



# ALWAY

---

Journey to the coast of Croatia  
and encounter ancient mummies,  
Roman ruins, unique wines and  
a slightly lewd parrot

# TO

---



*by Tony Perrottet*

*photographs by Simone Donati*

# ISTRIA

---

**Marshal Tito's ghost** was ready for his interview. Like any egotistical dictator, he had kept me waiting as he languidly made his way around his private refuge on Veliki Brijun, an idyllic, sun-soaked island off the coast of **Istria in the Adriatic Sea**. Finally, he looked me square in the eye and croaked: *Ciao!*, then *Kaksi?*, Croatian for “How are you?” This was followed by an expletive and an ear-piercing screech. **“Koki likes you,”** beamed the attendant, Lydia. “He usually only talks to women. If men go near his cage, he gets jealous and tries to bite them.”

The most celebrated resident of this dreamy outpost is, in fact, a parrot named Koki—and like almost everything in Istria, a spectacular, **heart-shaped peninsula on the Dalmatian coast of Croatia**, he has an eccentric history. The yellow-crested cockatoo was raised as an unlikely witness to world events, when in the early 1970s he became the beloved pet of Marshal Josip Broz Tito, the charismatic strongman of former Communist Yugoslavia, and began to mimic



**“It has been on the periphery, but it has experienced all of the ideological movements that have washed over modern Europe.”**

^^  
**PREVIOUS SPREAD**  
Built between 27 B.C. and A.D. 68, the Pula Arena is the sixth-largest Roman amphitheater still standing and one of the best preserved. It continues to be used today for plays, concerts and film festivals.

his master's colorful peasant vocabulary. Today, Koki gives the eerie sense that he is channeling the Cold War dictator, who was renowned for his brash independence. Like a character in an adventure novel, Tito rose from poor goatherd to become a revolutionary firebrand, heroic partisan leader against the Nazis (“Tito” was his nom de guerre), and authoritarian president of the postwar Balkan nation Yugoslavia (“land of the southern Slavs”), who strutted the international stage as leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, an organization of mostly developing countries that offered an independent path between the United States and the Soviet Union. Beginning in 1949, Istria's 14 Brijuni Islands became Tito's official residence for six months every year, and until his death in 1980, he invited a parade of world leaders to

visit. The guest list included Fidel Castro, Yassir Arafat, Muammar el-Qaddafi, Queen Elizabeth II and Indira Gandhi, who gave Tito five elephants to stock his own safari park on his estate. Joining this unconventional cast of political celebrities were Hollywood movie stars, who often sailed with Tito around the Mediterranean on his yacht. Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor were guests when Burton played Tito as a young partisan in the 1973 film *Battle of Sutjeska*. The American jazz singer Josephine Baker visited Tito, as did the Italian actresses Gina Lollobrigida and (on several occasions) Sophia Loren.

The handsome, snow-white cockatoo Koki hobnobbed with them all. As well as learning an array of unprintable curse words from Tito (a sign on Koki's cage warns that he utters many “friendly” phrases,



↑  
Tito's 62-year-old parrot Koki, a rare yellow-crested cockatoo, a breed known for its longevity, is one of Veliki Brijun's most outspoken residents.

↑  
The sixth-century St. Mary's basilica on Veliki Brijun was built to serve the inhabitants of the Byzantine castrum, or fortified settlement, nearby.

"but also those which we kindly ask you not to take personally"), he also acquired some of his owner's more intimate musings. As I left the aviary, Koki let out one final shriek—*Volim te, Sophia*, which I later learned was Croatian for "I love you, Sophia."

■ ■ ■

**AS MY VISIT TO VELIKI BRIJUN** showed, almost nothing fits a predictable mold in Istria, a strategically located peninsula that has long been on the front line of Europe's most extravagant historical dramas but managed to steer its own course.

"For over 2,000 years, Istria has been one of Europe's great crossroads," explained Vjeran Pavlaković, associate professor in the Department of Cultural Studies at Croatia's University of Rijeka. "It has been on the periphery, but it has experienced all of the ideological movements that have washed over modern Europe—fascism, communism, nationalism, romanticism."

↑  
Tito gives Sophia Loren (front left) and her husband, Carlo Ponti (rear left), a tour of Veliki Brijun with his wife, Jovanka Broz, in June 1969.



The benefit for travelers is that the layers of the past feel ever-present in Istria, where every era has left a mark. Its delirious natural beauty first enchanted the ancient Greeks and Romans, whose aristocrats luxuriated in marble-encased villas by its sandy beaches, until a wave of Slavic invaders swept down from modern-day Ukraine in the fourth century A.D. In the centuries to come, Istria was conquered in turn by almost every military power traversing southern Europe, culminating in a long and prosperous rule by La Serenissima, the Venetian Republic, from its Renaissance glory days until its fall in 1797. The revolving door only accelerated in the 20th century, allowing Istrians to joke that anyone born there before the First World War could have traveled to four different countries without leaving their home village. The peninsula was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918; Italy until the end of the Second World War; Yugoslavia until its breakup in 1991; and independent Croatia (with a sliver in Slovenia).

But despite the march of so many rulers, Istria's rich landscape and historic architecture have somehow managed to survive unscathed—a lucky streak that was repeated in the 1990s, when the Balkan conflicts devastated so many regions nearby.

This cultural cross-fertilization has imbued Istria with its fascinating quirkiness. The rich Italian heritage is particularly alluring, leading the verdant peninsula to be dubbed “the new Tuscany.” It is officially bilingual, and every town has two names, one Croat, one Italian. (Even “Istria” is Italian; Croats call it Istra.) Thanks to the Italian links, Istrian restaurant tables are laden with some of the Mediterranean's finest olive oils, delicious local truffles, an array of salamis, anchovies and cheeses, and fine wines like the bright white Malvasia and fragrant red Refosco, which was admired by the Venetian adventurer Casanova when he visited nearly three centuries ago. Still, it is far more than a lost province of Italy, says Pavlaković: “Obviously, Istria's identity is close to Italian, with its culture, food, language and architecture. But they see themselves as apart. Istria is neither Croat nor Italian. It has its own special brand, its own special flavor. And the Istrian identity has always come first.”



**MY JOURNEY BEGAN**, as journeys to the Balkans have for generations, in Croatia's capital, Zagreb—and specifically, at the Esplanade Hotel, which sits opposite the railway station. The majestic lodging opened in 1925 to cater to the waves of European travelers arriving on the Orient Express and has been a jumping-off point for the sunny Dalmatian coastline ever since, with Istria promoted in 1920s tourist literature as a terrestrial paradise.



▲ The Art Deco lobby of the Esplanade Hotel in Zagreb. The resort was built in 1925 to provide accommodations for passengers arriving on the Orient Express.

➤ The Gothic-style Zagreb Cathedral seen from the Strossmayer Promenade. The 354-foot-high twin spires were added after an earthquake damaged the structure in 1880.







For centuries, the city has been considered the last stop in Europe before the Yugoslav lands—"the eastern bastion of the West," Robert D. Kaplan called it in his political travelogue *Balkan Ghosts*. Visiting in the late 1980s at the cusp of the Balkan wars, Kaplan found the Esplanade Hotel "a massive, sea-green edifice" that exuded a "luxurious decadence" and "delicious gloom." Today, its chandelier-lit ground floor brimmed with exuberant Croat gourmands savoring treats from the hotel's first female chef, Ana Grgić. Outside, Zagreb's neo-Classical "Lower Town," with its bustling grand streets, also offered little hint of melancholy.

The somber aura of the Slavic east felt stronger in the more ancient "Upper Town," a fortress-like medieval enclave crowned by a towering Gothic cathedral, the fulcrum of Croatia's powerful Catholic church. Under a stone archway nearby, the faithful were kneeling like feudal penitents before a timeworn statue of the Madonna and flickering candles. And yet a few steps away were lanes covered with hallucinogenic contemporary street art, and a new Museum of Broken Relationships, dedicated to failed romances, with exhibits including heart-felt breakup letters and forlorn love mementos.



Zagreb's contradictions offered a prelude for my Istrian road trip. Only 110 miles west, at the end of the three-mile-long Učka Tunnel, the peninsula's coastline unfurled with a string of ancient ports rising above the glittering Adriatic and framed by mountains. Visiting these towns created a visual narrative of Istrian history. In Pula, an intact Roman amphitheater looms over the streets like a mini-Colosseum, while a splendid Temple of Augustus occupies a piazza surrounded by busy outdoor cafés. Other ports are scaled-down replicas of Venice designed in the Renaissance as outposts of the Serenissima's great maritime empire. I parked on the fringe of the most intact, Rovinj (Rovigno in Italian), which is dominated by a bell tower modeled on the Campanile in the

MAP: GILBERT GATES





◀ A worker drives through an olive grove at Chiavalon estate in Vodnjan. The 450-acre family-run farm produces olive oil from tree varieties grown in Istria for centuries.

## A wave of patriotic Istrian chefs featured truffles on their menus, and today the fungi are the top local ingredient.

Piazza San Marco. Cars cannot penetrate the maze of narrow streets, where cobblestones are worn smooth by centuries of foot traffic. Many lead to waterfront balconies filled with Renaissance sculptures and framed by baroque marble columns. Swimmers bask on the rocks down below and seafood restaurants set up tables teetering above the waves. But a touch of the Croatian contemporary is not far away: Across the bay, the postmodern wood and glass Grand Park Hotel offers sweeping views of the old port.

For the modern phase of my Istrian history lesson, I took a 15-minute ferry ride to Veliki Brijun (Great Brijun, or Brioni Grande in Italian), the largest of the 14 Brijuni Islands today set aside as a national park for their sandy coves, pine forests and transparent emerald-green waters teeming with marine life. The vessel docked in front of the Istria-Neptun Hotel, a grandiose relic of the golden age before the First World War, when Brijun became a health retreat for European high society. The state-of-the-art spa opened in 1902 with Art Nouveau design flourishes, an elegant ballroom and a heated indoor pool. The who's who of visiting intellectuals included Richard Strauss (whose ailing health improved radically), James Joyce (who spent his 23rd birthday at the hotel and became enamored of its goat cheese), Gustav Klimt, and the inventor Guglielmo Marconi (who sailed the Adriatic conducting wireless experiments on his yacht *Elettra*). Thomas Mann conceived the plot for his classic novella set in a chol-

▶ Almir Mahmutović co-manages Stara Konoba, a restaurant in Fazana specializing in traditional Istrian dishes such as pljukanci pasta with shellfish, far right. "We are rediscovering poor people's food," he says.

### BY LINES

**Tony Perrottet** is the author of six books, most recently *Cuba Libre! Che, Fidel and the Revolution That Changed World History*.

Photographer **Simone Donati** is based in Florence. His latest book is about people living in the Apennines Mountains of Italy.





Wines undergo testing at the Kozlović family winery in the village of Vale. The winemakers say they're striving to preserve indigenous Istrian varieties.

Ivana Karlič of Karlič Tartufi proffers black truffles she collected with her truffle-sniffing dogs in the forest near her hometown of Paladini in central Istria.

era epidemic, *Death in Venice*, during his stay on the island, which had once been riddled with malaria. Sigmund Freud stayed in the spring of 1914 with his associate Otto Rank. And a parade of Hapsburg royals holidayed at the resort, including the luckless Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand, whose assassination in Sarajevo in 1914 would precipitate the Great War and doom the Austro-Hungarian Empire to which he was heir, as well as its ethereal beau monde.

The serenity of those gilded summers lingers. Like all the islands, Veliki Brijun is car-free, so I explored its forest trails by bicycle, visiting such landmarks as a 1,600-year-old olive tree, which was surrounded by grazing deer; the ruins of a Roman villa by a sandy cove; and the overgrown basilica of St. Mary, which was occupied by the Knights Templar in the 13th century. For me, the most intriguing sites were from the island's second golden age, when it became Marshal Tito's escape in the Communist era and he enjoyed a level of "regal luxury" as president of Yugoslavia that bordered on the buffoonish.

Like a Hollywood actor from the Silent Era, he sported a fake tan, gleaming false teeth and richly dyed hair; sometimes, wearing a white safari suit and sunglasses, he would lead a tame leopard on a chain.

He raced around the islands on a speedboat with his wife Jovanka, a pretty former resistance fighter 32 years his younger, and sat for photo shoots on the islet



of Vanga, where he tended his garden and made wine in a mock peasant life. And yet Tito's charm was undeniable, fueling a personality cult that had Yugoslavs sending him 25,000 letters per year. He was also internationally admired for facing down Stalin in 1948 and putting Yugoslavia on a moderate, if still autocratic, "path to Socialism," a place where travelers from the Eastern bloc could find Western treats like blue jeans and rock music LPs. When Tito died in 1980, just before his 88th birthday, some 122 world leaders attended his funeral.

Although Croatians today have mixed feelings about Tito, his memory on Brijun is lovingly preserved. Apart from a splendid aviary where his pet cockatoo Koki lives a pampered life (which could continue for some decades, since the species' life expectancy is up to 100 years in captivity), there is a Tito Museum filled with faded photos of him posing with fellow dictators and a chapel-like structure made of transparent plastic that displays his car, a green 1953 El Dorado Cadillac presented by worshipful Yugoslav immigrants in the United States. One afternoon, I clambered through the underbrush to a rusty iron fence for a glimpse of the so-called White Villa, the official residence where Tito hosted political conferences and signed the "Brijuni Declaration" in 1955 that created the Non-Aligned Movement with India's Jawaharlal Nehru and Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. Strangely, perhaps, Tito's safari park still exists in the island's north. I cycled past zebras, ostriches and the last survivor of the elephants given to

him by Indira Gandhi, named Lanka. At the park's sun-dappled café, perched above the rocky shoreline, the tuxedoed waiter blasted Italian opera over loudspeakers to the few customers and puzzled animals. "Cappuccini with Puccini!" he declared.



**PRESIDENT TITO'S YUGOSLAVIA** was an illusion. Its rival provinces were only held together by Tito's dictatorial hand, and in 1991 they fragmented and Croatia declared its independence, abandoning Socialism in favor of a free market economy. Fertile, Italian-influenced Istria had always been a gastronomic hot spot, and its family-run farms, restaurants and vineyards blossomed. The Chiavalon family's award-winning extra-virgin olive oil farm, for example, is located in a UNESCO World Heritage site area near the coast above Fazana, whose ancient olive groves are dotted with circular stone refuges used for centuries as shelters by peasants. The two Chiavalon brothers now conduct the harvest while drinking sparkling wine and blasting Croatian rock music.

No product has pushed tiny Istria onto Europe's gustatory map as much as the white truffle, a rare fungus that grows underground near tree roots and is one of the world's most expensive delicacies. Like Italy's nearby Piedmont, Istria lies on the 45th parallel, the midpoint between the Equator and the North Pole, creating ideal growing conditions for the fragrant fungus. But for decades, its presence was a well-kept secret. In fact, some Piedmontese



▲  
The town of Rovinj, viewed from the belltower of the Church of St. Euphemia, was once an island separated from the mainland by a channel that was later filled in.



◀  
The Roman forum, or public square, in Pula, with the Temple of Augustus on the left. The Romans ruled Pula from 177 B.C. until the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the late fifth century.



**“What you see in Vodnjan can be seen nowhere else on earth.**

**Even the Vatican doesn’t have what we have here.”**

would travel to Istria in the 1970s to buy nuggets of “white gold” and sell them back home as “Italian.” Then, in 1999, an Istrian hunter named Giancarlo Zigante and his dog unearthed a white truffle weighing a whopping 2.86 pounds, the largest ever found at the time. Zigante listed his find in *Guinness World Records*, christened it “Millennium” and had a copy cast in bronze before devouring it in a well-publicized feast. The secret was out: The world was alerted that truffles could be found in Istria. A wave of patriotic Istrian chefs featured truffles on their menus, and today the fungi are the top local ingredient, served in humble waterfront cafés and Michelin-starred restaurants like Monte in Rovinj.

The high church of the truffle cult is Karlič Tartufi, a family-run business in the village of Paladini in central Istria, home to 70 humans and 100 truffle-sniffing dogs. In a complex above

Lake Butoniga, 25-year-old Ivana Karlič led me into a sanitized, lab-like room, where two small pyramids of black and white fungi were spread on a sorting table. “There are €75,000 worth of truffles here!” she declared, then held up one the size of a head of cauliflower. “The biggest are the most valuable, but their flavor is not the finest,” she said, adding that, like Chinese philosophy stones, “the shape influences the cost.” The white truffles are far more valuable than the black, selling for up to €700 a kilo, because they can only be found from September to December, mostly around certain lakes in Italy and Istria, while the black can be found year-round in many rural corners of Europe.

By 9 a.m., we had sampled six truffle liqueurs; by 10, Karlič had served a truffle omelet with truffle cheese, truffle butter and “Truffella,” a mix of truffle and Nutella. We then drove down to





the lakeside, where she released four dogs into the forest with encouraging cries of “shoo shoo, bravo!” The truffle hunter’s challenge, Karlič said, is to let the dogs sniff out the fungus but to stop their digging before they devour it. It’s exhausting but addictive work, Karlič said: “It’s like meditation. You go out for eight hours, you never look at your phone, you never even notice whether you are hungry or thirsty, hot or cold, walking for kilometer after kilometer in any kind of weather.”

Karlič suddenly stopped, then raced toward Lela, who was excavating the base of a distant tree. Gently shouldering the dog aside, Karlič attacked the earth with a hand spade. “When you look inside the ground, everything looks like truffle!” she complained, tossing aside clumps. “Even this bit of dirt.” Then she said: “Oh, I see it!” Lela had found a white truffle, tiny but sweet-scented. As a reward, the dog was given a mouthful of truffle omelet left over from breakfast.

Still, despite such classic Italian obsessions as wine,

olives and truffles, Istria remains a borderland with its cuisine as much as with everything else. Back in Fazana at the waterfront Stara Konoba (“tavern”), the co-manager Almir Mahmutović proudly served *pljukanci*, a thin, hand-rolled pasta that is traditionally moisturized with the chef’s spittle. “We are rediscovering poor people’s food!” he said, adding that Istrian *manestra* is a more humble version of Italian *minestrone* soup made from vegetable leftovers and one small piece of meat, while Istrian *polenta* is mixed with cheaper potato to make it more filling. Mahmutović also revealed that Istrians have a bracingly open relationship with the darker realities of life when he presented a grilled squid with a startling declaration of its mortality: “This was still alive at 3 this morning! The fishermen just caught it.”



**THIS EMBRACE** of morbid truths grew more noticeable as I drove deeper into Istria’s mountainous interior.

▲ The Church of St. Blaise in Vodnjan, completed in 1800, is revered for its relics, including the bodies of six saints.



➤ Father Marijan Jelenić, 83, is the parish priest of St. Blaise. He says the preservation of the saints' remains is a miracle.



▲ Jelenić shows a photograph of the body of St. Nikoloza Bursa (1447–1512), one of the mummies kept at the Church of St. Blaise.



Picturesque medieval hill towns sprout from almost every crag, but on closer inspection, a Gothic atmosphere hangs over many, tilting the cultural balance from the Mediterranean toward the Eastern European. In fact, in the cooler months of autumn, Istria can feel less like the “New Tuscany” than the “New Transylvania.”

Of course, this also gives the interior its own char-

acter, with the scars of Istria’s wars, plagues and occupations lying closer to the surface. I noticed this first in Vodnjan, an outpost of the Venetian Empire barely five miles from the coast, whose main church tower is the tallest in Istria, and was used for centuries by sailors for navigation. While bells tolled mournfully, a guide named Erika Forlani Cardin led me through empty, winding lanes to one of the town’s 61 chapels, the one-room Church of St. Martin, which was the headquarters of the Inquisition in the 14th century, and still has the words *ECCLESIA INQUISIT ISTRIAE* (“Holy Church Court of the Inquisition for Istria”) engraved over the door. “After some trials, they buried people alive in the walls,” Cardin said. “They found the skeletons when they were doing excavations.”

I’d heard that secreted in a back chamber of the Church of St. Blaise are some 370 Catholic relics, mostly the body parts of 240 different saints, including three intact “mummies” known to perform miraculous healing. They were smuggled from Venice in 1818 for safekeeping, turning remote Vodnjan into an unlikely pilgrimage site. The cache is today jealously guarded by the 83-year-old parish priest, Marijan Jelenić, so I went with an interpreter, Dina Žufić, to pay my respects.

I was in luck. Father Jelenić was lecturing to 40 high school students, and with a nod, he allowed us to



join them in a dark sanctum behind the altar. On one wall, dimly lit cabinets were crowded with dusty glass containers that held artifacts said to be, among other Catholic wonders, a piece of the True Cross, part of the Virgin Mary's veil and the tongue of St. Mary of Egypt. Most impressive were three desiccated corpses laid out in glass coffins, all still wearing their colorful religious robes. "What you see in Vodnjan can be seen nowhere else on earth," boasted the priest. "Even the Vatican doesn't have what we have here."

Despite his years, Father Jelenić was bursting with energy and spoke with the flair of a Shakespearean actor. "Look! Look!" he cried. "Here is the bedsheet of the baby Jesus. Here is soil from beneath the Crucifix. Here is a stone from the pillar where He was whipped by the Romans. Here is a part of the Crown of Thorns." The list went on: "There are relics from the 12 Apostles. Relics from the prophets! Look! Look! The finger of St. Anthony. More fingers! So many fingers! The pelvic bones of St. Sebastian. The foot of St. Barbara!" The three bodies on display were particularly sacred, Jelenić explained, because of their mysterious state of preservation. "This is a miracle right here in Vodnjan. There is no scientific explanation as to why they are in such good condition. They were never embalmed!" In 2009, the

reach Joe Biden! So he could give a huge donation to make the vault!" Then he cast an eye to the heavens: "An angel brought you here!"



**AFTER VODNJAN**, it came as no surprise to learn that another Istrian village, Kringa, claims to have been the home of the first vampire, or *strigun*—a certain Jure Grando Alilović, who in the 17th century terrorized villagers until he was dug up in the cemetery and decapitated. I was reminded of this when I visited the near-deserted hill town of Beram, where a gaunt vendor selling braids of garlic buds stood at the entrance of a shadowy forest path. The trail led to a small chapel renowned among art historians for its haunting fresco of the Dance of Death, although the sacristan, Sonja Šestan, opens it at irregular hours. A waitress at Beram's only tavern, where villagers were huddled in silence around a fireplace, provided Šestan's cell number. But when I called, Šestan abruptly informed me in Italian that she had to leave soon to make a risotto lunch. "When can you come?" she barked. "Now? Hurry!"

Šestan awaited me impatiently. "Be quick!" she instructed, as she unlocked the wooden portal with a giant rusty key. In the sepulchral darkness, I made out the *Danse Macabre* on the back wall, a series of men and

The medieval hill town of Beram is one of Istria's oldest continually inhabited settlements. Archaeological research shows people have lived here since prehistoric times.

Just outside Beram, the small 15th-century Church of St. Mary on Škriljnah contains an elaborate fresco cycle, including the famous *Danse Macabre*, painted in 1474.



**"My house is next to the cemetery too! I was born in Beram, I got married in Beram, and I will die in Beram!"**

corpses were given CT scans in a forensic laboratory. "The inner organs were all intact! A miracle!"

Father Jelenić led us into his office and opened a tome he had written about the trove, called *Sanctuarium Adignani*. It was as glossy as a high-end museum catalog, with beautifully lit photographs and a price tag of €2,000. ("Yes, the book costs €2,000, but it is worth 10 million," he declared. "It's priceless, really.") He eagerly flipped through its pages, holding his right hand up in reverence at key images: "Relic! Relic! Relic!" Then he paused at a double spread of the mummy of St. Nikoloza Bursa: While alive, Nikoloza had levitated, and her body could still cure disease. Even her image had spiritual power, Jelenić said, as he dangled a key chain above the page. "Look at the energy. You see how the keys move? Just from a photograph!"

Jelenić is planning to build a lavish vault beneath the church so the relics can be properly displayed and protected. ("I fear for the relics. A lot of people would like to blow them up!") The €30 million cost, he hoped, would be covered by book sales and donations. Anyone who gives €100,000 will have a bust in the church, he said. In a flash of inspiration, he asked whether the Catholics of the United States could help with funding. "I would like this book to





women partnered with grinning skeletons. The masterpiece was signed by the otherwise unknown “Vincent from Kastav” with the date 1474, but had been plastered over and only rediscovered in 1913. Raised on Ingmar Bergman’s film set in the Great Plague of the Middle Ages, *The Seventh Seal*, I had expected Death to be a figure draped in black and wielding a scythe. But when I asked, “Where is Death?” Šestan let out a peal of laughter. “Death is standing next to each person. Look, there is Death and the Pope, Death and a cardinal, Death and the King, Death and a peasant. Each person has his own Death. Death comes to all classes. And that’s good to see too,” she said with a laugh, “because we all die!”

She tapped her watch: “I have to go home to make risotto with porcini for my husband.” As I gave her a lift back into the village, she chortled: “My house is next to the cemetery too! I was born in Beram, I got married in Beram, and I will die in Beram!” And then with another grim laugh, she disappeared to make her mushroom repast.



**WHILE I HAD SEEN** Istria’s darker side—and its soulful and occasionally acerbic inhabitants—as somehow at odds with the sunny, lighthearted Mediterranean vibe, the mix now made sense given the trials the peninsu-

la has endured. Its litany of wars, plagues, occupations and dictators would have crushed the spirits of other, less resilient people.

On my way back to Zagreb I called at the Kozlović family winery, one of the most successful in Istria and surely the most beautiful. Rows of manicured vines stretched toward a hilltop crowned by a half-ruined medieval tower, all bathed in a light mist at dusk. “In Istria, we are peaceful people,” mused the winery’s current patriarch Gianfranco Kozlović, when we met at his tasting room. “We have always been caught in the middle of big competitors trying to take control of us. Venetians, Austro-Hungarians, Italians, Yugoslavians—wars and wars and wars!” Istrians have emerged fiercely independent, neither entirely Italian nor entirely Croatian, but they have also resisted the lure of the separatist movements that splintered the Balkans in the 1990s. “It was a nice idea,” he said of the local independence push that emerged around 2017 and spluttered out. “But not a real, practical possibility.” Instead, for 30 years Istrians have supported a centrist political party, the Istrian Democratic Assembly, committed to bilingualism and multi-ethnic cooperation. As we raised our glasses of Malvasia Istriana, I hoped that the moderate spirit of “Istrianity” would continue to thrive in all its elusive eccentricity. ♦