

Croatia...

...a land of scenery and seagulls

Words: **Stuart Render**

CROATIA'S ISTRIAN PENINSULA has become a popular destination for holidaymakers looking for that special blend of Mediterranean atmosphere, great food and world-

class scenery. But the region has more than a few surprises. It's not every day, for example, that you find yourself sitting in a café next to James Joyce. After all, the Irish

Rovinj is hailed as Croatia's 'Istrian jewel'

novelist, short story writer, poet and literary critic, regarded by many as one of the most influential and important authors of the 20th century, died in 1941.

I'm in Pula, the capital of the Istrian peninsula, that bit of western Croatia that sticks out into the northern reaches of the Adriatic, almost due east from Venice.

The city was an important provincial centre during the later period of the Roman empire and its legacy of public buildings from the time is among the most impressive in Europe.

Not far from where I'm sharing a bench with Mr Joyce is the city's most famous attraction and one of

the country's architectural gems. Constructed between 27BC and 68AD Pula's Roman amphitheatre is the only one of its kind in the world today with a complete outer circle wall. In its day this magnificent building, with 72 'windows', seated around 23,000 people. They were attracted by the opportunity to see animal fights and executions in the morning, then after lunch, gladiators fighting gladiators –and it was all free!

Portarata Square is home to the 'Arc of the Sergi', an original Roman gate and Pula's second best known attraction. My meeting with James Joyce has taken place just inside the gate, in a coffee bar where a bronze

statue of the author seated, and enjoying a coffee (and oh how the Croatians love to sit and drink coffee) is watching the world walk by. And should you really want to impress, you can tell your friends that Pula was also home to the real Captain Von Trapp, he of 'The Sound of Music' fame. Who knew?

DISCOVERING ROVINJ

Located about 45 minutes to the north of Pula is Rovinj, Croatia's 'Istrian jewel'. The old town reflects the architectural heritage of the Venetian Empire, which ruled the city (and the Adriatic Sea coast) for some 500 years. »

The 'Maiden with the Seagull' has become a symbol of the town of Opatija



The coach drops you off by the harbour where the view along the quayside towards the multi-coloured houses rising out of the water makes a truly memorable sight.

Dominating the town is the Church of St Euphemia, completed in 1736 and modelled on the tower of St Mark's in Venice. A four-metre high copper statue of St Euphemia sits atop the bell tower, showing the direction of the wind by turning on a spindle. Our tour guide, Ana, explains that the church and its tower has always been important to fishermen. "When the wind vane turns and points to the land," she says, "this is St Euphemia saying: 'Come back to the safety of the port'."

Inside the church is St Euphemia's marble sarcophagus, estimated to date from the 4th or 5th century.

Enjoying a coffee in the little harbourside market I'm reminded of Istria's other attraction.

The seagulls are large, ubiquitous and excellent scavengers. Ana tells us that they sit and watch, ready to swoop. She also tells us that Rovinj is one of the most popular day trip destinations in Croatia. It's easy to see why – and a destination not to be missed in a group itinerary.

Leaving Rovinj, I travel 30 minutes north of Rovinj to Lim Fjord, generally regarded as one of the most beautiful natural resources of the Istrian peninsula. On each side of the 10km stretch of water, steep, forest-covered mountains rise out of the water. The fjord has protected landscape status so there are no motor boats or any traditional water-based activities. What is allowed is a boat cruise that

leaves from the eastern end of the fjord. The one-hour cruise on board the 'MB Kosirica' offers a supremely tranquil and peaceful experience.

PORRIDGE AND A MAIDEN

A little further along the coast is Porec (pronounced Poretch, or even 'porridge'), one of the most popular destinations in Istria for overnight stays. Of particular note is the preserved 6th century Euphrasian Basilica, well known for its beautiful gold mosaics. The old town is mostly flat with an extensive seafront.

On the eastern side of the Istrian peninsula sits Opatija, the first holiday resort in Croatia. The town became popular in the middle of the 19th century with well-to-do Viennese holidaymakers, keen to take advantage of the warmer climate. Today, this



Rovinj's old town reflects the architectural heritage of the Venetian Empire

genteel destination appeals to a mostly mature audience, offering a classic mix of Croatian coastal beauty, grand spa hotels, Habsburg-era villas and botanical gardens.

'Lungomare' is a flat promenade that snakes for 12km along the coastline, offering views of the town and its many majestic villas, as well as the neighbouring islands. In the centre of town the Villa Angiolina, dating from the 1800s and set in a garden of exotic plants, houses the Croatian Museum of Tourism.

I come across an impressive-looking building, opened in 1898 as a covered market, and restored in 2010.

Inside I find a wonderful display of fresh fish, vegetables and fruit. On other days of the week the building houses a flower market.

Standing on the reef beside the Lungomare promenade is the 'Maiden with the Seagull', a statue of a girl extending her arm to a gull. Erected in 1956, and now a symbol of the town, it replaced an earlier statue erected to keep vigil over the soul of a local nobleman who vanished after being swept away by the sea in 1891.

Today, of course, the reputation of Istria's ubiquitous seagulls adds a new and, it has to be said, rather amusing element.



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GOING AS A GROUP?

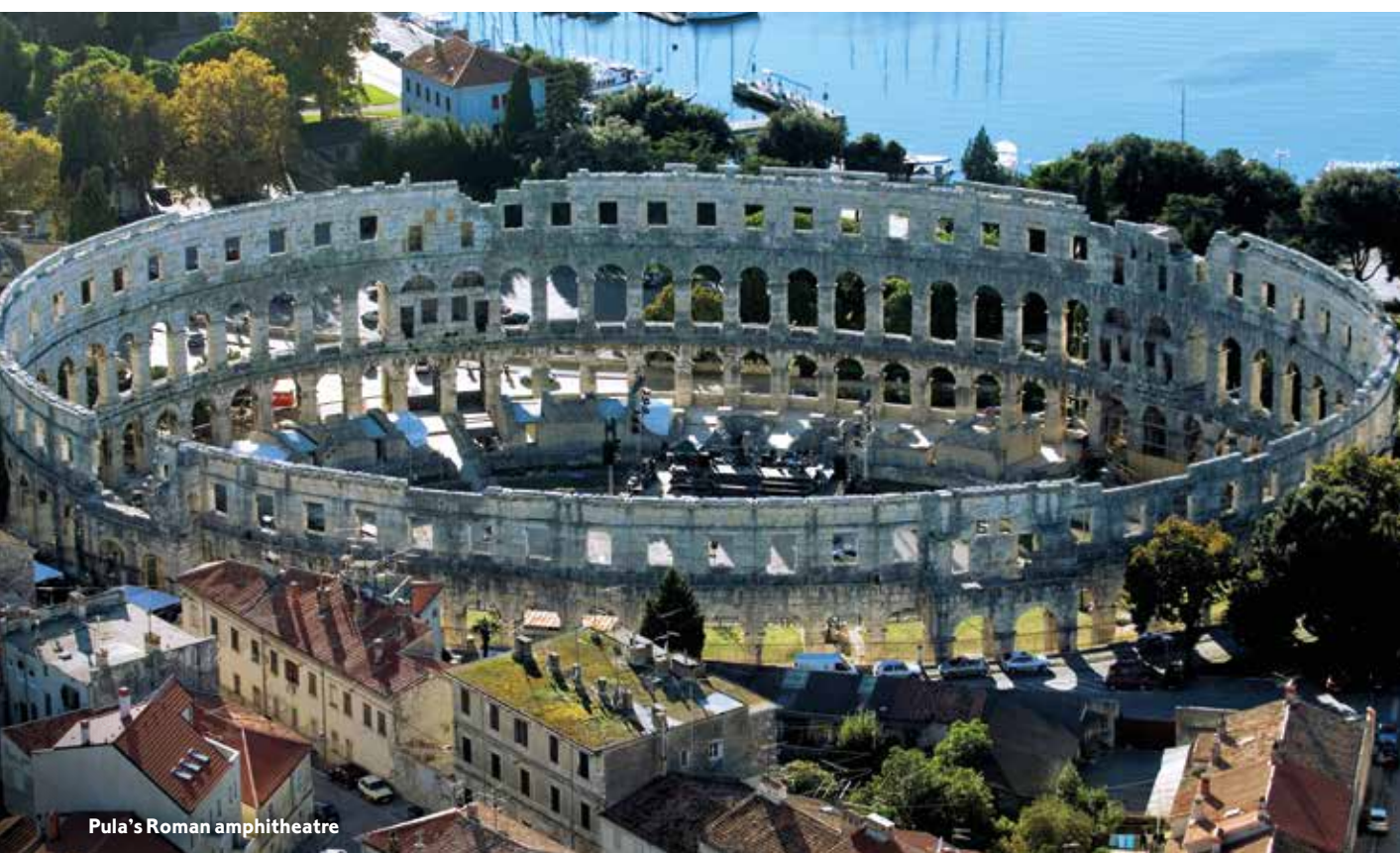
For a group visit Croatia is perfect, offering that often elusive mix of heritage and history, excellent food, wonderfully flat promenades and the prospect of great weather.

Our writer visited in mid-October and the temperatures were in the low to mid 20s. The coastal destinations are first-class. Travel inland, perhaps to one of the eight national parks, including the UNESCO-listed Plitvice Lakes, and you'll find some of the best lakes

and waterfalls anywhere in Europe. But avoid July and August, when it's hot and heaving, and do watch out for the seagulls!

Fly direct to Pula with Jet2.com and Ryanair. Season flights operate from London Southend (two hours) and other airports (around two-and-a-half hours).

Stuart's visit was kindly hosted by ICT Group Travel and South Quay Travel who offer a range of Croatia itineraries for groups, see ictgrouptravel.com **GTW**



Pula's Roman amphitheatre