



# WHERE MEDIEVAL

# MEETS MODERN

**A CHANGE OF COURSE LEADS THIS LONG-VOYAGING YACHT ON A JAUNT THROUGH THE RUGGED COASTLINE AND ANCIENT PORTS OF CROATIA'S DALMATIAN COAST.**

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
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EVEN THE BEST-LAID PLANS ARE SUBJECT TO change—something that is never more true than when dealing with yachts and ocean voyages. Beginning their circumnavigation in September 2009, the owners of *Golden Compass* planned a two-year adventure working their way eastward from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, through the Atlantic, Mediterranean and South Pacific and on to their homeport in Washington State. During two years of remarkable travel, *Golden Compass* attracted the attention of the superyacht set, earning her owners the prestigious Voyager's Award at the World Superyacht Awards in May 2012 in Istanbul, Turkey.

But *Golden Compass's* story didn't end there. After several memorable weeks in Papua New Guinea followed by scheduled yard time in Thailand, the plans that would keep *Golden Compass* on her eastward, homebound-track changed. The yard work was completed in advance of the 2012 summer

charter season, so the owners decided to make an about-face and head west, responding to increasing requests for charters in the Mediterranean. *Golden Compass* retraced her passage back across the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, up through the Suez Canal and into the Med, arriving just in time for the Genoa charter yacht show.

Afterwards, *Golden Compass* rounded the tip of Italy, heading into the Adriatic Sea and on to the medieval city of Kotor, Montenegro. Here, my teenage son, McKenzie, and I joined the yacht. This was a homecoming of sorts as I had the pleasure of exploring Cuba, the Amazon and East Timor aboard *Golden Compass* during its off-the-beaten-track cruise.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kotor is situated at the southern end of the Bay of Kotor, set approximately 15 miles inland from the Adriatic Sea. Dating back to 1550, the formidable walls of the Kotor Fortress protect the city that backs up to steep,

rugged mountains, the ramparts rising 850 feet above the bay. Inside its walls, charming architectural details, tiled roofs, plazas and winding stone streets appear much as they have for the past 500 years but are now filled with upscale restaurants, shops and inviting taverns.

An ancient path of hand-cut stone climbs 1,350 steps up from the city to the Castle of St. John at the summit. Once the city's fallback defensive position, the climb now challenges only tourists. The path through the fortress begins beneath a decorative arch behind the Church of St. Maria of the River. A journey best made before the heat of the day, the effort rewards the intrepid climber with a spectacular view of the city and the entire glacial-carved basin of the bay.

Although a lovely place, we would not linger in Montenegro—this trip was about exploring Croatia's Dalmatian Coast. Steaming north into the Adri-

atic bound for Dubrovnik, the rugged Croatian coastline was laid out ahead of us. A line of deeply scarred towering cliffs soared hundreds of feet up from the sea. The rock stood inhospitable and defiant, giving no invitation of landfall; "the cliffs of insanity" from *The Princess Bride* came to mind. The occasional village hangs high above the sea on a precarious perch, surrounded by a desolate landscape where solid rock prevents all but the hardiest of vegetation to take root.

During the five-hour run to Dubrovnik, *Golden Compass's* guests gravitated to their various areas of comfort around the vessel, some reading in the salon, some dozing as the easy rolling sea miles ticked off in our wake. I settled on the main aft deck, a spot where I had spent many hours enjoying a panoramic viewpoint while underway.

With a warm glow of sunset reflecting off a calm sea, *Golden Compass* arrived in Dubrovnik and

*these pages*  
Cruising from Montenegro (right page) to Rovinj, Croatia (left page) reveals centuries-old structures surrounded by modern-day trappings.



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Once a Roman amphitheater, Pula Arena in Rovinj (above) now hosts festivals and concerts. Likewise, stately plazas in Dubrovnik (right page, top) remain much as they were centuries ago, but today buzz with high-end cafes and shops.

dropped anchor near the entrance to the protected ancient harbor. The beauty of the anchorage was enhanced by the call to dinner and another of Chef Normand's wonderful culinary presentations. Following dinner, the Nautica tender rushed us towards the great stone dock inside the city's defensive walls for our first look at the magnificent old port.

Dubrovnik was built on a peninsula offering enhanced protection from warring neighbors. The first settlement dates back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and it went on to serve as one of the most significant maritime and mercantile centers of the Adriatic during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The massive wall that encircles the port stretches for 1.24 miles—a walk along it provides a great view of the historic city and coast. For another commanding vista, ride the tram to the summit for a spectacular aerial view, punctuated by the expanse of orange-tile roofs. Dubrovnik is a maze of narrow stone streets lined with shops offering everything from tourist trinkets to the latest international designer fashion. Too narrow for motor vehicles to traverse, the winding streets and steep steps require that everything from restaurant provisions to furniture be carried in on foot.

The city and its people are welcoming, giving little hint of the ravages of war and suffering they endured during an eight-month siege in 1991 when Dubrovnik was repeatedly attacked and bombarded by Serbians intent on conquering the region. As one shopkeeper told us, "it was bad, very bad, but now life is good again."

At the end of a day of exploring, *Golden Compass's* owners and guests met at the Taverna Arsenal, an upscale establishment that occupies the former stone arsenal building perched on the edge of the inner harbor. Seated at a table along the veranda, the view of the harbor at nightfall was magical, and the fare of fresh local seafood and pasta rivaled any we would experience.

Motoring through the night gave us the advantage of spending our days exactly where we wanted to be. The next morning dawned clear and calm as we pulled into the east side of Balun Bay at the island of Biševo and dropped anchor 100 yards from the Blue Grotto. A natural cave at the edge of the sea, the Blue Grotto has a narrow opening suitable only for very small boats. We paid the cave's gatekeeper and passed from daylight to darkness. Inside, with flashlight beams bouncing off the rocks, we wound through the dark into a large cavern illuminated by sunlight filtering in through an opening

in the rocks above. The chamber burst with an intense blue glow from the sunlight reflecting off the water. The grotto has only two access points—the one we entered in the boat or by diving through an opening in the cave's ceiling. McKenzie and I couldn't resist the challenge.

After lunch, we took a turn on the two personal watercraft and enjoyed some excellent father-son rivalry. Balun Bay offered the perfect environment for the sport; we maneuvered around towering rocks and entered deserted bays that haven't changed in a thousand years. By late afternoon, we were underway to the city of Split, a jewel on the "Dalmatian Riviera" 40 miles to the north.

We dropped anchor in Split at 9:30 p.m., just in time for some serious nightlife at an open-air, waterfront nightclub—or so we thought. The young, hip night scene doesn't get rolling until late, very late. By midnight our shore party, most of whom had been up since dawn, were ready to throw in the towel, but the club was just beginning to pulsate to the heavy beat with an ever-increasing volume and light show as hundreds of stylish young Croatians poured in ready for a good party. We gladly left them to it.

Split is far from a party town, though; it offers an abundance of galleries, museums and historic sights, and it is the region's cultural and administrative center. The Palace of Diocletian located in the heart of the city is a World Heritage site and is considered to be one of the best-conserved Roman palaces in the world. A delightful mix of old and new—the Split Blues Festival was being set up in the square when we arrived—the city entertained us with open-air markets, street vendors, stylish shops, balconies dripping with beautiful flowers and incredible views into the past.

As *Golden Compass* departed Split that evening for the 120-mile overnight run to Kornati National Park, we were treated to yet another spectacular sunset. We arrived at the park at 7:00 a.m. and cruised around the north end of Dugi Otok island, making a turn to the south where we would be protected in the island's lee.

The Kornati archipelago consists of 140 islands spread out over 124 square miles. This area bears more than a passing resemblance to Maine's rocky coast, although the fishing boats are of a distinct European design and fewer trees line the coast. We passed small villages—their red-tile roofs standing out from a backdrop of stone hills—on the way to Prolaz Proversa Bay at the cut between Dugi Otok



For an unforgettable moment, visit the Blue Grotto between 11 a.m. and noon, when the sunlight reflects through the water, bathing the grotto in blue.

right  
En route to Dubrovnik is the coastal town of Perast, Montenegro, where just offshore lies the chapel-topped manmade island of Our Lady of the Rocks. The legend of the church's origin dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and reveals that dozens of ships were sunk on the site to create the tiny island in honor of fishermen discovering the painting of "Our Lady," the Virgin Mary, on the reef.





**fact file**

**CAPITAL:** Zagreb

**POPULATION:** 4.407 million

**GOVERNMENT:** Parliamentary democracy, is in the process of accession to the European Union (EU)

**LANGUAGE:** Croatian, a South Slavic language that is used primarily by the inhabitants of Croatia as well as Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many locals speak some English.

**WHEN TO GO:**

Between April and September, with July and August being the peak of the tourist season.

**CLIMATE:** Mediterranean climate along the coast, 77 to 86 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer

**CURRENCY:** Croatian kuna

**PASSPORT REQUIREMENTS/**

**VISAS:** U.S. citizens need a valid passport for stays up to 90 days. Visitors must register with the local police within 24 hours of entry.

**TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS:** Travel may be restricted by mine clearing operations along former conflict lines. Check with the Croatian Mine Action Center's website [www.hcr.hr](http://www.hcr.hr).

**TELEPHONE CODE:** 385

**TIME ZONE:** GMT +1

**ELECTRICITY:** 220V, 50Hz Electric

**GETTING THERE/NEAREST**

**AIRPORT:** Dubrovnik and Zagreb

**GENERAL YACHT INFORMATION:**

Visit the Ministry of Maritime Affairs, Transport and Infrastructure for the Harbormaster's information for each cruising area: [www.mppi.hr](http://www.mppi.hr)

**TOURISM:** <http://croatia.hr/en-GB/Homepage>

**CHARTERING GOLDEN COMPASS:**

Contact Ocean Independence, James Graham-Cloete, tel: +44 (0) 1273 831 010, email: [james@ocoyachts.com](mailto:james@ocoyachts.com)

and Katina islands. Soon we were off to do some exploring and serious speed runs on the powerful PWC. The fast machine is rated to 80 miles per hour, but hitting 70 was plenty fast enough for me to show my boy that the old man can still mix it up.

As the day came to a close, preparations were underway on the sun deck for the owner's birthday party. We drifted with the breeze and enjoyed vintage wine and cocktails with a fabulous barbecue as we were treated to yet another startlingly beautiful sunset over the rugged hills of Dugi Otok. Slowly cruising through the protected expanse of waterway in the national park devoid of any signs of population, we seemed to be alone in the world.

Next was a 12-hour, 125-mile run to Rovinj. Located off Istria Peninsula, it is among the top coastal holiday destinations in Croatia. With its buildings set at the edge of the sea, the old city appears to grow out of the water, rising up to the Cathedral of St. Euphemia. A walk through the charming streets leading to the

cathedral took us by galleries, small hotels, bars and shops, their colorful doors and shutters vibrant in the morning light. A few miles down the coast, the Pula Arena caught our interest. Built in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. during the reign of Emperor Vespasian, the former Roman amphitheater that once hosted Gladiator sport is now a 5,000-seat venue for a variety of entertainment from film festivals to equestrian festivals to operas and concerts, while the underground passages now play host to viticulture exhibitions. This amphitheater seemed to typify the Dalmatian Coast, a place where old and new collide, creating a landscape of ancient cities rich with modern diversions.

As poet Robert Burns wrote, "The best laid schemes of mice and men go often awry," but it isn't always for the worse. For *Golden Compass's* guests, a change in plans provided a fresh chance to discover new ports and people and see the sun set from a different part of the world. ■