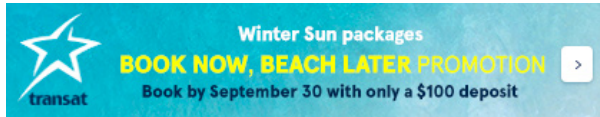


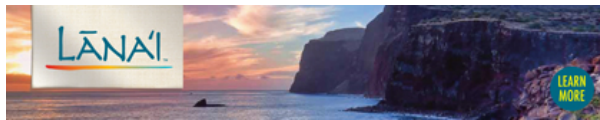


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IN THE SPIRIT OF BONACA

A soul soothing journey through Croatia

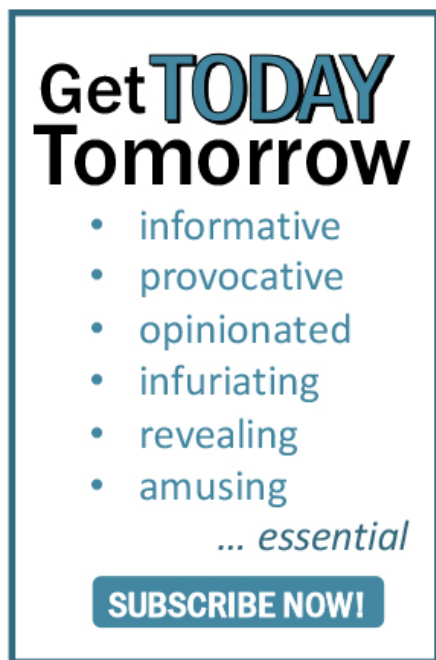
Steve Gillick

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24 JUN 2017: Ivan Kapetanic, the owner of Konobo Bonaca, is one of the more gracious restaurant owners that you will meet. After an unbelievably fresh seafood dinner he offered us Grappa as we plied him with questions about this family owned establishment ("Mom is the Chef") situated in

Sustjepan, a quiet village, just outside the hustle and bustle of Dubrovnik. Ivan explained that “Konobo” refers to a place where food is prepared, with the emphasis on “local”.



So here on the Dalmatian coast this meant squid, scampi, sardines, sea bream, prosciutto and lamb with salads adorned with cheese and drizzled in delicate, flavourful olive oil, all to the accompaniment of a white GRK or red Plavac wine, or a mug of cold Karlovačko or Ožujsko beer.

Bonaca (pronounced “Bonatsa”) refers to the sea when the water is calm, quiet and relaxed. It’s the most favourable condition for fishermen, but also for those who seek an enjoyable, unrushed dining experience where tasting the food, savouring the flavours and anticipating the joy of the next bite, all come into play.

It was this spirit of ‘bonaca’ that we found throughout Croatia on a two week journey that took us from Cavtat to Pula, Rovinj, Zadar, Split, Trogir, Hvar, Korčula and Dubrovnik. And everywhere we travelled, we talked with locals,

tour guides, fellow travellers and restauranteurs and each conveyed in their own words the importance of enjoying life: taking time to taste, see, do, converse, reflect and smile.



In Dubrovnik our guide Ivan Vukovic noted that locals can always tell when tourist season is about to hit because people start to walk around with take-out coffee. “Locals don’t do that”, he explained.

“We enjoy the flavour of the coffee, the time it takes to sit and drink a cup and the social aspect of drinking with a friend”.

In Cavtat, Duro Vragolov, the owner of the popular restaurant, Konobo Kolona told us that his father taught him to be a fisherman. After a moment of silence, he added, “watching the moon descend into the sea...that’s what makes me happy...that’s what washes my soul”.



While I initially thought that these were the words of a poet-philosopher, I realized on my travels that

these were the words of a Croat. And so much so that when the drinking cheer “Zivili” was explained as “Be filled with Life”, it took on a whole new meaning.

Croatia has become one of the more desirable travel destinations on the planet. It’s relatively safe and inexpensive, has outstanding food, 300 days of sunshine per year, coastal cities, islands and beaches to explore, a rich history, and just about everyone speaks English.

Cavtat is only 6 km from Dubrovnik Airport so on our first night in the country, we arranged a stay at a Villa on one of the hills overlooking this lovely Adriatic town. On one side of the seaside promenade there are restaurants, cafes, and ice cream and souvenir shops while on the other side, water taxis departing for nearby Dubrovnik, dock next to private yachts that range from small to palatial, and display flags from countries all over Europe.

A flight to Zagreb and a bus to Pula the next morning put us right outside the famous Amphitheatre built between 2 AD and 81 AD. Our Roman adventure continued at the Forum where the remains of the Temples of Emperor Augustus and Diana, the Goddess of the Hunt are only a short walk away from the Triumphal Arch of the Sergii dating from 27 BC. In the evening, the streets and squares in the area come alive with locals and tourists, strolling or just hanging out and enjoying the café culture.

But mornings in Pula are equally engaging with a vibrant morning market and samples of olive oil, black truffles and ping-pong ball-sized grapes, as well as lively conversations with the vendors.

The town of Rovinj attracts visitors with its narrow

winding, shiny, stone-slab streets, ancient churches, old houses, art galleries, and water-side restaurants. In the spirit of 'bonaca', we sat at a café, sipping beer and watched the activity in the market: flower sellers, fish mongers, ropes of red chili peppers and garlic decorating the market stalls, and all to the harmony of Church bells echoing throughout the city.

Leaving the region of Istria, our first stop in Dalmatia was Zadar where we entered the walled city through the Bridge Gate. Our guide led us around the city's iconic sites: the Lion's Gate, the square of the five wells and St. Donatus' Church dating from the ninth century. At dusk, the entire city seems to gather at the marble steps of the Sea Organ waiting for the sun to set. The organ was designed by Nikola Bašić to celebrate the sea and to remind the city of its roots. Water rushes into pipes and chambers under the marble steps, emitting mystical-sounding musical tones that vary in intensity according to the winds and the waves.



The scene changed again in Split, where thousands of tourists trailed after harried tour guides trying to explain the history and architecture in and around the Diocletian Palace complex. We decided to escape to Trogir, only 30 minutes away, for a return to 'bonaca' with a morning coffee, chats with the friendly market vendors and then a discovery walk that took us into the 13th century Cathedral of St. Lawrence with its absolutely amazing stone carvings, and on to the battlements of the 15th century Fortress Kamerlengo.

Our accommodation on the island of Hvar could be reached by climbing 79 steep, stone steps, but many steps higher was the path leading to Spanjola, the impressive 16th century Fortress. It's actually an easy climb and the views from the top are spectacular.

In Korčula there are no less than three Marco Polo shops, a museum and his actual home to support

the historical claim that he was born here when it was part of the Venetian empire.



And finally, we arrived in Dubrovnik. True to its reputation as the country's tourism magnet, the old city was packed with throngs of tourists and Game of Thrones fans, crowding through the Pila Gate, snapping photos and selfies and generally having a great time. The highlight for us was a late afternoon/ sunset walk on the city walls where the views of the city, the sea, and yes, even the walls themselves, are amazing.

Of course, there's a ton of activities and sights to see in each of the places we visited but it was the quieter moments that made the biggest impression. In Zadar we found a small quiet street with no tourists; just a two-table outdoor café. The owner greeted us, brought two cold beers, and offered to prepare a dish of the morning's catch of small fried fish. Inside the tiny restaurant, locals were talking, laughing and drinking coffee, wine and Rakija.

For me it was a perfect, personable afternoon and once again the spirit of 'bonaca' seemed to be with us; calm waters, taking time to appreciate great food, talking with new friends and well, that's life in Croatia. I'll be back!

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The appetizer at Konobo Bonaca in Sustjepan. Bonaca refers to calm waters



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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