



RIPE FOR DISCOVERY

ISTRIA, ON THE WEST COAST OF CROATIA, IS ONE OF THE PRECIOUS FEW EUROPEAN DESTINATIONS THAT COULD GENUINELY BE DESCRIBED AS AN UNDISCOVERED GEM

Having been the biggest holiday secret for its discerning neighbours for years, Istria came to international prominence in 2011 when it was named one of the 'World's Top 20 Destinations' by *National Geographic Traveller*. Located between Italy's Gulf of Trieste and Croatia's Kvarner Bay, Istria is the largest peninsula in the Adriatic Sea. With attractions that include the medieval hilltop town of Grožnjan and the paradise islands of Brijuni, Istria has been dubbed the 'terra magica' of Europe. Furthermore, as Denis Ivosevic, Managing Director of the Istria County Tourist Board, explains: 'In July 2013, we will be entering the European Union, which will enable Istria to be a part of the big EU family.'

DIVERSITY

From its beautiful beaches to its top-notch sporting facilities, diversity has been the secret of Istria's success. The 18-hole golf course at the Kempinski Adriatic Hotel on the border with Slovenia, for example, is considered one of Europe's finest and there is a multitude of water sports on offer, including windsurfing, diving and extreme sailing. Caving, paragliding and other alternative adventures add to Istria's increasing appeal.

Furthermore, there is plenty of art and culture available with international film, theatre and music festivals taking place and big concerts by the likes of Andrea Bocelli and Elton John. For local talent, the Istrian Museum of Contemporary Art

has displays of paintings, photography and design by Istrian artists since 1950. The region's style credentials are also flourishing with new five-star design hotels, such as a sleek Hotel Lone in the romantic Rovinj forest. Forming a magnificent backdrop to this 21st-century modernity is Istria's 3000-year-old heritage. Highlights include a first-century amphitheatre in Pula and the sixth-century Euphrasian Basilica in Porec, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

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GASTRONOMIC DELIGHTS

The region is also fast gaining a world-class reputation for its gourmet food, whipped up using the fine local produce. The region's extra virgin olive oil has been voted among the best in the world by the international olive oil bible, *Flos Olei*. According to Denis: 'Istria is the best olive oil region in the world after Tuscany.' Local wines, such as the white Malvazija, are increasingly recognised in international wine guides too, and for those wanting a deeper knowledge, there are many vineyards and olive mills to visit across the region.

Top-quality restaurants, traditional taverns and other eateries showcase local specialities from *manestra* (thick soup) and *fuzi*, the Istrian pasta, to seafood delicacies, such as spider crab. But the king of Istrian gastronomy is undoubtedly the truffle, of which there are no fewer than nine varieties. 'Trained dogs dig them up in the forest near Motovun,' explains Denis. Perhaps the best time to explore the region's food and wine is during the many gastronomy festivals held in spring and autumn, situated alongside waterfront views or scenic countryside.

REINFORCING ITS REPUTATION

Istria's reputation has been reinforced by famous international names including the acclaimed American chef, Anthony Bourdain who featured the region in one of his popular television programmes, *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations* in April 2012. Furthermore, the five-star boutique hotel, Monte Mulini in Rovinj, which opened in March 2009, has just become one of the 'Leading Hotels of the World'. As Croatia's popularity soars, Istria is determined to ensure its sustainability. Forty-four of its beaches and three of its marinas have been awarded the Blue Flag high quality mark, which recognises efforts made to preserve the integrity of the sea, coast and environment. No wonder Istria's fast becoming the region's hippest holiday haven.

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