

CROATIA

Traveling at the speed of Vis. **STORY AND PHOTOS BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO**



“The Mediterranean as it once was.”

IT WAS AN advertising slogan created in the mid-2000s by the Croatian Tourist Board and it was everywhere — billboards, magazines, websites. Whenever I turned on my television during the six years I lived in Belgium, I was lulled into a dream-like state by images of turquoise water and pearl-white crescents of sand near 1,000-year-old villages. I was ripe for the advertiser picking too — a California girl in a rainy and gray country in need of heat and sun. And it worked. I’ve visited Croatia many times in search of this halcyon hallucination. I found it, and much more, 30 miles off Croatia’s Dalmatian Coast, on the minuscule island of Vis.

Vis (pronounced veez) is not in the Mediterranean Sea, but that’s just semantics. “The Mediterranean” is both a region and an omnipresent state of mind whose ethos of lighthearted loafing and wine-fueled lunching fells any inclination to rush. The nearby Italians might call it *far niente*, do nothing, but in Dalmatia it’s called *pomalo*. Say it a few times under the hot Adriatic sun and it begins to drip off the tongue like thickened honey. Appropriately it means slowly, or little by little, and the idea drains deep into Vis’ rocky red soil, tangling with the roots of ancient olive trees, grapevines, and families who’ve been pomalo-ing here for thousands of years.

To call Vis off the beaten path might be hyperbolic, especially during the summer when direct daily car ferries arrive swollen with beachgoers from Split, Croatia’s ancient port city on the Adriatic Sea. But despite the easy access, a sense of remoteness prevails once you’re on the island. This probably has to do with the island’s history as the hideout of Josip Tito, the leader of former Yugoslavia who annexed the island for military use in 1944 and closed it to visitors domestic and foreign. Drive around Vis, and tunnels, caves and even an airstrip, now overgrown with grapevines, are reminders of the island’s strategic position as an Allied outpost during World War II. What remained when Vis reopened to tourism in 1989 was an unspoiled island of pristine beaches, of which there are so many you could visit one an hour for an entire day and swear

you’ve landed in heaven each time, along with feeling the serendipitous nostalgia that comes from 45 years of sequestration.

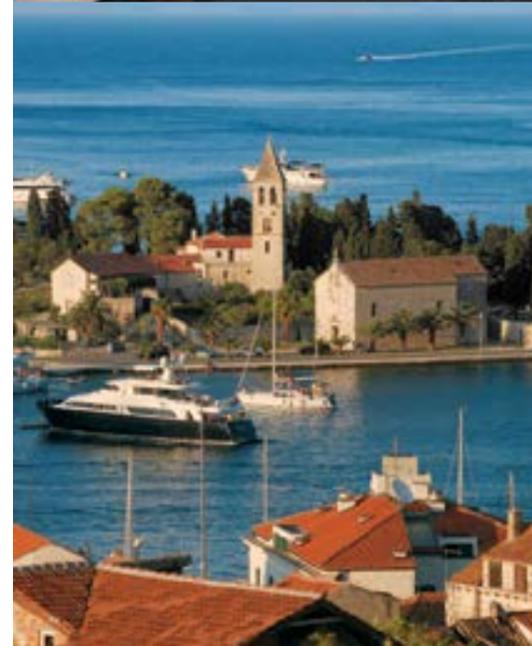
On my first day Miso Poduje, a local resident, historian, and owner of the funky Paradajz Lost Bistro in Vis Town, walks me around and recounts a history that feels far too vast for such a compact place. Founded as Issa in 397 B.C., Vis has welcomed a parade of past rulers ashore thanks to its strategic position in the Adriatic, including the Illyrians, Byzantines, Romans, Slavs, Austrians, French, British and Italians, whose influences resonate in the architecture and artifacts as well as the local dialect. We wander between white stone houses with rolled red tiled roofs and down silent Korzo Street, which once bustled with dozens of businesses. Near the ferry landing we climb around a weedy Hellenistic cemetery and see remains of a Roman bath, ancient streets and old city walls. Vis Town is separated into two parts — Luka and Kut — and as we stroll from one to the other, Poduje points and talks: a Franciscan monastery over there; Baroque homes of wealthy nobles there; the house where one of Croatia’s best known writers, Ranko Marinkovic, was born, there; and there’s the house that belonged to the Machiavelli family, whose plot we saw earlier in the town cemetery. He stops to show me a green bushy plant blooming from the crack between two stones of a wall. It’s a caper bush, stuck on the white facade like a bow on a birthday present.

Poduje tells me there’s an impressive collection of ancient amphorae and other antiquities housed in the Vis Museum, and he makes a phone call.

“Sorry, it’s grape harvest time so there is no one to open,” he says with a shrug.

It seems most residents of Vis have a vegetable patch or a square of grapevines to call their own, and I understand why Vis has the reputation of being a food lover’s destination. Two roads cut through the center of the island and both connect Vis Town to the historic fishing village of Komiža, just 20 kilometers away at the opposite end of the island; one’s a straight shot and the other is a winding lollygag through Vis’ gourmet gut, and the one worth exploring. »

Opener: The coastline of Vis holds many secret beaches. This page, clockwise from top left: Local signage; military tunnels remain on Vis; Sylvia Siminiati at Paradajz Lost Bistro; sunset over Vis Town; Vis Town harbor and monastery; pekas cooking at Roki.



OPENER: BORIS KRAGIC; OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT: MILADEN SCERBE



This page, clockwise from top left: Hib; a Franciscan monastery in Vis Town; a Falkusa boat in Komiza; Vis' agriculture interior is colored with vineyards; Srebena Beach; Terrace at Konoba Roki. Opposite page: Stivinia Beach, also known as the Secret Beach.



Vineyards, plump with Vugava and Plavac Mali grapes, ribbon the valley, while olive trees shimmer silver in the sun. It's along this road you'll also find several family-run taverns, called *konobas*, that serve authentic local and regional cuisine. For *peka*, a Dalmatian specialty and method of preparing meat and fish under a metal dome in hot coals, Roki's is unparalleled. Mario Fras welcomes me onto a tree-shaded terrace and leads me to the open fireplace where he oversees a half dozen *pekas* in smoldering ash cooking octopus, vegetables and lamb. Within a few minutes, a server approaches us with a tray lined with shot glasses of *rakija*, the most popular spirit in Croatia, almost always homemade, in a variety of flavors — grape, plum, honey, mistletoe — and a guaranteed catalyst for late nights and hazy mornings.

"*Zivjeli* (cheers)!" We clink glasses.

Like many young people from the island, Fras left to study and work in larger European cities. When it came time to raise a family, however, the pull of Vis was too much.

"I am from Vis. I was born here, took my first steps here, and will die here. Vis is in my blood and I am in its soil and I will do what I need to stay here."

Fish and seafood are staples, as you'd expect on an island rich in seafaring tradition. Fresh sardines are hauled in to Vis Town and Komiza, where local kitchens pick up the daily supply. Seasoned with salt and pepper and grilled on long metal spears is a common way to eat them at beachfront restaurants such as Konoba Stončica, located

on a bay of the same name and reachable via a short hike or swim. At Restaurant Val in Vis Town, chef Luce Vasa prepares a *paštafažol na bručet*, a hearty fish and bean stew with pasta, which I enjoy with a local white *Vugava* wine from Antonio Lipanović, whose barrels are stored in old military tunnels. *Viška pogača*, a local specialty made with savory dough similar to focaccia and stuffed with onion and anchovies, is a must, especially in Komiza, where tomatoes are added to the recipe.

On my last day, I plan to meet a friend of a friend, Leah Tolno, at her mother's gourmet shop, Pjan. After only a week on Vis, I walk along the quay and notice my steps fall into a relaxed pace measured by lapping blue waves against the seawall. Even traffic feels leisurely and the only klaxon I hear comes from the handlebar bells of bikes that ting-ting a hello as they roll by. As I nibble on thin slices of *hib*, a traditional cake made from figs, aromatic herbal brandy and fennel, I ask Tolno about her idea of pomalo.

She has a generous smile and unruly brown curls that spring when she tilts her head to reflect on my question.

"It's about life not measured in minutes," she finally responds.

"What's it measured in?" I ask her.

"Moments."

The thought entrances me and I cling to it as I board the ferry back to the frenzy of the real world. I'd been in search of the Mediterranean as it once was, but what I found on Vis is the Mediterranean the way it should be. **M**

ZELJKO KRČADINAC