

Don't re-Joyce, just rejoice in Istria

Istria boasts a famous link to James Joyce, but the Croatian peninsula has a lot more to offer, writes *Kevin Gleeson*

DURING the winter of 1904, a young James Joyce and his lover Nora Barnacle found themselves in the Austro-Hungarian naval village of Pula. The promise of a teaching job at the Berlitz Language School in Zurich having failed to materialise, Joyce reluctantly accepted a post with the school in a coastal town he described as a provincial backwater.

As soon as a job arose in Trieste six months later he was gone. Some 110 years later and this vibrant city can expect an influx of Irish visitors less keen on leaving. Croatia has long been a favourite destination for holidaymakers from these shores, and with the introduction of a direct Dublin to Pula flight commencing this weekend, figures are set to soar.

Checking into the city's Park Plaza hotel, my expectations of Croatia as a first-time visitor were already being exceeded. My first day starts with breakfast overlooking the clear waters of the Adriatic, fishing boats bobbing amongst the smattering of islands – the nearest of which belongs to the hotel. Guests can visit this tiny and uninhabited island if they choose; just hoist the flag when ready to return.

Instead, I opt for the short stroll into Pula for a guided tour of the city's Roman amphitheatre. Once a significant port in the Roman Empire, there are many monuments still remaining but this arena, the world's sixth largest, is by far the most impressive.

Today it continues to play an important part in entertaining the city's residents and regularly holds concerts and special events. The caverns underneath offer some welcome respite from the afternoon sun and a glimpse into how the Romans used to entertain themselves with a display consisting mostly of enormous wine presses and the jugs they filled.

Elsewhere in Pula there is a fantastic market selling the usual array of fish, fruit and flowers; a buzzing atmosphere makes it a perfect spot for lunch. When you are done, you can pop around the corner to Caffè Uliks, or Ulysses, and enjoy a coffee seated next to a bronze statue of the great man himself.

You could easily while away a few days in this

wonderful city without ever having to leave, but Pula is just one gem of the Istrian peninsula. A small network of motorways – ensuring no town on the peninsula is further than an hour's drive away – services the region. At its southernmost tip is the Kamenjak nature reserve. Nine kilometres long and with almost 40 kilometres of coastline, there is no shortage of secluded coves and pebble beaches to enjoy.

Head to the furthest point of the park and hidden amongst the tall rushes and bamboo you will find the Safari bar, a destination in its own right. With homemade fruit

wines and cocktails, it is definitely the place to get the post-swim party started. Just don't get too carried away as all park guests must be gone by 10pm.

Heading back north, the small medieval town of Bale is a maze of cobbled alleys and Venetian gothic buildings. A bohemian and deserted feel to Bale makes it an ideal destination for getting away from it all for a day or two.

The crumbling buildings are protected, but as long as the façade remains you can do pretty much as you like with the interiors. The



Idyllic: The coastline of the Kamenjak nature reserve, and left: Pula's Roman amphitheatre and the Safari Bar



newly-opened four-star Hotel La Grisa is a perfect example of how this can be executed. Some of the rooms are decorated with furniture and paintings recovered from the previously abandoned buildings that now make up the accommodation.

Casanova once came to the village during the 1700s in search of women and wine. And while I cannot speak for the women of Istria, the wine is certainly some of the best I have ever tasted. The Istrian Malvasia grape variety thrives as a result of the peninsula's unique microclimate and there are many wineries in the region you can visit.

A college graduate at a loose end named Bruno Trapan decided to put his time to good use reinvigorating a small vineyard left behind by

his late grandmother in the village of Sisan. Today, Trapan wines really are some of the best in the country and Bruno's somewhat guerilla winemaking techniques are such that he has even named one of his wines Che. Designate your driver and book an appointment at his tasting room.

Famed for its olive oil, truffles, seafood and wine, Istria is heaven for those who love their food. Throw in stunning scenery, swimming in warm waters and ample history, and, well, what's not to love?

Here's one Irishman who certainly won't be reluctant to revisit.

Aer Lingus flies Dublin to Pula from €132 return. www.istra.hr

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