Little Italy?

Rupert Parker discovers the
Continental side of Croatia

CROATIA IS famous for the walled city of Dubrovnik and its beautiful islands that float in the Adriatic. Yet in the far North, close to Italy, the region of Istria is beginning to compete.

The 1st century Roman amphitheatre in Pula is mostly intact, although gladiator combat has now given way to more peaceful cultural events — in summer there’s a film festival, opera season and concerts. Just up the coast, the city of Rovinj has a delightful old town, blue flag beaches and fine restaurants where you sip champagne watching the sun set.

The countryside inland is relatively new to tourism but its green valleys and forested rolling hills, topped with fortified villages, such as Motovun, are startlingly attractive. Wine and olive oil are some of the best in Croatia and you can visit vineyards and olive farms and sample their wares. Boutique style hotels blend into the landscape, often converted water mills or ancient castles, with only a handful of rooms.

But it's the truffles, the small fungus, that are prized as a delicacy by chefs, and only found in the wild.

So I make a date with Ivan Karli at his house near the village of Paladini. I'm welcomed by the barking of the truffle dogs and Ivan chooses his favourite and we set out into the forest.

It's already baking hot, the poor dog’s panting heavily and I’m thinking that we’re not going to find anything. Suddenly the animal’s animated and starts digging frantically — his owner pulls him off, gives him a biscuit, and carefully uncovers the soil.

Sure enough, there’s a black truffle sticking out, slightly smaller than a golf ball, but certainly big enough to eat.

Back in his kitchen, Ivan cracks some eggs, grates some truffle, and beats the mixture gently, before pouring it into a pan with melted butter. When it’s still runny, he adds parmesan, then tops it with thin slices of truffle, and serves up his Fritaja or Croatian scrambled eggs.

Sitting outside, with a glorious view,
it’s breakfast for a king. As I eat, Ivan tells me that he finds black truffles all year round on his hillside, but he only finds the highly prized white truffle in the valleys from October to January.

The secret of his success, of course, is a good dog, and he’s been offered over 12,000 Euros for his, although he’s not selling.

This is also a land of winemakers and the Kozlovic winery in Montjuc is a good place for a tasting.

The land has been in the family for generations and its history mirrors that of the area. In the past, this was a poor farming region, but day trippers from Italy, only an hour away, came here to buy cheap wine from the barrel. In the 1990’s Gianfranco convinced his father they should abandon the old ways and think about producing higher quality wines. They rebuilt the winery, added a bottling plant, and took scientific advice about their vineyards. He’s passionate about producing the perfect grape and has invested in the best equipment to turn it into wine. And it’s working — his Malvasia, the predominant local wine grape, is excellent and he’s won many awards.

Surprisingly, in such a rural area, restaurants pride themselves on their service and the quality of their crockery and cutlery. A good example is Toklarija, a slow food restaurant in a converted olive mill, in Sovinjsko Polje. Chef owner, Nevio Siroti, scoured the world for his place settings and the stylish...
cutlery dates back to 1931. His plates are from the 19th century. He's a perfectionist, so much so that, on a busy Sunday afternoon, he turns down other clients just to serve the two of us. I tell him about our truffle hunt and he grates some of his own over his delicious home-made tagliatelle.

As you'd expect, there are many hiking trails in the area and you can work up an appetite by spending a day around Buzet on the 19km "seven waterfalls" trail. Being summer there's not too much water but it's a great way to see the deserted interior — whole villages, which were once centres of water-powered industrial activity, are now being slowly claimed back by the forest. Along the way there are river pools, great for cooling down, and a couple of farmhouses that supply light refreshments.

I climb up to the medieval fortified town of Hum, noted by the Guinness Book of Records as the smallest in the world, with just 18 inhabitants. The walls enclose a handful of houses and the church of St Jerolim contains fragments of frescoes from the 12th century. I'm anxious to try Buska, their brandy. The recipe is secret but mistletoe is a key ingredient and it's claimed to have strong medicinal qualities. All I can say is that it seems to revive me after a hard day's walking.

Istria, given to Italy in 1919 and only gained independence after WW2, is a delightful region and feels more Italian than Italy. Many people speak the language and the influence is most obvious in the food and drink. Local fish, olive oil and, of course, truffles, mean you're guaranteed a decent meal. Some are hailing it as the new Tuscany so my advice is to get there before the crowds arrive — at the moment, you'll have the place almost to yourself.

GETTING THERE
MORE INFORMATION
Discover Croatia:
http://croatia.hr/en-GB/Homepage
Istria: www.istra.hr/en/home
FLY: Ryanair flies direct to Pula from London Stansted.
www.ryanair.com
STAY: Hotel San Rocco costs from £95 per night based on two people sharing a standard double room with breakfast.
www.san-rocco.hr
Spectacular: The 1st century Roman amphitheatre in Pula (above) and (inset) the colourful Istrian harbour and the coveted truffles that gave the trip an added bonus.