

Istria and Kvarner, Where the Adriatic Slows You Down

By Jackie



Rovinj, Istria

Where to Stay

Hotel San Rocco, Brtonigla: A refined rural retreat with exceptional gastronomy
Island Hotel Katarina, Rovinj: A peaceful island stay moments from the old town
Arbiana Heritage Hotel, Rab: Boutique elegance in the heart of Rab Town

Getting There

Flights

Direct flights from the UK to Pula (Istria) and Rijeka (Kvarner) during the main season.

Transfers

Easy transfers with short drives to the coast, plus frequent ferries to the islands.

Best Time to Go

May–June and September bring calm seas and fewer crowds.

Croatia has long dazzled travellers with its sunlit islands, medieval cities and famously clear Adriatic waters.

Yet beyond the well-trodden path lies a quieter, soulful Croatia that rewards exploration with memories that you'll never forget. In the north of the country lie Istria and Kvarner, regions where authentic Croatian life endures, nature's presence is ever near and centuries of cultural crossover are woven into daily life. These are regions well suited to travellers who value context, continuity and a strong sense of place.

Why Croatia Deserves a Spot in Your Travel Bucket List.

Istria: Culture, countryside and coast

Vineyards and olive groves dominate the Istrian peninsula, offering visitors access to a stunning coastline lined with historic towns. Rovinj, Poreč and Pula reflect the peninsula's complex and vibrant past. Pula's Roman amphitheatre is truly impressive, dating from the 1st century AD, it's among the best preserved in Europe. In Poreč, the 6th-century Euphrasian Basilica is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, renowned for its Byzantine mosaics. Venetian bell towers and pastel-coloured harbours speak to centuries of maritime trade and governance.

Istria has been shaped by Roman, Byzantine, Venetian, Austro-Hungarian and Italian rule, and these influences remain evident in its architecture, language and cuisine. Food

here is closely tied to the land. Fuzi pasta, typically served with truffles is a regional staple and a clear expression of Istria's inland-coastal connection.

If you venture beyond the main coastal towns to the interior, you'll cross diverse landscapes of green rolling hills with stunning rural vistas. Hilltop villages, family-run wineries and olive oil producers are easy to reach and rarely feel overrun. Distances are short, making it straightforward to combine cultural visits with time in the countryside.

The pull of the nature is never too far. Just off the west coast lies Veli Brijuni National Park, a protected archipelago that is easily accessible due to its close proximity to the mainland. The islands are car-free and explored on foot, by bicycle or golf carts. Roman villas sit within open parkland where deer, mouflon and peacocks roam freely. Brijuni offers a calm, ordered landscape that contrasts with the busier coastal towns.

Kvarner: Islands, promenades and natural drama

Southeast of Istria, the Kvarner Gulf has a distinct character of its own. Its towns developed later, shaped more by Austro-Hungarian influence than medieval fortification. Opatija and Lovran are defined by grand villas, landscaped parks and elegant seaside promenades. They are among my favourite bases in the region and are linked by the 12km Lungomare, a level coastal path that follows the shoreline and offers unique, uninterrupted sea views.

Kvarner's islands are close to the mainland

and easy to reach by ferry. Rab, in particular, stands out for its balance of historic structure, sandy coves and natural landscape. Rab Town is compact and walkable, its skyline marked by four Romanesque bell towers. Here, you can spend hours gazing across crystal-clear Adriatic waters dotted with sailboats, walking through pine forests, discovering quieter coves and watching fishermen mend nets in the harbour. The neighbouring island of Krk, is the most accessible, connected to the mainland by a road bridge near Rijeka. Explore the medieval walled town of Krk and visit the hilltop town of Vrbnik for its stunning views and famous Žlahtina wine.

A region that rewards time

Taken together, Istria and Kvarner form a coherent and complementary region. Istria offers cultural depth and rural landscapes, while Kvarner provides refined coastal towns and easily navigated islands. Both favour slow travel, short distances and meaningful engagement rather than checklist sightseeing.

Croatia's ferry network operates year-round, and from Istria it is even possible to sail directly to Venice (May-Oct), making logical multi-country itineraries easy to plan. Towns such as Rovinj, Lovran and Rab are well suited to travellers who prefer walking, café-based exploration and time to observe daily life.

For me, this part of Croatia consistently delivers depth and balance. It is a region that values continuity, rewards curiosity and allows travel at a pace that feels considered and enriching - qualities that keep drawing me back.



“Kvarner’s sunlit promenades are my favourite place to pause and watch the sea.”

Jackie