



Split

Epitomising luxury
and romance

In Croatia's second largest city, where the dazzling Dalmatian Coast gently kisses the sparkling sapphire waters of the Adriatic Sea, lives a love story of the 'happily ever after' kind.

words // Punita Malhotra

There's just one city in the world that is built inside a palace. Correction. This whole city is one gigantic palace. Spread over an area of 7-acres. Vintage value going back to 1700 years ago and remarkably well-preserved. Cherry on top? Accommodations are up for grabs in this all-white retirement palace of Roman Emperor, Diocletian! Calling die-hard reality-haters, fantasy-chasers and romance seekers to Split.

If Venice tops the list of dramatic entries by sea, Split comes a close second. The first glimpse of Europe's most striking waterfront promenade is hypnotic. An ivory-coloured, horseshoe-shaped bay, adorned with a row of immaculately arranged palm trees; seafront cafes under chic white sunshades, lounge benches and docked sail boats against ultra-glam backdrop of the time-ravaged Roman palace walls, oodles of warm sun, crystal-clear blue waters and open terraces for lungfuls of fresh air. Full marks to Diocletian for grabbing prime real estate for



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FOR THE FOOD LOVERS

Split is known for its scenic dining spots and also offers lip-smacking seafood and wine authentic to the region. Zrno Soli specialises in Mediterranean cuisine and is popular for its fabulous view of the waterfront dotted with luxury yachts. You'll be spoilt for choice at the Kadena restaurant which boasts of over 400 varieties of wine. Besides wine tasting events, the restaurant is frequented for its truffles, asparagus and wild rice. Classic decor of Croatian cherry wood, black granite and marble invites you to Nostromo Restaurant famous for its carpaccio, seafood risotto and lobsters.

his post-work life retreat. Reality meets fantasy in his idyllic abode till today.

TO DEEPER LOVE

Four solid walls and four grand gates to cross the threshold of the world where Diocletian once had his lavish home. No crumbling ruin this but a living, breathing city with a pulsating spirit, even after centuries. The classic harmony of the white limestone buildings stands undisturbed, ageless. Despite the buzzing squares, lively cafes, quirky boutiques and sleek hotels serving thousands of travellers who are drawn here every year, blending in with yesterday is effortless.

The People's Square (Narodni Trg) sets the mood for time travel, with the former City Hall, a fascinating gothic bell-tower

and a Romanesque-styled Palace of Cipriano de Ciprianis from the 14th century. Mere appetisers to the buffet of architectural wonders that lies ahead especially the countless Renaissance, Baroque and Gothic-styled mansions. Nobles and aristocrats of Split asserted their social status through their coat of arms. Deliberate symbolism using animals, birds and mythological creatures can still be seen on their mansion entryways. The Papalic Palace, belonging to an influential Venetian family, is the best example. Good news is that many such palaces within the palace have been converted into museums, hotels, restaurants and boutique stores. Open for business and accessible to one and all.

Beneath one's feet is the original

floor of limestone tiles where Diocletian once walked, when he built the Roman palace complex in 235 AD. The slippery, stone paved streets, polished smooth by millions of footsteps, are a wondrous maze. Surprises hide in every dark alley and every sunny square screams to be explored. Luscious curtains of fuschia bougainvillea drape walls, cafes with outdoor tables beckon, and even the black grime on the walls lays out its charm. The flamboyant Venetian influence is apparent everywhere. But unlike Venice, all streets in Split do not lead to a San Marco or a Rialto. Large enough to loiter, small enough to not get lost.

At the Golden Gate, not far from Narodni Trg is the world's smallest church, the 6th-century St. Martin's. At 5-mts wide, this



hole-in-the-wall has to be ticked off every Split-list. Bang opposite, Ivan Mestrovic's oversized statue of 10th-century Croatian bishop Gregory Nin makes a contrasting statement with its towering size. Tourists engage in big-toe polishing for luck or just for plain fun.

TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The epicentre of the entire Palace complex is the Peristil, the royal square. It is framed by two colonnades lined with six huge red granite Corinthian columns. Part of Diocletian's Egyptian loot. Even thronging crowds can do nothing to pale the imperial atmosphere of this spot. Standing here, one realises that the entire palace complex has been built with huge limestone slabs placed one over another, an amazing cement-less feat. Jaw-drops and eyebrow-raises are guaranteed.

Hogging the limelight is the magnificent St. Domnius Cathedral, dedicated to Saint Domnius, a Christian Bishop from nearby Salona, who was prosecuted under the rule of Diocletian. The 3500-year old black Egyptian sphinx standing guard at the gateway is one of the three that remain from the set of 13 that Diocletian brought back from the Pharaoh

Local INSIGHTS



POLJUD STADIUM
Popularly known as 'The Beauty of Poljud', the stadium is the soccer field of the oldest Croatian soccer team, Hajduk. The stadium has been the venue of many events including the 1979 Mediterranean Games.



CROATIAN NATIONAL THEATRE
It is one of the oldest surviving theatres in Dalmatia. It was built in 1893 and is known for plays, opera, ballet and concerts. The theatre is also the venue for annual Split Summer Festival.



You can fly to Dubrovnik with Vistara's interline partners Aeroflot, Fly Dubai, Turkish Airlines, and then to Split with Lufthansa, Qatar Airways, and SWISS.

Thutmose III's tomb. The pièce de résistance—gorgeous views from the 57-mt bell tower of the Cathedral. Red-tiled roofs of crumbly houses to the horseshoe bay are displayed like a painter's favourite canvas.

Back on floor level, more exploration is in order at the Peristil. Diocletian's octagonal-shaped mausoleum, for instance. The emperor wanted to create an impression that he was immortal—hence the eight sides that symbolise eternity. A wish partially granted, the mausoleum has been almost completely preserved, except for the domed ceiling, which has lost its glittering mosaics. He lives on

through its beautiful carvings and friezes.

People squat on red cushions scattered on the steps of the historic Luxor café opposite the cathedral. Inside the cafe, remnants of the imperial palace peek through the exposed walls and ceiling murals. At the head of Peristil, a small flight of steps leads to a large circular stone-tiled space, the Vestibule. Here, the Roman emperor, a self-proclaimed Sun God would enter the Vestibule daily around 12 noon to greet cheering crowds. One can rewind to those days by witnessing the same ritual being enacted here by actors, during summer months.

Since much of the palace lies in ruins, the only way to reimagine the layout is by touring the underground cellars that replicate the layout above. Entering the basement from the Vestibule, one can potter around the Central Bazaar, filled with little shops selling lavender and limestone souvenirs. The labyrinthine halls below were used to store food, make wine and press olives. In those days, the sea used to touch the palace walls directly and boats berthed at the gate to drop off supplies or receive noble guests. Fascinating fact: the basements were constructed to raise the level of the entire palace complex, so that Diocletian could enjoy a better sea view.

TO ETERNAL ROMANCE

Ancient Roman leftovers are strewn all over Diocletian's Palace. Ornate balconies, carved doorways, graceful Venetian windows, ancient exposed brickwork, and centuries-old graffiti: there is exotica everywhere. Yet for the 3,000 residents of the narrow, shiny-smooth stone streets of this unusual UNESCO-protected World Heritage Site, it's just another regular day at home.

The magic of Riva peaks at dusk. The Adriatic does its daily transforming trick—turquoise blue to silvery grey to inky navy. Waves ripple, lights twinkle, seagulls glide and people stroll. Gulls croak, children squeal and canopies flap. Wafts of salty sea breeze and sweet crepes fill the air. Secretive shadows lurk under the Palace walls. Is that a bunch of solemn-faced toga-clad Romans stationed at the columns? After all, the Emperor would be resting. ✨



— VISTARA QUIZ —

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Question 3: Who was the first person in India to be issued a pilot's license?

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