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Life & Style

# Istria? It's top of my list

Enjoy the clear waters, relaxed atmosphere and wonderful food of this northern peninsula in Croatia



The serrated coastline of Istria, Croatia

Rosita Boland

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Before the plane even landed in Pula, I felt I'd already had a glorious ad-hoc mini tour of Istria, the northern Croatian peninsula. We flew in over a serrated coastline studded with small rocky islands, some with single houses on them, over turquoise waters that were so clear I swear I could even see the fish that swam far beneath.

Istria is the biggest peninsula in the Adriatic Sea, and I can't say I've seen them all, but it's currently top of my list of Adriatic Sea Peninsulas. The fabulous coastline defines the entire place. There are no traditional sandy beaches, but what there is in every town and village along the coast are ladders down to that utterly clear water for swimmers, and sometimes carved-out rockpools for children. Local people go for a swim in Istria in the way you'd pop out for an evening walk in Ireland.

Pula is the peninsula's main town, and it has a surprising and surprisingly well-preserved collessium, one of only six in the world, including those at Rome and Verona. It's used as a natural amphitheatre for concerts these days, and can hold up to 10,000. "For Leonard Cohen, there were chairs.

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For [Marilyn Manson](#), there were not,” our guide divulged. It was here in this marvellously atmospheric place that we and thousands of locals watched the opening match of the [World Cup](#), when [Croatia](#) was thrown to the Brazilian lions and given a mauling.

Further up the coast is beautiful Rovinj, a small coastal fishing town famous for its cluster of privately-run galleries and period architecture. You can swim off the rocks here, as we did, first changing in the bathrooms of the sea-front Puntulina restaurant we later ate in. We could almost have called our order in from the sea. They minded not at all that their restaurant guests arrived fully dressed, and temporarily departed in swimsuits. Here; as elsewhere, the menu showcased excellent local seabass, squid, anchovies, sardines, and tuna tartar. The tuna fish features on Croatia’s two kuna coin, but most of the country’s significant catch is exported to [Japan](#).

State gifts come in many forms, but I did not expect to find them in the form of ageing exotic animals on the island of Brijuni. Designated a national park since 1984, this extraordinary time-capsule place has a hotel, the Neptune, whose interior could be a stand-in for the Grand Budapest Hotel, and a still-producing olive tree that is a staggering 1,600 years old. As for the zebras, lamas, ostriches, horses and a lone elephant that wander surreally around a section of Brijuni, these are all ancestors of gifts given to [Josip Tito](#), the first president of Yugoslavia, by some of the 100 heads of State who visited him here. Lanka, the lone Indian elephant, was the gift of [Indira Ghandi](#), and still survives today. Ferries run the half-hour journey from Pula, and you can either rent bikes or golf carts to explore.

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