

## The Transfiguration of my Past

The waves gently, yet demandingly caress the shore. The scent of lavender, the saltiness of the sea, pine trees, sage, juniper, oleander, bougainvillea, as well as, wild and medicinal flowers fill my senses. After a fresh, cool rain shower their scent is refreshed with a new life.



Merging into the sea, the old dock where I took my first leaps into the Adriatic patiently waited for my daughters to do the same, nearly 50 years later.

My ears listen to the tenderness of the soft-spoken, yet powerful and deep Adriatic and my heart overflows with an inescapable, familiar, distant, but intimate and quite recognizable awareness that never departed the depths of my soul.



Bougainvillea and lavender illuminate the pathway along the sea with color and fragrance.

I am home. I am in my birth country. My blood is intertwined with the soil of this land and its people. I may have been only 7 years old when I moved to my new homeland, but the culture of this ancient land does not dissolve. It is like the beautiful voice of Lorelei, who calls to all, grasps their hearts and the core of their being, never ever letting it go. Even if they leave, oceans away, the heart of Croatia, continues to beat within them. As it does in me.

It is simple...

It is gratifying...

It is mesmerizing...

It is exotic...

It is different yet familiar...



The Crucifix inside the St. Domnius in Split.

It is Croatia... the country of fantasy, allurements, ancient wisdom, deeply religious Catholic values and friendships that are passed on for generations. It is the country that was once a secret. And while the greatest wish of the Croatians was for the world to know their country's magic through tourism, somehow, now, *in secret*, I believe they wish the mystery had never been solved, the discovery, never made. That Croatia remained the ambiguous and mostly anonymous country it had once been.

Visiting as a child was fun. We swam, tanned, made friends, ate ice cream, laughed, we laughed a lot... As a young lady, I loved Croatia's fascinating and complex history, captivating past and old-world charm.

However, today, as a wife and mother, I find that it was not until this visit that I received true sight and insight, true understanding and appreciation for the country of my birth. I find that my words are inadequate. I find that my emotions have discovered depths and such intensity that I did not know resided within me.

In many ways, it is comparative to the birth of a child. As you first look at your sweet new baby, your heart discovers an alcove that simply didn't exist. Soon, another child is to be born and secretly you wonder, *is it possible that my heart can love this child as much as the first? Is there room?* You know it will, but you still wonder how that psychological, physiological alchemy occurs. And when the day arrives, you discover that next alcove,



The vacation house of my youth; built by my father and grandfather nearly 50 years ago.



My girls and I. I am wearing the same dress my mother wore in the '70s when I was a few years old.



that next secret chamber, which once again was invisible, yet in some beautiful, celestial way appeared within you. And it just continues. One, two, three, five... it doesn't matter. The heart is a mesmerizing and fascinating phenomenon that our humanity will never comprehend or understand. Nor should we.



Telephone lines and TV antennas transport a trace of modernity to the stones of old.

Croatia is the same. Each visit brings you only slightly closer to a riddle or mystery you did not know existed. It is the ancient—the nearly antique—that fuses and integrates with the contemporary and modern, while keeping a certain sense of unique old-world charm. It never seems to fully immerse itself into that modernity. It consistently shelters that old, creaky and decidedly aged past. If you are willing to open your heart to her, she will reward you with unimaginable treasures. If your crowded schedule and superficial touristic essence can take the backseat, she will honor you with gifts that surpass the richest of artificial souvenirs. She only requests an open heart.

I was fortunate enough to realize that this visit to Croatia was so much more than loving the simplicity of walking to the store to buy fresh bread every morning or strolling with the most delicious ice cream cone by the sea in the evening. It was more than fishing at dusk and seeing the

seagulls wait for their due since they allowed you the privilege to frolic in their sea. It was more than the 17-century-old city of Split or Diocletian Palace, or the multitude of ornate churches and cathedrals. This country was special. It was desired and in turn ruled by the Romans, Venetians, Austrians, French, Italians, the Ottoman Empire and others who were determined yet unsuccessful in conquering it. And it is this country made that me.

Yes, the history, the spilled blood, the battles for freedom were all a part of this country and me. But somehow this year I had evolved from a little girl having fun, or a young 20-something tourist enjoying the sights of a city to a woman who was able to see beyond the physical beauty. Of course, Split, for instance, is exotic, unique, historic and a rare, exceptional gem of antiquity and time immemorial. Yet what makes it special is not this. It is



The gorgeous bell tower of the Cathedral of St. Domnius in Split.

the people of Split... the people of Dalmatia... the people of Croatia. It is impossible to know this land or to appreciate it without knowing the living and loving heart that keeps it alive. And that heart is not the city center or the Riva, or the capital, it is its people.



My birth town of Split, Croatia.

The multitude of stories that have taken a hold of me will take some time to parse out and write. I do hope you choose to go on this journey with me and meet my Split, my Dalmatia, and my Croatia; not the Croatia of the Lonely Planet or Rick Steves or Mama Mia II or the Croatia of The Game of Thrones.



Three pomegranates grow together, from largest to smallest, reminding me of the closeness of family, culture and my three girls.

I would love for you to meet the country of heartfelt, unique, welcoming inhabitants, the country that is filled like a pomegranate with people of pure, limpid love for all, the country of family and friends

who come before all else. The country where strangers become friends, where friends become family. My only fear is that my tales will not do it

justice, but perhaps they will be enough to provide a glimpse into my heart and a sketch of my country that, one day, you can fill in with your own brushstrokes and hues.



The diverse hues of Croatia's Adriatic.

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