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Dalmatian tears of joy and tragedy

By Keith Spicer

DUBROVNIK. With Agra, town of the Taj Mahal, and Bruges, Belgium's "Venice of the north," this ancient city of Richard the Lion-Hearted is a place you can't leave without a tear in your eye and a vow to return. Occupied by scores of invaders but never conquered, Croatia's Dubrovnik is a gem in the Adriatic's clear, azure waters. Only Emperor Diocletian's Split up the coast can rival it. A cruise between the two should find a week in every lover's calendar – well, toss in farther-north Venice if you must.

In this seventh-century city, romance is carved in stone. Over 300 days a year, sunlight bathes ramparts, monasteries, churches, museums, one of the world's oldest pharmacies, cosy old inns and ivy-shaded upstairs restaurants. The latter serve langoustes, lobster and cuttle-fish with crisp white Croatian wines and deadly *Travarica* (herb brandy, 38% alcohol).

Even arriving gives you a tingle. Dropping down into Dubrovnik's airport, airline pilots zoom and dodge, betraying alarming nostalgia for Second World War dogfights. Gliding by sea toward the city's centuries-worn stone quays, another kind of pilot lands – masters of cruise ships pouring a couple of thousand passengers into more history than a day's visit can relive: the entire Old Town Centre is a UNESCO Heritage Site.

But there's many a tale of woe too. Of plundering pirates, greedy empire-builders, and just plain thugs. Among the empire-builders, count Napoleon, who promised to respect the city's independence if allowed free passage, then betrayed the town. Among the thugs, count the Yugoslav (Serb-Montenegrin) army which, in 1991-92, camped in

the hills above the city and on ships to bombard the unarmed Old Town, damaging 68 percent of the ancient buildings, plus countless houses, its snipers picking off innocent civilians.

Throughout Dubrovnik's history and literature, you feel a passion for independence cherishing religious and cultural diversity. For over a thousand years, this drew strength from trade and diplomacy. Long backed by Dubrovnik's own navy, the city-republic negotiated its way throughout the eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans. In its heyday 15th and 16th centuries, it established trading colonies in dozens of towns, spreading its self-governing ideas, culture and prosperity.

Its population now about 47,000, Dubrovnik is a 100-percent tourist town. Strolling down the main-street *Placa* after a 35-year absence, I saw the Old City now lovingly restored. The ramparts where King Richard walked after an 1192 shipwreck on nearby Lokrum Island still slow your footsteps. The cathedral began with Richard's 100,000 ducats – keeping a promise to God for saving his life at sea on returning from his failed Third Crusade (a saw-off, with Islam's Saladin keeping Jerusalem, while admitting Christian pilgrims).

Changes? Now the charming medieval streets teem with boutique hotels and luxury shops. Narrow, high-reaching backstreets pack in stores and small *pensions* for the cardio-vascular fit. Discotheques, bars and nightclubs attract a free-spending Euro crowd, many here on low-cost flights with those dogfight pilots.

On my long-ago visit, I was smitten by a beautiful blonde Serb interpreter called Ljiljana, now living in Ottawa. She could make all Yugoslavia, as Tito's multicultural federation was called, seem the world's sanest experiment. My guide this time was

Lidija, a passionate, pretty young Croatian brunette finishing her studies to become an economics professor. Fair-minded but outspoken, she would not dwell on the 1990s war, but anger seethed just below the surface. Many of her friends were killed, and she barely survived in her family's basement. "We don't hate the Serbs, but except for a few personal friends we don't really want to associate with them or their 'little-brother' Montenegrins. We just shut up to keep the peace, for silence is politically necessary."

Proud of her aristocratic ancestors, Lidija deplored how 19th-century Austrian occupation and the recent war had stunted her city-republic's old cosmopolitanism. "As in Sarajevo and other Balkan cities, many cultured people have left, making way for uneducated peasants. Walls of the mind now match the old city walls."

What draws the world here? A symphony of interesting people, ancient architecture, intimate, colourful pedestrian streets, renowned cultural festivals featuring first-class concerts and exhibitions. And, as in most coastal cities, a willingness to weave new with old – inspiring a hearty welcome to strangers.

In a Europe where hard-to-integrate immigrants, waves of real and fake refugees, and post-911 paranoia provoke deepening anguish, Dubrovnik feels like part of the solution to clashes of civilizations. In its tiny, blood-soaked corner of Europe, this fortress-city offers courage galore for peoples trying to marry freedom with tolerance.

Its lesson openness, its tools still prosperity and freedom, Dubrovnik breathes not just sea air, but a long-view attitude to life which translates as peace of soul. Try to get lucky and come here. And bring a hankie for your farewell.