

Kent on Sunday PICK UP YOUR FREE

A Kentish Christmas 2012

WINTER TRAVEL

Seafood, wine and the

Croatia is an unspoilt haven in which to enjoy a special Christmas, declares **Nick Ames**

FOR a touch of winter sun and an idea of how southern Europe's coastline looked before the invasion of mass tourism, the islands off the coast of Croatia offer anything from 1,000-year-old olive trees to a royal nudist beach.

The country has more than 1,000 islands, islets and reefs, with 66 of them inhabited.

While anything from boutique hotels to huts without electricity or running water provide accommodation, possibly the best way to go island-hopping is, naturally enough, by boat through Kvarner Bay, which was my approach.

The clear waters of the Adriatic are enticing at any time of year and the rugged landscapes of the islands provide a perfect backdrop for a relaxing cruise, with excellent food, drink and accommodation provided by Katarina Line.

And as Christmas nears, the islands of the Adriatic are particularly evocative.

For many years, right up until the late 1980s, Christmas did not officially exist in Croatia – then part of Yugoslavia and under communist rule with religion banned.



ALL OF A QUIVER: Crossbowmen give a display

The country declared its independence in 1991 and after a bloody war became a nation in its own right. And back came the Catholic Church, with Christmas a major celebration and places of worship decorated with wreaths throughout December.

Christmas markets are popular, and fish – a local delicacy throughout the year – forms the major meal on Christmas Eve.

The island of Krk has its own special seasonal traditions. There is home-made cheese, marinated fish and mulled wine, as well as an enticing

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joy of being alive in a dream place

range of Krk pastries made of almonds, walnuts and dry figs. Everything is accompanied by Christmas decorations and songs, while folk customs such as blessing the wine are also popular.

Walking the ancient streets and climbing down past the remains of the castle led to a stroll along what remains of the city walls and the chance finding of a bar embedded in the ancient fortifications... a truly atmospheric place for a beer – and I didn't need asking twice!

A maze of tunnels took us to another fantastic bar and a nightclub, while the terrace overlooks the harbour with its yachts, fishing boats, cruise ships and bustling restaurants.

Farther south is the island of Rab, with its main town on a slender peninsula and its ochre buildings dotted with palm trees and cacti.

I was pleased to make the acquaintance of one of the island's crossbowmen, who carry on a tradition dating back to 1634. The body maintains a museum with its weaponry and heraldic flags – and this particular member introduced me to one of the joys of the islands... the seafood, accompanied by local wines, is amazing truly.

In December there is the open championship for squid-fishing; St Nicolas's Day (December 6) is celebrated with seamen's feasts; and a month of shows culminate with Christmas concerts.

The island's first real brush with British tourists came when King Edward VIII arrived with his future wife, US divorcée Wallis Simpson.

The couple enjoyed the delights of a nudist beach – although whether they skinny-dipped is open to debate.

I, however, left no one in any doubt!





INFORMATION FOR VISITORS

■ Ryanair flies to Pula from London Stansted from £43.98 return. For more information or to book, visit www.ryanair.com.

■ You can also fly to Pula with Croatia Airlines or to Zagreb with British Airways, Wizzair, Easyjet and Croatia Airlines. The transfer to Opatija takes about two hours by car. Get to Krk by flying to Rijeka with Croatia Airlines and Ryanair.

■ A seven-night cycling and island-hopping tour of Kvarner Bay with Katarina Line costs from £328 per person on a half-board basis. For more information, see www.katarina-line.com.

■ For more on what to see and do in Croatia, go to www.croatia.hr.

Krk

■ Marina Hotel

<http://www.hotelmarina.hr/restaurant-0>

■ Krk Tourist Board

<http://www.krk.hr/en/>

Rab

■ Barbat restaurant

<http://www.hotel-barbat.hr/GB/intro.html>

■ Rab Tourist Board

<http://www.tzg-rab.hr/eng/otok/>

Pag

■ Pag Tourist Board

<http://www.tzgpag.hr/index.php?lang=en>

Zagreb

■ Double rooms at the Hotel Palace in Zagreb cost from £72 per person based on a bed-and-breakfast basis. For more information or to book, visit www.palace.hr/en.

■ Museum of Broken Relationships

<http://brokenships.com>

■ Zagreb Tourist Board

<http://www.zagreb-touristinfo.hr/?l=e>