

## Hidden Istria



by Rudolf Abraham

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Josip Zanelli walks slowly with me through the lush grass in front of his stone house to the diminutive Church of Sveti Rok, on the edge of the village of Draguč. This little community in Istria was once an important centre for the cultivation of silkworms, though nowadays it is a quiet, little-visited place with fewer than 70 inhabitants. It deserves to be in the limelight, for

ABOVE: Josip Zanelli unlocks the Church of Sveti Rok at Draguč. The church is famous for its cycle of 16th-century frescoes (photo by Rudolf Abraham).

Draguč is one of the most photogenic locations anywhere in this corner of Croatia.

Vineyards spill down the hillside towards a lake to the west called Butoniga jezero. The water is framed by a double rainbow that comes and goes as rain clouds slowly give way to sunshine. Standing in the small porch of the church, Josip unlocks the old wooden door with a large key, and waves me inside to look at the cycle of 16th-century frescoes which decorate the walls of its simple, dimly lit interior — an Adoration of the

RIGHT: Istria in context. Our map shows historic Istria in its entirety from the Golfo di Trieste to the southern tip of the Istrian peninsula. Places mentioned in the text are marked on the map (map scale 1:1,000,000).



Magi, a Baptism of Christ and a Temptation in the Wilderness — the painted surfaces illuminated by a small window, and etched with a tracery of Glagolitic script.

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The fresco cycle at Draguč is but one of many in the Istrian hinterland, few of which are ever seen by visitors. For while the Istrian coast is well-known for its exceptional cultural sites such as the dazzling UNESCO-listed Byzantine mosaics in Poreč, and the Roman amphitheatre at Pula (one of the largest and best-

preserved Roman amphitheatres in the world), the number of visitors who travel inland are few. This is a shame, because the Istrian hinterland is a truly magical place, with picturesque hill towns, impregnable-looking castles and hidden mediaeval frescoes, not to mention some of the best food, wine and olive oil to be found anywhere in Croatia. And all very accessible from the coast — in this compact area, hardly anywhere is more than an hour's drive from the sea.

The frescoes in Sveti Rok are the work of one Anton of Padova — who was not, as his name might imply, from Padova in Italy,

but from a small village called Kašćerga, visible on the far side of Butoniga jezero. The artist signed his work in Sveti Rok in both Latin and Glagolitic. A few kilometres away to the south-west is the Church of Sveti Marija na Škriljinah (St Mary of the Rocks) at Beram, just outside Pazin. Here the

The Istrian village of Draguč (photo by Rudolf Abraham).



frescoes are a little better known, if only perhaps because the church lies just off the main road that runs inland from Poreč to Pazin. An extensive

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series of 46 panels covering almost the entire walls, they were painted during the 15th century and include an extraordinary Dance of Death, in which an entire cross section of mediaeval society — from monarch to clergy, innkeeper to beggar and knight to merchant — march solemnly into the open arms of death, through

an array of cavorting, trumpet-blowing skeletons. Here too they are the work of a local master: Vincent of Kastav. The artist takes his name from the community of Kastav (just around the bay from Opatija).

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Detail of the 'Dance of Death', a scene from the 15th-century frescoes at the church of St Mary of the Rocks, Beram (photo by Rudolf Abraham).



has a population of only around one sixth of that of Pula. Come to Pazin in June, and you'll find the *TradInEtno* Festival in full swing, with traditional and folk musicians from all over Croatia and far beyond performing in the castle and in the streets. Istria's folk music is particularly noteworthy for its use of a distinctive, six-tone scale. The composer Tartini, who was born at Piran (on the coast, in territory that is now part of Slovenia) experimented with this scale. The two-part singing that is the hallmark of Istrian folk music, in which words are often replaced by emphatic syllables, is inscribed on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Standing by the dungeon of Pazin's stout-walled castle (now the Town Museum) I crane my neck to look down from a window into the deep gorge where the River Pazinčica vanishes into a cave and sinkhole, some 100 metres below at the base of a vertical cliff. Both gorge and castle form part of the backdrop to Jules Verne's 1885 novel *Mathias Sandorf* — the hero of which is imprisoned in the castle and sentenced to death, but makes a daring escape by climbing down the cliff into the gorge, and then into the cave itself, from where he is carried by underground streams to the Limski kanal on the coast south of Rovinj. Some say the cave and sinkhole, called Pazinska jama, also provided inspiration for the gates of hell in Dante's *Inferno*.

## EXPLORING THE ISTRIAN LINGUASPHERE

The fact that many Istrians — particularly those living in the west and north-west of the peninsula — are bilingual, speaking Italian as well as Croatian, is something upon which many visitors to the coast remark. Less familiar however are Istria's other languages, two of which are classified as severely endangered on the UNESCO list of endangered languages. Across the border from Croatian Istria, Slovene is of course the principal tongue.

## INFORMATION

To explore the inland areas of Istria mentioned in this article, it certainly helps to have a car. If time is less pressing, then you can do a lot by bicycle. Pazin and Buzet make good bases.

The most useful local airport is Pula, though Rijeka is also handy. The latter airport is actually on the offshore island of Krk (about 20 kilometres down the coast from Rijeka), though this is not as inconvenient as it sounds, for the island is linked by bridge to the mainland. Croatia Airlines ([www.croatiaairlines.com](http://www.croatiaairlines.com)) serve both airports, and in summer both Pula and Rijeka are served by a raft of discount airlines (particularly from Russia and elsewhere in eastern Europe).

Istria is a territory shaped by the sea, so arriving by boat is a fine idea. But you'll have to plan carefully. Venezia Lines ([www.venezialines.com](http://www.venezialines.com)) offer seasonal services from Venice to three Istrian ports: Rovinj, Poreč and Pula. The vessels *San Gwann* and *San Pawl* ply the routes from late April to early October (although Pula is served for just a 12-week period in midsummer). If approaching from the south, there is a very useful summer ferry from Zadar to Pula. This is a marvellous journey that weaves through a scatter

of islands, stopping off here and there along the way. The crossing from Zadar to Pula takes five to six hours. Details on [www.jadrolinija.hr](http://www.jadrolinija.hr).

From Pula there are buses and trains to Pazin, as well as direct buses to Pazin and Buzet from Zagreb ([www.akz.hr](http://www.akz.hr)). There is also a regular direct bus service (not Sundays) from Trieste to Pazin. Pula to Pazin by train takes an hour with services running three to eight times daily (according to season and day of the week). Many of these trains continue north beyond Pazin to Buzet — where the station is some kilometres from town. The only cross-border train is a seasonal Ljubljana to Pula service which runs daily for nine summer weeks. It stops at both Buzet and Pazin.

There's a footpath from Pazin to Beram; unless you're travelling by car, the best way to reach Draguć from Buzet is to hire a bike ([www.gral-putovanja.eu](http://www.gral-putovanja.eu)). The keyholders for the churches in Beram and Draguć can be contacted through the Central Istrian Tourist Office in Pazin ([www.tzpazin.hr](http://www.tzpazin.hr)). For information on Pazinska jama see [www.pazinska-jama.com](http://www.pazinska-jama.com); for more information on Istro-Romanian, see [www.istro-romanian.net](http://www.istro-romanian.net). For more information on Istria visit [www.istra.com](http://www.istra.com) and [www.croatia.hr](http://www.croatia.hr).

Istriot is the focus of much debate among linguists. It has been variously classified as a dialect of Italian, a dialect of Venetian (which is still spoken by around two million people in and

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around the Veneto region of northern Italy, as well as in Istria and Slovenia), or a relative of the now extinct Dalmatian dialect Vegliot (the last speaker of which died on the island of Krk in 1898). Others suggest it is an entirely separate Romance language, in some measure derived from the Vulgar Latin once spoken in the region. Nowadays Istriot is spoken by only around 1000 people, some 400 of whom speak it as a first language. There are just six communities in Istria where, if you are lucky, you might catch a snippet

or two of Istriot: Vodnjan, Rovinj, Šišan, Bale, Fažana and Galižana.

Travelling through central Istria with Antonio Guidici, a young guide from Šišan, in the drought-afflicted late summer of 2012, I listen to the casual, intuitive switches between languages and dialects as he talks to people on the street or on the phone — from Italian, to Croatian, to Istriot, or a mixture of all these, depending on whether he is talking to family, friends or colleagues, where they are from, or the topic of conversation.

Not to be confused with Istriot, Istro-Romanian is estimated to be understood or spoken by as few as 300 or 400 people, in two small, remote pockets of north-east Istria — the village of Žejane, in the Čićarija mountains north-west of Opatija, and the village of Šušnjevića and its surroundings, on the western slopes of Učka. It is an eastern Romance language, related to Romanian, probably brought to the area in the 15th century or earlier by settlers from the mountainous regions of Transylvania in what is now Romania. Perhaps the migrants were families

driven west by devastating outbreaks of plague, or perhaps they were mercenaries and their families (the so-called Vlachs) who settled in this north-eastern part of Istria (along with several other areas of south-east Europe) to defend the borders of the Austrian Empire against the Ottomans. In Žejane, some of the distinctive culture of the Istro-Romanians has been preserved alongside their language, including their folk costumes. Rather than as 'Istro-Romanian', villagers are more likely to describe themselves, and the language they speak at home, as Žejanski or Cici — or simply *po našu* 'in our language'.

### ISTRIAN CURIOSITIES

Radmila Karlič places a small basket of black summer truffles on the wooden table before me, sifting through them briefly with her fingers while she talks of the highly prized white and black truffles (*tartufi*) for which this part of Istria is famous. Radmila's father Ivan hunted for truffles hereabouts, she tells me as we sit outside the Karlič family home in the village of Paladini, as did her uncle — a tradition she continues enthusiastically with her husband and children, supported by the olfactory skills of a dozen highly trained truffle dogs.

Hunting for truffles in the woods around Paladini with Radmila Karlič and her dog Crnko (photo by Rudolf Abraham).



The drive to Paladini has taken us off the 'main' (a relative term, that) route between Motovun and Buzet, and up a winding road

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which climbs through the vineyards above Butoniga jezero — a large, man-made lake, created in the 1980s as a reservoir and now providing much of the freshwater for this part of Istria. The oak woodlands of the low, surrounding hills constitute some of the richest truffle areas in Istria — even though, as Radmila points out,

one of the best spots is now drowned beneath Butoniga jezero.

We walk downhill to the nearby woods, in the company of Crnko, a frenetically busy little black dog. She fairly hurls herself into the undergrowth, emerging almost immediately, wet-nosed and waggy-tailed, with a black truffle the size of a walnut in her mouth. Radmila dextrously exchanges this for a doggy treat, but before Crnko can even think about looking cheated, she's off again, thrusting her snout into the leaves

and turning round with another mouthful of tuber. "Naša zlatna šuma," says Radmila as I make my way back towards the car — "our forest of gold."

### THE PILLAR OF SHAME

North-west from Buzet in the tiny rural settlement of Salež — less than two kilometres as the crow flies from the Slovenian border, with an aging population of just seven — stands one of the few surviving intact pillars of shame in Istria. Once widespread in mediaeval Europe, the pillar of shame (or pillory) performed a similar function as the stocks — offenders and petty criminals

RIGHT: Pillar of shame in the village of Salež, near Buzet (photo by Rudolf Abraham).

were tied, chained or otherwise secured to them, and subjected to public torment and humiliation. The pillar of shame in Salež dates from the 18th century, and is particularly unusual in that, instead of being a mere column, it is carved in the shape of a man.

Driving up to Salež from the Bračana Valley, which meanders north from the Mirna Valley and the road between Buzet and Motovun, the narrow road performs a series of hairpins, before a road branches off to the left into Salež. The pillar — or *berlin*, as locals usually refer to it — is easily missed, and we drive into the village itself, where a bemused old couple sit in a patch of shade in front of their house, as clucking chickens pace slowly to and fro, and ripe, golden squash lie piled in the bright afternoon sun. The old couple direct us back along a dusty path towards the cemetery, where we find the pillar standing by a grassy track, while the hedgerow rustles in the breeze.

The Salež *berlin* is a strange and somehow enigmatic figure. Carved from a single block of stone not found locally, he wears a fez-like hat on his head, his left hand resting on his stomach below his naval and the point to which the accused would once have been chained or otherwise bound, while his other hand reaches down between his legs, as if to protect his groin. Why such an unusual figure should be found here in this corner of rural Istria remains something of a mystery. We return to Buzet and leave him gazing silently into the distance, his surface detail worn smooth and indistinct by the passing of time (and punishment), and colonised by myriad patches of pale, scaly lichen. ■

A regular contributor to hidden europe, writer and photographer Rudolf Abraham has been a frequent visitor to Croatia since the late 1990s. Rudolf lived and worked in Zagreb for two years. He is co-author of Bradt's new guide to Istria, published this spring. You can find out more about Rudolf's work on his website at [www.rudolfabraham.co.uk](http://www.rudolfabraham.co.uk).

