

CENTURION

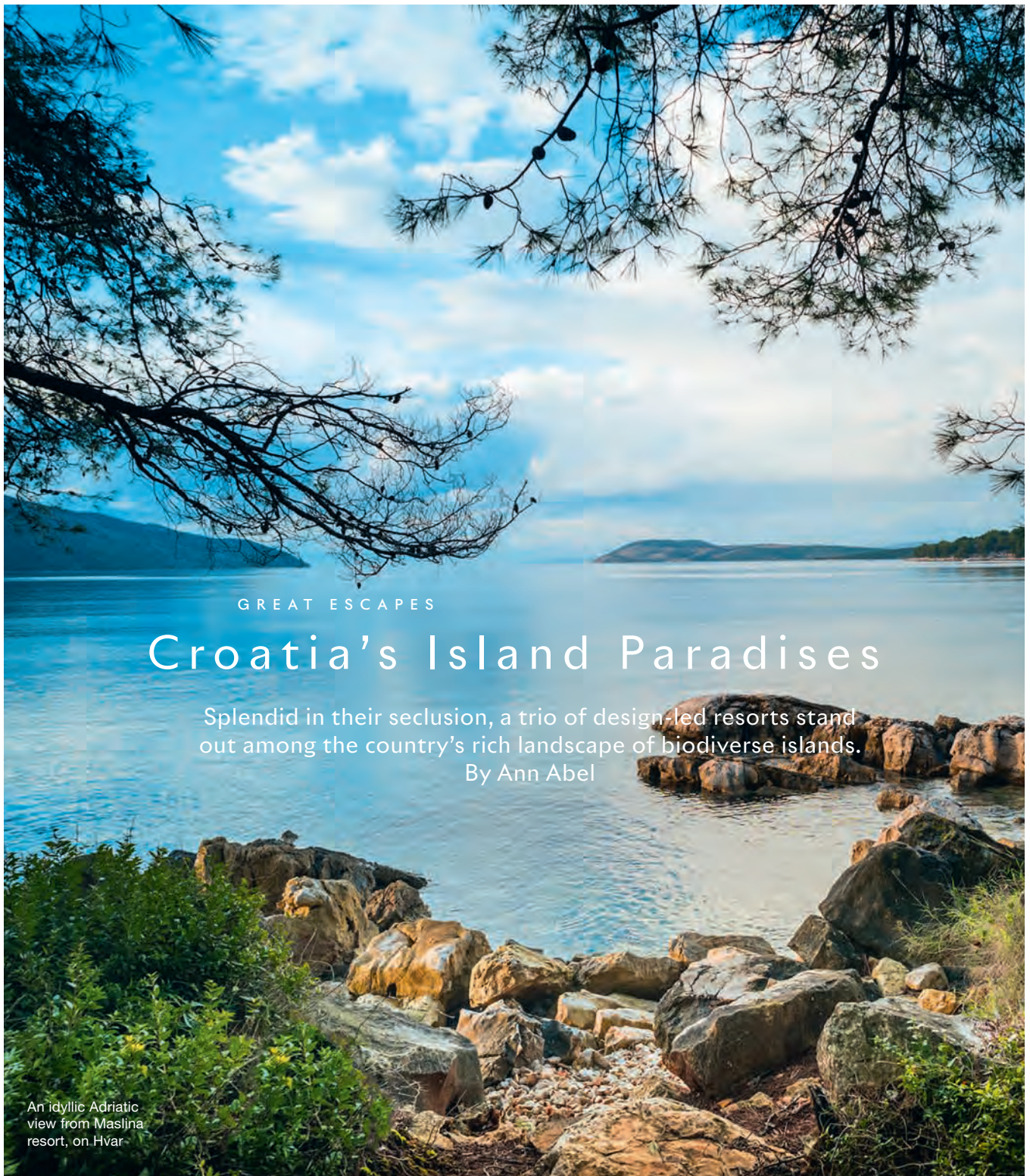
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GREAT ESCAPES

Croatia's Island Paradises

Splendid in their seclusion, a trio of design-led resorts stand out among the country's rich landscape of biodiverse islands.

By Ann Abel

An idyllic Adriatic view from Maslina resort, on Hvar



There's so much more to Croatia than the old walled city of Dubrovnik (overrun with tourists as it tends to be), the breathtaking Diocletian's Palace in Split and endless *Game of Thrones* hysteria. The country at the crossroads of central and southeastern Europe is not only steeped in history – the Romans, the Greeks and even the Neanderthals were all here, and during a recent visit to the island of Hvar, the international archaeologists were mad at work – but it's also made up of more than 1,000 islands, 48 of which are permanently inhabited, not to mention the small ones that just have positively dreamy restaurants or beach clubs.

Obviously, the country is a sailor's dream, with many scenic and easily navigable passages through the Adriatic. But for those who prefer to base themselves on land, several luxe hotels – two new, one still largely under the radar – offer an excellent introduction to Croatia's island lifestyle.

MASLINA

Hvar is known as something of a party island – and there is indeed lively nightlife in Hvar Town – but the two-year-old Maslina resort (maslinaresort.com) offers an antidote to all that. It takes its name from the local word for “olive tree” and, sure enough, nature is the guiding force.

Clockwise from above: approaching Hvar's Maslina resort; at the hotel's Pharamatiq Spa; the alfresco restaurant; the stone path leading up to the Maslina's Villa Borovina



That's obvious from the moment of arrival. The check-in desk is a gigantic hunk of unpolished white stone, weighing in at nearly 11 imperial tons, that was quarried on the nearby island of Brac. It was ferried over by special boat, and then everything else was built around it. And while there's nothing quite that dramatic anywhere else, the rest of the place is all quietly sophisticated natural materials: glass, wood, terracotta and local stone. >



PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: NIKOLA RADOVANI, KATE SEVO (2), © MASLINA RESORT



Most of the 53 rooms, suites and villas and just about all the swimming pools and other public spaces have perfectly framed views over the Adriatic (often from their private terraces), and the hotel claims a patch of seafront for private sunbathing atop the Mediterranean pebbles. That near-constant connection to the sea is just one pillar of the mindful approach at the heart of the hotel.

This mindfulness extends, perhaps most memorably, to the significant wellness component. Although short of billing itself as a spa resort, it has movement or meditation sessions every morning, and it grows many of the ingredients that are used in the spa treatments – drawing on Croatia’s long tradition of using herbs as medicine – in its own organic garden.

Villa Nai 3.3’s infinity pool, *above*, and its Grotta 11, 000 restaurant and stone-walled exterior, *below*



The garden also supplies the restaurant, both for its casual lunchtime poolside menu and its finer-dining evening format. The kitchen is led by Michelin-star chef Serge Gouloumès (Le Candille in Mougins, France) and, as is now de rigueur, embraces local and seasonal ingredients.

VILLA NAI 3.3

A tiny island with fewer than 2,000 people at the edge of the Kornati National Park, Dugi Otok is nowhere on most travellers’ radar. That was precisely the point for the owners of Villa Nai 3.3 (villanai.com), a super-luxe micro-resort that opened last year. It’s as quiet and secluded as it gets.

Sure, it helped that they had land on the island, near the village of Zman, that was already producing some award-winning olive oil. (*Nai* is the old Dalmatian word for “snow”, and the island used to get an average of 3.3 days of it per year, which they considered to be an important factor in the quality.) It also helped that, having had success in the construction industry, they had access to top craftsmen, engineers and designers, including the internationally known Croatian architect Nikola Bašić.

Beautifully integrated into the landscape, the villa is made from the same stone that was quarried to make room for it. It’s seamless from the front and invisible from behind. Inside, the five rooms and three suites are spacious and luminous, with no hint that



Right: Boutique Hotel Alhambra at sunset, and a cassis desert at its Alfred Keller restaurant, below



Since the 19th century, the northern island of Lošinj has been known as an “island of vitality”

they are, in fact, partially underground. They look out over the olive groves, the swimming pool and the Adriatic Sea.

Unusually for such a small hotel, there are two very good restaurants: 3.3, which serves a pescatarian tasting menu enhanced with the signature olive oil, and Grotta 11,000, an alfresco fire kitchen that’s an ode to the oldest Dalmatian, a caveman who lived here 11 millennia ago.

BOUTIQUE HOTEL ALHAMBRA

Since the 19th century, the northern island of Lošinj has been known as an “island of vitality”. It began with the work of botanist Ambroz Haračić, who looked at sunshine, humidity, temperature and latitude to determine that Lošinj had the healthiest climate in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Then he sealed the deal by planting hundreds of pine seeds. A forest flourished, and within it, so did some 1,200 species of plants, herbs and healing flowers.

The air has the best qualities of the forest and the sea, so it was originally a retreat for people with respiratory problems. Now we have better ways to treat those, so the island has found new purpose in tourism. (It’s popular with German-speaking clientele but still a secret to much of the world.)

It has one main lavish development, Lošinj Hotels & Villas, which is exactly what the name suggests. Among the choices, Boutique Hotel Alhambra (losinj-hotels.com)



losinj-hotels.com) stands out for its intimate size, Art-Nouveau-meets-contemporary design, Clefs d’Or concierge service and Restaurant Alfred Keller, which holds a Michelin star and has a wine cellar some 400 labels deep.

It also has access to the complex’s other restaurants, from steak house to Japanese, concrete “beaches” and enormous, ambitious Bellevue Spa Clinic, which offers everything from CBD massages and organic aromatherapy workshops to cryotherapy and personalised metabolic analysis with medical doctors. ↪

MORE TO EXPLORE

Croatia is awash in lovely places to stay, including several new openings. In Istria, Palazzo Rainis (palazzorainis.com) just opened on the marina in the city of Novigrad, with 16 rooms and suites in a neo-Renaissance Venetian mansion, while the new seaside Petram Resort & Residences (petramresort.com) is set to be the biggest luxury development in the region. Also in Istria, Baracija estate (baracija.hr) occupies a 19th-century villa on a hilltop overlooking acres and acres of vineyards and olive groves. On the Dubrovnik Riviera, Kalamota Beach House (kalamota-beachhouse.com) has 10 spacious suites overlooking the sea. Nearby, the D Resort Šibenik (dresortsibenik.com) has 63 design-forward rooms and six suites that are close enough to the sea to make you feel as if you’re on a ship. On the central coast just west of Split, Brown Beach House (brownhotels.com) brings a big dose of Tel Aviv-style cool to the Unesco-cited village of Trogir. And since you might also want to visit a city in Croatia, Zagreb’s glamorous Esplanade hotel (esplanade.hr) was built in 1925 as a stopover for passengers on the *Orient Express*, while Split’s Hotel Park (hotelpark-split.hr) has a similar vintage and freshly renovated Art Deco details. Finally, in Dubrovnik, it’s hard to top the Adriatic Luxury Hotels (adriaticluxuryhotels.com), particularly the royal history and magnificent setting of the Excelsior and the intimate feeling and trendsetting interior design of Villa Orsula. –AA