

Snapshots from a Croatian Vacation

Atlantica editor **Jonas Moody** muses on the pleasures and terrors of roadtripping the Balkan Peninsula with the other half.



PHOTOS BY GÍSLI RÚNAR HARDARSON ON HIS HOLGA 120CFN.

“*H*ostile-tality!” Gísli proclaims. “They should put that up on the billboards when you drive in.” This he tells me as we cross the border into Croatia, the third country after Italy and Slovenia on our maiden voyage into the Balkans.

“*Hostile-tality?* What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask. Although I know exactly what he’s getting at, I feign a dubious glance in an attempt to bait more conversation from my boyfriend, the taciturn Iclander.



“It’s like a Slavic version of hospitality where you have to win them over first, and *then* they let you into their hearts,” Gíslí explains with a laugh. He has clearly been cooking up this theory for miles while pretending to deejay the iPod and take in the mountainous scenery.

In fact, this has been our only conversation since leaving Kozina, a speck in the middle of Slovenia dominated by a single entity: the motel. It’s where travelers from Italy to Croatia stay the night and acclimate to the Eastern

European aesthetic of deep fried meat, anemic desk clerks, and an overall feeling of unspoken, unknowable personal suffering.

The countryside is stunning as we speed down the highway. Low mountains of white stone and grey-green scrub give way to vast stretches of turquoise water. In decades past this was the promised land of cold war snowbirds, the lucky few who escaped frozen Moscow for a warming moment under the Mediterranean sun. Even before the Iron Curtain fell,



people were staking out property on the Dalmatian coast. The guidebook tells us the modest hotel room we've booked in Split is built into what used to be the attic or servants' quarters or vomitorium (or something equally delightful) of the retirement palace Diocletian built in AD 308. It's the Boca Raton of Roman emperors.

Carrening past the majestic seascapes and bleached limestone coastline, we could be in Greece or Italy. But the dour faces of the locals hang in café windows and roadside cottages like deflated balloons—stark reminders of how Milosevic and Croatia's bloody war of independence from Yugoslavia, which ended just over a decade ago, drained every last drop of élan vital right out of the nation.

At a gas station outside Rijeka we make our first set-down on Croatian soil. In the distance four colossal high-rises jut up from the waterfront like giant, crooked fence posts, covered in rust and peeling paint. There are signs of life within some of the windows—lines of laundry or the odd plant—but most stare out like blank, catatonic eyes. Gísli snaps a picture.

The camera strung around his neck is an emblem of his character: a hunk of plastic from Hong Kong that demands a tedious process of changing rolls of film (which are only 12 shots long to being with). First, it requires that he peel off the electrical tape which holds the back plate in place and keeps out most light leaks. Then, under a jacket in his lap, he must blindly remove the old roll and insert the new. Finally, he re-tapes the back and cranks the film to the first frame. Each new roll requires at least ten minutes of silent, strenuous effort, while he contorts his face into expressions reminiscent of trying to retrieve spoons from the garbage disposal or talking a cat down from a tree.

But Gísli is the kind of person who likes antiquated technology to remind him of what he's doing, believing that a digital camera only removes him

from the joy of exposing film to light. At home he calls from a rotary phone. He composes his correspondence using a typewriter. He boils his water with a stovetop kettle.

When I suggested—half-jokingly—that we take a spring-break vacation in the Balkans, I expected him to snub the idea. And here we find ourselves ambling around historical Split. “The books say this is the town's best bakery,” I announce as we roam through what's left of Diocletian's retirement villa.

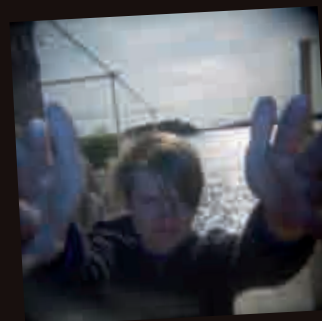
“Not the *best* bakery,” Gísli corrects me with a smug grin. “The book calls it ‘a favorite among the colorful locals.’”

Inside, a group of older, nearly toothless men crowd around the counter, gumming pastries, drinking espressos and chain smoking. These must be the colorful locals. Their banter wanes when we enter and try to coolly swagger to a nearby table with our maps, cameras, and guidebooks aflutter. The man closest to us begins clinking his cup against the saucer, spreads his lips to reveal significantly less than a full house of dental work and sends the hairiest eyeball this side of the Kremlin our way.

“I think he wants us out,” I tell Gísli out of the corner of my mouth. As if on cue, the sky cracks open and rain begins to hurl down.

“See! *Hostile-tality* at work,” Gísli proudly asserts as if pointing out the rare Azores Bullfinch of Portugal. “It's an invitation to prove we are worthy. That's all.”

And in one deft movement Gísli raises his demitasse in an expression of both good will and oh-my-what-good-coffee-your-country-serves, and the situation is defused. Without a glance or a word, the old man lowers his head back down and laps up the rest of his coffee, as piteous as an old dog. We finish our pastries, put on our matching slickers and mosey out into the downpour like Butch Cassidy and the



Sundance Kid after a showdown at the old bakery—an unstoppable duo.

In an attempt to escape the rain on the mainland we buy tickets for the ferry to Hvar Island, touted as one of the sunniest places on earth. Most hotels even offer a money-back guarantee if there is continuous rain during your stay. We conclude that this kind of optimism is rare for Croatia and worth the two-hour trip.

On board there's enough second-hand smoke to cause even a four-pack-a-day Marlboro man to tear up, but through the haze I make out life-size photographs of Pope John Paul embarking and disembarking a Jadrolinije ferry. I wonder whether he sat by the video game slots or if he was more taken in by the Italian soap operas dubbed in Croatian.

Arriving at Hvar we stand in front of the ferry's lift gate among the semi trucks belching out diesel fumes by the lungful. But as the gate slowly drops, it's as if the curtain has been pulled back on the opening sequence from Fantasy Island, with lush slopes full of olive trees and sweeping hillsides covered in grape stalks. Even the diesel odor disappears, usurped by the familiar smell of my grandmother's bathroom: lavender, which grows wild on the island. Gísli snaps a picture.

Not even the partly cloudy dispositions of the glummiest Croats can block out the intractable sunshine that fills Hvar's narrow streets. In the distance small fishing boats sail by, coming ashore at the marina to sell an octopus or two before taking their catch to the docks. Gísli strays from the touristed piazza in front of the town cathedral and the citadel, following a trickle of locals to the other side of the harbor.

Behind a high stone wall we find a soccer pitch full of kids who scowl as we walk by, a little market where old men tie up their donkeys and grimace at the world, and a field full of budding grapevines guarded by a band of

roving goats. The goats—ostensibly Hvar's friendliest denizens—come to investigate our presence before they are shooed away by a portly housewife, who is clearly suspicious, standing outside her farmhouse with hands on hips until we move on. Despite the absence of Hula girls and flowery necklaces, Croatia's *hostile-tality* seems somehow less caustic here among the olive trees and sea spray. Gísli snaps a picture.

Once we've explored the coves of the island's rocky coastline we settle into a restaurant hidden among the cobbled alleys of the town's medieval core. After a little black risotto cooked in squid ink and lot of white wine, we might as well be sitting in the back roads of ancient Rome. Our waiter, who has been palpably wary of our intentions to patronize his establishment, warms up to us the more we enjoy his Caric, the region's wine, harvested from the grapes his family grows.

"It makes sense in a way," Gísli finally says after gulping down the last mouthful of wine.

"That the amount of wine you drink is directly proportional to how good you feel?" I ask.

"No, I mean that you have to give them a reason to be kind," he says. "Any reason, really. There's something lovely about that." And with those words Croatia shape-shifts from the hateful bully I dread into the shy girl I want to coax out of her shell.

That evening our ferry back to Split is filled with the forlorn faces of jaded commuters, grimy truck drivers, lots of peroxide, lots of nail polish. I ponder this strange country filled with tragic beauty and wistful characters, and I wonder at my curious travel companion, forever loading film. It all leaves me perplexed and a bit seasick. Maybe I'll be able to puzzle out some answers once we get the pictures back. ◀