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Cultural  
Historical and Natural  
Attractions of Istria

# Istria Culture



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## Cultural Itineraries

### Frescoes of Istria

In search of Istrian frescoes is an exquisite and exiting cultural journey. We find about 140 localities with frescoes all over the peninsula. Some are elaborate compositions, others just scenes or fragments, mostly found in churches where they were much more than just décor. Depicting Biblical scenes but also universal issues regarding human destiny, they released suppressed emotions and brought enlightenment to the illiterate medieval peasant. The first frescoes in Istria appeared during the Carolingian rule. Their golden period is the Gothic Age (15th century) when some of the most magnificent examples of wall paintings in Istria were produced. In the 16th century the fashion faded and many walls containing frescoes were plastered with mortar. Today, restoration is under way in abandoned churches and many treasures have been found. Some frescoes are still waiting for the hand of the expert to bring them back to their original glory.

### Parenzana, Route of Health and Friendship

Parenzana holds a place of honour among pedestrian and cycling trails in Istria. It follows the same route as did the Parenzana railway that once joined Trieste and Poreč, from 1902 till 1935. The trail winds through green landscapes, alongside old viaducts and tunnels, where once a small, slow locomotive chugged. The train stations and little houses bring to mind old times. But where did the railway tracks go to? In Italian authorities dismantled them and loaded them onto a ship. Legend has it that the ship sank on the way to Africa, so parts of Istrian history lie hidden in the sea. Bringing together three countries, Parenzana is a symbolic route of friendship, a great venture in revitalising historical heritage and an ode to healthy living and the preservation of scenic beauty.

### Venetian Architectural Heritage

Venice's long rule on the west coast (13th -18th century) and in Istria's interior (15th -18th century) has left a trail of architecture and monuments. In the 15th century many streets and squares already had a Venetian look. Even in smaller towns, houses were built with large windows and balconies in the style of Venetian Floral Gothic. Internal courtyards were introduced, and houses had several stories. In the late Middle Ages and the Baroque, the aristocracy and wealthy bourgeois families built palaces. We find Venetian influence not only in residential buildings, but also in public buildings such as town halls. Other kinds of public architecture such as defensive towers, fortifications or town loggias, abundant in Istrian towns, as well as many churches, carry the seal of Serenissima.

### Archaeological Parks

In open-air archaeological parks the visitor will find remains of ancient civilizations: the foundations of their lodgings, walls and artefacts that could not be placed in a museum but remain at the original site, bearing witness to the ancient people of Istria, their customs and lives. We learn of the Bronze Age tribes through their hill-fort villages in over three hundred locations in Istria, through their thick fortified walls, graves and graveyards. These little known hill-fort inhabitants were succeeded by the Histri - an iron Age people. Lavish rustic villas and outbuildings along the west coast tell the story of Roman culture that blossomed in Istria after the Roman conquest of the Histri people. Among the better known parks is Nescatium by Pula, where in the 2nd century BC the pivotal battle between the Romans and the Histri people took place. Today, it is a treasure chest of findings from different epochs.

### Glagolitic Alley

The Glagolitic alley is a monument honouring the first Slavic alphabet called the Glagolitic Script in which an important part of Croatian literature was written in the 13th, 14th and 15th century. A series of 11 statues along a 7 km road between Roč and Hum honour the people and events that marked Glagolitic literacy in Istria. Literacy blossomed in these two towns and their environments through the work of many Glagolitic writers, and with the creation of many important documents and inscriptions. The path begins at the foot of Roč with the Glagolitic letter S for logos (mind, reason) and ends with the bronze doors at the entrance to Hum. The other nine signs include replicas of Glagolitic monuments, and the Table of the Brothers Cyril and Methodius, Byzantine missionaries who created the alphabet for the Slavs in the 9th century, thus laying a foundation for the development of their standard language.

### Castles of Istria

Istrian medieval architecture is marked by castles: stone fortresses in which feudal lords resided and controlled their lands. Castles were situated at strategic positions; were made of stone and usually had a main tower, fortifying walls, living quarters, outhouses and an open courtyard. Castles were attacked, burnt down and then rebuilt. Many legends of kidnapping, deception and rewards are tied to them. The first written document concerning Istrian castles is from 983. The one written in 1102 is very important because it granted most of them to the Patriarch of Aquileia. The most intensive building took place in the late Middle Ages, when Istria was controlled by Venice and the Habsburgs. Their decline began in the 16th century with the advent of the cannon. Castles were then abandoned. Some were later restored in the neo-Renaissance style, and to this day kindle the imagination of many curious visitors.

### The Path of Dinosaurs

The first dinosaur footprints in Istria were found in 1925 on the Veli Brijuni island, and later on the islet of Fenoliga by Cape Kamenjak. The bones of these great reptiles that ruled the planet in the Mesozoic Era, when the north Adriatic was land with only areas of very shallow sea water, were found off the coast of Bale. Both herbivorous and carnivorous dinosaurs lived there. They grew to a length of eight metres and walked on two or four legs. Based on petrified imprints in the ground, scientists have calculated their height, speed and other characteristics. Apart from the footprints, the educational and recreational trail on the Kamenjak Cape has life-size dinosaur replicas. The nearby National Park Brijuni with over two hundred petrified footprints invites you to walk through the magical world of ancient creatures that disappeared from the face of the earth over 65 million years ago.

### Stone Huts and Drystone Walls

An Istrian kažun (stone hut) is made of local stone without the use of any binding material. An average sized kažun weighs up to 30 cubic metres of stone, requiring about 70 tons. The roof is constructed in the 'false dome' method and covered in stone slates. Similar structures but called by different names can also be found in Dalmatia, as well as in other Mediterranean countries. Most were built in the 19th century by farmers and shepherds as protection from bad weather and as a place to keep farm tools and small farm animals. People who lived in these areas some hundred or more years ago cultivated land daily. Very often they had to take it away from the stone, which they afterwards collected and used for enclosing their plots. On the solid rock base larger stones were laid down and then smaller ones were arranged towards the top. This explains the origin of kilometres of drystone walls which are a unique sight today.

## Natural Wonders

### 7 Špilja Mramornica - Mramornica Cave

The Mramornica Cave, one of the largest subterranean chambers in Istria is situated south of Brtonigla, in untouched nature. It presents us with a richness of cave life, first described by the Italian travel writer Alberto Fortis in 1770. The steep opening leads into a 100-m-long and 50-m-high treasure chest of stalactites and stalagmites in various shades of red, yellow and brown. The highest stalagmite reaches a height of 13 m.

### 8 Feštinsko Kraljevstvo Cave

The Kingdom of Feština Cave is a small subterranean paradise in the heart of Istria. The cave was discovered in 1930 in the village of Feština, not far from Zminj. During the WWII, it sheltered the landowner from raging armies. The interior of the cave is 80 m long. Walking through it we find several natural sculptures: the Magician's Hat, the Tower of Babel, and the enormous Bat's Wings with grape vines.

### 9 Romualdova Špilja - Romualdo's Cave

Romualdo's Cave is one of the oldest habitats of early man in Istria. It is located alongside the Lim Channel on the steep slope of Mount St. Martin, 120 m above sea-level. The meandering cave is 150 m long and consists of 7 chambers, once used by Stone Age hunters. According to legend, it became the home of St. Romualdo of Ravenna in the early 11th century. After his departure, the faithful visited the site. Today, it houses a colony of bats. The entrance to the cave is only 47 cm high.

### 10 Pazinska Jama - Pazin Abyss

The Pazin Abyss is one of the most striking examples of karst pits in Istria. The 500-m-long entrance that dominates the landscape of the old town of Pazin inspired world famous writers (Jules Verne, Dante, Yriarte). At a depth of 100 m, the Pazinčica River sinks into subterranean passages. It is the largest Istrian underground stream that flows towards the Raša River valley. Over the abyss we find a bridge with a vantage point. The Pazin Castle, the largest medieval fortress in Istria, also affords a great view.

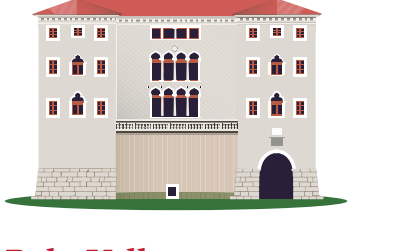
### 11 Palud

Palud is ornithological jewel of Istria, situated only 8 km south of Rovinj. Close to the Adriatic sea, a natural depression and marshy habitat was formed (210 hectares). It is the temporary or permanent home to 219 bird species. A canal dating from the Austro-Hungarian period connects the swamp with the sea. The brackish water is rich in mullets, turtles and eels. Swamp plants, oak trees and luxurious willows flourish in the humid micro climate.

### 12 Istarske Toplice

Istria's Thermal Springs originated on the site of the St. Stephen source of sulphurous waters located in the untouched nature of the Mirna Valley. The medicinal quality of the water was already known in times of antiquity. The warm source water, with its consistent composition and natural radioactivity consists of 13 kinds of minerals. A steep cliff (85 m) with the remains of the Church of St. Stephen emerges above the thermal springs.

## Cultural and Historical Monuments



### Bale-Valle

Bale will fascinate you with its architecture, picturesque streets, churches and dialects spoken by the descendants of its Roman inhabitants from the south of Istria. The dominant structure is the Soardo-Bembo Castle, built as living quarters, between two towers. The town loggia, the Pretorian manor, the remains of towers, fortifications and gates all date from the Middle Ages. The parish church was built in 1880. The remains of dinosaurs have been found along the coast, not far from Bale.



### Draguč

From Draguč we have a beautiful view of Lake Butoniga. This little hilltop town has Venetian fortifications and lavish Baroque and Classicist houses lining its main street. The 15th century parish church, a well and a granary are in the town square. The older church in the graveyard has an unusual facade. Its interior walls are decorated with Romanesque paintings. The little Church of St. Rocco (16th century) at the foot of town was decorated with frescoes by the master painter Antun of Padua.



### Grožnjan-Grisignana

Grožnjan is a centre of culture, situated high on a hilltop. It is a town of artists, positive vibrations, numerous galleries and studios. In the mid-14th century it fell under Venetian rule. Venice fortified the town walls and made Grožnjan a defence centre. A part of the fortifications has survived to this day, as have the town gates from the late 15th century, the Renaissance loggia and the Chapel of St. Cosmo and Damian (1554). The somewhat younger parish church has a lavish Baroque interior.



### Labin

Labin is a hometown of reformer philosopher Marija Vlačić Ilirik, the closest colleague of Martin Luther. A picturesque core of the old town is characterized by the Renaissance and Baroque patrician palaces, preserved walls, a loggia and the town gate in front of which the battle with the Uskokos took place in 1599. During the 1921 big strike, the miners proclaimed a one-month administration - the Albano Republic. The mining history of the town is preserved by the People's Museum while the artists are praised in Dubrova, the park of sculptures made by leading world sculptors.



### Novigrad-Cittanova

Novigrad was the centre of Carolingian rule in Istria in the 8th century. From the 6th to the 18th century it had its own diocese. Parts of the Venetian wall have survived as have the town loggia, several churches and Gothic houses. The Lapidarium Museum is a modern glass structure in the heart of the Old Town, next to the Cathedral of St. Pelagius and the main square. The stone exhibits span eighteen centuries of history.



### Poreč-Parenzo

Poreč, along with Pula, was the first Roman colony in Istria. To this day it still preserves the same street layout of the Old Town as in antiquity, as well as the ruins of its Roman temple. The Euphrasian Basilica Complex is a UNESCO World Heritage site, with its world-known Byzantine mosaics and remains of an older Early Christian church. The town centre consists of a Romanesque house, several Gothic mansions and the Istrian Parliament Building, the seat of the provincial assembly in the 19th century.



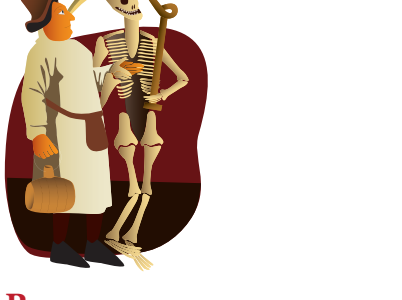
### Savudrija-Salvore

Savudrija is a small fishing village with the oldest lighthouse on the Adriatic, built in 1818. It was already densely populated in Roman times when its harbour was protected by a breakwater. It provided shelter for ships and supplied them with drinking water. Tradition has it that the Venetian navy defeated the forces of Friedrich Barbarossa and Pope Alexander III at Savudrija in 1117. This event was immortalized by Domenico Tintoretto in the Dodge's Palace.



### Umag-Umago

The environs of Umag are teeming with the remains of Roman villas. In the 9th century Umag fell under Frankish rule and was destroyed by the Croatian prince Domagoj. On the main town square, alongside the monumental church (1760) with its unfinished facade, we also see the bell tower and the public waterworks from the 17th century. In the Old Town we find many Gothic houses, distyles and coats of arms, the southern part of the fortress wall and the 14th century defensive tower, which today houses the town museum.



### Beram

Beram is known for its Gothic Church of St. Mary na Skrilimah, located in the graveyard. It has exceptional frescoes from 1474, the work of Vincent of Kastav. The largest composition, The Adoration of the Three Kings, is 8-m-long. The wall paintings on the west wall deal with the cycle of life: Adam and Eve, and the unpredictability of human destiny. The famous painting, The Dance of the Dead, reminds us that we are all equal in the face of death.



### Dvigrad

In Dvigrad we find the impressive remains of a town that spread over two hilltops and had a population of 2000 inhabitants. Due to plague and war only three families lived there in the 17th century. In 1714, when the parish moved to Kanfanar, the town finally died out. It is the largest complex of medieval remains in Istria. It consists of double fortifications, three gates, old streets, a 14th century tower and the remains of over two hundred buildings. The town centre had a square, a bell tower and the Church of St. Sofia which was located on the hilltop.



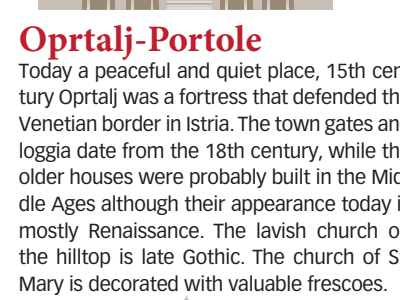
### Hum

Hum is reputed to be the smallest town in the world with just 20 inhabitants. Its structure is essentially urban, with fortifications, town gates and numerous Glagolitic inscriptions. The old 16th century custom, where inhabitants choose a prefect among themselves for a period of one year was reintroduced in 1977. The parish church with its Classicist facade was built in 1802 on the site of an older church. The Church of St. Jerome, in the graveyard, is decorated with 12th century frescoes.



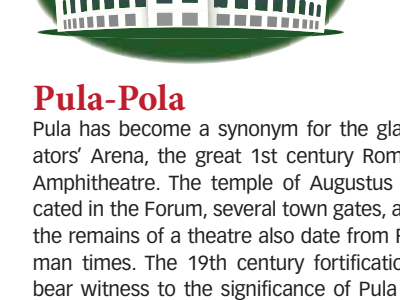
### Medulin

Medulin is teeming with the spirit of antiquity. There is an archaeological park on the Vizuła Peninsula, where once a rich Roman village and necropolis existed. Today, the play Crispo is performed in the park. It was inspired by the story of the first-born son of Emperor Constantine the Great, who allegedly was incarcerated and murdered in a country villa in Vizuła. Stone blocks, necessary for building the Pula Arena were hauled from the stone quarry in nearby Vizuła.



### Pazin

Pazin fosters SF and adventure literature. It all started with Jules Verne's novel Mathias Sandorf (Paris, 1885) in which the hero manages to escape from the castle located over the Pazin Abyss. This castle already existed in the 10th century, its today's appearance dates from 1540. The Town Museum and the Ethnographic Museum of Istria are located in it. The parish Church of St. Nicholas was mentioned as early as 1266. In 1765 it was renovated in the Baroque style.



### Pula-Pola

Pula has become a synonym for the gladiators' Arena, the great 1st century Roman Amphitheatre. The temple of Augustus located in the Forum, several town gates, and the remains of a theatre also date from Roman times. The 19th century fortifications bear witness to the significance of Pula as the most important port of the Austro-Hungarian Navy. Fortresses, underground tunnels, army barracks, a hospital, officers' villas, a military cemetery and many more structures are preserved.



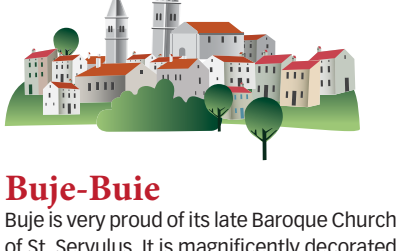
### Rabac

Located at the foot of the hill, overlooking the Kvarner Bay, Rabac today is considered the largest tourist resort of Istria's eastern coast. The Voga teleferika takes place in its bay, which is a boat race with paddles that took its name from the cable car that once transferred bauxite from the mine to the port in Rabac.



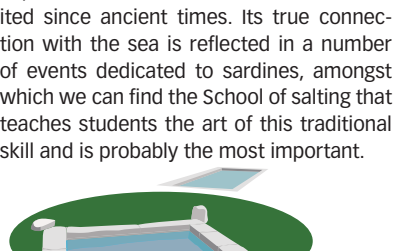
### Vižinada-Visinada

When in Vižinada, you must see the 14th century frescoes in the Romanesque Church of St. Barnaby, painted in the style of Giotto's pupils, as well as the 15th century frescoes in Božje Polje. In summer, the old water well is a meeting place for poets. Near the well stand a Neo-classical church, several mansions, and a granary with a price-list carved in stone (1726).



### Buje-Buie

Buje is very proud of its late Baroque Church of St. Servulus. It is magnificently decorated with statues, altars and paintings, and its organ is the work of a master craftsman. The bell tower also serves as a vantage point. The old square on top of the hill harbours a 15th century patrician house. Not far off we find rows of Renaissance and Baroque buildings, remains of Venetian towers, and the threestorey Ethnographic Museum, the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary with its own bell tower and lavish interior.



### Funtana-Fontane

Funtana owes its name to the springs of fresh water located close to the sea that were used from ancient times. One of the springs is called Perila (from the Croatian word for washing) because it was here where local women once washed their laundry. A number of excellent food houses give special charm to this little town.



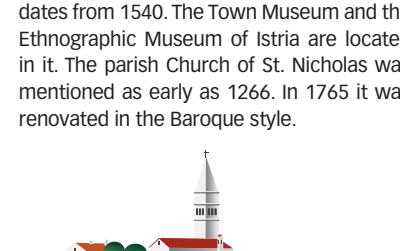
### Kotli

Due to its isolation, the village of Kotli has kept its rural 19th century look. It also managed to preserve its mills that were in use till 1964. The stone houses have many wooden elements, a material much used in the old architecture of northern Istria. When compared to the surrounding area, these houses are more complex and lavish. Thanks to the development of trades and crafts, life in Kotli was good. Its inhabitants were known to be excellent players of the traditional musical instruments bajs, vijulina and klarinet.



### Momjan-Momiano

The centre of Momjan consists of fine bourgeois houses built between the 17th and the 19th century, while the Church of St. Martin, with its five altars is a reconstructed Gothic church. We also find several single nave churches from the 18th and 19th century hidden within the town. The ruined castle on the cliff existed as a small fortress as early as the 13th century. It was damaged during a Venetian attack, but was restored. In the 16th century it became a castle with a tower, living quarters and a chapel.



### Pićan

From antiquity up to the 18th century, Pićan was the seat of the diocese. During the Byzantine Empire it was the seat of government for a significant part of central Istria. The Bishop's Palace, a part of the medieval walls, and the 14th century town gate are preserved. As a centre of non-material heritage it hosts the festival of Istrian legends, myths and stories. The Romanesque church by the graveyard is decorated with frescoes. The Church of St. Rocco is from the 17th century.



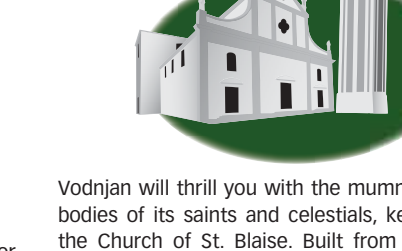
### Roč

From the 13th c. on, Roč was the centre of Glagolitic literature, written in the old Slavic alphabet. Many Glagolitic books and documents originated in Roč. The towers and fortifications date from the 15th c., the town loggia from the 18th. The medieval Church of St. Bartholomew has been renovated many times. The Romanesque Church of St. Rocco (12th c.) has many valuable frescoes. The town gates, a collection of Roman stone tablets and a Venetian cannon are only a few parts of the town's rich heritage.



### Svetvinčenat

Svetvinčenat is best known for its enormous castle that already existed in the 13th century as a fortress. In 1485 it was renovated in the Renaissance style. The main square is encircled by a single nave church, a loggia, and other buildings. A well is located in the centre of the square. The Church of St. Vincent at the cemetery, first mentioned in 1178, is rich in frescoes. In summer, the town hosts an international festival of dance and non-verbal theatre. Very old books and the Town Statute from 1520 are on display in the parish church.



### Vrsar-Orsera

Vodnjan will thrill you with the mummified bodies of its saints and celestials, kept in the Church of St. Blaise. Built from 1760 to 1850, the church has a rich interior and the highest bell tower in Istria (63 m). Vodnjan has preserved its medieval town appearance and its Istrian-Romanic dialect. Churches, houses and manors with Renaissance and Gothic details encircle the main square.



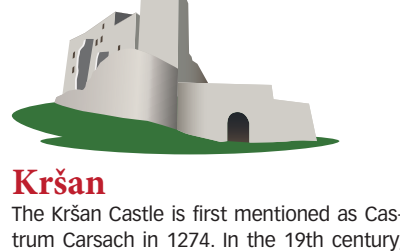
### Buzet

Although inhabited since ancient times, Buzet did not blossom until 1554 when it became the seat of Venetian military rule in Istria. The town walls were restored, trades and crafts flourished. A reservoir, the small and large town gates (16th century), the parish church (1784) and several manors and houses were built. A souvenir of Buzet is the replica of earrings found in graves from the 7th and 8th century in northern Istria. The originals are kept in the Buzet Museum.



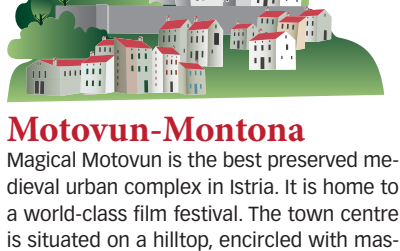
### Gračišće

Gračišće is one of the centres of green Istria. In the 16th century it was larger and stronger than Pazin, but was badly damaged during the wars and peasant uprisings. The medieval walls, the town gates, the round tower (1500), the town loggia (1549), the magnificent Salomon Palace with Renaissance and Gothic elements are all preserved. Several old churches as well as residential, trades and crafts houses are also parts of the heritage of Gračišće.



### Kršan

The Kršan Castle is first mentioned as Castrum Carsach in 1274. In the 19th century, a transcription of the Istrian Demarcation, a document establishing boundaries (1275-1375), was discovered there. In Plomin, you will find the oldest Croatian Glagolitic inscription (11th c.) on the Church of St. George and the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary with a fresco by Albert of Konstanz (1475). The Kožjak Castle, built on a prehistoric hillfort, is mentioned as Castrum Iosilach in 1102.



### Motovun-Montona

Magical Motovun is the best preserved medieval urban complex in Istria. It is home to a world-class film festival. The town centre is situated on a hilltop, encircled with massive walls from the 13th and 14th centuries, fortified with towers. The town centre consists of Renaissance and Gothic houses, a Renaissance mansion-castle and a church from the late Renaissance. The bell tower is 13th century. The Town Hall is the largest Romanesque building of its kind in Croatia. Legend has it that in ancient past Motovun was inhabited by giants.



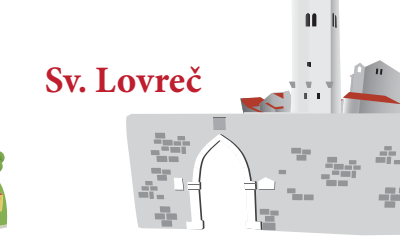
### Pietrapelosa

The Pietrapelosa Fortress was first mentioned in the 10th century as a ruin. It was restored in 1285 and in the early 15th century fell under Venetian rule. Although destroyed in a fire 200 years later, life in the fortress continued until the late 18th century. It was mostly inhabited by soldiers and sometimes by the aristocracy. The Romanesque Church of St. Mary Magdalene is situated within the walls.



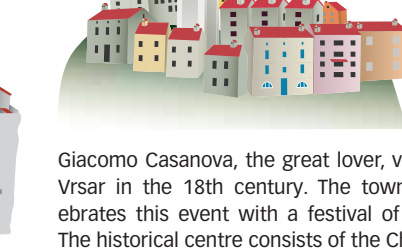
### Rovinj-Rovigno

Rovinj is a magical town with traditional fishing boats called batana and distinctive type of folk singing called bitnada. The Baroque Church of St. Euphemia, with a statue of the saint on the bell tower, has been celebrated in many a song. We can see strong Venetian influence in many other churches, Renaissance and Baroque houses, in the town gates and fortifications.



### Sv. Lovreč

Sv. Lovreč has managed to preserve its long fortifications, including several towers and town gates. The oldest part of the walls dates from the 11th or 12th century. The three-nave Basilica of St. Martin is the largest church from the first half of the 11th century in Croatia. The town centre consists of a bell tower, a stone-paved square, a pillar of shame, as well as a beautiful town loggia.



### Vrsar-Orsera

Giacomo Casanova, the great lover, visited Vrsar in the 18th century. The town celebrates this event with a festival of love. The historical centre consists of the Church of St. Martin and of a restored castle. The Romanesque Basilica of Mary of the Sea, located on the edge of town, hosts summer guitar concerts. The islands of Vrsar, the blue of the sea and sky, and the old stone quarry have all inspired the abstract expressionist painter Edo Murtić. Outside the town we find the well-known park of sculptures by Dušan Džamonja.