



**The secret
to immersing
yourself
in Croatia's
most famous
city is to
stay in the
moment.**



by David Farley
photographs by Kevin Faingnaert

Slow and Steady



**As the robust
Dalmatian sun
pounded down on
my pale forehead,
I strutted onto the
terrace of Orsan,
a mostly local
haunt hugging
Dubrovnik's marina,
to meet my friend,
Ivan Vuković, a
tour guide. I was 30
minutes late. And
that was intentional.**

Ivan put his palms in the air as I approached and then mimed looking at his watch.

The waiter immediately put an espresso in front of me. "I think I figured out the secret to *fjaka*," I said.

"Being late is not *fjaka*," Ivan said, letting out a chuckle. I sighed and took a gulp of coffee. "Neither is drinking your coffee like that."

Ivan took a tiny sip of his coffee. For the next hour, he nursed his espresso, micro sip by micro sip, and I sat there fidgeting, trying to focus on our conversation as we gossiped about mutual friends in Dubrovnik, but my mind drifted in and out of serious and inane thoughts: an article deadline, paying my credit card bill, and why the *chupacabra* only terrorizes Spanish-speaking countries. After Ivan finished his coffee, we began grazing on just-pulled-from-the-sea oysters from nearby Ston—so famed that Roman emperors used to place delivery orders—and *gavuni*, small fried smelts.

"See those guys back there?" Ivan said, nodding to a long table flanked by gray-haired crusty-looking sailor types. "They come here for coffee in the late morning. They linger, like cats lying in the sun, for lunch. Then they'll have a *rakia*"—a robust fruit brandy—"and maybe drink another coffee or a beer until the afternoon."

"So, they're unemployed losers," I suggested. "At best, Dalmatian hedonists?"

Ivan shook his head. "You don't get it. Maybe you're too American to understand *fjaka*."

I let out another defeated sigh and took a drink of the *rakia* we had ordered, making sure to take only a sip this time.

It was the first day of a monthlong stay in this stunning city located on the southern Dalmatian coast of Croatia. I'd just come from my father's funeral in Los Angeles. I'd spent an emotionally difficult month volunteering at a refugee camp in Greece. On top of my usual type-A habits of favoring work over play, I was an anxiety-loaded wreck. I was desperate for a different mind-set.

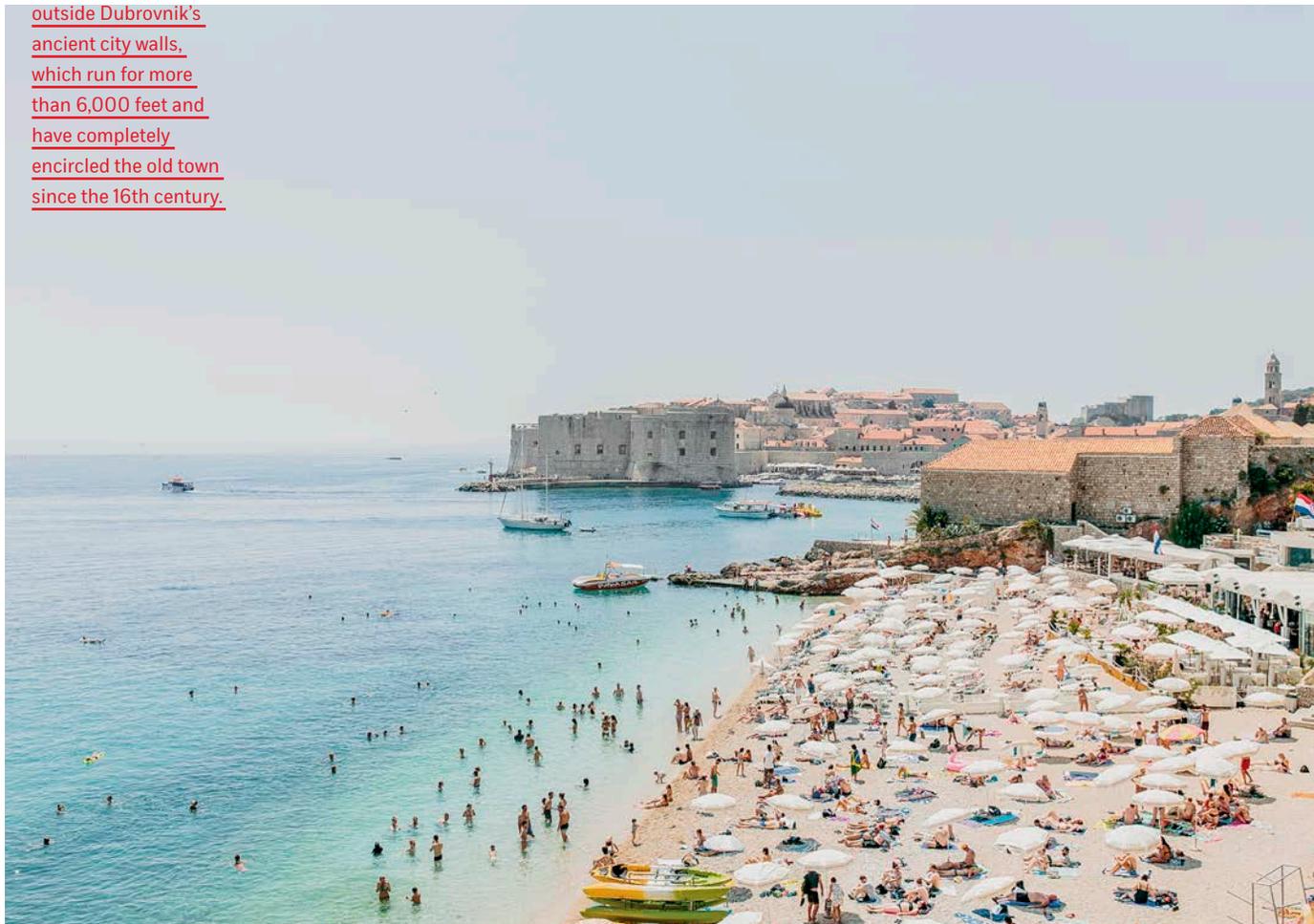
I had come to Dubrovnik because I love the city. I was first drawn here in 2004 simply because I saw an aerial photo of it. On a piece of land jutting out into the Adriatic Sea, Dubrovnik's 80-foot-high walls surround a warren of shiny limestone streets and crammed-together red-tile-roofed stone houses. It seemed like something out of a fantasy movie or a TV show. It's no surprise it had a recurring role on *Game of Thrones* as "King's Landing" and was a setting for *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*.

But Dubrovnik is more than just a film set. During my first visit here, I felt something about this place, something deep and elusive. I knew as I stood on Stradun, the main street in the pedestrianized Old Town, that I'd be back here a lot. My certainty was justified: I've now made almost a dozen visits to the city. But I had never heard of *fjaka* until my friend Zrinka Marinović, a lifelong Dubrovnik denizen, dropped the f-word. Aware of what I was going through, she also knew I was coming to town for a while. "You should explore *fjaka* while you're here," she told me in a text message. "It's exactly what you need." When I asked what it was, she said, "It's difficult to explain."

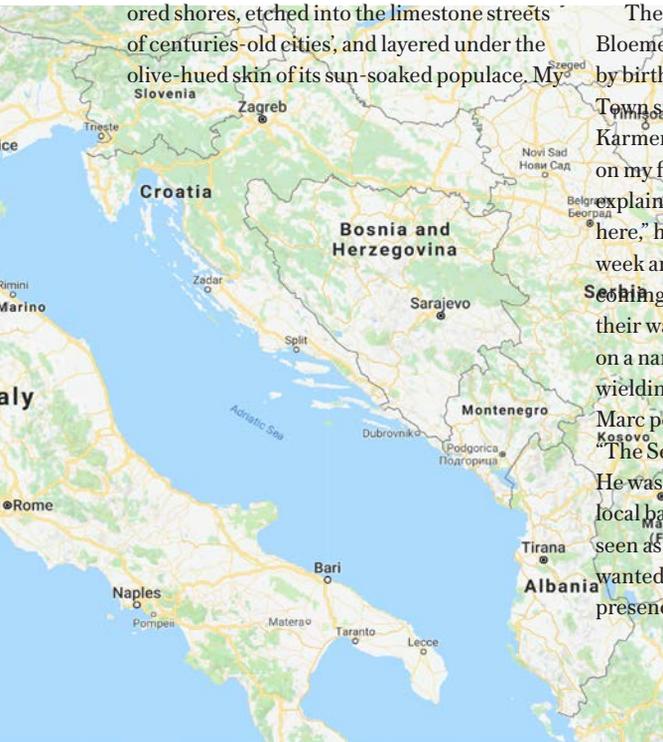
Online dictionaries (and Croatians from outside Dalmatia) often define *fjaka* as "laziness." The term probably arrived in the Middle Ages, via Venetian sailors and traders who used the Italian word *fiacco*, which means "tired" or "listless" and comes from the Latin *flaccus*, for "flaccid." Someone from Dubrovnik, on the other hand, will tell you it's a



Banje Beach lies just outside Dubrovnik's ancient city walls, which run for more than 6,000 feet and have completely encircled the old town since the 16th century.



sublime state of mind, a detachment from worries and anxiety about other goings on in life. It's 100 percent Dalmatian, an idea swirling in the warm *jugo* wind, drenching the azure-colored shores, etched into the limestone streets of centuries-old cities, and layered under the olive-hued skin of its sun-soaked populace. My



plan was to plant myself in the city of 42,000 people for a month and see if I could learn how to unlock the Dalmatian secret to doing nothing and being happy about it.

The next person I went to see was Marc van Bloemen, an insightful, opinionated Briton by birth who has lived in Dubrovnik's Old Town since 1972. For the last 20 years, he's run Karmen Apartments, a cozy inn where I stayed on my first visit to the city. He did his best to explain. "We have a different sense of time here," he said, when I met up with him about a week and a half into my stay. "We see tourists settling here and racing around, looking at their watches and their phones." As we stood on a narrow street in Old Town, selfie stick-wielding tourists marched past us as if on cue. Marc pointed behind himself with his thumb. "The Seaman's Club is all *fjaka*, all the time." He was referring to one of the few remaining local bars in Old Town, and the one I'd always seen as the most intimidating. I had long wanted to stop in for a drink, but the perpetual presence of surly-looking old Dalmatian dudes

nursing beers and glasses of *rakia*, amidst fluorescent lights and walls dotted with Motel 6-style nautical paintings, scared the hell out of me. "You're right: It's not welcoming at all," Marc said. "They don't want it to be welcoming. And this brings us back to *fjaka*. They're not after your money or business. They don't have to please you. But on the inside, they are very friendly."

Seconds later we were sitting at a table in the Seaman's Club with two silver-haired artists, Mišo Baričević and Josip Škerlj.

Rounds of *rakia* were ordered. Marc continued. "*Fjaka* inspires people to not be bothered by things. It's about not being money oriented. We have different priorities here that exist outside of capitalism. Like if a tourist says, I'll pay you to take me to that island, the Dalmatian may not do it, no matter how much money the tourist is paying. It's not because he's a jerk; he doesn't want to break his mellowness."

"*Fjaka* is meditation without the meditation," Škerlj said. Just then a woman with a nicotine-tinged voice at the next table yelled,



Guide to Dubrovnik

EAT

Orsan

Located on the harbor of Gruž Bay across from the cruise ship terminal, Orsan is a mostly-locals spot serving up fresh seafood and wine from the nearby Pelješac peninsula. Lunchtime is the best time to go.

Marina Orsan, Ivana pl Zajca 2, restaurant-orsan-dubrovnik.com

Taj Mahal

The name of this Bosnian restaurant in Old Town (as well as its sister restaurant in the Hotel Lero) is about as bewildering as, say, “Eiffel Tower” for a Mexican food spot, but the hearty stews, tender grilled meats, and affordable Bosnian wines will divert your attention from the name to the feast in front of you. *Ul. Nikole Gučetića 2, tajmahal-dubrovnik.com*

STAY

Hotel Dubrovnik Palace

Located in Lapad, two and a half miles from Old Town—bus no. 4 runs directly from Old Town to the hotel—the chic and comfortable Dubrovnik Palace offers Adriatic Sea views from balconies in every one of its 308 rooms. *From \$170. Masarykov put 20, adriaticluxuryhotels.com*

Karmen Apartments

Ultra-friendly Marc van Bloemen’s Old Town inn has four comfortable full-service apartments that will make you feel like Dubrovnik is home. Most have views of the old harbor and the city walls. *From \$90. Bandureva ul. 1, karmendu.com*

DO

Be a Tourist

Everyone’s doing it, which means you won’t have the place to yourself, but take the mile-long walk along Dubrovnik’s ancient city walls and hop on the cable car to the top of Mount Srđ, towering over the city. You’ll be rewarded with panoramic views of the Adriatic and the ancient city.

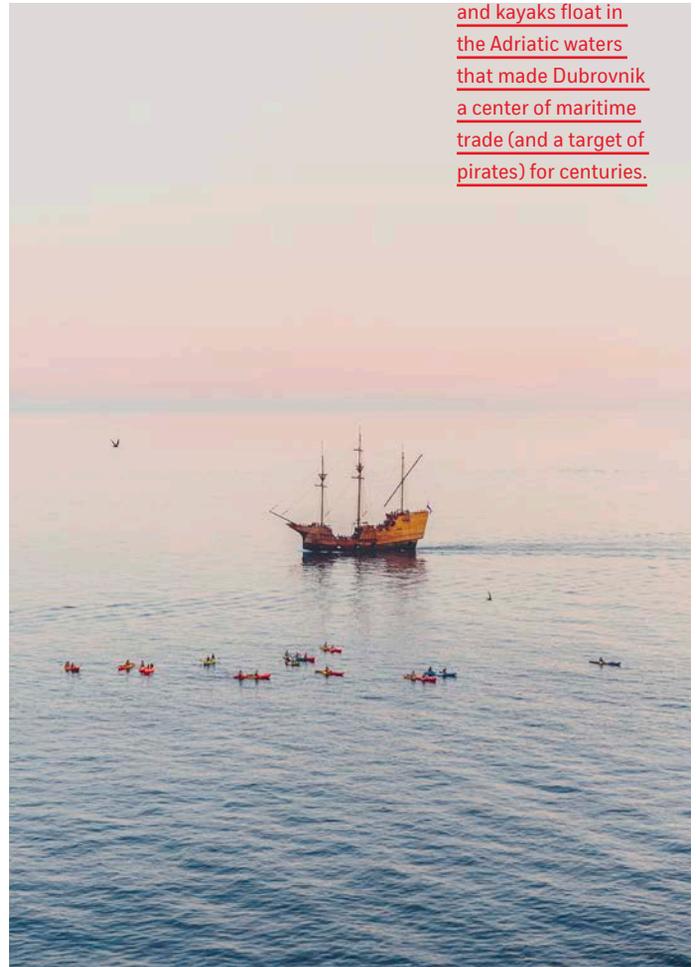
Good Food Festival

This annual four-day food extravaganza (starting the third Thursday of October) highlights local fare as well as regional food and wine from around Croatia. Wine workshops, dinners by well-known chefs, and food talks run throughout the fest, but the highlight is the 1,000-foot-long table of food and drinks that spans the entire Stradun. *tzdubrovnik.hr*

Rakia, the name given to brandy made from fruit (often plums), is the drink of choice throughout the Balkans.



Today, leisure boats and kayaks float in the Adriatic waters that made Dubrovnik a center of maritime trade (and a target of pirates) for centuries.



“Fjaka is having another beer!” and burst out laughing. We followed with a collective guffaw, and then Baričević said, “We have a saying: Fjaka is like when everything is a straight and flat line”—he made a horizontal slicing motion with his hand—“you’re not interrupted by the ups and downs.”

“You have to go see Luči,” Marc said, meaning Luči Capurso, a onetime Eurovision Song Contest participant and the owner of Caffè Bar Libertina in Old Town. “He’s a professional in fjaka. He’s brought it to perfection. He just closes up his bar when he feels like it. It doesn’t matter to him if he makes more money that day or not. It’s not about if you can afford to do that. You choose to do it. You decided to be that way. It’s important to understand that there is no time concept involved.”

I stopped in to Luči’s café about a week later. Luči and his son Mario were there. After ordering an espresso, I mentioned fjaka.

“Ah, fjaka,” gray-haired Luči said, which was pretty much every Dalmatian’s first response, as though to the name of a dear old

friend you have in common. I asked him for advice on how a non-Dalmatian might be able to attain this esoteric attitude. “You can start,” he said, holding up his index finger, “by having a nice, typical Dalmatian lunch outside on a sunny day. Even after you finish, sit there in the sun for a while. Relax. Watch the sea. Don’t think about what to write or where to go. Don’t think about tomorrow or even tonight. Turn your phone off. You have no goals for the next few hours.”

So I did. Or at least I tried. I left the apartment I had rented for the month without my phone. But sitting in a café while constantly feeling the urge to check my phone amounted to something of an existential crisis. I couldn’t cope with those blank spaces in between.

Then, on one phone-less coffee meeting, I asked acquaintance and local art historian Ivan Viden what fjaka meant to him.

He took a long 10 seconds to think about it, staring up at the high, ornate ceiling of Grad-ska Kavana Arsenal, a café smack in the center of Old Town, and then said: “The pauses in the

music are also part of the music. You wouldn’t have a melody without the stops. They make music together. So the pauses in life are part of life too.”

It started to make sense to me. Those pauses, or similarly, that sense of time, kept coming up in my thoughts the longer I was in Dubrovnik. Time has sped up in the last two decades. We now document and time-stamp nearly everything we do. Everything we eat. Every place we visit. And then we obsess over social media “likes,” checking our phones every 37 seconds. Our minds have blurred into a miasma of needy narcissism and self-affirmation. I don’t realize I spend so much time obsessing about all these things until I’m hanging out with someone who doesn’t.

And those people are in Dubrovnik. In the month I spent there, not one person I hung out with checked their phone while we were chatting over coffee or lunch. No one complained about how “busy” they were. No one rushed back to the office. No one even talked about their job.





[You'll find octopus](#)
[grilled \(as at restaur-](#)
[ant Orsan, pictured\)](#)
[or in peka, when it's](#)

[roasted under a cast-](#)
[iron dome at a Dalma-](#)
[tian pace: slowly.](#)



The longer I was in Dubrovnik—and, admittedly, the warmer it grew as summer approached—the more sluggish I became. I put off responsibilities (including the writing of this article). I walked slower. And I did something nearly every afternoon that I'd never done before: I napped. The longer and deeper the Dalmatian sun sank into my skin, the more fjaka did the same.

And as I walked around this stone city, physical signs were suddenly revealing themselves to me, things literally built into Dubrovnik—fjaka-delic messages from decades and centuries past. The numbers of the digital clock on the bell tower, for example, change only in five-minute increments; you needn't know the *exact* time in Dubrovnik, because time moves differently here. I began noticing café after café where outdoor tables were filled with locals looking as relaxed as Buddhist monks, as if they had no urge for the bill any time soon. And then there's the layout of the city itself: The buildings, including the medium-size cathedral, are all in harmony

with each other in size and color scheme, no one element more dominant, more gravitational, than the other, leaving you to just pull up a chair and gawk at Old Town as a whole, instead of running around to check things off a list.

Spending time in Dubrovnik might be the perfect remedy for the way we travel now. Most of us know how it feels to try to cram as much as possible into a vacation, as though we're trying to get our 10th stamp on a travel punch card. We count nations we've visited. We *do* countries. I've dashed through Southeast Asia and Central Europe like there was a ribbon waiting for me to break through at the airport gate, making sure to Instagram every moment along the way. If we're not careful, travel can become an exercise in exhaustion.

I had never realized this until fjaka started to filter into my system. But I felt I wasn't a full-on fjaka practitioner just yet. And then, on one of the last days I was in Dubrovnik, I met up with Zrinka Marinović, the friend who first introduced fjaka to me. We had just finished

feasting on grilled sea bass on the sunny terrace of the Hotel Dubrovnik Palace, the vast shimmering Adriatic Sea as our backdrop, a saline breeze gently slapping us in the face, and the sun warming our skin.

I asked her how one realizes they're having a fjaka moment, when they've entered into that sublime, elusive Dalmatian state.

"Are you ready to go?" she asked.

It was a Tuesday afternoon, and we both had work-related things to do. I rotated glances between the twinkling sea and the sun-splashed terrace where we sat. "When I think about it," I said, "there's no place I'd rather be than right here, right now." She raised her eyebrows a bit and nodded at me.

The work would get done. Maybe in a few hours. Maybe tomorrow. I ordered glasses of rakia for Zrinka and me. **A**

Contributing writer David Farley wrote about the Black Forest in the May/June 2017 issue of AFAR. This is photographer Kevin Faingnaert's first story for AFAR.

