



TAP ON IMAGES TO ENLARGE



INDULGE IN ISTRIA

From exceptional truffle dishes to stunning architecture and natural beauty, **Adam McCulloch** experiences the best of this Croatian province.





The dramatic limestone cliff tops in Croatia are adorned with sunbathers and sightseers.



INDULGE IN ISTRIA

From exceptional truffle dishes to stunning architecture and natural beauty, **Adam McCulloch** experiences the best of this Croatian province.





Cobbled streets in the picturesque town of Opatalj.

INDULGE IN ISTRIA

From exceptional truffle dishes to stunning architecture and natural beauty, **Adam McCulloch** experiences the best of this Croatian province.





Istria prides itself on fresh, delectable dishes.



INDULGE IN ISTRIA

From exceptional truffle dishes to stunning architecture and natural beauty, **Adam McCulloch** experiences the best of this Croatian province.





The seaside area of Rovinj.



INDULGE IN ISTRIA

From exceptional truffle dishes to stunning architecture and natural beauty, **Adam McCulloch** experiences the best of this Croatian province.



DESTINATION

Istria hides in plain sight on a cheese-wedge of land between Italy, Slovenia and the Dalmatian Coast. This much overlooked peninsula of fishing villages, truffle-strewn forests, wineries and ancient olive groves is a feast for gourmands.

It's fitting, perhaps, that I arrive by way of Venice and drive overland through Trieste, as during the 9th century all of this was part of the Venetian Empire. They conquered their neighboring countries not with the sword, but by establishing bountiful markets in every Adriatic port as far south as Turkey.

Flashing past my windscreen are tight clusters of stone houses and terraced hillsides. It is as if I am thumbing through a book on Renaissance landscape painters. When I check in to one such scene, Hotel San Rocco (www.san-rocco.hr) in Brtonigla, I see that the medieval barns conceal a stylish interior.

I join the hotel's owners, the Fernetich family, for lunch on the terrace in dappled afternoon light. While I plead unsuccessfully for them to adopt me (their olive oil alone would make a worthy inheritance), they ply me with wild asparagus risotto, wine, crusty bread and wild herbs foraged from the surrounding landscape. The family even produces vinegar, barrel aged for 20 years.

SOON WE ARE IN
POSSESSION OF
THREE GOLF-BALL
SIZE TRUFFLES.

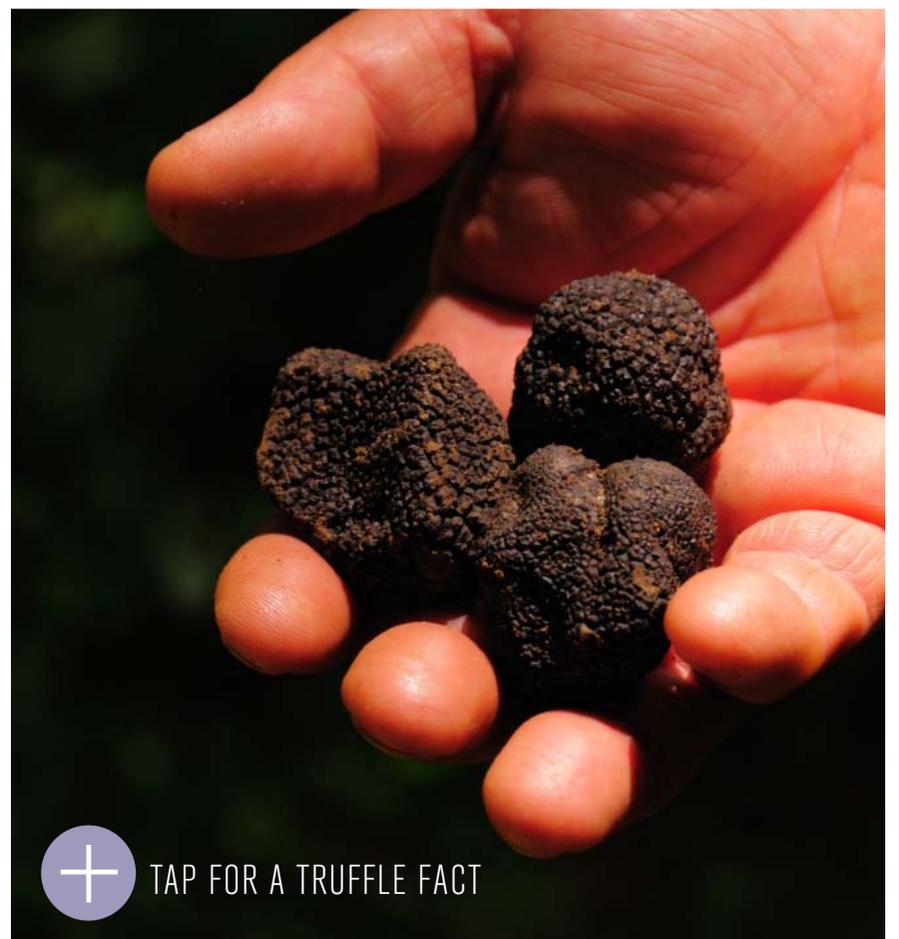
Istrians are both proud and humble about their culinary prowess. It seems that anyone with so much as a window box produces oil, wine or cheese (usually all three), plus endless variations on a delectably strong local fruit liquor, rakia, with which they ply every guest. Yet few consider themselves winemakers, distillers and such. Eating and drinking well is just a way of life here.

The following day I tour the medieval towns that cap Istria's soft hills with knuckles of stone. A wedding is in progress in Grožnjan and, while the town has

been variously fortified and abandoned for a thousand years, today the wonderfully Baroque Crkva Svete Marije church is noisy with good cheer. In May, the cobblestone streets polished by centuries of shoe-leather will echo with music, as the International Cultural Centre of Young Musicians has a seat here and offers everything from viola lessons to instruction in playing the church's ancient organ.

Istria is full of such surprises, not the least being the vast amounts of black and white truffles that grow in the oak forest below. I head there and meet with a giant of a man, a professional truffle hunter whose local beat is the Motovun Forest. His two eager dogs sniff at his spade-like hands, primed to find the earthy treasures. I learn that dogs are preferred over hogs because, well, 300 pounds of determined sow can be difficult to restrain when she catches scent of a truffle, which pigs find every bit as delectable as we do. (Did I mention Istria has excellent bacon?)

We trace an erratic path through the forest, following the rummaging dogs. Soon we are in possession of three golf-ball size truffles. I restrain from eating them from the giant's muddy hand, wisely saving myself until dinner at the famous Zigante Tartufi (www.zigantetartufi.hr).



+ TAP FOR A TRUFFLE FACT



DID YOU KNOW?

Istrian truffles were discovered in the 1930s along a railway line between Trieste to Poreč in the Mima valley. Of the two varieties of truffle that grow in Croatia, the more pungent white truffle (harvested between October and December) is far rarer than the black truffle which can be found between May and November.

The largest truffle on earth, weighing in at 1.31 kilograms was unearthed in 1999 near Buje by Mr Giancarlo Zigante. It sold for close to US\$300,000.



DESTINATION

The restaurant, located on the edge of the forest, serves truffle with every single course – the culinary equivalent of rolling cigarettes with hundred-dollar bills. From the fresh sea bass carpaccio to the pumpkin soup and lamb cutlet, every dish is laced with the region's decadent delicacy. Even the dessert of ricotta soufflé comes with an orange and white truffle cream.

Olive oil in Istria stands proudly alongside Italy. At Ipša olive oil estate (www.ipsa-maslinovaulja.hr) I am greeted by owner Klaudio Ipša. This man is serious about olive oil. I can tell because he insists on teaching me the correct way to taste it. (His is also the first Croatian olive oil included in the Italian guide of best olive oils.) In the stone cellar, I chase each sip of oil with a loud sucking of air as per his instruction. He forgives my sloppy technique and invites me to share a small feast of home-made sausage, olives and of course wine (it's 10am, after all), and I enjoy more than a few delicious bites.

I allow myself a couple of days respite from my culinary odyssey and head to the coast, boarding a ferry to Brijuni, (www.brijuni.hr/en/) a group of 14 islands just two kilometres offshore. The main island, Veli Brijun, was the jetset-era playground for Croatia's charismatic dictator, Tito, and, judging by the Cheshire-grin he wears in the museum's archival photos, playing

host to celebrities like Sophia Loren was one of his favourite pastimes.

Tito wasn't the first oligarch to call Brijuni home. While riding around the oak-shaded trails I stumble upon the remains of a Roman port and a Byzantine villa so complete the wine cellar still contains the original terracotta pots. What surprises me most (apart from the 1600-year-old olive tree) is the private zoo established by Austrian iron baron Paul Kupelwieser in the late 1800s. The violin-playing chimpanzee (yes, you read that correctly) may be long gone, but zebras and elephants still incongruously roam the landscape.

The next day I venture towards the Kamenjak Peninsula, where the dramatic limestone cliffs mark Istria's southern-most point. The cliffs are decorated with sunbathers and every now and then someone walks to the precipice and vanishes into the waters far below. The sun is hot so I repair to the shade of the Safari Beach Bar which proves easier said than

...THE DRAMATIC
LIMESTONE CLIFFS...
ARE DECORATED
WITH SUNBATHERS...



FROM LEFT: The Ipša olive oil estate; ruins in the Brijuni islands.



DESTINATION



ABOVE: Boats moored at twilight in Rovinj.

done. The bar is hidden among thick undergrowth and the trails are just as likely to lead to crazy playground equipment as they are to a quiet picnic table. I settle into a nest-like clearing and quickly doze off.

When eventually I awake and find my way out, I head to Rovinj, a medieval seaside town with all the charm of Venice. Here, I hire the services of a boat captain who ferries me around the glassy bay in an open wooden boat in order to see the city from the sea. The bay is festooned with the kind of items a child might draw: a lighthouse, a sailboat, a jagged island with a house perched on top. As we tie up on the island of Sveti Andrija, he explains that Istria is a junction of 'energy meridians' and has been attracting wellness travellers for centuries. The spa on the island is abuzz with blissed out visitors who meander among the healing pools as if in a dream.

In the afternoon, I walk along the harbour and up through the narrow cobbled streets into the old town. Near the cathedral, a futuristic glow emanates from a stone doorway. The waitress, aglow with her bleached hair and all white uniform, beckons me in like an apparition. Monte Restaurant (www.monte.hr) is like a spaceship hidden in a castle and the food is just as futuristic – inventive dishes like scampi and anchovies with an emulsion of sea urchin, green apple and bacon are the stock in trade here. When the last piece of chocolate bark passes my lips I know, like many before me, I have been utterly conquered. Istria has won.

FUN TO KNOW

WALKING WITH DINOSAURS

Fenoliga Park at the southern-most tip of Istria is one of the best places to view more than a hundred dinosaur footprints. The 600 metre long dinosaur walk (near the Pinižule Cove) is punctuated by life-size fibreglass dinosaur recreations.

www.kamenjak.hr/En-site/landmarks.html

LOVE IS IN THE AIR

Legendary lothario, Giacomo Casanova visited the Croatian seaside village of Vrsar in 1743 and 1744. In June, Casanovafest celebrates his life with a film festival, readings and kissing competition.

www.casanovafest.com

VENICE IS BUILT FROM ISTRIA

Many forests of Istria were stripped bare to provide Venice with the timber pylons upon which to build the grand homes. Even the foundation stones came from Istria – the white, dense stone resembling marble, yet soft enough to carve the fashionable swirls and flourishes of Venetian houses.

VRSAR WARS

Take a stroll through the seaside town of Vrsar www.istria-vrsar.com and visit nearby Dušan Džamonja Sculpture park and workshop www.dusan-dzamonja.com. This artist appears to have spent his life creating sculptures that closely resemble *Star Wars*' Death Star.

SLOW FOOD

Chef Nevio Sirotic's famous slow-food restaurant, Toklarija, is obscurely located halfway along the Motovun-Buzet road near Sovinjsko Polje. In spite of the lovely setting among century old olive groves, meals are often taken in the charming but windowless cellar of this converted olive mill, supposedly to prevent the view from upstaging the food. There is no written menu or website, the restaurant isn't open Tuesdays and Sirotic doesn't abide walk-ins. The food is that good. (Bookings: 091 926-6769)