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THE MAGIC OF CROATIA

By Kristin Vukovic

Sitting in my living room in Chelsea I hear sirens screaming and traffic humming, but when I close my eyes and picture myself in Dubrovnik, I'm immediately at peace. I envision strolling through Stari Grad, the old town in Dubrovnik, Croatia. I'm on Stradun, the main thoroughfare, walking on the worn white stone. I decide to stop for coffee and watch the panoply of tourists make their way down the promenade. I open my journal: *Sitting at my favorite café, Bistro Dubrava, I watch them pass by: Japanese ladies wearing little white gloves and carrying Burberry umbrellas; Italian men sporting suntans and swagger; Americans clad in t-shirts and flip-flops; Brits bearing sun-scorched skin and shopping bags...*

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Croatia

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For the past five summers I've visited Stari Grad, the white city constructed of the same stone used to build the White House and sourced from the Croatian island Brač. The city was christened "the pearl of the Adriatic" by one of Britain's most melancholy poets, Lord Byron. Many renowned personalities have visited the coastal gem, among them Agatha Christie and George Bernard Shaw. Shaw famously noted, "Those who seek paradise on Earth should come to Dubrovnik."

My grandfather's roots in Karlovac, a city a half hour drive southwest from the capital, Zagreb, brought me to Croatia six years ago, and I inevitably ventured to the coast for sun and sea. Every year come summer I yearn to swim in the Adriatic's clear blue water and sunbathe on the white rocks, to sit on Stradun, sip bijela kava (white coffee) and watch the world pass by, lazy afternoons blending into evenings and coffee into wine.

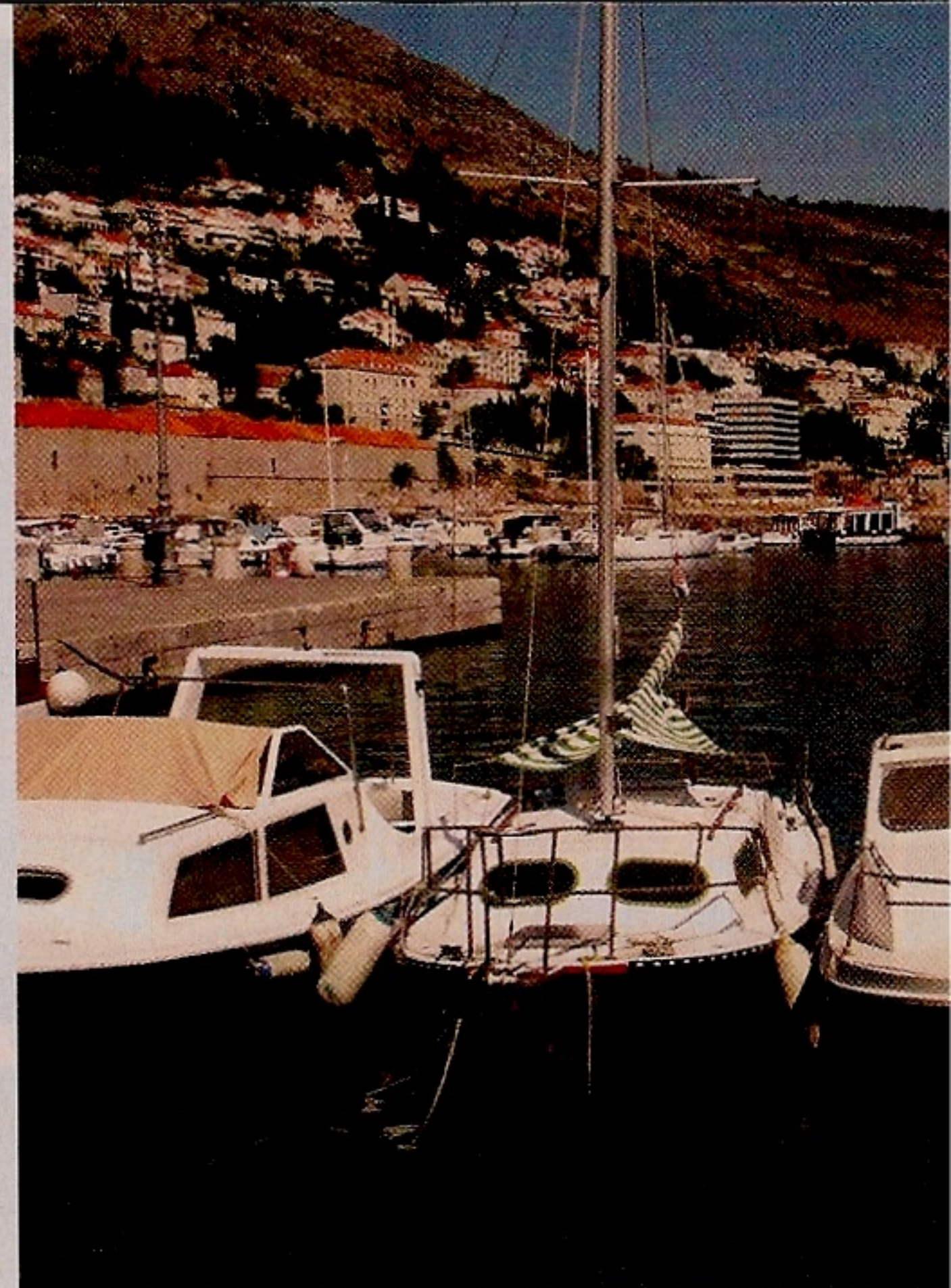


Even though I've been to Dubrovnik multiple times, Stari Grad never ceases to impress me. Great walls envelop the town; I've walked them many times to view the terracotta rooftops and Franciscan Monastery huddled within. Ad-

venturous travelers inevitably discover one or both Buža bars ("buža" literally translates as "hole in the wall" in Dalmatian slang, hence, The Hole in the Wall Bar), and they toast each other on the rocks while the sun sinks over the Adriatic. Lord Byron's moniker for Dubrovnik,

"the pearl of the Adriatic," is best realized at night; from a boat at sea, the lighted city's glow resembles a pearl nestled in the crags.

This time around I depart from JFK and arrive in the medieval city with my friend Senka, a Bosnian from Sarajevo. We lug our suitcases down the steep stairs of a side entrance; I am used to entering through one of the main drawbridge entrances, Pile or Ploe, so this access is new to me. We find our apartment, located on a small side street off of Stradun, Apartments Paviša (www.apartmentspavisa.com). Private apartments are much less ►



MAPLE STREET INN



The Maple Street Inn is just off 6A, Old King's Highway. The highway, formerly an Indian path, then a stage coach road, is now an historic district. The Maple Street Inn is a restored 1853 Second Empire Mansard Victorian. Guests enjoy the ambience of the 19th century along with 21st century amenities and unbelievably decadent or lighter fruits/low fat breakfasts. We have a screened porch and an outside terrace for guests to relax. The



expensive than hotels in Stari Grad. In fact, there are only two main hotels located within the walls: the Puci Palace (www.thepucipalace.com), a luxury hotel housed in a renovated 17th century Baroque manor, and Hotel Stari Grad ([www.hotelstari-](http://www.hotelstari-grad.com)

[grad.com](http://www.hotelstari-grad.com)), a small boutique hotel with eight rooms and a small roof terrace for breakfast.

After a nap to alleviate jetlag, Senka and I decide to hit East-West beach, just a few minutes' walk from the Ploe gates (www.ew-dubrovnik.com). Waiters serve us cocktails on padded lounge chairs, and although they are expensive to rent by Croatian standards, we agree that the comfort is worth it. After lunch, we head back to Stari Grad and wander into Sponza Palace. Sponza was formerly a customhouse where merchants from all

over the world brought taxable goods, and is now a museum commemorating the Yugoslav war and the Croatians from Dubrovnik and elsewhere who died fighting there. Seeing the lists of names and photographs is sobering, as are the maps surrounding the city, which depict the damage inflicted on the Old Town during the Yugoslav war in the 1990s.

It's getting late; dusk descends on Dubrovnik. After showering, we feel like new women. As our heels click down the stairs to Stradun, a flock of galebovi (seagulls) surrounds us. Not actual seagulls—a flock of Croatian men, nicknamed “galebovi” because they swoop and try to pick you up. Senka shoos them away, and they cluster around two unsuspecting women. We venture to Gil's Cuisine and Pop Lounge overlooking the harbor (www.gilsdubrovnik.com) for an international haute cuisine meal, which is excellent but hard on our wallets.

We decide to have a drink with my friend, Ivana Bacura (www.ivanabacura.com), a jeweler I met while studying in Dubrovnik

during the summer of 2004. I admire her new designs. She invites us to sit on chairs outside her small side street shop and catch up on what's happened since last summer. Ivana lives in Zagreb

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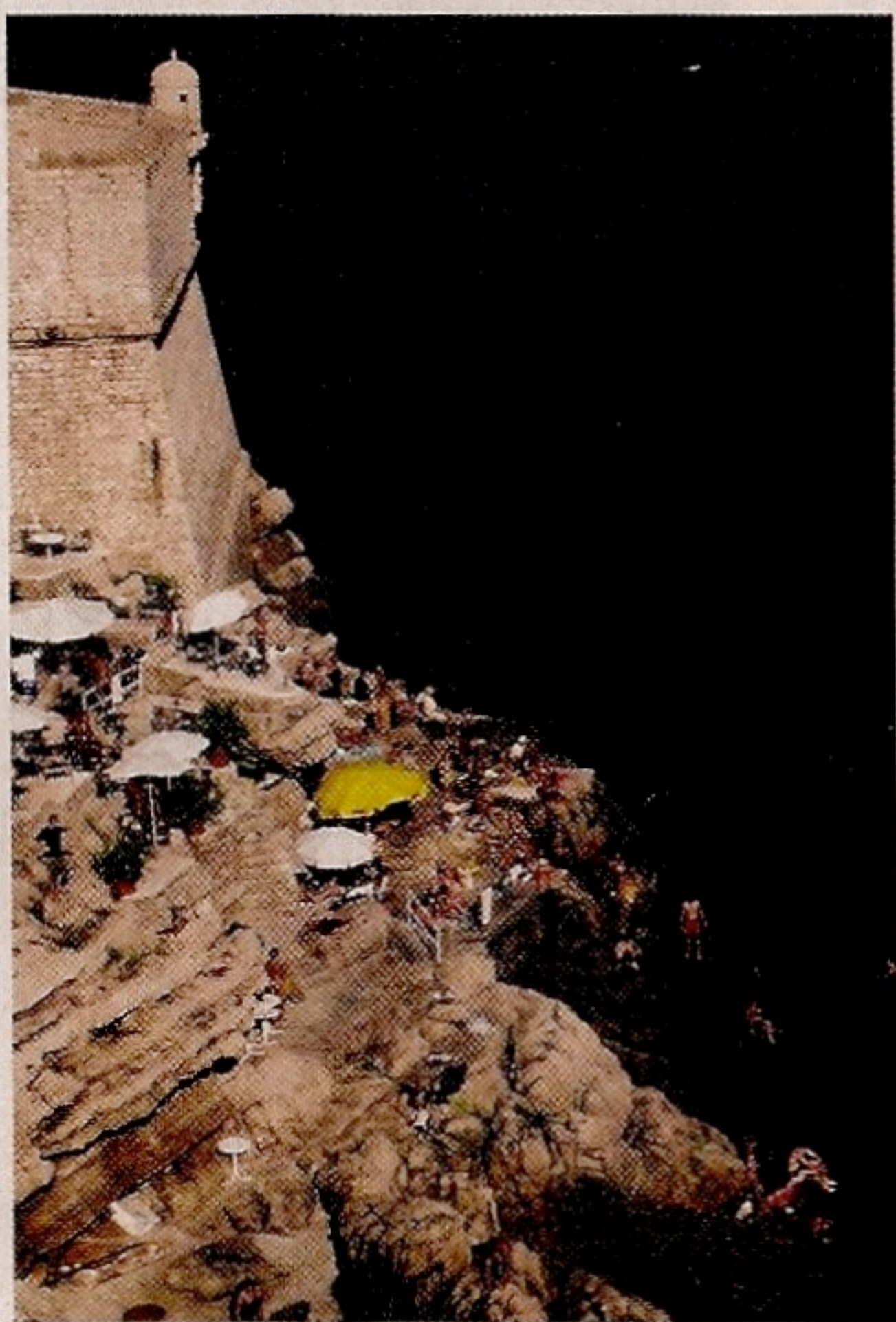
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for most of the year since Dubrovnik only comes alive from June through September. The rest of the year Stari Grad is a virtual ghost town because many locals who used to live there sold their homes for a profit after tourism picked up post-war. Now, many of these homes are rentals occupied by foreigners mainly during the summer months.

The next day we venture to Lokrum Island, just a short ferry ride from Dubrovnik's harbor. We watch peacocks strut through the nature reserve's botanical gardens and have lunch. Though curious, we are not feeling bold enough to visit the premier nudist beach on the easternmost part of the island (to partake, you must bear skin). Instead, we journey to Mrtvo More (Dead Sea), a crystal-clear lake on the island. We dip in our feet and sun on rocks near the cerulean water. Too tired to venture up to Forte Royale for the spectacular views, we take the ferry home.

After two days in Dubrovnik we fall into the rhythm of *fjaka*, a Croatian word that does not translate well and is not in my English-Croatian Dictionary. The closest approximation is, "a chilled-out state of being," where you feel like doing nothing. And that is exactly what you should do in Stari Grad: find a seat on Stradun, sip *bijela kava*, and watch the world pass by.



GETTING AWAY WITHOUT GETTING OFF THE COUCH

Sometimes the most difficult part of getting away can be figuring out that universal remote control on your coffee table. Which button turns on the DVD player again?

These ten movies can cure even the worst case of the travel bug without having to wait in line at Customs.

1) **Roman Holiday** (1953) – The big question for production of this film was, "Do we spend the money for color and shoot in a studio, or do we shoot on location in black and white?" Let the cinematography show you the correct answer when you fall in love with Rome almost as much as you fall in love with Audrey Hepburn.

2) **The 400 Blows** (1959) – The quintessential art house film and the spearhead of the French New Wave, this movie captures every angle of Paris, from beautiful monument to dirty back alley. At the end of this movie you'll know Paris so well you could give someone directions to the nearest patisserie.

3) **Born Free** (1966) – This movie made every kid an environmentalist and an animal lover. Along with bothering mom for the next year with the question, "When can we get a lion?"

4) **Summertime** (1955) – Director David Lean was heard to remark during the shooting of this personal favorite of his films, "I want Venice to be the star of this picture!" Not only that but he fell so head over heels for the city during production that it became his second home. It's tough to outshine Katherine Hepburn for the lead but if anyone (or anyplace) could, it would be Venice.

5) **Before Sunrise** (1995) – Everything anyone ever hopes for from being young

and travelling through Europe: Cheap wine and falling in love. This wink to the French New Wave will have you reliving every great kiss you've ever had.

6) **Riding Giants** (2004) – A documentary about surfing that puts you so close to the beach you'll wake up with sand in your sheets.

7) **Y Tu Mama Tambien** (2001) – This racy story about two friends travelling with an older woman got me to cancel my plans for two weeks and drive south in search of paradise. Guess what? I found it.

8) **The Road to Morocco** (1942) – Okay, so this wasn't shot on location and it isn't very PC or tolerant, but this, the best of the seven "Road Movies," has Bob Hope and Bing Crosby reminding us just how much fun (and trouble) we can get into when we let our inhibitions go when we're gone away.

9) **The Darjeeling Limited** (2007) – India apparently has more vivid colors than anywhere else on the planet. I couldn't be more excited to go see them for myself, let's just hope the reality of it can compare to the rich slow-motion shots paired with some of the greatest songs of all time.

10) **My Father's Glory & My Mother's Castle** (1990) – Basically The Godfather I & II of travel movies. Stunning remembrances of countryside France will have you booking your next summer at a remote château and checking your Zagat guide to see where you can fix your hunger for roast rabbit until you get there.

—Justin Skrakowski

