



Safety First In Croatia

Nigel Spike

It was a family holiday but Nigel Spike couldn't resist the underwater temptations of the Adriatic ...

WHY CROATIA? Well, it's surprisingly close (a two and a half hour flight from Scotland), it's warm - and the diving is good. There's an awful lot of coastline in this increasingly popular country, with access to water containing excellent life; fish might not teem in Mediterranean numbers, but there are nudibranchs aplenty, together with cuttlefish, lobster and other crustaceans to keep the average photographer clicking away merrily.

Flying into Pula, we stayed locally, plumping for the Orca diving centre,

conveniently located for ready (boat) access to some prime sites. We received a warm welcome from an enthusiastic team of staff instructors who have a bewildering variety of languages at their disposal: English and German are the most used. Such is the mix of nationalities coming to this part of the world that you can find yourself diving with Swedish, Swiss, Polish, German - even American - buddies.

Many divers from mainland Europe pile their kit into cars and drive hundreds of miles to settle in the area for a week or so. Camping, apartments and hotels cater for the mix of accommodation required by this League of Nations gathering.

The infrastructure is good, enabling easy access to other towns and villages; much of the building on the coast in particular makes sympathetic use of slopes of pine trees to break up the outline of rows of tourist buildings. If you are not taking up, say, a 10 dive package over a week, then hiring a car

lets you explore some of the country: well worth it, with islands, Roman and other historical remains, and national parks to visit; a day trip to Venice on a 30 knot ship is a popular option.

Croatia is not yet in the EEC, so you need to buy Kuna, the local currency (and euros for Venice!). Prices are generally very reasonable, although perhaps creeping up to parity with Scotland: the days of paying peanuts are long gone. Eating out al fresco can take on an Italian flavour with a plethora of restaurants in the narrow streets: fish is a speciality - but don't worry, the curse of McDonalds has struck here too...

Anyway, back to the diving: the effect of sometimes vicious storms and erosion has produced some interesting underwater scenery, with lots of crevices for the local fauna to use for shelter. Beware, as sharp storms can blow out a day's diving. Drift diving is unpredictable, with the same site experiencing steady, relaxing current - or none at all.

The 'bottom' tends to be a fine white

silty sand, as a result of the erosion of rock; when this is whipped up it can restrict visibility - not a problem when we were there. One of the local dive sites, Fraskeric, is a series of four short tunnels, with walls festooned with vivid sedentary life; on one dive here I counted no fewer than nine *Discodoris nudibranchs* in one small overhung cavelet.

All diving is escorted, but due regard is paid to the experience of individuals: no-one feels 'short changed' by the presence of those less conservative as regards air consumption. An enjoyable time can be had looking for sea horses in the shallows before getting back on board the boat.

When demand permits, and usually in conjunction with another dive centre, a bigger boat can be used to visit some of the impressive wrecks off the coast of Croatia, although this does demand a two hour passage (no real hardship on a sunny, calm day).

We visited 'the' wreck, off Pola: the *Baron Gautsch* is a passenger ship sunk by a mine soon after the start of the First World War, with hundreds of casualties. Lying upright in 39 metres, it is treated as a serious undertaking, for experienced divers only.

The wreck is buoyed bow and stern; the first act on tying up was to put a decompression bar over the side, equipped with a nitrox cylinder. A further cylinder was carried down to the wreck by the dive guide for anyone running short of air before the ascent. Finally, all divers put their name on a slate to be left at the bottom of the shot; when returning to the line, divers crossed their names off: the guide waited for all names to be cancelled before making his own ascent, in case anyone had become lost. Following the guide down the shot line, we were treated to a tour from one end of the ship to the other; two levels are open for easy penetration, although it is easy to be sidetracked by the shoals of fish and the (*Flabelina*) nudibranchs...

After an appropriate luncheon interval, and a democratic vote on whether or not to dive the *Baron* again, the boat moved for the short trip to the wreck of the *Istra*, lying in 41 metres (30m to the deck). This again was sunk as a result of hitting a mine, this time in 1943. It lies upright, but with a sizeable gap taken out of the hull near the bow section.

Safety precautions were put in place as before, with an enjoyable tour of the ship for all before some entertaining, extended decompression as buddies ascended at different rates, trying to accommodate the differing requirements of the wonderful boxes on wrists: with some modern computers, it might be an idea to take some waterproof Sudoku puzzles down with you to while away the odd quarter of an hour!

With the depth involved, as well as (to be realistic) long decompression stops, you have to think of kit: the shortie wetsuit that was fine for the other dives is, I would suggest, just not on for this; a thick wetsuit seemed to suit most. The usual 12L steel tanks had been ditched in favour of 15s by the dive centres.

I was 'allowed out to play' on the back of a family holiday that involved actually seeing scenery that was not underwater - and very pleasant it was, too. Thus I only sampled the diving available in this part of the world, helped by the relaxed, friendly staff at Orca. I intend to return.



colourful nudibranch



spiny lobster



flabelina affinis