

Heart of the matter

Katie McGonagle finds coast, countryside and character in Croatia's Istrian peninsula

@katie_mcgonagle

We're standing silent but tensed for action, when the sound of two short barks reaches us over the rustling of the leaves. Our guide dashes towards the source, ducking under the branches of oak and hazelnut trees as he hot-foots it to Candy, his trusty truffle-hunter.

Hurrying to catch up, we find white curly-haired Candy – a Lagotto Romagnolo dog, bred for this very purpose – standing expectantly by the base of an oak tree, as her master digs gently among the roots to uncover the knobbly mass of black truffle she's just sniffed out.

We're at Karlic Tartufi, a family-owned truffle farm in the hills of Istria, one of just a handful of places in the world where this 'black gold' grows – an apt description, since black truffles can fetch up to €400 a kilo, and their white counterparts 10 times as much. Here, there's no food that can't be bettered by the addition of truffle – the farm shop puts it in olive oil, ham, cheese and, perhaps most surprisingly, chocolate spread (better than it sounds), proud as they are of their prized export.

Then again, they've got reason to be pleased with themselves. This underrated region boasts

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The underrated region boasts the epicurean delights of Italy, pretty seaside towns, rolling hills and Roman ruins

all the epicurean delights of neighbouring Italy (though at more palatable Croatian prices), pretty little seaside towns, rolling hills and Roman ruins – and that's just for starters.

► PULA

Sitting at the tip of this heart-shaped peninsula is Pula, accessible via surprisingly short flights from London, Bristol, Manchester, Leeds, Edinburgh and East Midlands. We took off from Gatwick at 7am and were goggling over Pula's grand Roman amphitheatre by 9.30am.

Built in the first century, the arena is Croatia's best-preserved Roman structure, so completely untouched that you can almost feel the crowds jeering and the lions clawing at each other in the sand below. Sure, it's more likely to play host to music festivals and sporting events than

TOP TIP

Get free car hire and free airport parking with any James Villa Holidays booking with flights made by March 5

ASK THE EXPERT



Nikki Frampton-Fell, product contractor, James Villa Holidays
Croatia is the best place for a villa holiday, with hospitable people, great food and fantastic landscapes. Our Istria villas are modern and spacious, set in peaceful countryside and perfectly located to explore the medieval villages, historical sites and seaside resorts. It's easy to get around and find out why this beautiful region is so popular.

→ gladiators these days, but it should be top of any sightseeing list nonetheless, especially if visitors have time to delve into the tunnels below the arena for more artefacts from the ancient world.

Evidence of Pula's classical past is scattered around the city. Set at the end of the Roman Via Flavia, which began in Trieste, it attracted wealthy families who built everything from the grand Triumphal Arch to the Temple of Augustus. Look hard at the city walls and you might even spot relief carvings taken from Roman columns and recycled as building blocks for the rest of the city.

Pula is ideal for a quick weekend break, but that would be missing the real magic of this region, which lies in getting outside the city and exploring the smaller towns and villages along the coast. From our base at a James Villa Holidays property in arty Groznanj, near the Slovenian border, it was no more than an hour's drive to the region's beauty spots, making the region ripe for exploration.



LEFT: Local truffles



Look hard at the city walls and you might spot relief carvings from Roman columns recycled as building blocks

▶ ROVINJ AND POREC

This seaside town is made for meandering - there's no better way to appreciate its little cobbled streets and sea views, popping in to its farmers' market or tiny little ceramics shops when the mood strikes.

Yes, you can climb the hill up to the impressive Church of St Euphemia or even hire a bike to get a feel for the

city and its surroundings (rental from €10 a day), but set out to Rovinj with a must-see list in hand and you're rather missing the point.

Much better to wander through the old town, follow one of the signs that say 'terrace, this way' and clamber down a few ancient stone steps to find a cafe set right over the water's edge. Look out for swimmers bathing in its calm waters, with yachts sailing to and fro in the distance, or listen out for the strains of the string quartet playing in the main square.

Another step up the coastline is Porec, proving just as photogenic with its winding cobbled roads, pastel-painted shutters and Gothic-arched shops lining the streets.

Here, it's definitely worth making a beeline for the basilica, even if you think you're not interested in history. This building dates back to the sixth century (and there are the remains of a fourth-century chapel on-site, in case 1,500 years of history isn't quite impressive enough), and

Tried & Tested

VILLA PRINCIPE, GROZANJ

If first impressions are everything, then this contemporary, single-storey villa scores off the charts. The views from the private infinity-style pool alone - all rolling hills and gorgeous green countryside - will give clients the wow factor they're looking for on arrival.

It's got all the modern fittings and slick decor you'd expect, but takes the edge off the impersonal feel with homely furnishings and bright fabrics, not to mention a piano in the living room and little touches such as a well-stocked fruit bowl and array of kitchen essentials.

The two double bedrooms and one twin are all en suite. There's an extra WC and a spacious living room and diner, leading out to a patio with a private pool and barbecue area, and free Wi-Fi throughout.

The quiet location means car hire is a must, as with most of James Villas' 47 properties in the Istrian peninsula. But the property is within a short drive of good bars and restaurants in nearby Buje, for those who want a little nightlife as well.



Book it: A seven-night stay, including flights from Gatwick on June 16, starts at £669 per person based on six sharing. Bookings made before March 5 also receive free car hire and airport parking. jamesvillas.co.uk

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Prices are based on per property, per week, on selected dates in April and May, they are subject to availability and Terms of Rental.



LEFT:
Rovinj

RIGHT:
Euphrasian
Basilica,
Porec

BELOW:
Brijuni
National Park



4 OF THE BEST

TASTES OF ISTRIA

Raise a glass at Damjanic winery, which produces white malvasia and red boronja with aplomb. Leave room in your case to bring a few bottles home.

Taste organic olive oil at Chiavalon and find out why this producer has been rated among the world's top 15, and what you should look for in your extra virgin olive oil.

Get a private chef to whip up a feast. James Villa Holidays can book a chef for €40-€80 a head for a tailored four-course meal with wine, in your villa.

Fill up at Pula's farmers' market, where you'll find honey scented with sage or chestnut, rich truffle oils, fiery grappa and hefty wedges of cheese.

→ still displays its original mosaic floors and Greek marble columns, with later medieval frescoes every bit as exciting as its original features.

► BRIJUNI NATIONAL PARK

If it's good enough for Angelina Jolie – just the latest in a string of celebrities to pass their time on this little group of islands, following in the footsteps of Queen Elizabeth II, Sophia Loren, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, no less – it's probably worth a visit.

Of the 14 islands that make up the national park, just two are open to visitors. The largest, Veliki Brijun, is a pleasant 20-minute ferry ride from port town Fazana (itself just a short drive from Pula), and though no one



Exploring Istria is about taking your time, forgetting the sightseeing schedule and pausing to appreciate the way of life

lives here full time, it has a thriving tourist trade by way of a couple of waterfront hotels.

A sightseeing train takes visitors on a loop around the island, stopping off at its mix of odd attractions – from an early 20th-century zoo, now home

to just one elephant, ostriches and a handful of other animals, to the coastal spot that sports the fossilised footprint of a dinosaur. The highlight is The Boathouse, a museum set in the one-time home of the island's only doctor, which tells the story of the islands' flora and fauna to brilliant effect. It's so good, in fact, that it's worth making sure visitors know the time of the last ferry, as they're liable to get swept up in the natural history of the island.

Then again, exploring Istria is all about taking your time, forgetting the sightseeing schedule and pausing to appreciate the way of life on this Croatian peninsula – all the better with a glass of malvasia in hand and a sea view ahead. **TW**



PICTURES: CROATIAN NATIONAL TOURIST BOARD/DEJAN HREN; IGOR SELER; IVO BIOCINA