

# Jewel in *the crown*

Sarah Reeve discovers a treasure trove of gems on Croatia's romantic Istrian peninsula

Blessed with a warm, sunny climate and unspoilt landscape, Croatia is fast becoming a destination hotspot for UK travellers. Coined, 'the Mediterranean as it once was', the country is rich in authentic character and charm. With romance on the radar, the beautiful Istrian peninsula is a honeymooner's dream – a region of contrasts from the blue of the crystal-clear Adriatic Sea to the lush green countryside.

## A COASTAL PEARL

After a hassle-free two-hour flight, I arrived from London Stansted at Pula Airport en route for the picturesque town of Rovinj, my base for the next five days. This romantic hideaway is bursting with culture, history and natural beauty, as well as gastronomic delights and friendly locals too.

I stayed at the Lone Hotel, Croatia's first design hotel and a real gem. Set by the sea surrounded by the centuries-old Golden Cape forest park, it has everything and more to offer newlyweds. From fine-dining

restaurants, bars, entertainment, wellness centre and spa to sunbathing terraces, tennis courts, new outdoor pools and nearby Lone Bay – you don't have to stray far for honeymoon bliss.

## OUT AND ABOUT

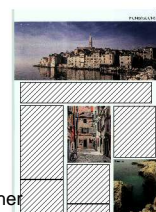
With everything on hand at the hotel, you may not want to budge from the five-star luxury, but the beating heart of picturesque Rovinj is well worth the short 10-minute walk. The fascinating old town, with its labyrinth of cobbled streets has to be explored on foot, so don't forget to pack some comfy flats. It's long been a magnet for artists, with the renowned Grisia Street boasting a wealth of galleries, craft and artists' workshops to browse. The long-established Grisia art event is held here on the second Sunday in August every year. But be prepared for the winding, narrow streets to be rammed with visitors in peak season. To avoid the crowds and soaring summer temperatures, it's best to visit in late April and May or from early autumn. However,

with a myriad of bars and welcoming taverns, there's plenty of opportunity to chill out and enjoy a reviving drink or just sit and watch the world go by.

## FROM BLUE TO GREEN

For the more energetic, why not experience the scenic coastline for yourself and take a boat ride around the archipelago of 22 islands? There are a number of excursions available from a pirate cruise with fish picnic, underwater sightseeing or romantic night trips – check out the boat information points on the town shore.

To venture further afield and soak up the full flavour of the region you can hire a car or bike. With a host of scenic routes and trails, you can discover the wine areas of Istria, follow the olive oil routes or trace the rocky coastline, fringed with white stone beaches, secluded coves and flat rocks – perfect for sunbathing.





## FOODIE HEAVEN

The rich gastronomic mosaic of the area covers everything from fine-dining à la carte restaurants to homely taverns and inns offering traditional dishes. You can stumble across hidden culinary treasures in some of the remotest spots, feast on fresh, local produce, washed down with one of the renowned regional wines. The cuisine is based largely around seasonal ingredients using freshly caught fish, locally reared meat and specialities such as wild asparagus. Don't be surprised to sample some of the local delicacies, such as the region's legendary truffles, featuring throughout the menu from starter to dessert. I even had olive oil drizzled on my ice cream – a first for me and a taste sensation!

With the area rooted in the sea, it's no wonder its famed for its fish dishes – there's an embarrassment of riches, the only dilemma is which to choose; impressively large langoustines, octopus, spider crab or maybe a platter of succulent scallops – to die for! For further information visit the tourist board website [www.croatia.hr](http://www.croatia.hr) ♥

## Must do

♥ For a true taste of Istria, you can be sure of a warm welcome at the family-run Stari Podrum. The rustic tavern oozes homely charm and serves up a feast of tasty traditional dishes.  
[www.staripodrum.info](http://www.staripodrum.info)

♥ Sample liquid gold at the Ipša family's olive plantation nestled in the green valleys of north western Istria. Visitors are welcome to visit the estate all year round and taste the award-winning olive oils, while taking in the glorious, panoramic views.  
[www.ipsa-maslinovaulja.hr](http://www.ipsa-maslinovaulja.hr)

♥ A cool place to hang out, the Trapan Wine Station is fast building a name for itself in the industry, driven by its owner, fondly nicknamed the Che Guevara of wine.  
[www.trapan.hr](http://www.trapan.hr)

## Don't miss

### Valentino Cocktail & Champagne Bar:

Straight out of a film set, this has to be one of the most romantic spots in the world. Perched on the rocks overlooking the crystalline waters, you can sit on the terrace or lounge on cushions on the rocks and feel like a movie star, glass of fizz in hand. The place to be seen, it's fabulous by day and honeymoon heaven by night illuminated by the underwater lighting.

[www.valentino-rovinj.com](http://www.valentino-rovinj.com)

**Truffle hunting:** Known as an aphrodisiac, Istrian gold and the king of gastronomy, these tasty tubers have a distinctive flavour and strong aroma all of their own. Feast on a breakfast of omelette and truffles, followed by sausage and cheese at the family-run Karlic Estate in Paladini, followed by a truffle hunting session led by their specially trained dogs.

[www.karlictartufi.hr](http://www.karlictartufi.hr)

**Pula:** The largest city in Istria, it boasts one of the best preserved Roman amphitheatres in the world. You can almost feel the excitement of the gladiator fights that took place here 2,000 years ago.

The town boasts a host of other Roman relics, bustling market and wide choice of places to eat. For a real treat, indulge in a delicious seafood lunch at the smart Milan restaurant.

[www.milan1967.hr](http://www.milan1967.hr)

**Wine tasting:** Visit one of the fabulous wineries in the region to sample some of the best local tipples from the crisp, white malvasia to the deep, ruby red teran or sweet, golden muscat. The Kozlovic Winery in Momjan is owned by one of the oldest winemaking families in Istria. Well worth a visit not just to taste the award-winning wines but to admire the fabulous scenery and striking modern building set into the hillside.  
[www.kozlovic.hr](http://www.kozlovic.hr)

## Dining out

### Villa Meneghetti

Nestled among the vineyards and olive groves, this place is a little piece of heaven. Surrounded by beautiful scenery you can enjoy delicacies prepared by top chefs, sip a glass of Meneghetti wine and watch the sun go down over the vineyards.

[www.meneghetti.info](http://www.meneghetti.info)

### Batelina

Rated this year as the best restaurant in Croatia you need to plan in advance to eat here. Located in the seaside village of Banjole, just south of Pula, it gets booked up well ahead so don't bother turning up on the off chance. It's famed for fish dishes prepared in exciting and original ways, fresh from the daily catch.

[www.istra.net/en/restaurants](http://www.istra.net/en/restaurants)

### Restaurant Zigante

Located in Livade, home of the Istrian truffle. The world's largest white truffle was found in the area by Giancarlo Zigante in 1999, weighing 1.31kg it made the Guinness World Records.

[www.restaurantzigante.com](http://www.restaurantzigante.com)

**Also check out:** The Masèra restaurant in Rovinj for high-end food at great prices.

[www.masera.hr](http://www.masera.hr)

## Booking it

**Accommodation:** A premium double room with a balcony view at the five-star Hotel Lone in Rovinj starts from £116.14 per night including breakfast for two and use of the wellness centre and spa.

[www.lonehotel.com](http://www.lonehotel.com)

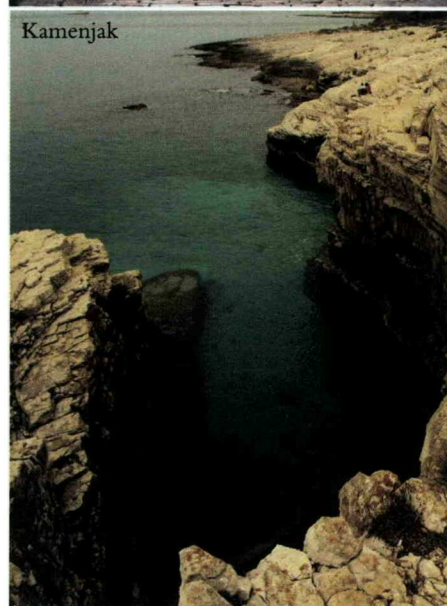
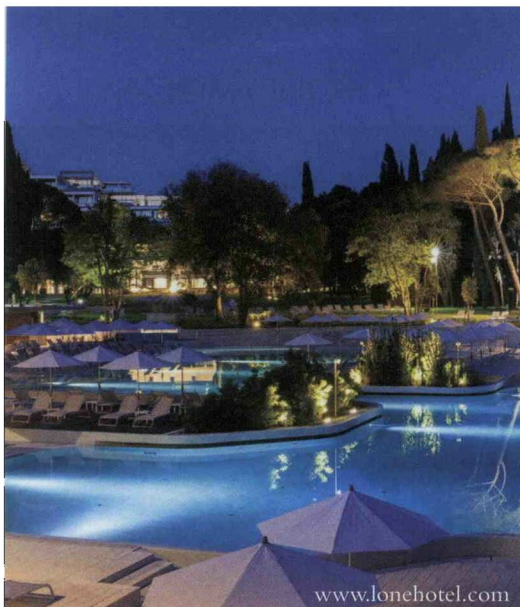
**Also check out:** Park Plaza hotels and resorts.

[www.parkplaza.com/croatia](http://www.parkplaza.com/croatia)

**Flights:** London Stansted to Pula with Ryanair, from £56 return.

[www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)





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