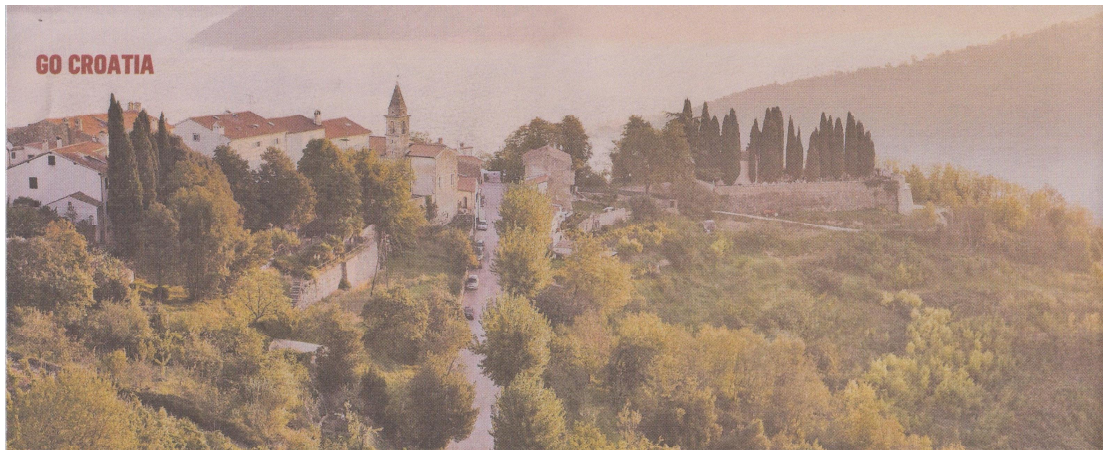


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On the truffle trail

It's been described as Tuscany 50 years ago, with exquisite olive oil, cheeses and wines – and there's an abundance of black and white truffles. **Marie-Claire Digby** visits Istria

FROM THE DAPPLED shade of the pool terrace at the family-run San Rocco hotel and restaurant I can, without leaving my wooden sun lounger, reach out and wrest a big, juicy melon from its dusty Moorings and pluck handfuls of cherry tomatoes from red rivers of them cascading down stone terraces surrounding the pool. Just a little more exertion and I can reach up to pick ripe figs, plums and apples from the trees behind me.

Later on, when the gentle autumn sun finally dips behind the hills that hide the dramatic coastline behind, I eat a truly accomplished tasting menu in the hotel's rustic outdoor dining room. It is a celebration of the bounty of those mountains and the sea – wild seabass, scampi, squid and black truffles – anointed with a fiery, pungent olive oil made by the Fernetich family who run this boutique hotel, and served with excellent local wines. Sounds idyllic doesn't it? And it was. So where is this kitchen garden of the gods?

Istria, the largest peninsula in the Adriatic, is in Croatia but was part of Italy as recently as the early part of the 20th century. Trieste is just a short 40km drive, through neighbouring Slovenia, and Italian influences are everywhere, from the dual-language road signs to the love of great food and wine. And chest-bursting pride in their olive oil, which sells for a premium price, both at home and the small quantity that makes its way to a discerning export market.

Istria has been described as Tuscany 50 years ago, and if there were such a thing as a recipe for a good life, you might just find it here in this dramatically beautiful country of inland mountains and scenic coastlines, where everything grows in abundance, where they make great wine, and where the forests are studded with pots of gold in the form of truffles – both black and white – and

found in such abundance to make the Italians weep.

The largest white truffle in the world, a 1.3kg whopper, was found here, near Buje in the north of the country, in November 1999 by Giancarlo Zigante, whose good fortune allowed him to prosper and establish extensive truffle-related businesses including restaurants, a truffle processing plant where the fungi are preserved, added to cheeses and salamis, and made into products including sauces, oils and pastes.

Zigante is a leading light in the annual Subotina festival in the town of Buzet, a medieval hill town in central Istria also called the city of truffles, and an excellent base for exploring the historic villages, olive oil groves and vineyards that line the Mirna river valley. As part of the festival which celebrates local traditions, every September a carnival air fills the town as preparations are made to cook a giant *fritaja* or omelette, using one egg for every year in the calendar date, and a small mountain of truffles. The omelette is cooked in a giant paella pan by a team of chefs with wooden spoons the size of oars. Once they've emptied gallons of truffle oil into the pan, and melted a ton of butter infused with truffles, we have to take their word for it that there are the requisite 2012 eggs in the mix, as the liquid gets poured into the pan from giant plastic drums.

The aroma as 10 kilos of shaved black truffle hits the pan is intoxicating – and they're not yet finished gilding the lily. Once the eggs have reached the right creamy consistency and are almost set, local dignitaries – and the lead singer from the pop group that will entertain the crowds later – shave a further further kilo of white truffle on top. At 8.15pm, 45 minutes after the eggs hit the pan, the omelette is deemed to

IDYLLIC LIVING
Motovun, above, a hilltop town in Istria, the largest peninsula in the Adriatic;
PHOTOGRAPH
GETTY

be ready and the servers try frantically to keep up with demand from the jostling crowd for the 40 kuna (€5) portions of golden, aromatic eggs.

The season for the black, or summer truffle, starts in May and lasts until November, while the more prized and much rarer white truffle can only be hunted from September until the end of January. Black Istrian truffles, which can be shaved and eaten raw but benefit from being heated in butter or oil, sell for up to €600 a kilo, while the white truffle, more complex in its scent and flavour, is often grated over hot pasta or eggs, and fetches up to €2,000 a kilo.

Anyone can hunt for these nuggets of gold which grow underground at the base of trees, most often oaks, in Istria's acres of public forests, but few are successful, and those who are rely on the assistance of a highly-trained assistant with superior olfactory skills – a truffle dog.

Radmila and Goran Karlic run a truffle hunting, dealing and processing business in the village of Paladini, a few kilometres from Buzet. Radmila is a fast-talking, quick to smile, bundle of energy.

She takes us on a short truffle hunt with the family's star performer, Blackie, an eight-year-old retriever/cocker spaniel who has been responsible for sniffing out kilos of prize specimens and who is probably worth his weight in gold.

When Blackie was just four months old, he found and dug out a 200 gram truffle, on his own; a star in the making. "He brought it in his mouth; we thought at first it was just earth," Radmila says.

Before long, Blackie's insistent barking bring us running, and he waits expectantly while Radmila uses a small shovel to carefully excavate the earth and find the small black nugget snuggled into the moist dark soil. It's much more exciting than I thought it would be, and its easy to see how truffle hunting can become a passion.

Gourmet gifts

While you might not want to infuse your holiday clothes with truffle aromas, there are other Istrian specialties you should make room in your suitcase for. The olive oil is world renowned, and good names to purchase are Ipsa, Torkop and Meneghetti. Fruit grappas, especially ones made with mistletoe, are a local speciality. The Rossi range, which includes eight different flavoured grappas, is top notch and you can pick it up at Pula duty-free shop.



Will there be anything there when the shovel enters the ground, we wonder, and if so will it be a marble, or a life-changing turnip-sized specimen?

Blackie sniffs out two, admittedly small, black truffles during our short scramble down into the forest, where black truffles grow on the slopes, Radmila tells us. She is more reticent about telling us where to find the prized white truffles, saying only that they prefer more sandy soil.

Truffle hunts with Radmila, followed by a tasting of her truffle sausages, cheeses, patés and spreads, usually last about three hours, and cost 150 kuna (€20). See karlictartufi.hr.

There are several festivals and fairs honouring the Istrian truffle, from September to November, making this the best time of year to visit. The towns of Buzet and Motovun are among the best places to base yourself to go on a truffle-eating bender. To be sure you are getting authentic truffles, look for restaurants displaying the "tartufo vero" sign, which indicates that they have met the requirements for handling and serving the fungus to a high standard.

FOOD HEAVEN

Above: making a 2,012-egg truffle omelette in Buzet.

Below: wild mushrooms, cheese and sausage with truffles at Stari Podrum in Momjan.

PHOTOGRAPH: MARIE-CLAIRE DIGBY



Istria . . . where to

STAY

San Rocco has been voted best boutique hotel in Croatia four times. The restaurant is worth a detour even if you're not staying there. Double room from €119. San Rocco, Brtonigla, Verteneglio 52474, Istria. Tel: 00-385-52-725000, san-rocco.hr.

In Buzet, stay at **Vela Vrata Hotel**, where the 20 bedrooms are a mix of traditional and newly-built. There is a restaurant and a terrace with amazing views. Double room from €78. Vela Vrata Hotel, Buzet, Istria. Tel: 00-385-52-494750, velavrata.net

In Pula, Istria's capital, the **Hotel Amfiteatar** is a modern option right beside the Roman amphitheatre with an excellent restaurant. Double room from €61. Hotel Amfiteatar, Amfiteatarska 6, Pula, Istria. Tel: 00-385-52-375600, hotelamfiteatar.com

EAT

Stari Podrum is a *konoba*, or tavern, where Mira Zrnic cooks, her husband Dragan forages for wild foods – mushrooms, truffles and asparagus in particular – and their daughters attend to customers. It was here that I ate the best tagliatelli with truffles of the trip, and the antipasti of grilled wild mushrooms, truffle cheese and sausage was also outstanding. A five-course lunch costs about €12, and the house speciality, a

giant Istrian T-bone steak with copious white truffle shavings, is €14. Stari Podrum, Momjan, Istria. Tel: 00-385-98-292151.

Restaurant Zigante is possibly the best restaurant in the truffle-growing region, with very formal staff, starched linens, and prices to match. Almost everything comes with an avalanche of truffle shaved on top; even the ice-cream is made with truffle (surprisingly good). A lavish six-course dinner costs about €80. Restaurant Zigante, Livade 7, Istria. Tel: 00-385-52-664302, restaurantzigante.com

In Pula, it's worth searching out **Restaurant Milan**, a smart suburban restaurant in a hotel of the same name. An excellent lunch of seafood salad, squid ink risotto, grilled red mullet, and a lovely old-fashioned dessert trolley heaped with cakes, was served with great charm. Five courses, €28. Restaurant Milan, Stoja 4, Pula, Istria. Tel: 00-385-52-210500, milanpula.com

GETTING THERE

Croatia Airlines has flights to Pula via London and regional UK airports. Ryanair flies to Pula from Stansted. From Dublin you can fly to Dubrovnik with Aer Lingus and catch a flight to Pula, or fly to Trieste with Ryanair, with overland transfer. For more information on Istria, see croatia.hr