

Croatia Crusin'

Steve Thompson July, 2017

Armed with my newly acquired ICC certification I was able to book a week of cruising in the islands of Croatia.

Dragging my family along we arrived in Trogir on Saturday at about 4pm which is a town about 30 minutes' drive north of Split. These two are the newest cruising Mecca cities in the Med with hundreds of boats rented each week. Due to an absence of large marinas further south around Dubrovnik most of the activity is from Split, Trogir, Sibernik and Primosten with Zadar further north.

Arriving somewhat sweaty at the marina in about 30C we found our bareboat operator who directed us to "Pia" on pier F our home for the next week, advising us that very soon a member of staff would provide the orientation and checklist.

Pia is a 2009 Dufour 36 with three cabins and one head.



It came with a Zodiac tender (three small persons was a squeeze) and a 2.5hp outboard. We stowed our bags and grub and then after waiting an hour and being anxious to get under way to our first stop of Necujam on the island of Solta I went in search of "staff".

"Staff" was found smoking in the office store room and reluctantly dragged his sorry butt out to the pier armed with a clipboard and no clue.

Using his moderate English as an excuse he flipped through the checklist without really explaining anything and certainly not actually checking anything. He did not know how the chart plotter worked, how the auto-pilot worked, how the shower drain worked etc. Quickly realising that this sub-human life form was not the full quid I nodded at everything he mumbled, signed the checklist and sent him packing.

The next issue was getting the boat out of the marina. The usual afternoon Mistral was in full flow of 15 to 20 knots. Also, I was told that the marina being 30 years old had not been designed for boat

lengths of 50ft up and so was a bit of a squeeze. I managed to collar a more nautically competent (by observation) chap with the right coloured T shirt on to take us out of the marina and drop him off at a nearby jetty from which we could easily make our egress.

It did not take us long to realise that Pia had experienced a hard life without much TLC. The wind instrument had appeared to have disliked pointing forwards and had slunk to the SW making wind speed and direction readings hopelessly inaccurate.

Pushing on we rounded the rocky headland of Otoc Ciovo and headed for Necujam which was about 3 Nm away. Hoisting what could loosely be described as the sails upped our speed to around 5 knots and using my phone for navigation set a course for the desired inlet and then sat back and enjoyed the scenery.

Coming into the sheltered inlet I followed a couple of other boats and did my best to emulate their anchoring technique (not a forte of mine as you will soon discover). In about 10m of water I hailed "anchors aweigh" and then explained to number one son that this meant let it down. We soon worked out that each 10m of chain was indicated by painted red links and so let out about 30m.

There were about 10 other boats enjoying the spectacle of a rank amateur fumbling around while sipping their pre-dinner cocktails. One of these boats was about a 60ft "Gulet" which is essentially a party boat with skipper and crew that chugs around the islands dispensing alcohol around 18 hours per day with never the Dacron raised up a mast.

This particular monster had anchored from the front and tied to shore at the back. Being inept I had not realised just how much anchor he must have had out the front and in my over-zealous attempts to snub (tow it backwards to ensure it bites) my recently lowered anchor snagged on his chain. This brought the party animals out for a look with lots of gesticulating, shouting and laughing to follow.

From my vast knowledge of physics I had computed that my 30hp diesel was unlikely to make any headway in dragging the anchors apart so opted to haul mine in until it was vertical and then drop it as quickly as possible while reversing hard. By pure fluke (nautical pun) the anchors separated and we had another, somewhat more successful go at remaining stationary.

A swift dip in the water to cool off followed by dinner restored our equilibrium at least for a couple of hours until the hail of "my device won't charge" came from esteemed daughter and number two son. So I was charged with the task of investigating this most devastating of findings but fiddling around with the 12v inverter produced no acceptable result.

The drunken residents of the Gulet sung us off to sleep the wee hours and we were greeted with a beautiful morning and enjoyed a refreshing swim prior to breakfast. Despite overnight lows of 20C plus and no fans or AC the boat was still sufficiently cool for a reasonable sleep under a sheet.

For the purposes of brevity I will state for the record that the entire week of weather was 30 to 34 C, clear skies with morning breezes of around 12 knots from various directions and late afternoon Mistral of around 15 knots from the north dying out at about 7 to 8 pm.

I wanted to further investigate the lack of power from the inverter and so started the engine to see if that made any difference and went below. A minute later there was much shouting in French and as I came on deck saw what looked like their boat coming into us with either a boarding party (I read too much Master and Commander) or a fending brigade. Finally they managed to articulate that it was Pia that was moving because I was in reverse. The gear shift was in the neutral position but sure enough as I pushed it forward it clunked out of reverse and into forward and so thanks to the French

awareness we averted an expensive collision. Upon further investigate it appears that the control cables from the throttle/gear lever were not properly adjusted and it proved to be a continual problem trying to work out which gear we were in without revving the engine or looking over the stern; more bad maintenance.

Our next destination was the much lauded beach of Zlatni-Rat which appears on just about every Croatian travel brochure. However the lack of voltage was beginning to cause concern and communication with our charter owner revealed that we needed to go to the town of Stari-Grad on the island of Hvar by Monday lunchtime.

The morning wind sprang up and we attempted to hoist the main sail. Now, on board my S80 I do not have lazy jacks and failed to realise that a batten can get caught in this network of lines. Compound this with a Bimini that meant I couldn't see the main and number one son who has little sailing experience we indeed snagged a batten and tore the main sail adjacent to a patch that was already there below the third batten pocket (clearly some other mug had the same problem).

It was shortly after this point that we discovered that there was no tank water on board. The water pump was thumping away merrily but to no avail. There were two tanks and no amount of switching between them produced a molecule of H₂O.

We had been told by our most esteemed charter chap that there was free water available at every port so we decided to head for the port of Hvar on the island of Hvar. Rounding the north end of this island revealed a passage that was chock full (not sure this is the appropriate nautical term) of vessels ranging from a Zodiac to a couple of cruise ships.

With all crew on the lookout (this was not a problem since there was no charge left in any of their devices) we edged our way into the port of Hvar and it was mayhem. Finally a space appeared on the wharf and we set fenders and drifted sideways and tied up fore and aft. No sooner had we done this we were set upon by a couple of angry chaps in white polo shirts holding VHF radios. The message was clear that we were not welcome, that they had no water for us and to go to the island of Palmizana (pronounced like the meal) to get water.

We were unceremoniously shoved off and on our way for about 30 seconds and then the engine stopped, it would start in neutral but stalled every time we tried to engage a gear. This could only mean that a mooring rope had come astray and got caught around the prop. At this point the white shirt brigade took pity on us and arrange a boat to tow us into the middle of the harbour and raft up to a big old fishing boat.

The next 45 minutes number one son and I dived with a knife and eventually removed the offending rope.

We then arrived at Palmizana and when we pulled up to the jetty were told they had no water. This also happened to be the stop over for one of the huge (and I mean huge) party boat flotillas. I counted at least 60 large monohulls and cats with the "Yachting Week" flag fluttering on their backstays. So we chugged off to the other side of the inlet and anchored in about 15m of water next one other boat.

Using the tender we ferried across to the marina and watched in awe while eating our pizza dinner about 300 party goers get onto large taxi boats headed for the town of Hvar about 2miles to the SE. On our way back along the jetty we could clearly see that there was water coming from the hydrants and so took the opportunity to bring the boat in to fill up. Number one son and I then returned to the boat in the tender and attempted to open the companion way hatch. This was very difficult as

the lock appeared to be jammed and was then rendered impossible when the flimsy key broke off in the lock. Luckily one of the hatches had not been locked and we were able to gain access to the boat which we immediately brought into the jetty.

The rear tank filled up in about a minute indicating that there was a fault somewhere in the plumbing. The front tank appeared to be empty so we continued filling until another white shirt arrived with a VHF radio yelling at us for using the water. I relayed our intel that this was supposedly free and so what was the issue. He demanded our boat paperwork and said we would have to pay. So I trudged off to the marina office and handed over Pia's blue folder. I was then presented with a bill for around AUD 75. After picking myself off the floor I described that only one tank was empty (having been failed to be filled by our charter "staff" but I was met with a shrug of the shoulders and a demand to stump up the cash. At this point I was fed up to say the least and in my best whinging Pom tone described that I had been told by two other "officials" from Hvar and the charter operator that water was free, also I had only one tank filled at the commencement of my journey and the other tank while full was not working. I said that this was my first trip to Croatia Sailing and certainly was not leaving me with a good impression thus far. This heartfelt diatribe met with some success and she reduced the bill to AUD15. I returned to the boat to find that it had just had the forward tank topped off indicating that it had been completely empty.

I knew the wind was forecast to change early in the morning swinging from the N to the SW and I am sure that my highly honed seagoing instincts woke me at 7am the next morning (either that or a full bladder) to find we were slowly dragging anchor and had moved about 30m. Disaster averted we set forth to Stari-Grad to meet our chap. Now Stari-Grad was never on my flexible agenda of destinations for the week and as we plodded into the entrance we were delighted by the spectacle of a beautiful little harbour.

Being only around noon we also were arriving at a time where there is plenty of wharf space.



At this point I will make some observations. We had no choice but to travel to Croatia in July understanding that it is peak season. I had not realised quite what this meant in terms of the sheer

numbers of boats that overwhelm the limited wharf and moorings in each port. It became obvious that an early start each day was necessary to get to the next destination as quickly as possible to get a spot. This dashing about was contrary to my desire to peacefully sail to our next place of stay largely determined by the direction of the wind. Once in a port it is extremely busy and noisy with lots of ferry and big boat wash causing the boat to bob around continually.

We therefore determined that the best thing to do was to avoid ports and go to anchorages instead in the many deep water inlets around each island.

However, back to Stari-Grad. More men in white shirts directed us to the place they wanted us to moor on the wharf. With a stiff breeze blowing the fools decided to put us stern in right next to a concrete jetty that was down wind. No great surprises as we drifted toward the jetty frantically putting out extra fenders while they watched apathetically as we bumped the bow into the jetty. Luckily no damage done. It costs about AUD120 for the night to remain tied up to the wharf with water and power and this is a lot more than indicated by the blogs on the internet.

Our charter owner arrived an hour later replete with a fresh inverter and replacement main sail. He also said that the water tanks were prone to air locks and now that both were full things seemed to be working well.

That evening we had a lovely walk around town and an excellent meal.

Number two son managed to get a small electric shock when he touched the shore power cable with wet hands. Close inspection revealed a damaged sheath where someone had trapped it in the locker lid, more bad maintenance.

The following day we finally made it to Zlatni Rat beach on the island of Brac and were quite underwhelmed. I think that in Australia we are spoiled by having such wonderful beaches everywhere. This became a theme in our whole stay in Southern Europe where we learned to treat "there is lovely beach" with a degree of scepticism.

After a glorious two hours of beating (wonderfully cool when it is 34C) into a 12 knot breeze we went in search of a small anchorage further north from Bol and found an idyllic spot with only two other boats. We anchored in 15m of water snubbing until I thought all was firm. In this process number one son was stung by a wasp that looked extremely painful (luckily the wasp was OK). After things had calmed down we saw quite a few more and so kept all food below decks. The swimming was fantastic and the solitude quite marvellous compared to the hustle and bustle of Stari Grad the night before. To be doubly sure of things I rigged up the spare anchor and dropped that from the stern.

Once again my sixth sense (aka my bladder) alerted me to something amiss at about 1am. Poking my head through the front hatch I was aghast to see the rocks a mere 5 m away but still in 25m of water. The wind had changed in the night and dragged both anchors about 75m. The wife and kids were rudely awakened as I started the engine and got out of trouble.

I dove the next morning and saw a line in the sand where the main anchor had dragged. It turned out that the sand was probably only 10cm deep on top of rock.

Another wonderful 2 hours of beating and we arrived at another secluded cove with about 6 boats in it. After a chat with an experienced skipper I laid the appropriate amount of chain, tied a stern line to the shore and didn't move an inch all night.

I had originally planned to go to the island of Vis to see the blue cave (that at midday shines through a gap and turns the water an eerie blue. However, Vis is quite a long way off and the hordes of boats heading there each morning put us off.

The charter requires that all boats are back in port on the Friday night. We had a lovely 20 knot Mistral to help us home hitting 8 knots on a beam reach.



Stopping at a few nice places to swim we ambled our way back to the beautiful port of Trogir shown below at night.



When we arrived at the refuelling station a huge superyacht was in the way and so I did not attempt to go anywhere near it instead opting to dock the boat and worry about the fuel later. It turns out they have jerry cans for such a purpose and we ended up using only 30 litres of diesel for 20 hours of

engine running time which was evidently half of their expectations. I guess most of these charter yachts don't even put the sails up all week.

Recommendations

- Don't go in July or August, too busy. September is evidently the best. If you must come in peak season rent out of Sibernik and island hop around there where it is a bit quieter.
- Take lots of provisions purchased from the mainland as the supermarkets on the islands are expensive and have limited range.
- Rent a recent (under 5 years old) boat if you want everything to work and check yourself that everything works as it should before departure.
- Avoid the busy places that charge a lot for mooring and talk to the charter operator about the flotilla schedules so that you don't go near them. The inlets are plentiful and secluded with very deep water close to shore.
- If you come to Croatia then Trogir and Dubrovnik old towns are a must see but the general advice is not to try and sail there in a week.