

# When Ljubljana empties every summer, Miha comes to Istra for a holiday

in his grandmother's bungalow by the sea, and this summer I came too. The bungalow is a solid, four-square stone structure with its own lawn sloping at a gentle gradient beneath the umbrella pines down to the spiney, fissured limestone pavement that stands in for beaches, all down the western Adriatic. The pines are beautiful. Their trunks are ruddy as the Istran soil, and the grass under them is matted with needles. In the midday lull, tawny squirrels with feathery tails skip, freeze, skip across the grass, and once, just once, a hoopoe stalked back and forth for half an hour, the first I ever saw: a crested, electric-blue bird probing the lawn with its bill.

Our nearest town was Umag, where the Hotel Adriatic advertised its casino with handbills in the local shops: 'Roulette, Black Jack, and Sloth Machines'. No mechanical

help is needed: the Istran summer evaporates your energy all by itself. Politics disturbed no one's daydreams on the coast, and the only National Question on anybody's mind was one that unites rather than divides: what Albert Camus, casting around for definitions of Mediterranean culture, once called 'the nationalism of the sun'.

A wave is a rare event on this coast, where the sea invites idleness. After picking a path between sea-urchins that sway, shrink and expand around your toes in the water's distorting lens, you roll on to your back, tread water, turn somersaults, ramble about, watch the windsurfers sliding by. A rare crawler ploughs a solemn furrow across the bay. Outward engines buzz absently, children cry like seagulls. Beyond the low, pine-topped promontories Umag's giant concrete factory is weirdly profiled against the sky; pure ideological industry, installed after the war and due for closure any day now.

After midday a north-westerly breeze ruffles the water, and the limestone is abandoned for long, slow lunches in the shade. Posters in Umag and other towns try to whip up interest in 'Topless Boxing' and 'Miss Wet T-Shirt' competitions (the latter sponsored by Europcar) but tourists look more interested in the fruit and vegetable market, or hushing their rebellious kids, or glancing at the kitsch trinkets hawked on the harbour fronts. Handsome Macedonian waiters flash their teeth in the cafes, posing for snaps with plump Dutch girls. The Byzantine basilica in Porec smells of salt; its mother-of-pearl mosaics scintillate in the shallow-angled sunbeams of early morning. Potatoes in the market are crusted with warm red earth, and the plums have a bluish bloom. Sea and sky merge milkily, before the sun has burnished a horizon into view.

Istra is a place for holidays of habit and placid routine, and nowhere more than in the workers' camps along the coast. One of these is tucked away in the woods near Miha's bungalow. Dozens of minuscule pastel-coloured cabins with two or four beds, a washbasin, and a couple of chairs on a tiny concrete veranda. No privacy and no entertainment. No litter, no 'vandalism', no noise above a murmur from the whitewashed bar-restaurant at the hub of the camp, where

meals are served by middle-aged women in hospital overcoats and canvas ankle-boots, the Central European sort open at the toe and heel. We found the campers on the nearest bit of shoreline, stretched on their towels, eating fruit, and working their way through the Slovene daily paper.

These frugal places are known as 'syndicalist tourism' and they meet a real need for affordable holidays. Workers come from all over Yugoslavia, and Istran camps are the most popular. Miha says they cover their costs, but doubts they will last many more summers. They have nothing to do with commercial tourism, and besides, the new national government in the Republic of Croatia won't want them. They are a hangover from the days of federal Yugoslavia, which died here too in this bloody summer of 1991.

But that violence was still a year away when Crispin turned up in transit from Venice to Dubrovnik and walked straight from the car, through the bungalow and into the water, shedding camera bags and sweat-starched clothes as he went. Over supper he elaborated a brainwave that inspired him as he splashed about. He fancies that swimming tours of Istra and Dalmatia just might catch on, as a minimalist aquatic version of fell-walking or adventure holidays. The basic package could be attractively cheap: a bathing costume, flippers, a waterproof rucksack for the travellers' cheques and a change of clothes, an optional lightweight tent to keep overnight expenses down, and here you would be, as free as the dolphins that still sport in these waters. Free to meander from Umag to Montenegro, tracing a white wake of pencil-thin arabesques upon the map's duck-egg blue, emerging in the south well exercised, fingers and toes minutely ribbed, and rimed all over with a thousand tiny saline scales.

When the fighting did erupt the following summer, first in Slovenia's Ten Day War with the Yugoslav Federal Army, then in Croatia, it put paid to such daydreams, as it did to down-to-earth tourism. Although Istra saw no fighting, after 26 June 1991 its coast emptied like a sinking ship. Holidaymakers fled to Italy by ferry from Pula and Porec. Once the fighting in Slovenia had ceased, Miha drove down the deserted highway to

Ljubljana to check his little property was intact. Umag was a ghost town. "Istra infelicissima a abbandonata!" exclaimed a scholar from Trieste in 1819. In 1991 it was once again most wretched and abandoned.

Istra is the stalactite that hangs into the upper Adriatic from the northern coast of Yugoslavia. A limestone peninsular some seventy kilometres long, shelving westward to the sea, cleft by fertile valleys, its hilltops dotted with ash-grey and terracotta villages.

While there is room for pedantic dispute about its north-eastern border, lying somewhere between Rijeka at one extremity and Koper or Trieste at the other, geography has demarcated Istra with, by Yugoslav standards, unique clarity. Nobody passes through the Istra; one goes into it, as into Sicily or the Mull of Kintyre, and even Victorian travellers in the Adriatic could be confident of discovering antiquities here and further south in Dalmatia.

Istra has always been a region in the fullest sense, with its own history, dialects and folklore. Like nowhere else in the federation except Vojvodina, it still generates an identity beyond ethnic and national difference. Its most successful governors have always been those who respected its people's wish for self-administration.

After they had finally subdued the place, the Romans endowed its coastal town with civic constitutions which endured in modified form through Goth, Avar and Byzantine occupations, into the middle ages. It was the feudal rule of the Patriarchs of Aquileia, based at the northern tip of the Adriatic, which drove these towns into the Venetian Republic during the thirteenth century. Though the eastern interior still belonged to the Archdukes of Austria, most of Istra was Venetian for five hundred years, until Napoleon frowned at the ancient Republic and it collapsed into dust. Under Venice, the four cities of Istra – Capodistria, Cittanova, Parenzo and Ppola – were self governing, and the smaller towns were 'free communities', entitled to administer their own affairs.

After brief interludes within the Illyrian Provinces of the French Empire, and as an appendix to Bonaparte's Kingdom

of Italy, Istra became Austrian in 1814, then Austro-Hungarian in 1867. It sent its own deputies to the parliament in Vienna, and became a fashionable resort after the *Sudbahn* connected Fiume (now Rijeka) and Vienna by rail.

Rooting among the bookshelves in Miha's bungalow, I found an old pocket-sized, scarlet-bound guidebook printed in Bohemia in 1913: in the nick of time for the last season on the Austrian Riviera. The Handbook of Dalmatia, Abbazia, Lussin, etc. 'The Austrian Riviera', including the Albanian coast, the Jonain Islands, Corfu, Patras, Athens has a chapter on Istra. Its information is redolent of the Habsburg Empire's amazing stability. The pages about Abbazia (Opatija) then 'among the most fashionable sea-side places of the world', include a list of physicians available to tourists 'Dr J Cohn, Dr P Corpocich, Dr A Craciunescu, Dr S Ebel, Dr N Fabianic, Dr G Fodor, Dr J Gluck, Dr P Goering, Dr X Gorski, Dr J Knopfmacher, Dr K Szego, Dr M Szigeti.

With its Jewish, Romanian, Hungarian, German and Croatian names, the list epitomises the internationality of the late Habsburg world, based on a freedom of movement that has not been equalled since and is now hard to imagine. The handbook reminded its readers: 'Passports are convenient, but not absolutely necessary for travellers in Austria-Hungary.' A passport-free zone from Dubrovnik to Krakow!

After the Habsburg Empire gave up the ghost – the largest single casualty of the First World War – the Treaty of Versailles ceded almost the whole of Istra to Italy. The most significant remnant was the port of Rijeka, the denial of which was more than the poet D'Annunzio could bear. With his thousand 'legionnaires', he invaded the town in September 1919 and proclaimed himself Regent of the Quarnero. This hijacking was allowed to succeed, and Fiume was incorporated into Italy in 1924, depriving the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes of its principal port.

After the Second World War, the Allied Council of Ministers awarded the peninsula to Yugoslavia, though without the coveted strategic port of Trieste at its northern apex. This was the only significant change to the country's

prewar borders. Italian Istria had become Yugoslav Istra.

Almost all of it lay within the republic of Croatia; just the northern coast and a wedge of its hinterland are Slovene. As with all internal Yugoslav borders, this one was invisible, immaterial, until 1991, when Slovenia erected border-posts along Istran backroads to demarcate the limits of its vaunted sovereignty. As yet the border is still more symbolic than real; the officials wave through nine cars in ten. But one's heart sinks at the omen of international borderlines gouging Istra yet again. Although it witnessed ethnic atrocities under Italian rule and then in the Second War, this stalactite never bears hatred among its people, who feel – in newcomers' cases, come to feel – they are Istran first and foremost.

To be sure, this regional loyalty tends to irk the new national governments of Slovenia and Croatia, which seem blind to Istria's specialness and value. Ljubljana merely spurns calls for devolution of power.

Zagreb goes much further. In Croatia's 1990 election, not just the Italian community preferred to vote Communist, on the principle better-the-devil-you-know. Many Croats too bridled at the rhetoric and emblems of resurgent nationalism.

Croatian President Dr Franjo Tudjman was so offended by the relative unpopularity of his radical nationalist HDZ party (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica, the Croatian Democratic Community) which swept to victory in the election, that within weeks of taking office his ministers were discussing how to repopulate Istra with Croats from Rumania. Who would, of course, express their gratitude in future polls. Small wonder that even anti-Communist Istrans viewed the advent of multi-party democracy with mixed emotions.

If Miha's bungalow had been built a hundred and fifty years ago, its owners might have seen the boat that carried Sir Gardner Wilkinson past this coast, on his way south from Trieste, in 1844.

Though he did not pause here, Sir Gardner duly noted "the view of Omaga, sitting on the water's edge; and the inland Buia beyond, with its church crowning the hill on which it stands." There is no further mention of Umag or Buje in his

redoubtable *Dalmatia and Mentenegro; with a Journey to Mostar, and Remarks on the Slavonic Nations; the History of Dalmatia and Ragusa; the Uscocs*, nor any mention at all of the territory between the shore and the hilltop, which was invisible to him. It is simply eluded by that semi-colon.

This was eminently sensible. He was keen to meet the Vladika of Mentenegro; he had a lot of travelling ahead of him and there was no reason to suppose he would miss anything by not stopping. The boat furnished vistas for his eye as a cinema provides scenes for its audience. The status of spectator was quite natural to Sir Gardner Wilkinson: he doesn't question or investigate it. And indeed he didn't miss anything by not stopping – nothing except the ordinary life of Istra.

What power that semi-colon reveals! What gulfs of difference, far deeper than the offshore waters between his boat and the shore. For Sir Gardner, unburdened by personalities that could not be maintained by the postal service, or duties that could not be carried out by proxies (bank manager, bailiff, lawyer) on his behalf, disposed of nothing less than the power of freely-chosen and arbitrary movement. This incalculable privilege conferred another: the power to observe without obligation, apparently without any awareness of himself as an actor in the scene.

Sir Gardner was a doughty English explorer, knighted for his contribution to Egyptology. Our awareness of the malign influence that well-intentioned outsiders can have upon indigenous cultures did not exist for him because it has been generated by changes – including the social and environmental effects of tourism – which were already in motion by the 1840s but not yet perceptible to many. Nor did knowledge exist of the seductive pitfalls of detached spectatorship, especially when it borrows the robes of a recording angel.

By an inevitable paradox of modernisation, the ever-increasing proportion of humankind which inherits Sir Gardner's power of voluntary movement is ever less able to grasp the meaning of deracination. By the same paradox, those who do know what it means because they experience the



deracination at first-hand, are worst placed and least able to communicate this meaning. Anyway, for my part, while I know that my English predecessor in Istra travelled with a Victorian sort of confidence which is now an anachronistic as hereditary peerages, still I find in myself a mysterious conviction which I can't explain and that Sir Gardner would have dismissed as so much humbug; that although the sea bears no trace of his passage nor the landscape of his gaze, this place is not what it would have been had he never sailed by and written what he wrote.

There is cruel confirmation of the modernisation paradox in the fact that we only know anything of life inside the semi-colon because that way of life was shattered by political turbulence after the Second World War.

When the Partisans declared the annexation of the old Italian territories in Dalmatia and Istra, with their half-million inhabitants, most of the Italians, plus a good many Croats and Slovenes too, fled north to Italy. This drove the new regime to even harsher measures against the Italian minority, amounting at times to terrorism. Village priests were hounded and even murdered. Sixty-three of the ninety-two Italian schools were closed. Toponyms were Slavized. What Fascist Italy did to Croats and Slovenes before the war, Communist Yugoslavia now did to Italians.

That postwar exodus was the last big thing to happen to Istra, and its effects are inscribed on the landscape. Historically, it conformed all too neatly to a tradition – one of Istria's oldest – that President Tudjman's HDZ heedlessly threatened to revive: namely, waves of forcible immigration and depopulation. When finally it had defeated its Hungarian and German rivals for Istra, which lay devastated by war and plague, the Venetian Republic welcomed Slav, Greek and Albanian refugees from the Ottoman Turks; Porec, which had had 3,000 inhabitants in the fourteenth century, was reduced by 1646 to a hundred souls. In this century Italy and Yugoslavia have both coerced the population, and imported their own nationals to shore up their claims to ownership of the region.



The exodus dragged to the mid 1950s, affecting the whole peninsula from Rijeka to Koper. Eventually it numbered as many as 250,000 people: a massive haemorrhage. Among the refugees was the Tomizza family from the village of Materada, midway between Buje and Umag, in the heart of Sir Gardner Wilkinson's semi-colon. Young Fulvio Tomizza was twenty when he joined the flight to Trieste. He found work there as a journalist at the local radio station, published his first book a few years later, and has been a steadily productive novelist ever since. The Istran exodus lies at the core of his work, Deracination has been his Muse.

Called simply *Materada*, that first novel is set in 1954, perhaps the nadir of Istra's postwar history. The London Memorandum had just confirmed Yugoslav possession of Istra and Italian possession of Trieste, precipitating a final rush of Italians, and Slavs too, across the border. Tomizza's miniature epic shows the exodus at fever pitch, destroying the morale of the community by bringing out the worst. Prudent farmers grow sly and suspicious, marriages buckle, children despise parents, brother fights brother. The settling of old scores is on everyone's mind.

Materada is devouring itself at such a rate that people are relieved to get away, 'and the ones who stayed were almost apologetic for not having left already'. Not that the place had been a paradise before; its tragedy is that events far beyond the villagers' control now conspire to exploit their weaknesses, hammering a wedge into the hairline fractures of old ethnic tension, injecting hatred into minor villages feuds.

In the narrator's imagination an air of apocalypse hangs over Materada. The very land is emptying, "as if abandoned to perpetual night."

The plot turns on exactly this question of the land and who possesses it. Francesco Kozlovic, the narrator, farms his uncle's land, to which he is bound by wordless peasant loyalty. The two little local towns are the axis of his universe. "Buje was the capital of the world for us," and "for me," he confesses, "Umag is the most beautiful place in the world."

The ailing uncle has made a will leaving half his land to

his son, who lives in Trieste, and the other, richer half to Francesco and his brother Berto. But they all know that this second half has been marked down for expropriation by the Communists when the old man dies.

Francesco doesn't want to emigrate; he merely wants justice. He has worked this land, sowed it, made it fruitful; it belongs to him and to his sons after him by elemental, indisputable right. To a farmer, the politicisation of everything is to the corruption of everything. Ideology is used to justify revenge and the abuse of power by petty officials. Francesco takes his case to the local Communist officials; they sympathise but they won't intervene because, though Francesco helped the Partisans, he still won't join the Party. Then they change their mind and offer him a way to get the property, but only by laying false charges against his uncle, who is legally unassailable. The evils of traditional injustice and revolutionary injustice mirror each other. Francesco is revolted, refuses to play along, and accepts he and his family have no choice but to follow his neighbours into exile.

First Crispin left, then Mojca arrived from Ljubljana. The three of us drove through Materada and Buje to Motovun, one of the hoary hilltop towns in the interior.

The road spiralled upwards from the river valley, round the hillside, towards the town walls. Except for a few old people on the balcony of a pensioners' home, who peered at us a moment and resumed a solemn debate about which of them owned the most teeth, we had the place to ourselves. Miha noted a children's playground, new since his last visit, under the walls: "It shows the place must be picking up."

These great walls – 'of venerable age', as my 1913 Handbook safely observes – are presented as the town's prime tourist attraction. They completely encircle the town, making a citadel of the town centre, and they were needed, too, more than 700 years ago, when Motovun had a brief spell of independence as the republic of Montona, before submitting to Venice's easy terms as a protection against more rapacious predators. In return Venice demanded wood from the local forests to build her navies, stone from the quarries, and a

legion of reserve soldiers, 4,000 from all Istra.

Relics of Venice are all around, from the Lion of Saint Mark embossed upon the main gatehouse, to the cathedral's main treasure: a silver-gift altar that belonged five centuries ago to the army commander of the Serenissima, Bartolommeo Colleoni himself, he of Verrocchio's tremendous equestrian statue. We could not admire the altar because the cathedral was locked, so we paid a few dinars to make a circuit of the walls instead.

Miha was right: Motovun is regenerating; the shells of old buildings were being cleared and repaired. On the terrace outside an unexpectedly smart hotel, the first diners were eating tartufi-truffles, a local speciality – washed down with teran, an Adriatic red wine as sharp as the limestone ridges where the grapes grow. An empty cafe in a cellar inside the walls was pumping disco beat into the evening air, which absorbed the noise utterly. Only the shreeing of swifts as they swept in arcs high above, where insects floated on the warm currents, disturbed the peace of the Venetian loggia that overlooks the valley of the Mirna.

We sat in the loggia and absorbed the view, all purple and grey in the grainy dusk-light. Between the road and the river, the valley bottom was squared into large cereal fields. Except for patches of straggling vineyard on the lower flanks of the valley, the rest of the landscape was more or less unfarmed. The tops had presumably always been wild – left to sheep and goats, during the centuries when Istra exported wool. Otherwise, signs of lapsed cultivation were everywhere: overgrown orchards of fruit and olive trees, empty farmhouses, crumbling terraces on the hillsides, fields and hedgerows gone rankly to seed. Istra stretched into the distance like a secret garden, intimate, still, melancholy and somehow waiting, rich with untapped potential.

From a swift's-eye view the stillness seems a fact of nature. But not so. It is desolation, produced by humans, and it proves an absence – the absence of those thousands of families that fled in the forties and fifties. From Roman times Istra was assiduously farmed, and travellers were always impressed by

its fecundity. According to legend, Saint Jerome was born near Koper, though he preferred the ecstatic hardship of an anchorite's life in Palestine. Probably Istra never suited ascetics. "The country abounds in vines, olives and grain." Sir Gardner remarked. "A country so bountifully favoured by nature", enthused another Englishman a few decades later, "would at all times have enjoyed the prosperity which seems now to be its portion, had it not been the bone of contention between neighbouring powers, who ended by making a desert of it."

In his memoirs, the Triestine Giani Stuparich (1891–1961) celebrated Istran abundance. "The cultivated land reached as far as the eye could see, and Istra kept arriving in our house with its gifts. Father had many friends there, in all parts. Besides the prawns and figs from Cherso (present-day Cres), there were sea-bream from Cittanova (Novigrad) and oysters from Quietto (the estuary of the Mirna river); demijohns of oil arrived from Umago (Umag) and casks of wine from Parenzo (Porec), and slender bottles of a delicious rose wine from Dignano (Vodnjan); there were kid-goat, hare, and sheep's milk cheese from the interior, and peaches and grapes from Capodistria (Koper) and Isola (Izola)."

The sad serenity of the landscape is present in the people too. Maybe I was anaesthetised by my own summery contentment, yet Istra did not seem traumatised. A Slovene journalist who investigated the postwar exodus wrote recently that "Very few regions in Yugoslavia endured after the Second World War such a dramatic change of populations, of cultures, of customs, and also of economic activity." While this is certainly true, and some of the exiles in Italy remain angrily unreconciled to their 'expulsion', inside Istra there is a shared sense of loss and a common distaste for nationalist politics, whether Slovene, Croat or Italian in origin. A common resignation, born of the certainty that whatever happens, Istra is peripheral, decisive for nothing in Yugoslavia's chaotic deliberations. Born too of the draining away of energy when a province can't keep its youth.

In Motovun and Buje and Groznan, the minority

language became audible at twilight. Old crones chatted in Italian as they hobbled home with bags of shopping or sat in their doorways, wrapped in relict's crappy weeds. A shopkeeper leaning on his counter – at forty the youngest Italian in Groznan – nodded back, without turning, at the waxy portrait of Tito on the wall behind his counter and murmured, as non-Slavs do throughout Yugoslavia, that the minorities were safer when he was around...

Even without the violence that caused it, Istra's depopulation might have happened anyway. Throughout the Mediterranean basin the pull of urban industries has steadily emptied the land of its peasants. Thirty years ago, before its empty farmhouses became the villas and second homes of 'Chiantishire', Tuscany probably looked much as Istra looks today.

Not that this consoles Miha, shaking his head at the landscape: "It's such a pity. Don't you see, Istra should be the Yugoslav California? Our Silicon Valley? It has everything going for it, but nothing changes."