

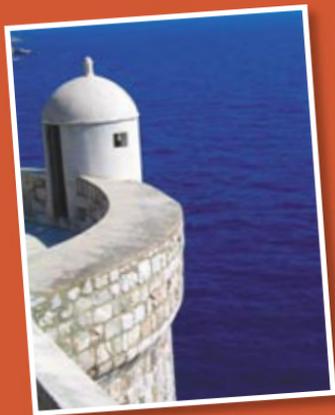
# GOING PLACES #1

JOHN COONEY



# DUBROVNIK

## MEDIEVAL MAGIC



Funny how things change, eh. We knock up timber fences to keep the kids next door from nicking our lemons and riding bikes on our lawns. But, 1000 years ago, our ancestors threw up massive rocky ramparts to keep the neighbours at bay. “Medieval walled cities” – that’s what we now call those old towns. And with their soaring battlements, looming castles, towering cathedrals and cobblestoned alleyways, they’re the stuff good fairytales are made of.

**T**o be honest, I'd never heard of Dubrovnik. I wouldn't have bothered to go there if it hadn't been one of the stop-off places on our Mediterranean cruise. And I would've been the loser. Because Dubrovnik, trust me, is nothing short of magic.

I caught my first glimpse of this fortress-from-the-Middle-Ages as our ship slid through vivid blue waters on its way up the Croatian coast. And I was instantly won over. The old city is an architectural marvel, jutting out on a peninsula into the Adriatic Sea, and encircled by ancient fortifications that rise a solid 25 metres from the water's edge.

*"Grad Dubrovnik smješten je na krajnjem jugu Republike Hrvatske. Proteže se u duljini od 20.5 km od rta Orsula na istoku do Bršćina na zapadu,"*\* said one of the websites I looked at. And, as you can imagine, I was none the wiser. But, fortunately, the Croatian guide who welcomed us ashore spoke English. And as she led us across a wooden bridge and through huge arched gates into the Old Town, I fell under Dubrovnik's spell.

It was like stepping back in time. Before us lay the *Stradun* – the gleaming limestone street that runs straight through the middle of town to a second set of gates at the other end. Quaint shops and cafes line the route, and narrow alleys lead off steeply from either side.

Just inside the gate is a domed fountain (dated 1444) in which ancient visitors to this hygiene-conscious city had to wash themselves before they were allowed any further. We'd showered that morning, thankfully, and were allowed to board a coach and head up into the surrounding suburbs for a birds-eye view of the Old Town.



**D**ubrovnik, from that height, is a patchwork sea of terra-cotta roofs, punctured here and there by a sculpted dome or tower, and surrounded by those ever-present honey-coloured walls – first erected (according to our guide) way back in the ninth century.

Croatia's long and colourful history is littered with foreign influences – from the Romans (as early as 395AD) ... to the Venetians (who were jealous of the region's sea-power and treasures) ... the Hapsburgs (who plonked castles everywhere) ... the Turks (who came conquering in the name of Islam) ... and the Nazis (who invaded during World War II).

Worried by Serbian nationalism, Croatia declared its independence from the former communist Yugoslavia in 1991 – which, in turn, led to a bloody struggle. The Serbs invaded (with help from the Yugoslavian Armed Forces) and engaged in some 'ethnic cleansing' – plus an eight-month siege of poor old Dubrovnik. I later saw a map near the Old Town walls, pin-pointing which of the city's structures (more than half of them) got clobbered during



the bombardment. And from up above the city it was easy to see which roofs had been replaced in the massive repair effort following the ceasefire (the bright orange ones that haven't yet weathered).

**B**efore heading back into the Old Town, we sat in rows in this tiny outdoor theatre and enjoyed a lively folklore show – traditional Croatian song and dance. These attractive young entertainers in their colourful costumes



and hats were so full of life and fun and music and hope, I found it hard to believe they'd only recently survived a brutal, hateful war.

Down on the Stradun, we followed our guide through a maze of squashed-up side-streets ... climbed countless flights of ancient stone steps ... poked around inside the Church of St Blaise (baroque style, if you're into styles) ... roamed the Sponza Palace (one-time customs-house and mint) with its elegant façade and majestic courtyard ... explored a 14th-century Franciscan monastery (where Napoleon's troops were once billeted) ... checked out one of the oldest apothecary's shops (pharmacies) in the world ... and saw enough architectural and artistic jewels to give a man a serious headache.

I was, by this stage, totally walked out. Which is a shame. Because I never got to venture along the top of Dubrovnik's 25-metre-high, 6-metre-thick, 2-kilometre-long wall with its 16 towers. You're allowed up there (so long as, I guess, you're suitably washed). And the view, I'm told is sensational: the restored Old Town on one side, with its marble-paving, tall houses, convents, churches, fountains and museums – and a brilliant stretch of blue Adriatic on the other side.

Croatia has long been rated one of the most beautiful parts of Europe. And you don't have to be there long to see why ...

**F**unny how things change, eh. Once upon a time, bearded, black-robed nobles met on these same streets to discuss the city's fate. But today, it's just tourists, meeting in outdoor cafés to discuss the city's charm.

Which is what I did that Tuesday morning on the Stradun. Under the beady eye of St Blaise (the city's patron saint, whose

statue stands by the city wall), I sampled a strong cappuccino ... watched locals going about their normal Tuesday morning business ... and listened while a skinny minstrel with a guitar sang some slightly-out-of-tune Croatian ballad.

Magic? You bet!

Dubrovnik? You gotta go there! ❁

\*Translation: "The City of Dubrovnik is situated at the far south of the Republic of Croatia. It stretches along 20.5 km from Cape Orsula in the east to Brscine in the west."



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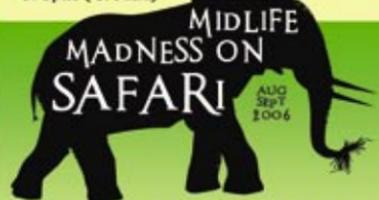
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