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CROATIA: AMONG EUROPE'S MOST BEAUTIFUL AREAS FOR CRUISING

MORE THAN TWO THOUSAND YEARS OF HISTORY, AN IMPRESSIVE LANDSCAPE, SECLUDED BAYS, AND HARBOURS BOTH TRANQUIL OR BUSTLING – CROATIA HAS EVERYTHING THAT A CRUISING ENTHUSIAST COULD DESIRE. WITH OUR GRAND STURDY 40.9 SEDAN, WE COULD VIEW CROATIA FROM A NEW PERSPECTIVE!

And to say it right away: we have been sailing the Adriatic in a number of different vessels since back in the 1980s, but none was as comfortable and safe as the Hippo – a well-deserved name! Although the Adriatic is often derided as “just a bathtub”, things can get very uncomfortable when the cold “Bora” wind sweeps down from the mountains and churns up the sea. But even in weather conditions that had made our solid old motorsailer creak and groan, and we had felt better off with lifejackets on, the Linssen lived up to its name and lay there unconcerned like a big heavy hippo in the water. But let's begin at the beginning.

After its maiden voyage on the Meuse, Waal and Rhine, we took over the new boat at Izola (Slovenia) on 6 June 2013 and set off to enjoy the transfer trip to our home marina at Simuni on the island of Pag (Croatia). The coasts of Slovenia and Istria were still very busy, with a lot of buoys marking obstacles that we had to look out for. But

despite it being the holiday season, things got less busy after we had crossed the Kvarner Gulf and left the coast of Istria. We naturally stopped off in Rovinj before the crossing. The town has a long and turbulent history. The Romans called it “Ruginium”, which the Slavs changed to “Rovinj” in the seventh century. Rovinj is well worth a visit. The townscape has been shaped by its rich history, with winding alleys and an overall Romanesque-Gothic appearance, but with renaissance, baroque, and neoclassical buildings too. Particularly striking is the Basilica of St Euphemia, whose 60 m-high seventeenth-century tower is topped by a 4.70 m-high bronze statue of Euphemia herself, the patron saint of the town.

Another interesting town is Pula, with a history dating back 7000 years. In 177 BC, it was captured by the Romans, who built an amphitheatre there in the reign of the Emperor Augustus that is now one of the main sights. Other remains from the Augustan period are the Temple

of Rome and Augustus, the partly preserved city walls with their gates, and the remains of two theatres.

After a two-week voyage with several stopovers at historically notable locations and secluded, picturesque coves, we reached our base at Simuni on the island of Pag. We have been coming here for many years, and we really enjoy the homely atmosphere of one of the smallest marinas on the Croatian coast. Pag is famous for its lace, which is still painstakingly produced by hand, and its sheep's milk cheese, now made in cheese dairies partly modernised with funds from the EU. The milk comes from sheep that graze on the mostly very poor soils – often apparently consisting only of scree – throughout the island and also on the generally uninhabited neighbouring islands. When you cast anchor in the bays of these uninhabited islands (for example Maun), you may quite possibly see the sheep come down to the beach in the evening to drink water from the sea. It is supposedly this and the saline meadows that give the cheese its distinctive taste. Another interesting feature are the olive trees – some up to 1500 years old – around Lun at the northwest end of Pag. As on the other Croatian islands, the production of olive oil is an important part of the economy.

Located in central Dalmatia (about an hour's drive from Zadar), Pag is the ideal starting point for cruises both short and long. In deciding on the "Longtop" Sedan – i.e. the model with an extended roof over the cockpit – we were influenced by our previous experience in the area: intense sunshine, which not only heats up the sea significantly (in June already up to 28° C) but can also be hard on the skipper and his crew. So our chosen model is also



suitable for pale-skinned northern Europeans! However, this kind of boat is not very frequent in the Adriatic, and we have already become accustomed to being gazed at

in every harbour that we visit. Even the owners of sleek yachts have to admit that the Linssen offers an impressive degree of comfort. That also applies in rough seas and conditions that are a challenge for sailors and that keep those fast, sleek yachts in the harbour.

So much for our boat. In June 2014, we used the first part of our stay in Croatia for some short trips, which we'd like to tell you about. From the ACI Marina at Simuni, we set a course of 330° past the lively harbour town of Novalja – popular especially among younger visitors to Croatia – and past the island of Pag to Rab. To starboard, we could see the ancient olive trees around Lun that we already mentioned. Near the headland lies the sleepy little village of Tovarnele. Drawing level with the buoys marking the shallows, we changed course to 350° and sailed directly into the bay at Cifnata. The sandy bottom is ideal for anchoring, and although the bay is frequented by day-trippers, they leave in the evening in small yachts or taxi boats. We reached this intermediate destination at a leisurely 5,5 knots in just under 5 hours, and prepared for the night. We enjoyed the quiet of the evening and after breakfast set course the next morning for the harbour at Rab (44° 45' N, 14° 46' E). We were greeted there by the four striking bell towers of the historic centre, which is built on a steep rocky ridge. At the harbour entrance, we came across a whole armada of boats both large and small – like a swarm of mosquitoes – that were on their way to the numerous bathing inlets. That was fine by us, because it meant more space in the harbour. The marina is situated opposite the quay of the town's harbour and is a very convenient place to moor. But for an hourly charge of 20 kunas (about EUR 2.50) you can also moor alongside the quay itself. The Linssen's bow and stern thrusters meant that "parking" was not any problem. The advantage of mooring by the quay is that you have easy access to the town centre: you don't have to walk around the harbour basin as you do if you tie up in the marina. Rab is over 2000 years old, and with narrow lanes and many churches has a special flair all of its own. With Rovinj and Zadar, it counts as an historic and cultural gem of northern Croatia. There are numerous excellent restaurants, but we will mention only two. One is the stylish "Paradiso", in the old town loggia and the Cernota Palace, which also has its own picture gallery, which the owner is happy to show to visitors. The slivovitz and the house wine are both produced by the restaurant itself. The link with the coast is also shown in various items that give the restaurant its exclusive atmosphere.

The "Rab" tavern is in a rustic but refined style. With its wooden beams and a welcoming gallery, it has a tradi-



tional atmosphere and its excellent but inexpensive dishes make it really worth a visit. It's striking that younger people in Croatia prefer to communicate in English, while older people usually understand German better. But basically, there are no communication problems. On this cruise, by the way, there were five of us on board the Linszen, but none of us felt there was too little room. One reason is of course that the cockpit offers plenty of space, although a cover needs to be put up if it rains.

After a good meal and some extensive sightseeing, we left Rab in the evening so as to spend the night at Cifnata again. Next morning we set a course 253° for the island of Cres. During the crossing, we were in fact caught out by a moderate Bora wind, making it seem sensible to stop over and spend the night in the bay of Toveračica on Cres. That also made things a bit easier for our guests, who weren't such experienced sailors. Next day, we rounded the island to the southeast and sailed comfortably through the Lofinjanski Channel, with Cres to starboard and Lofinj to port, to the little town of Osor. At Osor, the islands of Cres and Losinj are separated by a canal – only 11 metres wide – that was constructed more than 2000 years ago. The bridge over the canal is opened twice a day, at 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. For the vessels that are waiting, there is an area with buoys and a clearly marked navigation channel. The buoys enabled us to tie up and use our Zodiac dinghy to go ashore. The Zodiac is equipped with a 4 hp Torpedo electric outboard motor, allowing for elegant and almost silent operation.

In Roman times, Osor was a strategically important centre with about 20,000 inhabitants, because the sea route from Aquileia to Salona passed through the Osor Canal. Surrounded by strong defensive walls, it was the site of numerous temples, a forum, theatres, and palaces. The harbour was the base for Ravenna's navy, and in 530 AD, the town became the seat of a bishop. It was later devastated by the Saracens and sank into insignificance. To-

day's Osor is a village of scarcely 100 residents, with ancient remains that are well worth seeing.

We continued on a course of 148° past Losinj to starboard and Orjule to port to the island of Ilovik. At the south-eastern tip of Losinj there is a small uninhabited island, Kozjak, which we rounded, keeping it to port and looking for a suitable bay to anchor off the west side of Ilovik. We decided to anchor in the bay of Pažine in the south of the island and to finish the day there.

Next morning, we set a course of 132° for Ugljan, passing by Silba (to port) and Premuda and Ist (to starboard). At the southern tip of the island of Silba we had to correct our course again slightly so as to pass Sestrunj (to starboard), with the offshore islands of the Tri Sestrice, to reach the island of Ugljan. We moored at the "Olive Island" marina at Sutomiscica, a brand-new marina leaving nothing to be desired.

After a restful night in the marina and after replenishing our stores (including water) we set course for Zadar. Ugljan and Zadar are separated by the Pafimanski Channel, which we crossed in less than an hour, tying up at the town's marina. Getting into this marina is a tight squeeze, and a bit of a challenge for a 40-foot vessel. The Linszen is somewhat cumbersome, but using its bow and stern thrusters enabled us to moor without problems, although without the additional rudder, things would have been extremely difficult. We can't really recommend this marina because it is extremely expensive and crowded. Although we were only moored for a few hours so we could do some sightseeing, we were immediately charged for 24 hours (including for unnecessary water and electricity!), whereas at all the other marinas there is also a charge for just half a day. So what you need to do is either stay for the whole time you've paid for or go to the Borik marina instead. As we've already seen, Zadar is a real gem and very much worth visiting. It's no wonder that the AIDA cruise ships put in here too. The ferries that are constantly coming and going also need a lot of space, so we were glad – especially after our days of peace and tranquillity – to get away from the hustle and bustle.

On the way back to the island of Pag, we once more moored off the island of Vir, and could admire a spectacular sunset, which compensated for the stress at Zadar. One thing that this cruise showed us is that the Longtop model of the Grand Sturdy Sedan is ideal as far as we're concerned for sailing in this area. Croatia's membership of the EU has led to changes in the conditions for yachts. The important thing now is no longer the length of the vessel but the power of the engine. That made this year's permit significantly cheaper than in the past.

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The Hippo has an engine speed of from 1800 to 1850 revs per minute, producing 5.5 to 6 knots (diesel consumption: about 5 litres per hour). That is rather slow compared to the usual yachts in the Adriatic, but we're not in any hurry. People often talk of "slowing down and starting living" – that's what we actually managed to do! In return, the boat is extremely reliable, and remains docile even in rough seas. There's enough space even when you have guests on board, and we have come to appreciate the storage space too. A Fritz!Box and the connected stick allowed us to connect up with the rest of the world via the Internet, and there was a stable WLAN network on board for our mobile phones, iPad, and other devices. We hadn't thought about installing an additional external antenna for all this, so we had to make do with an after-market antenna with a magnetic base, which we extended out through the sliding roof in areas with a weak signal. When sailing in this area, I advise bow and stern thrusters and auto pilot. We also think it's absolutely necessary to be able to cover the cockpit with a cover during bad weather.

Finally, we would like to record that Linssen doesn't just build top-quality vessels but also provides a first-class service. That more or less guarantees that the "best weeks of the year" will be just what we want, namely totally relaxing!

