

Istria



Continental Croatia meets the Adriatic in Istria (Istra to Croats), the heart-shaped 3600-sq-km peninsula just south of Trieste in Italy. While the bucolic interior of rolling hills and fertile plains attracts artsy visitors to its hilltop villages, rural hotels and farmhouse restaurants, the verdant indented coastline is enormously popular with the sun 'n' sea set. Vast hotel complexes line much of the coast and its rocky beaches are not Croatia's best, but the facilities are wide-ranging, the sea is clean and secluded spots still plentiful.

Pazin, in the interior, is the administrative capital of the region, while coastal Pula, with its thriving shipyard and Roman amphitheatre, is the economic and cultural centre. Tourism along the coast centres on the fetching fishing village of Rovinj and the ancient Roman town of Poreč, surrounded by a modern sprawl. Inland, the medieval towns of Motovun, Buzet, Labin and Grožnjan perch on hill crests in atmospheric clusters.

The northern part of the peninsula belongs to Slovenia, while the Ćićarija mountains (an extension of the Dinaric Range) in the northeastern corner separate Istria from the continental mainland. Just across the water is Italy, but the pervasive Italian influence makes it seem even closer. Italian is, in fact, a second language in Istria, while many Istrians have Italian passports, and each town name has an Italian counterpart.

The coast, or 'Blue Istria', as the tourist board calls it, gets flooded by tourists in summer, but you can still feel alone and undisturbed in 'Green Istria', even in the mid-August. Add acclaimed gastronomy (starring fresh seafood, prime truffles, wild asparagus and award-winning wines), sprinkle it with historical charm and you have a little slice of heaven.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Admiring the mosaics at **Euphrasian Basilica** (p171) in Poreč
- Truffle-hunting and feasting in the forests around **Buzet** (p178)
- Taking in Rovinj's fishing history at **Batana House** (p166)
- Walking the trails of the legendary **Pazin Cave** (p177)
- Catching alfresco screenings during the summer film festival of **Motovun** (p181)
- Soaking up communist chic at Tito's playground of **Brijuni** (p163)
- Exploring the wild landscapes of **Rt Kamenjak** (p160) near Pula



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History

Towards the end of the 2nd millennium BC, the Illyrian Histrian tribe settled the region and built fortified villages on top of the coastal and interior hills. The Romans swept into Istria in the 3rd century BC and began building roads and more hill forts as strategic strongholds.

From 539 to 751, Istria was under Byzantine rule, the most impressive remnant of which is the Euphrasian Basilica (p171) in Poreč, with its stunning mosaics. In the period that followed, power switched between Slavic tribes, the Franks and German rulers until an increasingly powerful Venice wrested control of the Istrian coast in the early 13th century. Treaties signed in 1374 and 1466 gave continental Istria to the Habsburgs.

Misery, famine and warfare haunted the peninsula. Bubonic plague first broke out in 1371 and regularly ravaged Istrian cities until the 17th century. Although the Turks never reached Istria, the peninsula lay in the path of the fearsome Uskok pirates from Senj who repeatedly attacked Istrian cities throughout the 16th and 17th centuries.

With the fall of Venice in 1797, Istria came under Austrian rule, followed by the French (1809–13) and the Austrians again. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, most of Istria was little more than a neglected outpost of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

When the empire disintegrated at the end of WWI, Italy moved quickly to secure Istria. Italian troops occupied Pula in November 1918, and, in the 1920 Treaty of Rapallo, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes ceded Istria along with Zadar and several islands to Italy, as a reward for joining the Allied powers in WWI.

A massive population shift followed as 30,000 to 40,000 Italians arrived from Mussolini's Italy and many Croats left, fearing fascism. Their fears were not misplaced as Istria's Italian masters attempted to consolidate their hold by banning Slavic speech, printing, education and cultural activities.

Italy retained the region until its defeat in WWII when Istria became part of Yugoslavia, causing another mass exodus, as Italians and many Croats fled Tito's communists. Trieste and the peninsula's northwestern tip were points of contention between Italy and Yugoslavia until 1954, when the region was finally awarded to Italy. As a result of Tito's

reorganisation of Yugoslavia, the northern part of the peninsula was incorporated into Slovenia, where it has remained.

THE ISTRIAN COAST

At the tip of the Istrian peninsula is Pula, the coast's largest city. The Brijuni Islands, the former playground of Tito, are an easy day trip from here. The east coast of Istria centres on the modern seaside resort of Rabac, just below the ancient hilltop town of Labin. The west coast is the tourist showcase, with Rovinj the most enchanting town and Poreč the easiest – and cheaper – holiday choice, with plenty of lodging and entertainment options.

PULA

pop 65,000

The wealth of Roman architecture makes otherwise workaday Pula (ancient Polensium) a standout among Croatia's larger cities. The star of the Roman show is the remarkably well-preserved Roman amphitheatre, smack in the heart of the city, which dominates the streetscape and doubles as a venue for summer concerts and performances.

Historical attractions aside, Pula is a busy commercial city on the sea that has managed to retain a friendly small-town appeal. Just a short bus ride away, a series of beaches awaits at the resorts that occupy the Verudela Peninsula to the south. Although marred with residential and holiday developments, the coast is dotted with fragrant pine groves, seaside cafés and a clutch of fantastic restaurants. Further south along the indented shoreline, the Premantura Peninsula hides a spectacular nature park, the protected cape of Kamenjak.

History

In the 1st century BC, the Illyrian Pola (now Pula) was conquered by the Romans and used as their administrative headquarters for the region that stretched from the Limška Draga Fjord to the Raša River. The Romans cleverly exploited Pula's terrain, using Kaštel Hill, which now contains the citadel, as a vantage point to protect the bay. The ancient town developed in concentric circles around the hill, with the amphitheatre placed outside the fortified city centre. Pula joined the powerful Venetian empire in 1150 to protect itself