

TRAVEL AND ADVENTURE

# Sailing Odyssey



Lying on the magnificent Dalmatian Coast of Croatia, Dubrovnik is known as the 'Jewel of the Adriatic' for its enchanting beauty edged by a turquoise ocean



Photograph: Keri Harvey

Croatia, Montenegro, Greece and Italy – exotic, diverse and seductive destinations they are for sure. But the journey to get there is the real attraction when you're cruising carefree on seas of perfect calm

By Keri Harvey

It's raining steadily but nobody seems to care. A band has struck up playing light jazz on the square and street cafes are crowded with animated evening diners. In Luza Square in the old town of Dubrovnik nobody notices the rain and they focus instead on their evening outings, treading carefully on the slippery wet marble paving as they walk. We sit at a small café, sipping steaming coffee and licking buttery pistachio ice-creams at the same time. Croatia is renowned for their exceptional ice-cream, and we're not missing out – even if it's raining tonight. >

### JEWEL OF THE ADRIATIC

Opposite is the baroque Church of St Blaise – the saint is the symbol of Dubrovnik’s independence – and the square is watched over by a stoic clock tower. Actually, Dubrovnik’s old town is a completely intact medieval city, with about 1 000 people living there. Within its fortified walls that encircle the old city for 2km, are an ancient monastery and a pharmacy established in the 1600s, still in daily operation. Between the evening socialising, nuns and robed, bearded priests amble on their way and shop owners casually chat to each other in the street. The atmosphere is festive and relaxed; everyone is in a good mood.

Interestingly, Dubrovnik has no industry and the city of just 50 000 people exists just as an idyllic tourist destination. It’s known as the Jewel of the Adriatic, and not for nothing either. The small city hugs the coast with its evocative stone buildings and red tiled roofs, gardens of bougainvillea, fig and orange trees. It’s utterly beautiful, lying on a sea of intense blue, and the old city is just the same as it’s been for over 400 years. One would have to look hard to know that a decade ago the Siege of Dubrovnik happened here. Over 2 000 bomb shells were dropped on the city, but reconstruction was swift and precise, and the only evidence of this legacy is the different shades of red of the roof tiles and new stone where buildings were repaired.

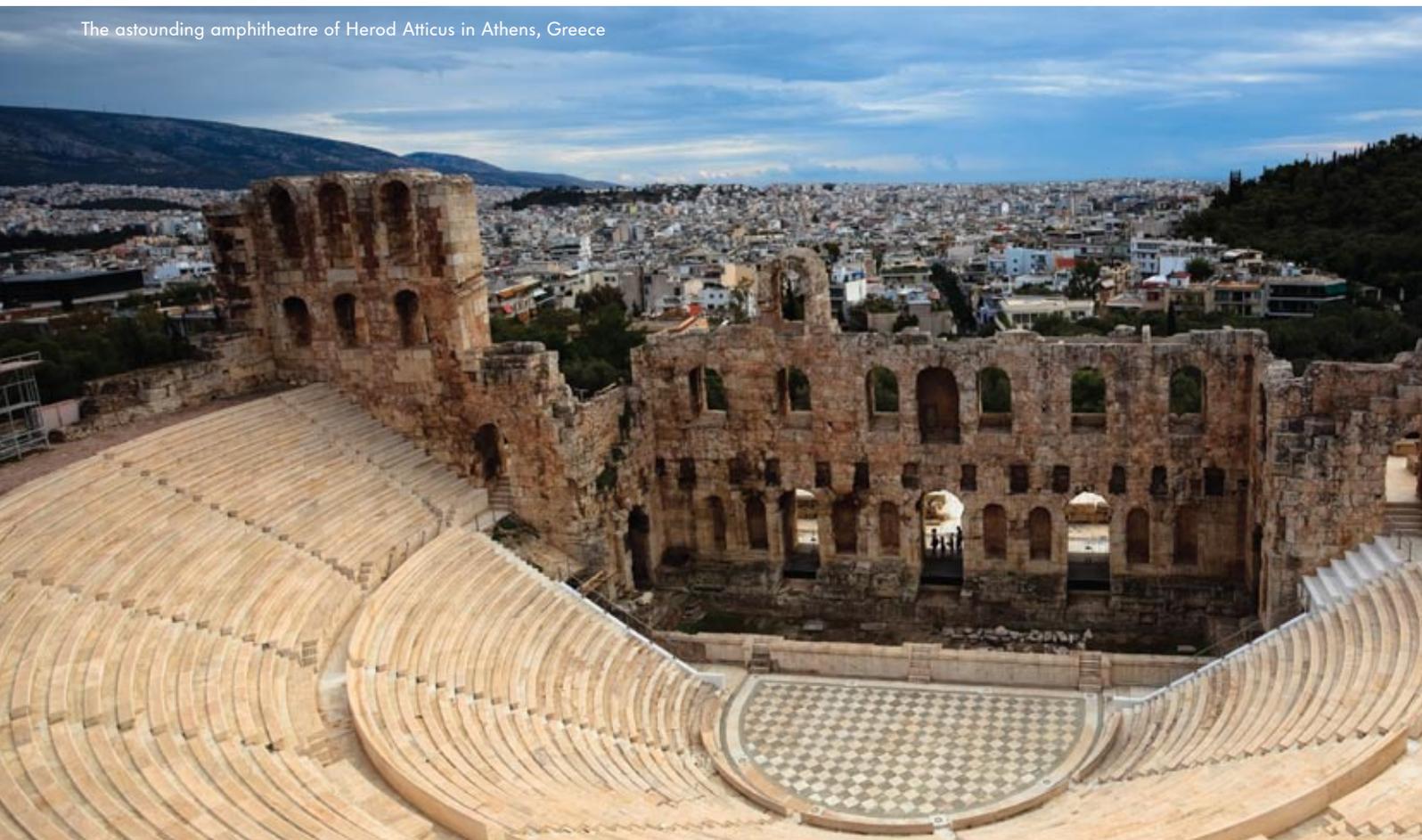
While Croatia is known for its take-your-breath-away grappa, which is a welcome drink for house guests and enjoyed with figs, it’s less renowned for its fine wines. They’re surprisingly good though, completely unique in the world and produced by small exclusive estates. Andre Crvik is a third generation winemaker in his family and says: “Croatsians think food is important, not wine, but I think wine is life.” Surprisingly, the tiny Croatia with a total population of fewer than five million people produces 130 different wines found nowhere else on earth. Who would have thought?

### VOYAGE OF TRANQUILITY

Genteel Dubrovnik, swathed by sparkling turquoise sea is completely idyllic, postcard beautiful and warmly hospitable, with the journey to get there just as enjoyable and utterly breathtaking. Not just for the tranquil, calm voyage of slow sailing, but for the unique experience of travelling without any fuss at all. To get where one is going, there are no planes, trains or taxis to catch, no upheaval of packing and unpacking bags, no clearing customs or flashing passports at surly officials, no queues, no rushing, no stress or exhaustion, just pure enjoyment. That’s the allure of sailing, because when your floating luxury hotel travels with you from one destination to the next, all the rough edges and annoyances disappear from the travel experience.

The most intriguing thing about cruising aboard a luxury liner is how the destinations become a part of the travel experience. Because the ship itself is a destination travel

The astounding amphitheatre of Herod Atticus in Athens, Greece



experience too. Restaurants aplenty, a spa, observation deck, various bars, coffee shops and a club and casino are just some of the trappings onboard. There are shops, boutiques, a business centre and library, areas for sport or reflection, deck games or pure relaxation at one of the swimming pools or whirlpools. Do yoga or have your hair done. There are short courses for mind aerobics, Broadway-like entertainment shows to watch, movies to take in, or you could just cocoon in your suite, go absolutely nowhere and order in for dinner. It's entirely up to you.

On board the Yachts of Seabourne, mega yachts that host a maximum of around 400 guests, service and attention is particularly personal since the ships are of the smallest and most exclusive cruise ships operating on open waters. Their special status is seen in suite too, with luxurious, spacious and decadent bedrooms and bathrooms, and personal attendants. Every creature comfort you could think of is there, and quite a few extras. Then, before you turn in at night, the Seabourn Herald informs guests of your next destination, the weather, all the entertainment and offerings on board and off, and any other information that may be useful. In the morning the newspaper is delivered for news from the rest of the world.

But what's most surreal about cruising is that you literally go to sleep in one country, and wake up next morning in another. It's almost like time travel in the real world.

#### CLASSIC ATHENS, COLONIAL CORFU

"Just a little further," smiles a Greek policeman as we ascend the well worn path to the mighty Acropolis, watching silently over Athens. When we arrive at the top, we are breathless, not for the steep climb to get there but for the majestic ancient before us. This Sacred Rock of the city is one of the most recognisable monuments on earth, and was the core of ancient Greek culture.

The buildings now seen on the Acropolis have stood there for over 2 500 years. The Parthenon is arguably the most important. Dedicated to Athena the patron goddess of Athens, it's still considered the most perfect example of classical architecture on earth and is the international symbol of Greece. There's also the smaller Erechtheion completed around 405BC and the Temple of Athena Nike (completely unrelated to either footwear or sports clothing). The collection of perfect columns – or Propylaea – that is the gateway to the Acropolis is just a hint of what lies beyond.

Down below, at the foot of the Acropolis, lies the city of Athens in perfect white. It covers the surrounding hills and is punctuated by its ancient wonders in stone: the Temple of Zeus, one of the gateways to the ancient city; Hadrian's Arch, and magnificent open air theatres, where audiences watched Greek tragedies and philosophical debates. Yet modern Athenians live with ease amidst these >



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Cruising aboard Seabourn Odyssey is luxurious and decadent, yet also unpretentious and relaxing. This is elegant, slow travel at its finest



remarkable ancient relics, and the city is as beautiful, efficient and clean as can be. It's an exemplary synthesis of old and new living harmoniously.

Again we are told "just a little further" by a Greek policeman, when we ask how far the walk is to the market at Monastirakiou. Greeks seem used to walking far, because 'a little further' was a 45-minute brisk walk on tired legs. But if you want olives, halva, flatbread, fresh seafood, fruit or vegetables, it's there fresher than fresh. Antiques, bric-a-brac, ancient relics, paintings or lunch – it's just around the corner and trade is lively and animated. We can't resist the olives, huge and glossy. And the array of traditional saints depicted in artwork is both mystical and fascinating. St Christopher, the saint of safe travel, joined me to journey onwards.

As we sail out of Athens and leave the evocative white city in our wake, the Mediterranean will take us to the Ionian Sea – sapphire blue and perfectly clear. We dress up for dinner and dine with a full sea view, enjoying cuisine fit for any Greek god. Luxury cruises are well-loved for their excellent and diverse food offerings, but Seabourn is renowned for cuisine that is utterly sublime. It's an important part of the cruise experience, and is always impeccably fresh and beautifully prepared and presented. Menus strive to offer options that reflect the traditional cuisine of the country you're travelling in. So tonight we are going Greek for sure.

In Pylos we catch tender boats, ship to shore, and wander up the hill to see the star-shaped fortress of Niokastro. It's a little reminiscent of the The Castle in Cape Town, just older and with a good sea view. Today is too hot for wandering around though, and we hear fresh seafood and a big carafe of white wine whispering our names from a seaside restaurant. We oblige and watch the world go by in the pretty Peloponnesian village around us. After all, we're travelling slow, and stopping to taste the octopus.

Corfu is completely confusing on first sight. Yes, it's a popular Greek island to holiday, with two magnificent forts – the older one from the 14th century and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Yet the town's architecture is thoroughly Venetian >



The exquisite coastal village of Pylos in Peloponnese, Greece

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– complete with quaint shutters on the windows and colourful flowers in hanging window boxes. Then the third obvious influence is clearly English, with perfectly manicured cricket fields where games are regularly played by men in white, as sidewalk café patrons watch the matches from the periphery. There’s a simple explanation though: these were the countries that occupied and so influenced Corfu in the past, which may be why it’s still a favourite holiday getaway for the British.

### NEW MEDIEVAL MONTENEGRO

“Tomorrow morning there’s something special in store,” says our captain, Mark Dexter, as we pass him in a passageway on board Seabourn Odyssey. “Be up on the observation deck at 6am and you will see.” Of course we’re up and arrive, half asleep and clutching a cup of strong coffee. Outside on the observation deck in front of the mega yacht are dozens of people, yet it’s dead quiet. Everyone is awestruck and gazing out to sea in all directions. The darkness of night is slowly lifting over the sea, and as it does there’s the most extraordinary site. We’re sailing up a fjord, the southernmost one in Europe, though more accurately it’s actually a submerged canyon. Surrounded by land on three sides, we slowly ease past little villages waking up to the new day. The first rays of sunshine are twinkling on the ocean and our gaze is fixed on the surreal beauty around us. This is Montenegro.

Touted as a place of ‘wild beauty’, Montenegro is extraordinary. It’s a brand new country, just five years old, with a tiny population of under a million and the medieval town of Kotor, where we dock, is another UNESCO site. The old walled city is criss-crossed with cobbled



A taverna in Agni bay on Corfu island

streets and little squares. It’s a quaintly pretty place with palpable antiquity and many stories to tell of war and peace. In the ancient churches of St Tryphon, St Nicholas, St Luca and St Mary, we light candles for loved ones and buy rosaries for keepsakes, though it’s really lacework for which Kotor is known.

“Tasting is free,” smiles a dark-maned lady trader at the market that happens in the shade of the city walls. She hands us a paper thin slice of Montenegrin prosciutto. “Just try it,” she says, “it’s very good.” Salty, smoky and delicious, she’s absolutely right, and we also taste the dried figs that jostle for space on displays. Still, this doesn’t fortify us enough to climb the 1 500 stone steps that scale the mountain behind the town. All the way up are a dizzying collection of ramparts, towers and bastions, with a tiny church the reward at the top. Instead we wander the old town, chat to a jolly priest in full length black and get lost and found many times in the labyrinth of narrow cobble streets.

It’s dark when our mega yacht does a U-turn and heads back out to sea from Kotor, but we watch the illuminated city walls until they disappear into the night. We slip into bed, and say goodnight to Montenegro because tomorrow we will again awake in a new country. Ravenna,



The Basilica di San Vitale located in Ravenna, Emilia Romagna, Italy, famous for its beautiful mosaics and architecture

Italy is our next stop, to see the prolific and perfect mosaic work in the city that's renowned for this ancient art form.

### STAR SPANGLED MOSAIC

We dock watched over by a stoic white lighthouse and enjoy some quiet time on board before heading into town. Star-spangled mosaic domes, sailing boats, vast rows of biblical disciples, birds, animals, intricate pictures of heavenly beings and ornate mosaic floor carpets. Everything is so detailed it would be a masterpiece if painted, yet these are all mosaics – each little tile cut to precision to create an intricate picture that resembles a painting. Ravenna is ancient mosaics top to toe, and modern shops and homes have carried the tradition forward, many with mosaic facades and detailing. It's an enchanted journey to a fantasy land of little puzzle pieces so masterfully placed they have created classical art.

And the mosaic talent of Italy is carried through in Venice too, that most romantic of cities in all the world. Here in the Basilica St Marco on the city's central square, the riot of marble floor mosaics are submerged in seawater every few hours. At high tide, water seeps through into the piazza St Marco and through the floor of the ancient basilica there, inundating the magnificent mosaics. Then at low tide it all dries out again, for a few hours.

### A LIVING WATERWORLD

Venice literally floats on the sea, the buildings held by millions of supports driven into the sea sediment. Imagine a city criss-crossed by about 180 canals and held together by 450 bridges. This is what gives Venice its unique charm and gracious elegance. On land it's a myriad of narrow cobbled alleyways, opening onto little squares and connected by tiny bridges, underneath on the waterways the gilded gondolas squeeze past each other. Shutters and window boxes frame lace draped windows, red Venetian flags fly high and motor boats scuttle about the bigger canals on daily errands.

Since there are no cars in Venice, some boats carry fresh fruit to the market, others have piles of clean laundry, and some collect the garbage. It's a living waterworld, a place of gently worn opulence, but evocative as ever. Shop for elaborately blown Murano glass – fashioned into anything from jewellery to glass balloons, ascend the campanile on the piazza for an aerial view over the red roofed city with its basilica domes gleaming in the sun, dance with flocks of pigeons on the

square, or listen in to live classical music played from elegant square-side restaurants. Or just sit quietly on the sidelines and watch Venice at play, as you imagine the grandeur of old that once lived here. The pink Doges Palace gives a clue, as do the marble paved streets and elaborate architecture throughout the city.

Venice epitomises elegance, and this floating city is an apt place to disembark from a decadent mega yacht. Sailing is one of the oldest ways to travel; now it's been revived and elevated to a new level of luxury that emphasises slow travel. More and more, travel is about the journey and the experiences along the way, the tastes and textures. It's also about the good life too. For some that could be waking up in a new city while enjoying a decadent breakfast on your private suite balcony, for others it could be watching the stars while out at sea or licking buttery ice-cream in the rain. 

For more information:

Web: [www.cruises.co.za](http://www.cruises.co.za)

E-mail: [michele@cruises.co.za](mailto:michele@cruises.co.za)

Telephone: 011 327 0327



Venice's tangle of canals and elegant buildings make it a beautiful and evocative destination – the romantic capital of Italy