

Winter in a Summer Town

Though tourists mob Dubrovnik come July, its 'off-season' really is the most wonderful time of the year

BY DAVID FARLEY

SOMETHING WAS missing in Dubrovnik. I stood atop the thick, imposing walls of this Croatian medieval city looking out at the rickety red-tiled roofs, the shimmering, wintry Adriatic Sea just beyond. Then I turned my gaze to Stradun, the wide, limestone-clad, pedestrian street that cuts through the walled town and the city's main public promenade since the 13th century. Some people milled about chatting; others slowly paraded down the lane.

The missing element? A throng of tourists. What a difference a season makes in Dubrovnik. Where was the miasma of Tiva sandle-clad humanity pushing each other through the city's narrow streets? The mustached restaurant barkers trying to lure visitors into restaurants? The gargantuan cruise ships lurking in the distance?

On my umpteenth visit to this stunning Croatian city, situated on the southern Dalmatian Coast, I had decided to come during the off season. Friends here often warned me to avoid the city in winter, saying that it's depressing in its emptiness. The walled, car-free Old Town streets are spartan. Shops and restaurants are boarded up for the season. And few hotels stay open.

But this winter may be the best time to see the "Pearl of the Adriatic": The city's three-year-old Winter Festival—which runs from early to December to early January—has expanded, adding more outdoor concerts and performances. Food and drink stands line streets and squares. The festival has injected a zest into Old Town that Dubrovnik has rarely seen since the period before the early-'90s Balkan wars; more wintertime direct flights have been added (from London and Frankfurt, among others); and more hotels have begun keeping their lights on for the winter season, offering dramatically lower rates.

That said, not everything is open, restaurant close earlier, and access to the walkways on the medieval walls is limited. And admittedly, it's chilly—temperatures typically hover in the 50s, but last year snowfall blanketed the city. Still, I



QUITE CONTRARY A rare snowstorm blanketed Dubrovnik last winter. Tourists overwhelm the city's Old Town in summer but visitors are sparse in winter.

decided to find out if exchanging a tourist-mobbed city for one that had diminished services would be a good bet. Without the crush of summertime visitors, would another side of Dubrovnik reveal itself?

The morning after my arrival in this city of 42,000 people, I met up with former mayor Andro Vlahušić, the chief initiator of the Winter Festival. "We don't need any more summertime tourists," he said, echoing many of the local officials and residents who are working to impose a limit to high-season visitors, "So I helped to create a festival in winter."

Not that everyone is in favor of it. When the food and drink kiosks popped up on the 1000-foot-long Stradun during the festival two years ago—selling everything from sausages from Slavonia, a region in northeastern Croatia, to freshly

shucked oysters from Ston, a nearby seaside town—many vocal residents acted like a heresy had been committed. Stradun is about as beloved a street as any you'll ever walk. One of my local friends told me that she won't even ash her cigarette on the street. When I asked Mr. Vlahušić about the opposition to the food kiosks on the promenade, he said much of the fury has quieted down recently and pointed to a historical precedent. "I realize Stradun is a like a spiritual place for the people of Dubrovnik. But in the Middle Ages, Stradun was a market street. There were fruits, vegetables and livestock for sale. This is a sort of return to that—but only for a short time."

One day I had coffee with Ivan Vigjen, an art historian who recently headed the project to restore the main altar of the city's cathedral. He told me he refuses to patronize the kiosks on Stradun. "I'm not at all against tourism, but there's this perversion in our minds about it," he told me, as we sat at an outside table at Gradska Kavana, a popular café in Old Town. "Every March and April, I see headlines about fixing up this or that because the 'season' is coming. I wish instead, the city would do something for us that doesn't necessarily have to do with tourism."

But if attracting wintertime visitors had been the chief motivation for the Winter Festival, the new mayor, Mato Franković, seems to be shifting the event's focus to please the denizens of Dubrovnik. "Locals avoid places like Stradun during the high tourism season," he told me in

his office, "So we want them to enjoy the city in the winter too."

This year, the city has re-situated the center of the festivities in Old Town, moving some of the food stalls and kiosks from Stradun to nearby Gundulić Square where there are daily performances of traditional Dalmatian klapa music. An ice skating rink recently sprung up in the Lapad part of town.

And as with last year, during the festival, public transportation in and around Dubrovnik is free after 5 p.m. to encourage denizens of the city to go to Old Town. For the

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week I was in Dubrovnik, I witnessed mostly locals sipping wine and eating regional Croatian fare at the kiosks that are sprinkled around Old Town. One Friday evening, for example, the walled town was swarming with locals. On one end of Stradun, strings of blue Christmas lights draped across a domed 15th-century fountain and on the other end, the 100-foot, late-medieval bell tower was glowing in white light. An outdoor concert by a Dalmatian acapella group had just concluded on the steps of the Church of St. Blaise and the crowd of locals had gravitated to the food and drink kiosks. Traditional holiday songs and Dalmatian folk music interspersed with tunes by Stevie

Wonder, Prince and Alicia Keys seeped from speakers affixed to buildings. Families shared plates of *prikle*, fried dough balls, and couples toasted each other with thimble-sized glasses of *rakia*, a fruit-based brandy that is ubiquitous in this part of Europe.

I was tempted by the street food, but I heard a few rumblings that a kiosk called Gulozarije just outside Pile Gate deviated from the sausage-and-rakia formula. I hardly recognized anything on the menu, which was handwritten in Croatian. A woman sidled up to me. "You should try the *morsko jaje*," she said. The woman, Marija Papak, the chef of this kiosk, explained that *morsko jaje*, translated as "sea egg," is a white sea urchin. "It's delicious," she said and quite rare. "You cannot find it anywhere in Dubrovnik." I was sold.

After the sea egg, she set down a few more dishes in front of me. *Domaci umbol* is unctuous, thick-sliced ham cured by one-month exposure to the salty Adriatic air. *Stonska torta* is a cake made in the village of Ston and filled with cinnamon, walnuts, almonds, chocolate, and, most improbably, ribbons of pasta. I'd never eaten anything like it and I loved it.

I walked through Pile Gate, one of three entrances to Old Town, my feet about to hit the shiny limestone-sheathed Stradun, to get one more look at this beautiful city in full party mode and largely free of tourists like me.

► For more details on visiting Dubrovnik in winter, see wsi.com/travel.



FAIR WAY The historic Stradun street during last year's Winter Festival.