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# *Exclusively* *Yours*

*Discovering a new city can be daunting, but achieving an authentic—and highly exclusive—experience is in fact easier than ever before.*

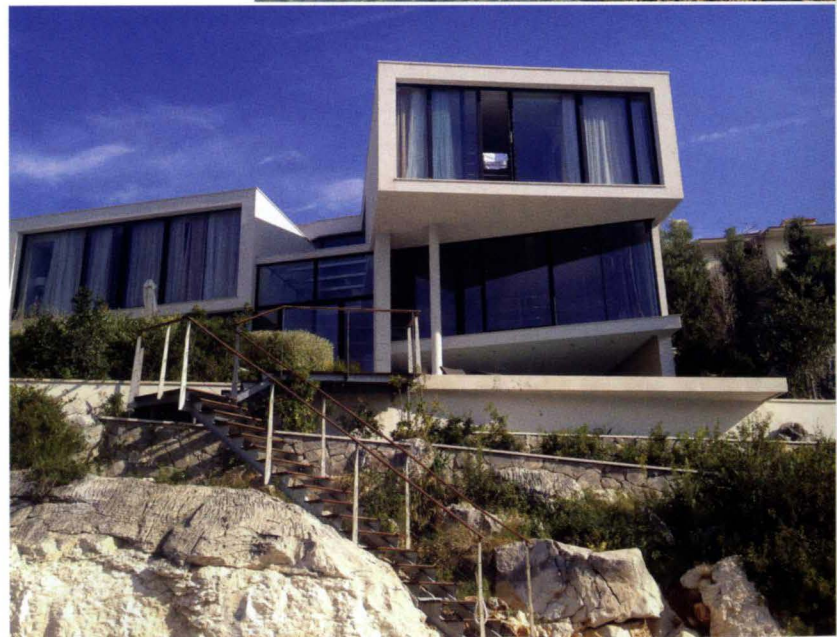
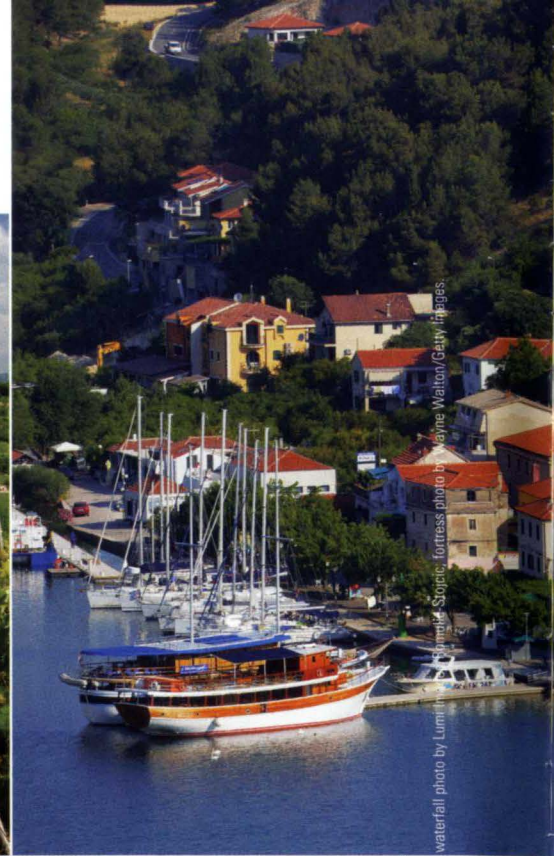
*By Maryam Siddiqi*

Krafne kod Mate (the English translation is “Doughnuts at Mate’s”) is nowhere near Diocletian’s Palace in Split, Croatia—the city’s number one tourist destination. Instead of joining the crowd of sightseers, I find myself at a cozy, one-room spot that is tucked away next to a bus stop, not far from the coastal highway. It houses a combined kitchen and service counter and is a place where locals on the go might grab a quick midday sandwich. Or, as I did, an aperitif in the form of a doughnut freshly filled with chocolate. As my friend and I watch the chef pump sweet filling into puffy balls of baked dough, I wonder how anyone would know about this place if they didn’t know a local. Fortunately, I have one in my company. Stjepan Begušić, the Split native tasked with welcoming me to Dalmatia for the week, is letting me in on the sorts of secrets that don’t show up in guidebooks.

I met Stjepan through Exclusive Resorts, a members-only travel company that provides access to select luxury properties around the world, such as the brand new villa I stayed in on the Adriatic shore in Primošten (an hour’s drive north of Split). Exclusive Resorts connects their members with a local host in each destination throughout their stay. The host is essentially someone to ensure not only that the airport transfer will show up when it’s meant to, but also to book a last-minute restaurant reservation, for instance, or accompany you to Klis Fortress (where episodes of *Game of Thrones* have been filmed) and then to indulge, as I have, in the best chocolate-filled doughnut this side of the Atlantic.

Mate’s kitchen is just one Croatian secret revealed to us throughout the week thanks to Exclusive Resorts’ local and elite network.

Long known to European tourists from surrounding countries such as Germany, Slovenia and Italy, Croatia is rising in popularity as a vacation destination for North Americans. While there are no direct flights to be had (yet), connections to Split on the coast or the inland capital of Zagreb are available from most major European cities. What awaits along the coast is crystal-clear water, shimmering in beautiful ombré from clear to green to deep, dark blue, with a backdrop of craggy mountains. In between are tiny fishing villages that were established centuries ago with mazes of cobblestone streets lined with sturdy stone houses, thriving farmers’ markets and fishmongers and piles of history (Romans, Ottomans, Austro-Hungarians—name an empire and it’s likely to have occupied this land at some point). Between the sea and the mountains are national parks like the stunning Plitvice Lakes and further south is Krka, home to a series of cascading waterfalls and the world’s second commercial hydroelectric plant (the first of which is at Niagara Falls), as well as olive trees and vineyards and a burgeoning gourmet culinary scene.



Clockwise from top left, view over vineyard; photo by Stuart Black; seascape photo by Stjepan Hawilec; villa and beach photos by Marjan Sudrić; waterfront photo by Lumina; harbor photo by Wayne Walton/Getty Images.



Alan Mandić is another Dalmatian who reveals some local flavour to me. His company, Secret Dalmatia, provides Exclusive Resorts' members with access to the region's luxe gems—some of which are more hidden than others. We meet in Skradin, a colourful town that's one of the entry points to Krka National Park (depending on what time of day you arrive, the town swells with nature fans embarking and disembarking the ferry), and he leads the way inland to Plastovo, home of Bibich winery.

Winemaker Alen Bibić greets us at the door and walks us through the history of his winery as well as a sampling of his restaurant's 13-course tasting menu. His wife, Vesna, expertly oversees the kitchen, offering guests dishes that are works of art to both the eyes and the taste buds (a deconstructed olive has had its pit replaced with olive oil, while a dish called "Summer Garden" is escargot on a bed of creamed spinach accompanied by edible flowers and a quail egg cut in half and placed to look like a mushroom).

We enjoy a different Bibich varietal with each dish, getting an introduction to indigenous grapes such as *debit*, *babić* and *plavina*. As we do so, Alen explains that his grandfather taught him about winemaking on this land, where his family has lived for several generations. The oldest vines under Alen's watch are 55 years old: "We lost a lot of vines during the war," he explains. The cellar is open daily for tastings, but dinners here are a truly exclusive affair. I ask the restaurant manager if he's busy. "Every night we're booked," he tells me. There is only one dinner seating—and only one table. Dine here, and the winery is yours for the evening.

Mandić also connects me with Tatjana Ciciliani, who lives in Trogir, a walled city on an island and a UNESCO World Heritage site that's about halfway between Primošten and Split. Tatjana is a straight shooter who immediately makes us feel like family. If Alen Bibić is a master of precision, Tatjana is a master of spontaneity. Before a hands-on cooking class in Dalmatian cuisine, she guides us through the town's fish and farmers' market. As we walk, she suggests a menu with such speed and creativity that we agree to everything she says—and then offer to carry the groceries.

We retreat to her kitchen and she puts us to work: my friend makes herbed salt while Tatjana teaches me to clean, gut and fillet fish. Over the course of four hours, we make and eat a half-dozen Dalmatian-inspired dishes including fresh goat cheese, cured ham and figs, zucchini spaghetti with stingray and baked peaches with cream and berries. As we do so, Tatjana fills us in on the history of Trogir and the current town gossip: which parts of town were used as sets in *Dr. Who* episodes and what she cooked the crew when filming was done.

As a destination, Croatia doesn't have to try hard to impress—it's home to gorgeous landscape, centuries of history, natural havens for both relaxation and adventure, and the stunning Adriatic Sea. But, in the end, it's the locals and their secrets that bring this beautiful country to life. ♦