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Istria: Tuscan Style living on Croatia’s Adriatic Coast

By Tricia A. Mitchell

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evning has arrived, and a tangerine-colored sun sets behind the limestone arches of a 2,000-year-old Roman amphitheater. Above, seagulls dance on a warm sea breeze—a peaceful contrast to the line of armored actors and their iron swords preparing to engage in hand-to-hand combat. However, my husband and I are looking for something a little more calming.

You might think I was somewhere in Italy. However, the evening I’ve described took place in a town called Pula, on Croatia’s Istrian Peninsula.

Before my husband Shawn and I traveled to Pula for a five-week trip, I’d read descriptions proclaiming Istria to be the “new Tuscany.” Indeed, Istria’s scenic routes—dotted with Cypress trees and crimson poppies—does remind me of the alluring landscape outside Florence, where I’ve purchased pepper-salt olive oil and opulent dessert wine, and where I’ve enjoyed meals in locals’ homes.

But Istria and Tuscany are pleasant differently. Istria is more affordable, allowing us to live on three islands or relaxing at the beach, and your evening dining on wild asparagus roasts in a hilltop town.

You’re about 60 miles from Trieste, and just a four-hour ferry ride from Venice across the Adriatic Sea (it’s about $80 for day-trip tickets, but ferries only run out during the tourist season).

Along the coast, pine trees frame azure waters and pebbly beaches, while quiet coves lure snorkilers, kayakers, and sailing enthusiasts. Romani, Istria’s most famous of Istria’s sandstone towns, with its lemon, raspberry, and ochre-colored buildings packed tightly into a square, is a cup of Jivka kava (Croatia’s version of a latte) in Romani while looking out at the sparkling Adriatic, before having a picnic of Istrian cheese and olives and watching the sailboats go by.

Istria has had its share of rulers. Historical occupiers have included everyone from the Illyrians and Romans to the Venetians and Austro-Hungarians. However, for the past 26 years, Istria was part of Italy, which explains why city names are still written in both Croatian and Italian. It all makes for something a little more calming.

The base of just 1 $300 a month, Tricia and her husband enjoy exploring hilltop towns in Istria, which overlook grape vines and olive groves.

Istria cuisine includes everything from fresh seafood and pasta dishes, like fusili, to homemade sausages and sauerkraut. Gourmands will enjoy Istria’s olive oil, prosciutto, sheep- and goats’-milk cheese, and olive oil. In 2017 Croatian olive oil was declared first among the best in the world. The Istrian peninsula hosts the New York International Olive Oil Competition. It certainly tasted delicious drizzled over a spinach, goat cheese, and walnut salad.

While Croatian is the official language, young Croatians often speak flawless English and are enthusiastic to practice it with visitors. It’s not just the locals who are welcoming, either. Whether you’re in Pula or in the smallest Istrian town, you’re bound to encounter ex-pats from all walks of life who have carved out new lives here.

Four years ago, freelance writer Izel Potunić and her husband moved to the quiet village of Gradiček. The couple renounced an old stone home there, eventually finishing it off with a brick oven specially designed for baking artisan bread.

“I love the friendly people, relaxed pace, and living close to nature. There’s also plenty to explore: hilltop villages, seacoast towns, gastronomic festivals, wild beaches, and walking trails,” Izel adds.

Eager to share stories about her new life in Istria, Izel writes about Istria culture and places of interest on her blog, Iztiramudownwindow.com.

The region’s pleasant climate makes it possible to enjoy the outdoor the tourist season. A quarter of a century ago, Istria was an exclave of the classic Mediterranean, with maximum temperatures of 82 F in July and minimums of 38 F in January. Island areas with higher elevations see greater temperature differences. Fortunately, you can swim in the Adriatic Sea on Istria from May to October. Also, if you’d rather stay out of the sun, opportunities exist on the peninsula and cycling trails are easy to find.

Medieval frescoes tuck away in tiny chapels await art history fans, and there are plenty of castles and archaeological parks to visit. Istria’s largest medieval fortress is in its administrative capital, Pula.

Winer Jules Verne is said to have been so impressed by Pula’s dramatic bay that he converted his novel, 20,000 Leagues under the Sea, into the novel, 20,000 Leagues under the Sea. The penultimate chapter was shot in Pula. The city is also home to the Istrian Museum of Architecture and Art.

On a budget of just 1 $300 a month, Tricia and her husband enjoy exploring hilltop towns in Istria, which overlook grape vines and olive groves.

Geography: The name “Istria” describes two different territories: the Istrian Peninsula and Istria County. The Istrian Peninsula is an arrow-shaped land encompassing Croatia, Italy, and Slovenia, but is mostly owned by Croatia. Istria County, located on the peninsula just a bit larger than Rhode Island, is “the most beautiful part of Istria,” the Istria Facebook group. This group is small and growing, but its members share everything from regional cultural events and trips to homemade sausages and sauerkraut. Gourmands can enjoy a glass of chilled Malvasia wine, soft music, and a chance to enjoy the outdoors all year. Coastal areas like Pula are classic for relaxing at the beach, and your evening dining on wild asparagus roasts in a hilltop town.

Cost of living: We spent $532 to rent a furnished one-bedroom apartment in the heart of Pula’s Old Town. It was on a picturesque main street, less than 200 yards from the Arch of the Sergi—a triumphal arch built by the Romans. Shopping at European chain stores and making your own meals at the farmers markets and tiny grocery outlets, our groceries were roughly $155. We try to do a lot of at-home cooking, so our food costs may be lower than the average traveler’s. However, at Pula’s restaurants, you can try a tasty seafood dish (like squid, octopus, and cuttlefish) for about $12.50.

Visas and bureaucracy: U.S. citizens can stay in Croatia for up to 90 days on a tourist visa, which is issued on arrival. If you want to stay longer than three months, you must visit a local police station in Croatia and initiate a formal process demonstrating that you have health insurance and a minimum income, per couple, of $473 a month. See more details at Stat.gov.hr/j20032.htm.

Base Yourself in Istria—What You Need to Know