



Everything you need to know to plan a dive trip to Croatia

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Croatia and particularly Istria the area I have been visiting, has had a very turbulent and exotic history. As the largest peninsula in the Adriatic Sea and with a large natural harbour at Pula, the area has always been strategically important, leading to numerous wars and deals over ownership during the last two millennia. The name is derived from the Illyrian Histri tribe, described by the Romans as fierce pirates. These pirates benefitted from a very rocky coastline, which provided numerous small inlets in which to hide and difficult navigational challenges. It wasn't until 177 BC that the Romans finally subdued the pirates and took control of the area. After the fall of the Roman Empire the area descended into chaos and was pillaged by numerous different groups, finally becoming a recognized part of the Lombard Kingdom in 751. During the next 500 years control of this area passed back and forth between various warring neighbours, before reverting to Italian rule as part of the Venetian state in the 13th Century.

In the late 17th Century control of this strategically important area again changed hands several times as various early forms of the Austrian Empire battled Napoleon. From 1814 until the end of World War 1 the Austrian Empire maintained control, at which point Istria was given back to Italy, who remained in charge until the end of World War 2, when the state of Yugoslavia was formed. Finally in 1991 with the breakup of Yugoslavia, Istria was divided between the newly independent states of Croatia and Slovenia.

Croatia has a similar size population to New Zealand, although the land area is only 1/5th of the size. The currency is the Kuna, although Euros are accepted by the majority of services which cater to tourists. Croatian is the official language and it is expected to become the 24th official language of the European Union upon its accession later this year. Tourism is a major industry and accounts for up to 20% of Croatian GDP, with Croatia ranked as the 18th most popular tourist destination world-wide. As part of my background research it came as a small surprise to me to discover that about 15% of these visitors (over one million per year) arrive specifically to enjoy naturism - an industry for which Croatia is apparently world-famous! In fact Croatia was the first European country to develop commercial naturist resorts.

WAR in the ADRIATIC

In 1814, Pula was restored to the Austrian Empire. Its large natural harbour became Austria's main naval base and a major shipbuilding centre. In World War 1, the port was the main base for Austro-Hungarian dreadnoughts and other naval forces of the Empire. The WW1 Adriatic Campaign was largely limited to blockade attempts by the Allies and the efforts of the Central Powers to thwart the British, French and Italian moves. Following the collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918, Pola (renamed) and most of Istria was assigned to Italy. After the collapse of Fascist Italy in 1943, the city was occupied by the German Army and remained a base for German U-boats. During WW2 the Adriatic saw only limited naval action, starting with the Italian invasion of Albania and the joint Axis invasion of Yugoslavia.

However, during both WW1 and WW2 significant quantities of mines were laid in order to protect Pula harbour, which was the key to controlling the entire Adriatic. The presence of so many mines is the reason for many of the shipwrecks in the area. Although after WW2 efforts were made to clear mines and 'safe passages' were marked out, mines continued to sink ships for more than a decade after WW2 was over.

During the Cold War, the Adriatic Sea became the southernmost flank of the Iron Curtain as Italy joined NATO, while the Warsaw Pact established bases in Albania. After the fall of communism, Yugoslavia started to break



apart. The ensuing Croatian War of Independence included limited naval engagements and a blockade of Croatia's coast by the Yugoslav Navy. The Adriatic Sea was also the theatre for several NATO operations, including the blockade of Yugoslavia, and intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

ISTRIA TODAY

Today Istria is peaceful and picturesque, a delightful holiday destination. The various wars which raged following the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990's did not really reach this area and so there is nothing to indicate the many centuries of dispute centred here. Pula the main town and port has a population of approximately 60,000, although this swells significantly during the busiest summer months when the tourists arrive. As well as beach based holidays the beautiful Adriatic coast is also hugely popular with sailors and Pula harbour is full of yachts. Pula is also home to one of the best preserved Roman amphitheatres in the world. According to the tourist brochures this one of the 6th largest Roman arenas still standing and the only one with all four side towers remaining. Another of Istria's historical links to the Roman times is olive oil, which is still produced in this region. Apparently olive oil from this area is 'world famous', a particularly light oil seen by many as the 'gold' standard of olive oils.

DIVING OPPORTUNITIES AND FACILITIES

We were based at Krnica Dive (www.krnicadive.com), located just meters from the water at Krnica Harbour. The small town of Krnica is about 25m north east of Pula, with the harbour a further 2km down the hill. The town has a Pizza restaurant (called Kum – the humorously named 'Kum Pizza' is actually awesome), a Post Office, a small supermarket and not much else apart from a beautiful old church, lots of very old houses and several very comfortable tourist apartments. On my arrival at Pula airport my taxi driver actually queried whether I really wanted to go there, saying 'but there's nothing there'.

The dive operation is run by Maurizio, who if he wasn't running a dive business could easily have been the Don of a large and well-connected family. He knows about everything that is going on, orchestrating each day's events without ever appearing stressed or unhappy. He is probably one of the greatest hosts I have ever met, organizing several fantastic barbeques and inviting us into his home, where he provided yet more food and drink. And when he wasn't providing the food he took us out to some amazing restaurants – the wood-fire cooked octopus with truffle pasta was a particular highlight. The other staff members – Zarko, Tony and Velimir (apologies if I've got any spellings wrong) are also all incredibly welcoming and helpful, allowing me to feel like I'd been a customer here for years rather than a first time visitor. My main piece of advice for new visitors is to relax and go with the flow – whilst it may appear that nothing is happening or being organized sometimes, everything is in fact perfectly under control and operating to Maurizio's schedule.

The dive shop has everything a visiting tech diver could need, backplates, wings, can lights, twins and stages, argon bottles, even scooters; and pumps more trimix in a month than NZ probably does in a year. Fills are done overnight so you are never left waiting for tanks; dry-suit repairs and any other problems are also fixed immediately and if you did have a major suit problem you can always try out one of the Santi demo suits which are available. Depending on where you wish to dive Maurizio has arrangements with the owners of various different boats in the area, providing options for anything from 4 to 30 divers at a time. (Just remember to take your dive quals and some form of ID with you on the boats in case the police do a snap inspection. On his last trip here Rich got fined for not having his ID and on his return to Croatia for this trip he had a few interesting discussions with immigration before he was allowed in.)



Water temps vary significantly; it was 17 degrees at the surface and 13 degrees at 40m when I was there in May. The visibility ranged from 5 – 20m depending on where we dived, but in general on the wrecks the visibility was good enough to really appreciate the scale of each ship and navigate easily.

Finally when you come to pay make sure you have cash, as there is no EFTPOS facility and credit cards are not accepted. You can pay in Euro's or Kuna; in fact everywhere except the local supermarket accepted Euros.

WRECK: CESARE ROSSAROL

Launched in 1914 the Cesare Rossarol was an Italian light scout cruiser. At 85m long and only 8m wide she was built for speed and could launch torpedoes while maintaining over 30 knots. She began service in November 1915 and her main duties involved scouting, laying mines, escorting battleships, defending against aircraft and fighting other small ships. As well as torpedoes she was fitted with a variety of guns, two beautiful examples of which can still be seen on the stern section of the wreck. She actually survived the war intact, but hit a mine only a few days after the official armistice was proclaimed. The force of the explosion tore the ship in two, with the bow immediately sinking. The severely damaged stern section drifted for a short while before sinking and now lies approximately 300m away from the bow section. This was one of the largest losses of life for the Italian navy during the war, with 93 petty officers and marines dead, including 7 officers and the captain.

There are several different dives possible on this wreck, with depths ranging from approximately 45-49m. Both the bow and stern sections have mooring lines, but it is the stern section which is undoubtedly the most picturesque. It sits on the sea bed with a 20-30 degree list to port, making identification of the various features quite easy. As well as the two well preserved guns you can also admire the range finder, the steering wheel and two telegraphs. There is a limited penetration opportunity where the ship broke up, but be prepared for some very tight spaces and lots of silt. When we dived the wreck there was a line joining the main bow and stern sections, but unless you have a scooter you will use a lot of gas swimming between the two. There is plenty of other wreckage scattered between the two sections, but beware of fishing line and nets. In the days between our first and second dives on this wreck fishermen had placed a long low net between the two sections which we nearly crashed into whilst scootering. The bow section is totally inverted and breaking up badly, but you can still see one of the guns; with much of the plating falling away the penetration is easier. The very narrow streamlined bow makes for a great photo opportunity.

WRECK: SS LENA

Originally named the Nuevo Estremadura this cargo ship was built in Scotland in 1879. She was 70m long, 9m wide and powered by a triple expansion steam engine. She was renamed several times, finally becoming the SS Lina in 1907. At this time she was owned by Vincenzo Granata – you can still see his insignia on the funnel. In January 1914 during a voyage from Fiume to Catania with a cargo of timber she crashed into Cherso Island in thick fog and was wrecked. She now sits upright, with her bow at 25m and her stern at 55m.

As she sank so close to the shore this dive is possible in most weather conditions. Also given the varying depths she is often dived as the first wreck of your trip. The descent line brings you directly to the bow section where two large anchors remain strapped in place. The steel hull and framework of the ship still remain, but much of the wooden decking has eroded making penetration very simple. Inside the holds you can still see the remains of the timber cargo. The bridge and cabins were positioned in the middle of the ship and a typical first tour of the wreck takes you from the bow down to mid-ships and then back again, ducking in and out of the interior for most of the way. With the many options for light and shadow this makes for another very photogenic wreck.

WRECK: SS VIS

Originally named the SS Renteria this cargo ship was built in Scotland in 1921. She was 79m long, 12m wide and had a gross registered tonnage of 1,870. Her original owners sold her in 1934 and the new owners renamed her the SS Vis. On the 13th of February 1946 she was heading to Rasa to load a cargo of coal. She was navigating close to the Istrian coast, within a 'safe' corridor (one that had been cleared of mines), however she hit a mine on the starboard bow and sank rapidly, with the loss of 3 lives. She now sits perfectly upright on the bottom, with the hole where the mine hit clearly visible.

The Vis is a perfect tech dive, offering a variety of depth between 40-60m. As you descend onto the bow of the ship you often find a smoky or foggy layer in the water, which gives the ship a ghostly appearance. She is also heavily draped in nets, particularly around the stern and to have a good look at the propeller requires pushing these heavy nets aside, just like you would part curtains at a window. There are numerous penetration opportunities on this wreck, including all 3 holds and the superstructure. Again this wreck is a photographers dream and for many people it is the highlight of their dive trip to Croatia.

WRECK: MV ARGO

This ship was built in Canada in 1942 for the Royal Navy and was originally called HMS Flint. Her duties involved mine sweeping and convoy escort. She was 46.8m long, 8.3m wide and 507 tons. After the war she was sold as part of a package of ships to a Norwegian company, renamed the Argo and fitted out as a refrigeration vessel. At this time the engines were upgraded from steam to diesel and her deck was extensively remodelled.

On January 22nd, 1948 she was navigating from Venice to Rijeka in very bad weather, with a cargo of tomatoes. As it was only a few years after WW2 many of the mine fields still had not been cleared, so ships had to stay within certain safe channels, but with such bad weather this proved impossible - she was blown off course and out of the safe passage, where she unfortunately hit a mine. At the time of the explosion the captain was actually discussing with the first mate whether to drop anchor and wait for better weather as he had realized he was off course. The violence of the explosion ripped the ship in half; 11 of the 12 crew perished, with only one managing to swim ashore in the freezing winter conditions.

Today the Argo lies in two equal sized parts, both upright, at a depth of approximately 50m. The descent line brings you to the bow section where you can explore the fo'c'sle and the forward hold. It is relatively simple to drop into the forward hold and swim out through where the explosion ripped the ship in two. From here you need to rise up to the top of the remaining superstructure where a line runs for about 50m to the aft section of the ship. Here if you look through the tiny porthole into the cabin on the aft deck you will see an old brass instrument used by sailors to measure distance travelled. Penetration on the aft section is possible in the engine room but beware – it is very tight, very silty and home to some very large and inquisitive conger eels.

WRECK: SS PASCOLI

This Italian cargo ship was built in 1902 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Originally named the SS Szeged and owned by the Royal Hungarian Sea Navigation Company, she was renamed the Pascoli when she was sold in 1922. She was 99m in length, 14m wide and had a gross registered tonnage of 2,859 tons. In May 1941 she was on a voyage from Bari to Sansego when she hit a mine.

This is not a regularly dived wreck as it is a long way out. We loaded our boat on the evening before and headed out at 4am, reaching the wreck a little after 9am. However, this sacrifice is worth it as the visibility is excellent and the wreck is totally intact.



The wreck is upright and sitting in a little over 60m of water. The average depth of our dive was 51m, and we could easily have gone deeper had we explored the holds. Behind the superstructure there is easy access into the crews quarters where bunk bed frames still stand. Due to the depth and size of this ship this is a perfect scooter dive. In the fo'c'sle there are still many ships lanterns scattered around.

WRECK: SS LUANA

Originally named the SS Majorca this vessel was completed in 1892 and started life carrying freight between Hamburg and Leith. She was sold to a Belgium company in 1924 and renamed the Leopold De Wael and renamed again in 1933 as the Luana when she was sold to an Italian company. Even today her name is often mistaken, with many divers confusing her with another wreck close by called the Giuseppe Dormio. She is 68.6m long and 11.5m wide.

In March 1947 she was transporting bauxite from Manfredonia to Venice, when like many of the wrecks in this area she hit a mine and sunk rapidly, with the loss of 12 lives.

Today the wreck sits upright and relatively intact in 49m of water. The only section of the wreck with significant damage is the bow, which is where the mine hit. Visibility on this wreck is often superb and at 25m we could clearly see the top of the superstructure below us at 39m. Most of the wooden decking has rotted away, so it is easy to drop through the metal structure into the wreck. The aft hold is easily explored without need for a line. Swimming to the stern brings you to the most visited and photographed part of the wreck – the emergency steering wheel, which is heavily encrusted but intact and still clearly recognizable. During our dive it was surrounded in a cloud of small fish. The very top of the superstructure is starting to fall inwards so penetration in this area is a little tight. On the day we dived this wreck we had perfect surface conditions and no current, although we were warned that sometimes the current can be very strong in this area.

WRECK: KALLIOPHI

This is the biggest of the wrecks I dived, at 134m long and 7,176 tons. Built in the United States in 1943 as part of the liberty ships program she was originally named the SS Robert Dale Owen. In 1947 she was sold to a Greek company and renamed the SS Kalliopi. Unfortunately in December the same year she hit a mine whilst on route from South Carolina to Rijeka.

She now lies broken into three parts on the seabed at 62m. The largest and most interesting section is the mid-ships which lies on the port side. The bow section lies nearby, but has totally turned over and the stern section is approx. 400m away. The top of the mid-ships section is 42m and from here you can drift down past the fly bridge, look into the main bridge and on the seabed see two of the lifeboats. Penetration is possible – just don't forget the depth as deco racks up quickly. Also be aware of strong currents and talk to the boat skipper regarding drifting deco – as the wreck lies close to two shipping lanes.