



An Aquatic Adventure on the Adriatic

By Leanne Mercer

My fiancé Matthew and I recently spent four months travelling around the world and one of the highlights was a kayaking trip off the coast of Dubrovnik in southern Croatia, during October 2013.

After a couple of days exploring the gorgeous Old Town of Dubrovnik we met with the team from Adriatic Kayak Tours (www.adriatickayaktours.com) to hire two single kayaks and all the paddling gear we needed. As well as renting kayaks to experienced paddlers, they also do 1-14 day guided tours, and have a wide range of top quality boats and gear. Together we plotted out a three day route through the Elaphiti Islands, booked our accommodation and discussed good places to eat. There are thirteen islands in the archipelago but only three are inhabited and camping opportunities are limited, so it was great to get the locals' advice.

On our first day, we put-in at Zaton, a bay just north of Dubrovnik, and paddled around Kolocep Island to Lopud Island. It was an easy couple of hours and we enjoyed the views of the rugged pine forests, olive groves and stone houses on Kolocep. We reached the southern end of Lopud and stopped for a picnic lunch, a drink from the tiki bar and swim in the sandy bay of Sunj.

It normally takes a few days of salt, sand and sunscreen for me to develop a good crop of 'beach hair' but the

Adriatic Sea is so salty that it was instant! With the high buoyancy levels we bobbed around in the shallow bay at Sunj and joined in with some kids tossing a ball around.

Lopud island is shaped like an H, with Sunj beach on the south side of the horizontal bar and Lopud town on the north side. It takes about 20 minutes to hike from one side to the other. After the cruisey start to the



trip we thought it would be a quick paddle up the west coast and into Lopud's main bay at the opposite end of the island... yeah right! The Nor'wester had really picked up and it was hard work! At one stage I was just paddling on the spot like a kayak-treadmill and when Matt stopped to wait for me he would come shooting backwards.

We finally got into Lopud harbour and as we beached I thought I was hallucinating: Matt looked like the Abominable Snowman with his holiday-beard and eyebrows completely encrusted in sea salt. Our hands were pretty sore, slowly ground raw with each paddlestroke as the splashes evaporated quickly in the hot sun, leaving only the salt on our hands and paddle.

Having used up all the fuel in the tank, we walked down the waterfront in search of the famous Lopud bakery. It was a calorific oasis at the end of our saltwater-desert crossing. We devoured everything with our eyes and eventually settled on a few things to take back to our guesthouse. Five steps and three bites later Matt's pizza bread was gone and mine didn't last much longer!

Lopud is a peaceful fishing village with a few hundred inhabitants. Its Franciscan monastery dates back to the 15th century and sits stoically amongst crumbling limestone cliffs and towering palm trees – a beacon to those entering the bay. The village has a number of guesthouses and seafood restaurants catering to the overnight tourists, however, most visitors come and go on day-cruises from Dubrovnik. It was quiet in mid-October, the end of the summer season, but still warm enough to dine al-fresco and watch the sun dip behind the hillside as the lights of the moored yachts sparkled across the bay.

The wind dropped overnight and we had a pleasant second day cruising over to Sipan Island and up the west coast to Sipanska Luka (the port/town) on the northwestern side of that island. There were a number of caves to check-out along the way and we saw some schools of small fish jumping. The Adriatic water is an amazing turquoise blue and we had great views of the kina and starfish in the rockpools below.

It got a bit choppy towards the end of the day when we passed through the channel between Sipan and Otok Jakljan islands. Turning into the bay towards Luka we were broaching a bit due to the strong following seas, but we caught some great surfing waves too.

Sipanska Luka is slightly bigger than Lopud and a little more developed. A mistake with our guesthouse booking meant we were put up in the fancy hotel that dominates the waterfront. We felt slightly out of place in the hotel lobby, dripping in our salt-encrusted paddling gear, amongst the well-dressed yacht owners starting their après-sail. A hot shower soon fixed that and we strolled down the bay to check out the half a dozen different restaurants. The locals gathered on small stools outside their homes or shops and drinks were served on make-shifts tables as everyone soaked up the last of the day's rays.

On our third and final day we paddled north to the



top of Sipan and crossed over some rough seas to the Croatian mainland. With strong winds it took almost two hours to cross and I was busting for a wee stop by the time we reached the mainland. The beaches in southern Dalmatia are few and far between, so we had to scramble out onto some rocks at the bottom of a cliff to achieve some (rather exposed) relief. Luckily no yachts were going past at the time!

We had a long but pleasant paddle down the coast of the mainland to get back to Zaton bay.



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The landscape in this area is dramatically dry, almost barren. Pines and cypress trees cling to the cliffs and olive groves and vineyards have been terraced into the hillsides wherever possible. There were some gorgeous, mostly empty, holiday homes tucked into the bays along the way, hidden from the main road winding high above. Even in October, the sun was harsh and we wore our paddle jackets for sun protection more than anything else. The packet of lollies strapped to my deck was also starting to look a little worse for wear.

We stopped for lunch and a swim at a nice beach halfway along the coast. I threw on the snorkel & mask and was surprised at the variety of fish. During our lunch stop Matt sent a text message to the kayak rental company and unfortunately set a very ambitious pick up time!

That afternoon, after around seven hours of paddling, we hit the wall. Our muscles ached and we were low on energy. But we were a team and we supported each other to dig-in and finish the adventure together. We were determined to make it on time, so with much encouragement, humour, and melted sticky lollies we paddled on and crossed the finish line, physically exhausted, but with a fantastic sense of achievement.

