

Memories on the Adriatic

A writer returns to Dubrovnik to share her love for the city and her family's Croatian roots with her daughter

By Kristin Vuković

“Mommy, when can we climb the mountain?” my daughter asks, pointing across the bay.

It’s an early September afternoon and Uma, fresh off a two-hour nap following an overnight flight, is raring to explore Dubrovnik. *Just like Mom*, I think, smiling. I wasn’t sure about taking a 4-year-old to a fancy restaurant shortly after a red-eye, but my husband, J, insisted we celebrate my birthday, and I’m eager to feed our burgeoning foodie her first John Dory (“Yum!”) and show her the awe-inspiring views. Across the bay from Vapour Restaurant, on Hotel Bellevue’s sprawling terrace, a steep staircase covered in graffiti zigzags down a limestone cliff to a sheltered cove where the Adriatic Sea shines in a riot of turquoise and azure hues. In 2004, when I spent the summer studying Croatian in Dubrovnik as a university student, I walked down those steps to the pebble beach almost every day; back then, I couldn’t have

imagined I would someday retrace my steps with my daughter. So many things have changed, and I’ve changed, too. I want to show her everything that is important to me, the places that hold my memories alongside the city’s rich history.

My love affair with Dubrovnik began on a 2002 trip to Croatia with my parents. My father, who grew up in Dayton, Ohio, wanted to learn more about the place his parents came from; after they passed away, he strove to discover more about our origins, to preserve our heritage and reclaim some of what was lost, especially since they didn’t teach him the language. (They wanted their children to speak English without an accent, to “Americanize.”) My grandfather was from Karlovac, a city in central Croatia near the capital, Zagreb—nowhere near Dubrovnik or the sea. I was enamored with the region of Dalmatia, and in particular Dubrovnik, its handsome palaces and

fortresses sprung out of a fairy tale. I vividly remember my first encounter with the city’s Old Town, how I marveled at the thick limestone walls clinging to the rocks like barnacles, encircling a patchwork of terra-cotta and red-tiled rooftops, and below, stones polished smooth by millions of soles over hundreds of years.

Two years later, I returned to study Croatian at the *Centar za Strane Jezike* (Center for Foreign Languages) in Zagreb and Dubrovnik. Two years after that, I brought my now-husband to the coastal city I’d fallen in love with. We said our I-dos in the Old Town in 2009, surrounded by friends and family from around the world.

Although Dalmatia is quite different historically and culturally from my grandfather’s hometown, I felt drawn to the region. It turns out there was a reason: A genealogist researched the Vuković family tree and discovered that our roots likely trace back to Dalmatia, in the vicinity of Zadar,

Joris van der Zalm/Unsplash

The Dominican Monastery in Dubrovnik’s Old Town



in northern Dalmatia, and Šibenik, in central Dalmatia. In the first part of the 16th century, the Ottomans conquered parts of the region, causing a great migration away from the coast. After the Ottomans were defeated, around the start of the 18th century, there were further population movements to the liberated interior.

I wanted to know where I came from, to find my people, my tribe—and once I found them, I grew attached. In Croatia, I saw my face in others; we shared a common ‘ic’ ending to our surnames, and everyone pronounced Vuković correctly. It all made me—an only child—feel less alone in the world. Claiming this history was my attempt at belonging. And now I wanted my daughter to belong too.

On our second day in the city, we venture into the Old Town (*Stari Grad* in Croatian). “Is this Elsa’s castle?” Uma inquires as we approach Pile Gate. (*Frozen* has followed us to Dubrovnik.) “It’s her winter castle,” I say, playing along. “She’s not here right now.” From her perch atop J’s shoulders, Uma takes in the view as we walk across white



cobblestones, passing buildings with hunter-green shutters that have become familiar to me over more than a dozen visits. Despite the hordes of tourists, Stari Grad still exudes a magical quality, inspiring in me a sense of wonder. These walls are teeming with the past.

Ragusa, as Dubrovnik was once called, was an independent maritime republic established in 1358. A forward-thinking community, it boasted one of the oldest pharmacies in Europe and a complex aqueduct system that supplied fresh spring water to citizens. The locals were ahead of the times

in other ways, too, abolishing the slave trade in 1418. One of the reasons I chose Dubrovnik as the site of our wedding was because of its history of welcoming foreigners and refugees of all nations; J is a Punjabi Sikh from India, and I felt this was an ideal place for the merging of families from different cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds.

“Do you want to see where Mommy and Daddy were married?” J asks. Before *Game of Thrones* and *Star Wars* turned Dubrovnik into a movie set, we had our wedding at Sponza Palace, a former 16th-century customs house, mint, and arsenal that’s now home to the state archives, with thousands of public records and manuscripts dating back to the 12th century. I point to the statue of St. Blaise, the patron saint of Dubrovnik, carved into the stone above the palace entrance; the saint

can be seen above all the institutions and city entrances in Old Town. On our wedding day, in early September 2009, a drizzle fell as my father walked me down the aisle in Sponza’s atrium, its Renaissance columns and arches exposed to the sky. Seeing my daughter skip around the courtyard where I’d wed her father leaves me overcome with emotion.

I may want to savor the moment, but Uma is already running out onto Stradun, the Old Town’s main artery, ready for the next adventure. I’d promised her we could climb the city walls, which

boast panoramic views; sections of the walls date back to the 12th century, and they were completed by the end of the 16th century. “This is a lot of stairs!” she exclaims as we huff our way up—which is definitely saying something, since we live in a fourth-floor

walk-up in New York City. We don’t even attempt to walk the full loop atop the sprawling walls, which stretch 1.3 miles and encompass forts and walkways, but on our short sojourn Uma enjoys pointing to the people below, who move in an ant-like procession along Stradun.

After exploring the Old Town, we’re famished. Appropriately, given that it’s our anniversary, we have reservations at The Pucić Palace, where we celebrated our nuptials with family and friends. The 17th-century building is located near Gundulić Square, which has a statue of Dubrovnik’s greatest

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Federico Ciamei (Old Town); agefotostock/Alamy Stock Photo (Sponza Palace)



Courtesy of The Pucić Palace (restaurant); courtesy of Kristin Vuković (Uma in water); Sergio Aznar/Alamy Stock Photo (BOWA)

writer, Ivan Gundulić. I’m relieved to find that nothing much has changed. At Restaurant Magdalena, on the terrace where as newlyweds we danced and cut cake, we sit surrounded by olive trees and fragrant Mediterranean herbs, with views of rooftops and the palace’s small chapel, in front of which our friends had made speeches and offered toasts. It seems like yesterday, but here we are, 13 years later, having dinner with our daughter. I order the Black “Ston” Risotto with cuttlefish and shrimp. “Why is it black?” Uma asks. I laugh, then explain that the squid ink gives it that color. I convince her to take a bite. She prefers her pasta, but I consider it a triumph that she tried something new—and black.

Visiting our wedding venues brings back a flood of memories, and so does the next day, when we board a speedboat to Šipan, the largest of the Elafiti Islands. On our second trip to Dubrovnik together, in 2007, J, then my boyfriend, rented a boat to explore this archipelago northwest of the city. We docked in Šipan’s tranquil, idyllic Vrbova Bay. Our captain had made a reservation for us at a simple, tucked-away tavern, Konoba Vrbova, on the shore’s edge. The owner pulled up a lobster cage at the end of the dock and let us choose our lunch. We drank fine Croatian wine, swam in the clear, salty water, and floated buoyantly. The heady mix of wine and sun elicited a blissful repose. It was a perfect day.

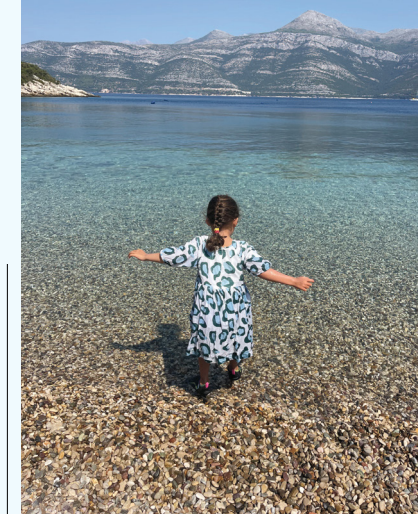
Lounging on the bow of the boat on the way back to the Old Town, J proposed, and I giddily said yes.

In 2016, the humble tavern imprinted on our memories became a restaurant called BOWA—Best Of What’s Around. The Šare family, who also own Bota Šare Oyster & Sushi Bar in Dubrovnik’s Old Town, acquired BOWA in 2019. While the new owners maintained the place’s rustic charm and quality fare, this gem is no longer hidden, attracting celebrities and discerning visitors seeking a unique getaway and dishes made from the day’s catch and local vegetables, such as organic arugula from Šipan.

While we wait for BOWA’s sleek black boat to whisk us to Šipan, my daughter asks, “Will we see Croatian Maui?” (*Moana* has followed us to Croatia, too.) Uma is concerned about the boat capsizing, as *Moana*’s does in the movie when she attempts to sail past the reef, before the demigod Maui shows her how to navigate. “Don’t worry, he’s going to teach us how to sail the boat,” my husband assures her. After we board, I explain the story to the captain, who is a sport and plays along as “Croatian Maui,” even letting Uma hold the wheel.

Thatched-roof cabanas and a white stone hut come into view, surrounded by carob, fig, and olive trees. Before indulging in a leisurely

This page, clockwise from top right: the author’s daughter wades into Vrbova Bay; cabanas at BOWA; Restaurant Magdalena, at The Pucić Palace; previous page, from top: tourists in Stari Grad, Dubrovnik’s Old Town; the atrium inside Sponza Palace



lunch, we recline on lounge chairs and sip grk, a native Dalmatian white varietal from the island of Korčula. I feel my New York City stress slowly melt away. Uma, who stubbornly refuses to change into her swimsuit, wades into the shallow water in her dress, her arms outstretched for balance as she navigates the slippery pebbles. My husband takes a photo of her; set against the backdrop of the mainland’s majestic mountains, it looks like a still from a movie.

Initially, I was somewhat trepidatious about our first international family vacation since the onset of the pandemic, knowing the challenges that travel with young children can entail, even in the best of times. Uma, though, has helped me ease into the Dalmatian *pomalo* mode, encouraging me to take it easy and slow down—an approach that’s made even easier to embrace by the fact that we’re on an



island, with nowhere else to be. As we eat sashimi and grilled scampi, she diligently collects pebbles, arranging them in a row and asking how many she can take home. She plays with scampi shells, wiggling the pincer claws at us. The hot afternoon wears on, and we succumb to a torpor known locally as *fjaka*, a state in which you aspire to do nothing—and that’s just what we do, until “Croatian Maui” ferries us back to the mainland.

Times have changed since I was a student sitting at cafés on Stradun, nursing the same coffee for hours—and Dubrovnik has changed, too, especially as it has become a popular filming location. *Game of Thrones* merchandise is ubiquitous. Die-hard fans still flock to the site of the infamous “walk of shame” scene, the Jesuit Staircase that descends from St. Ignatius Church to Gundulić Square. On a previous trip, I’d witnessed a man reenact the scene by throwing a cork at his girlfriend as she descended the steps, shouting, “Shame, shame!”

Before my family’s 2002 trip to Croatia, American friends had asked us if it was safe to visit. The Croatian War of Independence, which erupted after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, took place from 1991 to 1995. Dubrovnik’s Old Town was bombed during the conflict, and remnants of the war can still be seen, from shrapnel pockmarks

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on Stradun to new tiles on old roofs that sustained hits. Maps showing damage from the war are positioned near the Old Town’s entrances—including Pile, Ploče and the old harbor—but they are often overlooked by visitors. Some scars are invisible: In the years since the conflict ended, much has been repaired and rebuilt. The Dubrovnik Cable Car, which was built in 1969 and destroyed in the war, became operational again in 2010. Uma is thrilled

by the panoramic journey up Mount Srd in the windowed cabin, and she relishes pointing at the cable cars going up and down the mountain.

On our last night, my husband books a sitter and plans a date night at Nautika Restaurant, where we had our intimate wedding-rehearsal dinner with family from India, Minnesota, and Lake Tahoe. Situated at the edge of the sea, near Pile Gate, our elevated patio table has prime views of the imposing Fort Lovrijenac, an 11th-century fortress set on a rock that towers over the Adriatic Sea. As I savor a tender lobster tail from the Dalmatian island of Vis, I think back to that long-ago night when we sat together at this restaurant in my ancestral homeland, joining families from halfway across the globe, East meeting West.



I wished that my grandparents could have been there to celebrate with us, to hear me speak their language. I was sure my grandfather would have been especially proud of my adventures; he’d sailed to countries around the world with the U.S. Navy, but never returned to Croatia. “Živjeli,” I say, smiling at J and raising my glass.

After dinner, at our Airbnb, I kiss our daughter on her forehead and whisper “*laku noć*” (good night). I resolve to teach her some Croatian words and phrases when we get home, so she can learn some of her great-grandparents’ language. (I’ll give her some Hindi, Daddy’s secret language, as well.) My husband and I spend one last evening on the balcony watching the moon dance on the water, the cove’s white pebbles illuminating the beach of my youth. How

much life has happened since then. The Adriatic’s waves ebb and flow in an endless cycle, pulling me back to my ancestors’ homeland and returning us to Dubrovnik, where J and I became family.



Clockwise from top: the Dubrovnik Cable Car; the Old Town’s Pile Gate; a romantic dinner at Nautika Restaurant

Federico Ciamei (cable car, Pile Gate); courtesy of Nautika Restaurant (lobster)