



CUT-OUT-AND-GO GUIDE | CROWD-FREE CROATIA



instant escapes

Crowd-free Croatia

Escape the mainland hordes and discover the allure of the Elafiti islands

Smart people, aristocrats. They used to escape Dubrovnik's summer crush on the Elafiti isles. Mostly free of cars and crowds, the lush archipelago, 30 minutes away, remains a place to relax — in shimmering bays and villages the colour of old ivory. There are three main islands to discover — so skip the city crowds and go hopping! By **James Stewart**



SEE & DO

Why have the likes of Morgan Freeman and Tom Cruise dropped anchor in Sipanska Luka, off Sipan island, recently? Because it's the Adriatic backwater of your dreams — a **sun-baked fishing village of stone houses and sleepy cats, wrapped around a glassy bay**. Dawdle beneath the harbour's palms, then walk up the bay's left side to find Prijezba beach: turquoise water, white shingle and a mellow beach bar. Bliss.

Of the three main Elafiti islands, Lopud is the holiday isle, Koločep the castaway experience, Sipan the traditional one (ferry-hop between them for £1.60; www.jadrolinija.hr). Sample Sipan's rustic soul on a cycle ride (bikes about £8 for a half-day from most hotels). The road from Suđurađ rolls 5km past **vineyards and the ruined summerhouses of long-dead Dubrovnik nobility** to the junction for Velji Vrh. You'll ascend through olive groves for a heart-swelling panorama of green-fuzzed islands from the archipelago's high point (234m).

Sipan is tricky for walkers, as there are no signposts. To explore, hire licensed guide Marija Mgoravica (mgoravica@gmail.com; 2-4 hours £18). An encyclopaedia on the Elafitis, she'll lead you on paths **perfumed by wild rosemary to hamlets cocooned among olive groves**, and reveal Byzantine chapels with frescoes the colour of wine stains — locked to other visitors, open to you.

HERITAGE WINE

Like your reds? Besides merlot, the Daničić family produces the granddaddy of 'em all — full-bodied **plavac mali**, a Dalmatian red that's been DNA-traced as the source of Californian zinfandel.

Holy order: the 15th-century Franciscan monastery on Lopud, home to the TBA21 arts institute's new exhibition space; below, the Elafitis at sunset; the quiet fishing village of Sipanska Luka

Tastings at Daničić Simo (00 385 20 758166; Suđurađ), the only commercial vineyard within the Dubrovnik area, are on the veranda of the family home. You'll **sample reds harvested from the Daničić family's 350 vines**, as well as delicious, grassy olive oil pressed from its 800 trees. No wonder the Dubrovnik aristos called Sipan the 'Golden Island'.

You've come for sunshine, not culture (we know). But make time for Lopud's gallery, which, after 10 years' renovation, should rival those in Dubrovnik. This summer, queen of arts Francesca von Hapsburg opens Gospa od Spilica, an outpost of the TBA21 international arts institute, in the island's 15th-century monastery (for exhibits, book regular weekend tours at lopud.tba21.org). Expect **Renaissance Italians up against cutting-edge Modernists** such as Olafur Eliasson and Ragnar Kjartansson. Even if the exhibitions aren't to your taste, the Gothic architecture is heavenly.

Avoid tour companies' 'fish picnics' — they're just rushed booze cruises. Instead, assemble your own group and charter a vessel from Dubrovnik Boats (dubrovnikboats.com; half day from £266, up to 10 people). It's an **A-list experience at civilian prices**, a speedboat piloted by a captain (see Ask a Local overleaf) with a little black book of pine-scented coves notched in white cliffs. Take a dip in the lapis-lazuli seas of Koločep's Blue Cave — the skipper will make sure you're there when the tour boats aren't.

Want more action? Try Adriatic Kayak Tours (adriatickayaktours.com; full day £44, book ahead). The pick of its three tours goes from Lopud to Sipan: paddle 3km across blue-black water, dwarfed by the mountains, to caves in the ragged limestone coast. Then there's **lunch, a swim and a chance to play Crusoe on an uninhabited islet, Ruda**.

Time for a lazy beach day. Sunj, on Lopud, is the loveliest spot in the whole region. **A pine-lined bay edged by a scimitar of fine sand perfect for castles**, it has two restaurants for lunch — one rustic, one cool. If you can't face the 1.5km hike across Lopud, catch a buggy taxi (£1.75) near the harbour. ➤



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EAT

● **Simply does it**

KONOBA SKERIC (Mains about £12)

Because: It's a no-frills harbour joint of yesteryear, with plastic chairs, nautical decor and local plonk. Choose from what its fisherman-owner caught that day, banged on the barbie and served with chips. **Travel's tip:** Service is pretty laid-back — don't come if you're in a rush. *Gornje Celo 35, Koločep; 00 385 91576 1165.*

● **Family affair**

MANDRAC (Mains about £13)

Because: With old stone walls and knick-knacks left from when it was the owner's grandparents' home, this family bistro is dining's answer to a hug. Flavours are unfussy, prices generally reasonable. **Travel's tip:** Beware fish priced by weight — it's dearer than elsewhere. *Obala Iva Kuljevana 49, Lopud; 00 385 98 428821.*

● **Shellfish and style**

OBALA (Mains about £19)

Because: This smart number has Lopud's best waterfront, most talented chef and most charming waiters. Expect tip-top regional faves: oysters, squid-ink risotto, rich brodet fish stew. **Travel's tip:** Come at sunset for a front-row seat as Lopud village blushes pink. *Obala Iva Kuljevana 18, Lopud; 00 385 20 759170, obalalopud.com.*

● **Crusoe-esque escapism**

BOWA (Mains about £22)

Because: Sipan's sexy newcomer is all castaway cool on a quiet bay: aperitifs in an open-sided lounge bar, modern Med dishes in cabanas, and sunloungers before a shimmering sea. **Travel's tip:** Avoid the 30-minute walk from Sudurad by hiring a kayak (about £6 an hour). You'll be there in 15 minutes. *Pakljena Bay, Sudurad, Sipan; 00 385 916 366111, bowa-dubrovnik.com.*

● **Culinary adventure**

KOD MARKA (Five courses £30)

Because: Answer 'fish' to the owner's 'fish or meat?' query and you'll get a meal created from whatever's freshest — maybe tuna prosciutto, octopus cake, seafood risotto and grouper. **Travel's tip:** Reserve days ahead for a terrace table. *Obitelj Prižmić, Sipanska Luka, Sipan; 00 385 20 758007.*

DRINK & SHOP

● **Wine and seascapes**

VILLA ROSE

Because: The alfresco bar here is a belter, with a pinch-me terrace. Come at dusk to sit beneath olive trees as the sun sizzles into the sea. **Travel's tip:** Try top Croatian fizz Tomac — it's a third of the price of Møet. *Donje Celo, Koločep.*

● **Taste of the islands**

KANTUN

Because: Decision one: buzzy terrace hung with fishing nets or snug stone storehouse? That's easy. Tougher is selecting from the four pages of drinks on offer. **Travel's tip:** Cocktailed out? Order the *travarica* — homemade grappa infused with a heady medley of herbs. *Obala Iva Kuljevana 2, Lopud.*

● **Local craftsmanship**

SOUL OF LOPUD

Because: Within a semi-ruined house is a jewel box of red-coral earrings, olive-wood necklaces, art and unique beauty products, all the work of local artists. **Travel's tip:** Don't bother looking for a street number — this is at the junction with Ulica Miha Pracata. *Obala Iva Kuljevana, Lopud.*

ALFRESCO TABLES

Can't bear to sit inside? Mandrac sets a few tables waterside around the tiny small-boat harbour outside. It's a nice spot for breakfast or morning coffee, too

BECAMERA READY

Boat tours with Dubrovnik Boats also include wine and beer, the loan of snorkelling gear plus the use of a GoPro camera — and you get to keep the memory card afterwards



ASK THE LOCAL

Skipper Tomislav Valjalo has been sailing around the Elafitis since he was a boy. He runs trips with Dubrovnik Boats

“On land you don't fully appreciate the Elafitis' beauty. And you need a guide or you'll miss some amazing places — **my favourite bays have no name.** Koločep island for me is the most beautiful. I love **walking the trail from the harbour up through the forest to the lighthouse.** You can scramble to the bay beneath — there's a shipwreck there that's popular with divers. Sunj is the best looking beach: it's **one of the few with sand and it's shallow and safe** (I take my kids there). Veli Jakljan is another **sand beach on the uninhabited island of Jakljan** (it's not often cleaned, though). Get there by canoe (about £24 for four hours) from Sipanska Luka.



STAY

● **Beauty on a budget**

HOTEL SIPAN (Doubles from £42, B&B)

Because: You'll fall asleep to the sound of the sea here. Yes, Standard rooms are a bit poky (Superiors are worth the extra), the furniture's IKEA-esque, and no, there's no swimming pool. Yet, as well as friendly staff, this cheapie has a million-dollar location on the Elafitis' prettiest harbour. **Travel's tip:** Don't hang around at Sipan's port: the island's only bus meets ferries at the wharf to take you 5km to the hotel. *Sipanska Luka, Sipan; hotel-sipan.com.*

● **Simple style**

LA VILLA (Doubles from £63, B&B)

Because: No TVs, sketchy in-room wi-fi — you'll rediscover the joy of switching off in this young couple's updated harbour B&B. Its eight simple rooms are a blend of whitewashed walls, floaty curtains and cool wicker chaises longues. **Travel's tip:** For an extra £84, book the Blue Room — it has a dreamy balcony above a beach. *Iva Kuljevana 33, Lopud; lavilla.com.hr.*

● **Fancy spa stay**

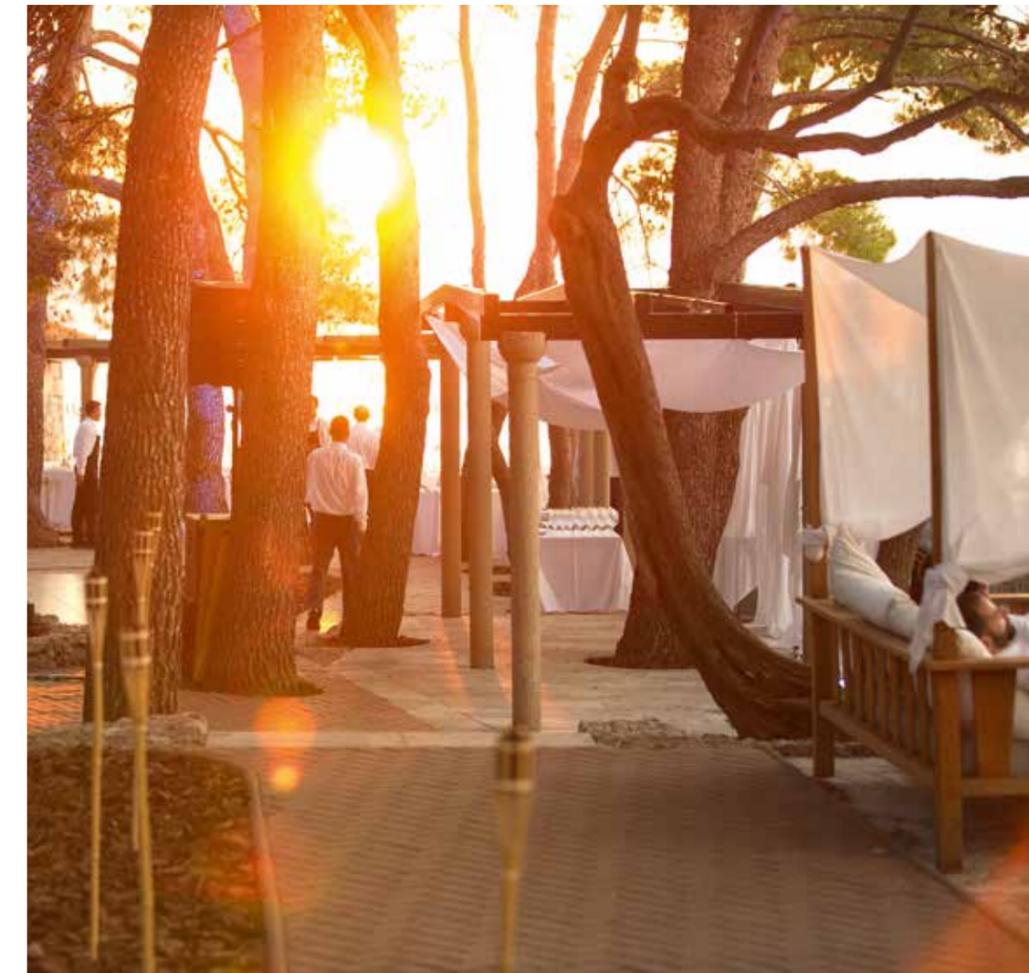
LAFODIA (Doubles from £76, B&B)

Because: All rooms have views of mountains beyond sparkling sea, and balconies come as standard in this 182-room, glossy resort at the end of Lopud bay. The pool's huge (by local standards) and the Elafitis' best spa peddles treatments by the ton. **Travel's tip:** Book front-facing Superiors (from £113) for wraparound views. *Obala Iva Kuljevana 35, Lopud; lafodiahotel.com.*

● **Calm, quiet luxury**

HOTEL BOZICA (Doubles from £84, B&B)

Because: The mood's laid-back in this 26-room bolthole. There's an infinity plunge pool teetering above glittering sea, yoga under the pergola, and a private 'beach' (OK, concrete wharves). **Travel's tip:** Fancy James Bond glamour? Other hotels in the Elafitis run Dubrovnik day trips, but only Bozica lets you stay for dinner, then whisks you back by private speedboat (£47). *Sudurad 13, Sipan; hotel-bozica.hr.*



GOLFBUGGY TRANSFER

If you can time your arrival on Lopud so you land between 10am and 1pm, the Lafodia will send a golf buggy to pick you up. Beats the sweaty 15-minute walk round the harbour with your bags

Tread the boards: clockwise from top left, the cool bar at Bowa; sparkling views at Lafodia hotel; switch off at Villa Rose; expect regional fare at Obala, on Lopud's waterfront; smart room at Kalamota Island Resort

● **Traditional charm**

VILLA VILINA (Doubles from £112, B&B)

Because: It's a friendly family hotel of '30s vintage, where high ceilings, swagged curtains, fans overhead and a vine-covered terrace above the bay lend an air of tradition. A pool? Just uphill through the olive grove. **Travel's tip:** Park-view rooms are the cheapest and yet are bigger than the harbour-view Standards. Seafront suite No. 10 has the only balcony. *Obala Ivana Kuljevana 5, Lopud; villa-vilina.hr.*

● **Look, no kids**

KALAMOTA ISLAND RESORT (Doubles from £157, all-inclusive)

Because: A fairly bland all-in package job by Tui (it owns the hotel), this place nevertheless ticks a lot of boxes for blissed-out hols. It's spread behind a quiet stretch of sand, the restaurants are open to warm sea breezes and there's a spa: tick, tick, tick. And it's adults only. **Travel's tip:** Don't come for excitement — the clientele tends to be old-ish. *Donje Celo, Koločep; tui.co.uk.*

GET ME THERE GO INDEPENDENT

EasyJet flies to Dubrovnik from Stansted, Gatwick, Luton, Bristol, Manchester, Edinburgh and Belfast from £36. **BA** flies from Gatwick, from £63. Or try **Jet2, Norwegian, Flybe** and **Tui**. Airport buses (£4.75) terminate at Gruz port, where Jadrolinija (www.jadrolinija.hr) ferries sail to Koločep (30min), then Lopud (55min), then on to Sipan (95min); all £2.25 one-way.

GO PACKAGED

Prestige (prestige.holidays.co.uk) has seven nights at Hotel Bozica from £633, B&B, including flights. **Completely Croatia** (completelycroatia.co.uk) has seven nights in Villa Vilina from £799pp, B&B, with flights.

FURTHER INFORMATION

See tzdubrovnik.hr. July and August in Lopud can be busy until the last ferry back to Dubrovnik departs at 6pm. Sipan is quietest around Sipanska Luka. Beaches are safe, but take swimming shoes — sea urchins love rocky coasts. ■