

ISTRIA
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I've never been very good at geography. Is Istria the same as Austria? What is the difference between Slovakia, Slovenia and Slavonia? Why is there a Galicia in eastern Europe when everyone knows it is in Spain?

Answer: Istria is a large peninsula sticking out into the Adriatic. Politically it is divided between three countries: most of it belongs to Croatia, some of it to Slovenia, and a small but populous section in the north-west (round the city of Trieste) to Italy.



Historically it has been occupied by foreign powers almost continuously: by the Greeks, Romans and Byzantines in ancient times, by the Venetian Republic in the Middle Ages, by Austria in the 19th century, by Italy from 1918 to 1945, and by Yugoslavia until 1991. Austrian rule was in general benign; Italian rule pretty unpleasant and involving forced italianisation and the banning of Slavic languages and even Slavic family names; Yugoslav rule began with a bloody purge of all supporters of the previous régime.

Not surprisingly, the population is mixed. In the hinterland there are numerous Croatian dialects of almost equal incomprehensibility, while Italian is still spoken – or at least understood – along the western coast. Public signage is in Croatian and Italian. But there are also a few Serbs, Bosniaks and Albanians, and even a small remnant of the aboriginal Istro-Romanian race which Unesco has described as “the smallest ethnic group in Europe”.

Within Croatia, Istrians regard themselves as more than just ordinary Croatians. On account of their mixed ethnicity, they pride themselves on being socially more progressive than the *Lumpenproletariat* in the rest of the country, and they seem to wear their allegiance to the Catholic Church lightly. While the Croatian flag of red and white chequerboard is seen everywhere, it is generally shown topped with the arms of the five historic regions of the

republic and flown together with the flags of the European Union, Italy, and Istria. The latter depicts a blue field across which a golden goat with red horns and hooves marches defiantly, and Istrians are proud of their mascot, which they associate with a tough, independent and enquiring nature. In the 2011 census, 12% of the inhabitants put their nationality down as “Istrian”.

Being part of Croatia, however, has landed the Istrians in a mess. The Croatian administration is topheavy with bureaucracy and riddled with corruption, much of the land is unproductive, and the legacy of recent wars has been unhelpful. Foreign companies are loath to risk investment in such a dodgy place, so unemployment is rife, and young people prefer emigration to poor working conditions at home; many of them head for Ireland.

However, Croatia has a warm climate and hundreds of miles of spectacular coastline (though no sandy beaches!), so tourism has come to the rescue, making Croatia the world’s twentieth most popular tourist destination and providing no less than 25% of national GDP. (Wine, olives and truffles are also significant.) So far as we could see, the whole coastline of Istria consists of an unending series of hotels, villas and apartment blocks, offering an unlimited menu of activities to gratify all visitors, from hyperactive youths and nudist swingers to geriatric pachyderms.

This generates a huge service industry, and we found the Istrians we met to be impressively multi-lingual, which is just as well because in our whole week there we never found one Croatian phrase-book – come to think of it, I don’t think we even saw a bookshop, though there were plenty of information pamphlets. At the back of the guidebook to Croatia belonging to my friend Willie were a few useful phrases, and I managed to master a couple of dozen to use for politeness’ sake.

On the positive side, the modern developments are tastefully done, the larger buildings carefully landscaped, and the only intrusive features are the occasional derelictions caused by nihilist ideologues of the past. The historic towns present a hospitable face to the cultured visitor, and the spectacular mountains and forests are still pristine.

The national currency is the *Kuna*, of which you will get just over seven per euro.

Our trip

Willie and I booked a holiday with the Travel Department, leaving from Dublin Airport on the evening of Tuesday 21 May, flying to Pula, and thence by coach to Poreč and our hotels. We departed with some misgiving, for we left behind us a series of fine sunny days, to face into heavy rain that had covered the whole Balkan region for two weeks and showed no signs of stopping. Sure enough, it was raining when we arrived; it rained all night, and the temperature was unseasonably low. But next morning the rain stopped, the skies cleared, the sun came out, and there followed five sunny days.

We took stock of our surroundings. Our hotel was enormous, one of many run by the ubiquitous Valamar company. Our fellow-guests were mainly Germanic or Slavic, with a smattering of Angloglots. There was a coach party of Teutons on whose conversations I tried to eavesdrop, but in vain: the sign on their coach revealed that they were from Rottweil (and were thus *real* Rottweilers) and Börsingen. Mr Google tells me that Rottweil is a delightful old town in south-west Germany situated between the Black Forest and the Swabian Alps, and is linked by bus route to Börsingen in Switzerland – no wonder I couldn’t understand their *Schwyzerdütsch*!

The hotel was impersonal but super-efficient. In particular, the hundreds of guests were fed with impressive promptitude a varied and plentiful supply of nutrients: you could eat like a caterpillar until you burst, if you really wanted to. And this was but one of perhaps

hundreds of hotels stretching all down the Croatian coast! What consumption of food, water, electricity! What masses of waste poured into ... where?

Our Travel Department group consisted of about forty, divided between two hotels. Some we got to know quite well, others not at all, and we eventually chummed up with Charles Gannon, a retired employee of RTÉ, his former colleague Monica, and her cousin Betty who was celebrating a “significant” (but unspecified) birthday. Our guide, Anna Maria, was excellent, providing just the right mixture of firmness, humour, efficiency, and interesting information.

Normally, the Travel Department organises plenty of excursions and also allows a couple of free days. We were in Poreč for seven days, but we only had 2½ days of excursions, leaving us with 4½ days to fill. Normally, this would not have bothered us as we generally take off on our own anyway by bus or train. BUT: in Istria public transport is almost non-existent! Everyone comes by car, we were told. Yes, there are buses between the main towns, but that is all – and we were warned on no account to risk our lives on the trains!

Poreč

Poreč (Parenzo in Italian) is an attractive town with many old buildings, despite having been heavily splatted during World War II. Built by the Romans as a *castrum*, the centre preserves its original layout, based on its original streets, the *Decumanus* and the *Cardus Maximus*. The main attraction is the wonderful Basilica of St Euphrasius.

We recommend a visit to the *Lapidarium*, which combines museum, café, and an open-air display of ancient carved stones. It would have been better if the captions had been run past native English speakers – the *Bocca di Verità* is for posting complaints about *sanitation* rather than *sanity*.



Poreč has long been a tourist mecca, and the seafront is dominated by a hideous hotel built in 1910 (the local council sensibly refused planning permission, so the company simply

built a little peninsula and put the hotel on it). The region has a permanent population of 17,000, increasing to over 100,000 at the height of the season. Our guide told us that in winter it took her five minutes to walk from one end of the town to the other, but an hour in summer.

This presents the cultural tourist with a dilemma: do you visit in the spring (before the sea is warm enough for swimming), when many churches and museums are closed (as we found to our disgruntlement) or in the summer when the place is mobbed?

Rovinj

On day 2 our group visited Rovinj by boat, and Willie and I liked it so much that we returned by bus on our last day to do further exploration. The historic centre is built on an isthmus (originally an island) and the narrow winding streets wind up and up until you emerge onto a plateau on which is the huge Baroque basilica of St Euphemia, and from which there are magnificent views. The Venetian-style campanile dominates the coastline and is surmounted by a statue of the saint herself, usefully doubling as a weather-vane.



According to her legend, Euphemia was a sixteen-year-old virgin (somewhat precocious, to judge from her statue) martyred at Chalcedon in the reign of Diocletian. She was plonked into the arena to be eaten by a lion, who obligingly chewed off her arm but thereafter refused to co-operate, so she was broken on the wheel instead. Her relics were preserved in Venice, but the sarcophagus containing them amazingly floated to the shore at Rovinj. The citizens tried in vain to drag it up the hill to the church, but a small boy with a cart and four oxen miraculously managed the task without difficulty. All this is depicted in the apse where sarcophagus and relics are now preserved.

On the way home our boat sailed up part of Limski Kanal or Lim Fjord – actually not a fjord (glacial inlet) but a ria (sunken river valley) – a spectacular estuary with forests on each side.

Novigrad and Grožnjan

The next day was free, so Charles, Willie and I hired a taxi and went first to Novigrad / Cittanova, a small coastal town to the north of Poreč. It has a historic centre and ancient fortifications, but we felt it lacked the character of other Istrian towns and to our disgust the church was CLOSED. We wandered into the museum, only to find a conference was in session, and in fact we observed in the courtyard various groups of academics arguing earnestly over coffee and cakes, as academics do.

To our surprise, however, a young woman leapt to her feet, made us welcome, and gave us a detailed tour of the *Lapidarium*, which contained some ancient twirly carvings that might almost have been plundered from Newgrange. Every time we passed the table with the cakes my mouth watered, and I felt that as the delegates weren't going to eat them they might as well be offered to us. But Novigrad hospitality was by no means exhausted – and they were!

We continued to the hill town of Grožnjan, where we sat in a wonderful terrace café surrounded by dramatic views. Grožnjan was formerly Italian-speaking, but in the 1950s the communist clampdown on all things Italian, and the old animosity between Croats and Italians, caused most of the population to leave. In the 1960s it was repopulated by artists, and it now hosts festivals of painting and music (folk and jazz); we preferred it as we found it, quiet and picturesque.



Pula and Motovun

On day 4 we were taken to Pula by bus. Pula is the largest town in Croatian Istria and is famous for its Roman remains, shipbuilding history, and tourists. Our first stop was the huge Roman amphitheatre. Even in late May it was thronged with visitors. We continued through the old town, admiring Roman arches and temples, until we were left to our own devices. Willie and I climbed up to the top of the town where there is a seventeenth-century Venetian castle with a museum which we didn't have time to visit. The castle is off the beaten track and we could look down on the dereliction and grot which is a legacy of war and dictatorship.



You really need more time to get the best out of Pula, which gives the impression of being pretty run-down (even the shipyard is closed and its directors are in gaol on charges of corruption); the town would be in a bad way were it not for its Roman remains which act as a tourist magnet. James Joyce spent six months here in 1904 teaching English to naval officers (including the future Admiral Horthy) and he too was unimpressed, describing it as “a back-of-God-speed place – a naval Siberia”, adding that “Istria is a long boring place wedged into the Adriatic, peopled by ignorant Slavs who wear red caps and colossal breeches.” This hasn't stopped the locals from putting up a lifesize statue of him in his favourite café, now called the Ulix (Ulysses).

We went on to Motovun, a lovely little fortified hill town in the hinterland, described as “a typical example of Venetian colonial architecture”. Willie and I got away from the crowds remarkably quickly, had a nice lunch in a smart café which we had all to ourselves, and rejoined our coach by walking down through the other side of the town, which no one else apart from Charles had thought of.



You'd wonder what the future holds for Motovun. Already the pressure for development is very strong, and there are plans by foreign investors for two 18-hole golf courses, a huge resort below the town, and applications (rejected so far) for 123 new villas. This may bring jobs, but it won't do much good for the local truffle harvest.

Pazin and Beram

Day 6 was another free day, so Charles, Willie and I hired our friendly taxi driver once again. Our first stop was Pazin, the inland capital of Istria, where there is a fine castle with a museum. Alas, this was not a very successful expedition: it rained all the previous night, it rained all morning, and it was a Monday so the castle was closed. If only our driver had been available the following day (as planned) all would have been well – fine weather and an open castle.

In the vicinity of Pazin is the village of Beram, and even in the rain it was impressive. I quote the *Rough Guide*:

BERAM, 6km west of Pazin just off the road to Poreč and Motovun, is an unspoilt hilltop village with moss-covered stone walls and some of the finest sacred art in the region. One kilometre northeast of the village is the Chapel of Our Lady on the Rocks, a diminutive Gothic church with a set of frescoes dating from 1475, signed by local artist Vincent of Kastav. Of the many well-executed New Testament scenes that cover the chapel interior, two large frescoes stand out. The marvellous, 8m-long equestrian pageant of the *Adoration of the Kings* reveals a wealth of fine detail – distant ships, mountains, churches and wildlife – strongly reminiscent of early Flemish painting, while on the west wall a *Dance of Death* is illustrated with macabre clarity: skeletons clasp scythes and blow trumpets, weaving in and out of a

Chaucerian procession of citizens led by the pope. A rich merchant brings up the rear, greedily clinging to his possessions while indicating the money with which he hopes to buy his freedom.

Our driver produced the lady keyholder who let us in and explained what we were looking at, just as in a BBC television documentary programme by Francesco da Mosto. My photos did not come out very well, thanks to the gloom of the interior, the rain outside, and the ban on flash, so here is one from the internet:



We were back at our hotel in time for lunch – except that there wasn't any, not even a crumb. Moreover, as the hotels are all some distance out from the town, if it is raining you are faced with the choice of either trudging off through the wet into Poreč to eat or staying indoors and starving until dinner at seven. We trudged, bought nice snacks, and returned wetter than when we had set out.

Verdict

Istria has delightful and ancient historic towns, a vista-strewn coast, and a largely unspoilt interior of mountains and forests. The coast is also strewn with tourism and you just have to accept that. The virtual absence of public transport is astonishing, and is to be regretted as you soon see everything that is *sehenswert* in your local town and you need to explore further afield – the Baredine caves were only a few miles outside Poreč but were accessible to us only by taxi. Finally, the tourist authorities must ensure either that it doesn't rain or that the hotels provide lunch – on holiday one doesn't expect to have the stark choice of being either starved or soaked!

Finally, be aware that the local *prošek* can apparently achieve astonishing results!

Rakia's Grappe Schnapps

for - per - für 40,00%N

Anti-age

You can't stop time but you can slow it down with this rakia. It returns vigor, it's a natural Botox, eliminating all worry lines and leaving only the laughter ones. The recommended dosage is two sips before a meal. For a radical effect drink it all at once.

Non puoi di certo fermare il tempo, ma lo puoi rallentare con questa grappa che ti dà l'energia ed è un botox naturale, elimina le rughe lasciandoti solo il sorriso sulle labbra. La dose consigliata: due sorsi prima dei pasti. Per un risultato radicale però la bevi tutto d'un colpo!

Man kann die Zeit nicht aufhalten, aber mit Schnaps kann man sie verlangsamen. Er bringt den Aufschwung zurück, er ist ein natürliches Botox, das alle Falten eliminiert, nur die Lachfalten zurücklassend. Empfohlene Dosis ist zwei Schlucken vor der Mahlzeit. Für eine radikale Wirkung trink alles auf einmal.

Anti-stress - Gegen Stress

Stress is good, it means something is important to you. Problem is the way you perceive it. This rakia relaxes the muscles and clears the brain history of errors in judgment which result in stress. Dosage: Two sips to relax, 4 to feel zen and all of it to be the master of the universe.

Lo stress di per se' a volte fa pure bene, dipende da come lo si percepisce. Questa grappa ti rilassa e ti ripulisce l'animo dai vari sbagli della vita che poi formano lo stress. Dosi consigliate: due sorsi per un buon relax, quattro per una sana fase zen, e tutto il bicchiere per essere il re dell'universo!

Stress ist gut, es bedeutet, dass etwas wichtig ist. Das Problem ist Art und Weise wie man ihn wahrnimmt. Dieser Schnaps entspannt die Muskeln und reinigt die Geschichte des Gehirns von allen Fehlern, die mit einem Stress resultieren. Dosis: Zwei Schlucken zum Entspannen, vier zum Zen und alles austrinken um der König des Universums zu sein.

Better Sex - Migliore sesso - Besserer Sex

Two sips of this rakia and all of the fears, shame, prejudices disappear. You're left with pure passion, joy and lust. You'll be a m.f., sex ify, crazy, open, sensual love machine out of control.

Due soli sorsi di questa fantastica grappa, e tutte le incertezze, la vergogna ed i pregiudizi spariscono! Restano solo la gioia e la passione. Ti sentirai felice, appagato, sudato e seksi! No limit!

Zwei Schlucken von diesem Schnaps und alle Befürchtungen, Scham und Vorurteile verschwinden. Was übrig bleibt ist pure Leidenschaft, Genuss und Begehr. Du wirst eine verrückte, offene, sensuelle Maschine außer Kontrolle.

Slimming - Dimagrire - Abnehmen

The rakia releases a special ingredient - self confidence. It lifts your head up elongates the neck, sucks in your stomach, lifts the butt, smashes cellulite. It accentuates the cheekbones and provides a thigh gap, while simultaneously not touching the breast size. Dosage: 2 sips on an empty stomach.

Questa grappa ti fa sentire sicuro di te. Alza il mento, allunga il collo, pancia piatta, glutei rialzati, elimina la cellulite, gambe a forma e seno perfetto, guance rosate...dose consigliata: due sorsi a colazione.


Dieser Schnaps erlöst eine Sonderzustat - Selbstbewusstsein. Er hebt das Kinn, verlängert den Hals, zieht den Bauch ein, hebt den Po, zerstört Cellulite. Er betont die Backen und macht Lücke zwischen den Oberschenkeln. Die Brustgröße bleibt unberührt. Dosis - 2 Schlucken nüchtern.

Love - Amore - Liebe

The love rakia helps you in the hardest and most beautiful search in your life. First sip clears negative energy of past lovers, second one lets go of all that was wrong, third one opens the heart chakra and the forth one starts the adventure. You can drink it all at once, fall in love with a stranger tonight.

La grappa dell'amore ti per la fase più bella della tua vita. Il primo sorso ti ripulisce da quella energia negativa dei tuoi amori passati, il secondo ti ripulisce da tutto quello che non va, il terzo apre il cuore dell'amore e con il quarto incomincia l'avventura. Bevi alla tutta e innamorati subito! questa notte!

Der Liebeschnaps hilft bei der härtesten und schönsten Suche im Leben. Der erste Schluck reinigt die negative Energie der ex-Geliebten, der zweite entlässt alles was nicht gut ist, der dritte öffnet das Herzkakra und der vierte beginnt das Abenteuer. Du kannst ihn austrinken und dich in einem Fremden noch heute Abend verlieben.



My Croatian glossary

Good morning	Dobro jutro
Good evening	Dobra večer
Hello	Dobar dan
Pleased to meet you	Drago mi je
How are you?	Kako ste?
Good, thanks	Dobro, hvala
Yes	Da
No	Ne
Please	Molim vas
Thank you	Hvala
Excuse me	Oprostite
Do you speak English?	Govorite li Engleski?
I don't understand	Ne Razumijem
Speak more slowly	Mozete li govoriti sporije
Here	Tu
There	Tamo
What?	Što?
When?	Kada?
Why?	Zašto?
Where?	Gdje?
Where is?	Gdje je?
Where are?	Gdje su?
Street	Ulica
Square	Trg
That's fine	U redu
Tea	Čaj
Coffee	Kava
Beer	Pivo
Water	Voda
Enjoy!	Uživati!
The bill, please!	Molim vas, račun!
Help!	Promoč!
Stop!	Stani!
I'm sorry	Žao mi je
Seeya	Vidimo se
Goodbye	Dovidenja