

48 HOURS

SPLIT

Sleep in a palace
and bask on
beaches in
Croatia's second
city, says
Ella Buchan

Nowhere blends the ancient and modern so beautifully as Split.

Its beating heart is the Diocletian's Palace, one of the world's best preserved and most imposing Roman ruins. This is a living, breathing museum, with around 3,000 people still residing within its limestone walls.

The labyrinth of alleyways, squares and smooth stone steps can just as easily lead to a trendy bar with tiny outdoor tables or a leafy courtyard with washing lines strung between apartments.

All this is just steps from the pedestrianised Riva promenade, lined with cafes and restaurants, while bustling Bacvice Beach is a 15-minute walk away.

Direct easyJet flights from London make it ideal for a weekend city break, with easy access from the harbour to some of Croatia's 1,200-plus islands. Do Something Different has a day tour of Brač (£43), which boasts one of the Adriatic's best beaches.

Suggest clients staying a few nights or more take a tour of Salona, three miles outside the city and once the capital of the Roman province of Dalmatia. Viator has a three-hour tour with a local guide (from £52), including Kliss Fortress, which *Game of Thrones* fans may recognise as the city of Meereen.

▶ DAY ONE

09.00: Roman emperor Diocletian fancied himself the reincarnation of Jupiter, and the lavishness of what became his 'retirement home', the 4th-century Diocletian's Palace, reflects this grandeur. Start in the basement halls, entered through the south or brass gate by the harbour (£4.50). Built to prop up the apartments above, these eerie rooms are perfectly preserved thanks to years of being used to store waste. Excavated in 1952, the caverns were used for many of Daenerys' scenes in *Game of Thrones*.

diocletianspalace.org





13.00: Touch the Grgur Ninski statue



16.00: Coffee stop



17.00: The Archaeological Museum



14.30: View from Marjan Hill



08.00: Rafting on the Cetina River

Where to stay



SAVE

Art Hotel

A 10-minute walk from Diocletian's Palace, this property straddles business and boutique. Rooms are big and bright with plush beds and minibars, while the wellness centre with pool and sauna give it an edge over some smaller properties. Bigger family rooms make this a great choice for those travelling with kids. Doubles from £85 per night.

arthotel.hr



SPEND

Hotel Peristil

With just 12 rooms, three of them singles, Hotel Peristil is small but perfectly formed. A few steps from the Silver Gate, with views over the Cathedral of St Domnius and Bell Tower, the building incorporates original palace ramparts. Rooms are simple and unfussy, containing antique furniture that contrasts with the modern decor. Doubles from £100 per night.

hotelperistil.com



SPLURGE

Hotel Vestibul Palace

This member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World ticks the boxes on both counts – it has only seven rooms, each stylish and beautifully appointed. Some feature exposed parts of the original walls, while all have Aveda toiletries, huge beds and handmade furniture. The hotel is built into the palace vestibule, from which the melodic sounds of traditional Croatian a cappella or 'klapa' singers drift into the courtyard. Doubles from £110 per night.

vestibulpalace.com

→ **10.00:** Emerge blinking into the daylight via a staircase leading to the Peristyle, the colonnaded central square of the palace and a popular meeting spot. Stop for coffee at Lvxor, a cafe with seats on the stone steps among pillars of red granite and sphinxes in various states of repair, imported (or pinched, some believe) by Diocletian from Egypt.

lvxor.hr

10.30: You'll need a head for heights to mount the claustrophobic staircase to the top of the Bell Tower, built in 1100AD (entry £2.20). At the top you can look over the city landscape, but most striking of all is the view down into the bells below. Less vertiginous is the Cathedral of St Domnius, also located off the Peristyle (entry £4). Originally Diocletian's mausoleum, the Christians he once persecuted destroyed his tomb and converted it into a church in the 5th century.

12.00: Head north towards the main city square, Pjaca, in front of the west (iron) gate of the palace.

Venetians took over the city in 1420 and evidence of their rule can be seen in various buildings, including the old city hall, which is now an art gallery whose recent exhibits include Picasso's bullfighting scenes.

13.00: Exit the palace via the golden gate at the north, stopping to rub the toe of Croatian sculptor Grgur Ninski's statue, said to bring luck. Then head west, following the palace walls for five minutes to reach Veli Varos, one of the oldest parts of the city. Grab a table at Konoba Varos (Ban Mladenova 9) for traditional Dalmatian food like monkfish tails marinated in olive oil and lemon (£11.90). konobavaros.com

14.30: Turn right out of the restaurant and head up Ul Senjska for a steep, 10-minute climb up to Marjan Hill, Split's green oasis. Stop at the viewing point for spectacular photos taking in the palace, harbour and distant mountains. Caffè Bar Vidilica occupies a prime spot at the entrance to this pretty park.



Walk for 45 minutes to reach pretty Kasuni beach, with a cafe and dedicated sections for dogs and nudists

15.00: Marjan's paths weave through shaded, fragrant forest to some of Split's best beaches. Walk for 45 minutes around the southern side of the park, past old stone houses and tiny churches, to reach pretty gravel beach Kasuni, complete with a cafe and dedicated sections for dogs and nudists.

19.00: By the iron gate, Mazzgoon serves traditional food with a modern twist on its shady terrace (1 Bajamontijeva). The menu includes homemade pasta from Korcula island and shrimp burgers. Mains cost from around £7.50. mazzgoonfood.com

21.00: Figa cocktail bar has hobbit-sized tables and benches with stripy cushions arranged down the stone steps – perfect for a spot of people watching (Buvina 1). Night owls can finish up at Ghetto, a walled courtyard bar with furry seats and bird murals, which is open until 2am (Dosud 10).

DAY TWO

08.00: Escape the city for a morning rafting on the crystalline Cetina River in Omis, passing through rapids, caves and waterfalls. Situated 15 miles from Split, the Omis Riviera is ringed by mountains with vineyards, olive plantations and tiny fishing villages. Viator has a three-hour trip from £60 per person, with pick-up from the Riva promenade.

12.30: Back within the palace walls, Bokeria (8 Domaldova) serves seasonal local produce and seafood with Mediterranean flair in a bright, airy space with wine bottles lining the walls. Mains from around £10. facebook.com/bokeriasplit

14.00: Spend the afternoon browsing souvenir, art and craft shops in the palace. Studio Naranca (Majstora 2) sells brightly coloured jewellery and works by local graphic artist Pavo Majic. Oleoteka Uje (Maruliceva 1) has local spirits, wines, olive oils and scented soaps. On the Peristyle, Atelier Perajica has passed through three generations of photographers, documenting decades of life in Split. studionaranca.com; uje.hr; atelierperajica.com

16.00: Pause for one of Split's favourite pastimes – coffee and people watching. On the Riva, Cakula has Renaissance-style frescoes inside and outdoor seating cooled by the sea breeze. Northwest of the palace and tucked behind the National Theatre, Luka serves some of the old town's best ice cream in flavours from apple pie and apricot to salted caramel, at 80p a scoop (2 Svaciceva). facebook.com/LukalceCream

17.00: From Luka, turn right then take the next right up

Zrinsko-Frankopanska to reach the Archaeological Museum, founded in 1820 (entry £3.50). The impressive collection includes stone epitaphs from the ancient Roman settlement of Salona, Greek ceramics and artefacts from prehistoric to medieval times. armus.hr

20.00: Konoba Dioklecijan is a local gem with a big terrace set into the original openings of the palace (Dosud 9/Aljesina). Nibble on a selection of local cheese and salty, smoky Dalmatian ham while sipping house-made wine for around £1.20 a glass. Then feast on barbecued lamb or beef stew, with mains from around £5.

22.00: Round off the night at La Bodega, an antique tavern and cellar in the palace's Vocni Trg (Fruit Square) with more than 250 varieties of Croatian wine. Decorated with dusty gramophones, dryer hoods and typewriters, with hams hanging over the chunky wooden bar, it's a cool and cosy spot at which to start or end an evening. labodega.hr/split