. Here, at Istria's southernmost tip, is the Premantura peninsula, home to Cape Kamenjak Nature Park. Adventure-seeking holidaymakers come here to swim from rocky and pebbly beaches, watch locals jump from cliffs or rent a kayak or paddleboard to explore a jagged coastline pockmarked with caves.

### QUIRKY CROATIA

North of Pula is the attractive fishing village of Fažana – worth a stop in itself just to stroll around its colourful lanes and have a swim. But it's also the departure point for the 15-minute boat ride to Brijuni National Park, which certainly qualifies as one of Croatia's oddest places – in the nicest sense of the word.

Of the archipelago's 14 islands, two are open to the public, and it's the larger of the two, Veliki Brijun, that contains the quirkiest mishmash of history. It was inhabited during the Roman and Byzantine empires,

“Some might skip Pula in favour of the resorts, but that would mean missing out

became an aristocratic playground under the influence of an Austrian industrialist in the 19th century and later, a summer residence for former Yugoslav president Tito. That storied past has left a mix of ruins alongside much later additions including a golf course, several hotels and villas, beaches and even a safari park.

Holidaymakers driving around Istria will soon spot countless signs advertising wineries and olive farms. Istrians pride themselves on their award-winning wines and olive oils, and connoisseurs are spoilt for choice.

One of Croatia's finest hotels, Meneghetti Wine Hotel & Winery, a 20-minute drive north of Fažana, has always been a go-to place for top-quality wines and oils. This year, the hotel opened its Wine Lounge for tastings and there's a new events space for weddings in this idyllic spot, surrounded by olive groves and oak and cypress trees.

### BEAUTY SPOTS

Another half-hour drive along Istria's west coast leads to one of Croatia's most breathtaking towns, Rovinj, which embodies Venetian-style elegance. Its old town





FROM FAR LEFT:  
Cobbled street  
in the Old Town  
of Rovinj; Cape  
Kamenjak  
Nature Park

PICTURE: Shutterstock/  
SCStock; Aleksandar Gospic

is on a thumb-shaped peninsula topped with the baroque spire of St Euphemia Church, with narrow lanes swirling around it. Because it's one of the most exquisite places in Croatia, it does get busy.

An appealing option is to stay at the three-star Island Hotel Katarina, set on a little isle a 10-minute boat ride from Rovinj's harbour. There's a beach here too, so even if clients are staying in the town, they can hop over for a swim – and enjoy some of the best views of Rovinj while they're there.

A close rival to Rovinj in its beauty is Poreč, the largest tourist resort in Istria and home to the Unesco-listed 6th-century Euphrasian Basilica. The old town has kept its Venetian charm and it's

in the surrounding areas where holidaymakers can find large beach resorts geared toward families.

Istria's inland hilltop villages are nearly as much of a draw as its coastline. Motovun is the best known, and while its medieval square at the top of the village can get crowded during the season, it's a pleasant stop on one of the cycling tours on the Parenzana bike trail that follows a former narrow-gauge railway line from Trieste to Poreč.

Motovun is also truffle country and foodies will want to visit one of the farms such as Karlič Tartufi, where you can go on a truffle hunt with their adorable dogs, followed by a truffle-tastic lunch in the restaurant. It's a true taste of Istria. **TW**

### BOOK IT

**Jet2holidays** offers seven nights on a B&B basis at BO Hotel Palazzo in Poreč from £1,004 per person, twin-share, including flights and transfers. [jet2holidays.com](https://jet2holidays.com)

**Completely Croatia** offers a five-night stay at Hotel Spirito Santo in Rovinj from £1,549 per person, based on two sharing on a B&B basis. The price includes flights and the choice of private transfers or car hire. [completelycroatia.co.uk](https://completelycroatia.co.uk)

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