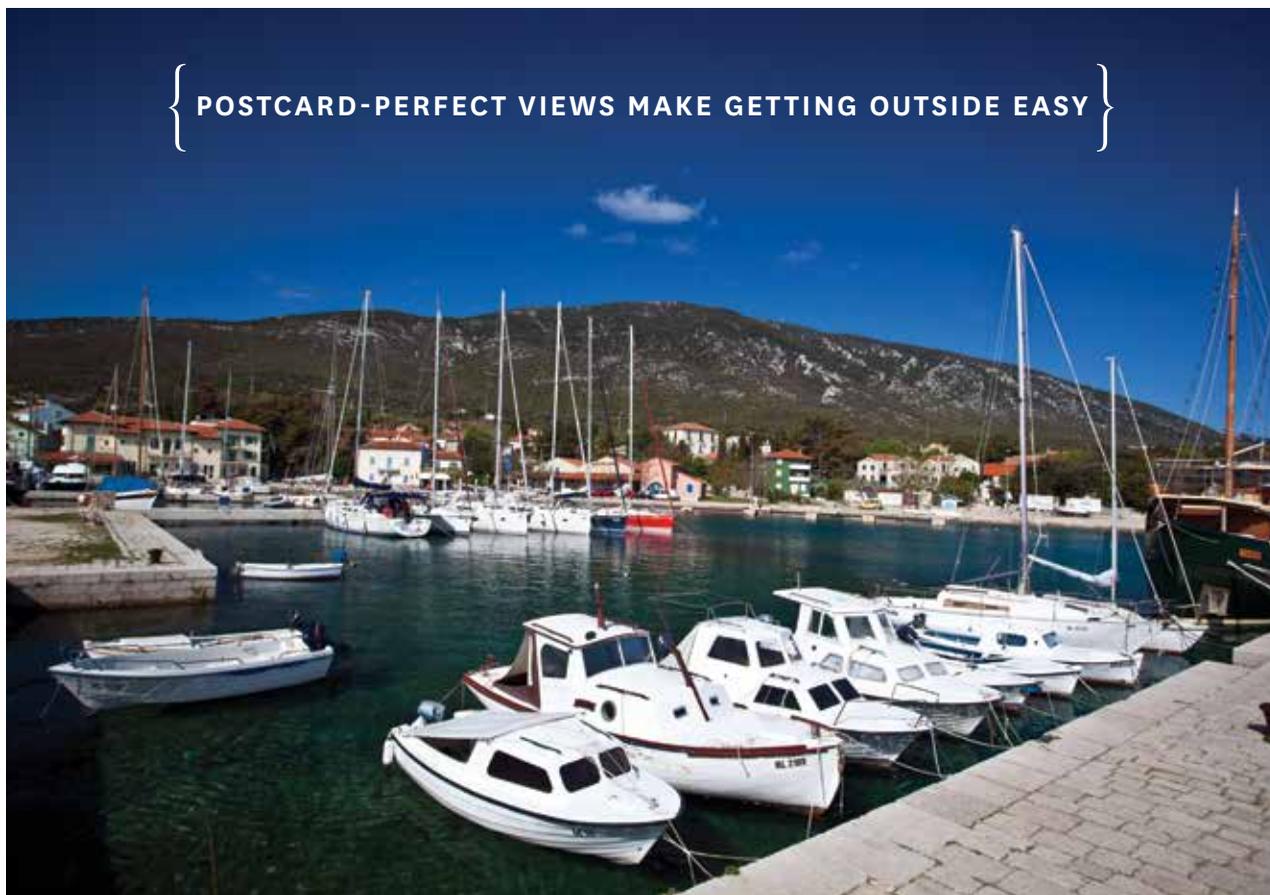


# WALKING IN PARADISE

One woman's trip to a Croatian island nudges her toward a healthier lifestyle

by ROSALIND STEFANAC

{ POSTCARD-PERFECT VIEWS MAKE GETTING OUTSIDE EASY }



IT'S 8 A.M. ON A SUN-DRENCHED AUGUST MORNING and I don't feel much like moving, let alone embarking on a trek that will wind through forests, over hills and through a fishing port. I arrived in Losinj, a 33-kilometre-long island on the western coast of Croatia, just before midnight yesterday after almost 16 hours of travel from Toronto via plane, bus and ferry. Sleep seems like a much better option.

But my sister, who has been here for a week on vacation

and is already looking more toned, coaxes me with the promise of an afternoon of lounging when we return. We opt for a three-kilometre paved path from Mali Losinj (the island's municipality where we're staying) to Veli Losinj, a pretty little town on the southeast side. It's one of the shortest and most popular trails on the island. At a brisk pace, seasoned walkers should be able to do both directions in 45 minutes, but in my jet-lagged state it takes us an hour and a half. Still, within minutes of setting out, I'm

ABOUT 40 PERCENT OF GUESTS COME FOR HEALTH REASONS, SEEKING REFUGE FROM STRESS, FATIGUE OR RESPIRATORY ISSUES.



smiling. To the left of the path is an awe-inspiring vista of massive flat rock nestled against the azure waters of the Adriatic Sea. To the right is a 100-year-old forest of trees that tantalizes my nostrils with the scent of pine.

Welcome to a walker's paradise. Dubbed the "Island of Vitality" for its optimal geographic air quality, 1,200 plant species and 207 days of sunshine a year (attributed to a geographic location that combines the Mediterranean and mountain/plain climate), Losinj has hundreds of kilometres of trails that boast impressive views. The hotels in the area can provide a guide, but between the signs and friendly locals, it's pretty easy to find your way around.

Posted along many of the trails are large information boards in English and Croatian that give tips on proper walking posture, as well as stretches to do before and after your hike. Durdica Simicic, director of the Tourist Board of Mali Losinj, says the city put up the signs several years ago to promote exercise among tourists and locals and to inspire them to "take in the beauty of Losinj and of life itself." Sure enough, certain boards suggest walkers engage their senses, be it by gazing at the ocean, touching the stones en route or inhaling the scent of pine.

During our walk, we pass other tourists and locals of all ages, some of whom are running or biking. One local tells me he runs this path every morning before work. Some rest at one of several benches situated along the way to have a drink of water or a snack. By the time we finish, I'm feeling so energized, I suggest a cooling dip in the ocean before we head back to the small apartment my parents own. Tomorrow we'll start a trail on the other side of the island that

1. ENJOY GREAT EATS IN LOSINJ
2. A PEEK AT SOME WILDLIFE
3. VILLA KAROLINA
4. BEACHES OF BOK BAY
5. CIKAT BAY

## IF YOU GO TRAVEL

**FLIGHT FROM TORONTO TO ZAGREB, CROATIA** during peak season (June to August), \$1,400; off-season, \$900

**BUS FROM ZAGREB TO LOSINJ** (including 20-minute ferry boat), \$60 one way

**DAILY BIKE RENTAL** \$20

## WHERE TO STAY

There are several four- and five-star hotels and villas on the island, as well as private rooms/apartment units equipped with their own small kitchens and bathrooms. Prices for a private residence for two people range from \$54 to \$85 per night, depending on the season. Camping is also available on several parts of the island.

## WHERE TO EAT

Locally raised lamb is a staple, as is seafood. Many restaurants feature seafood caught daily by the local fishermen. Stone oven pizza is another favorite, with toppings like calamari or tuna. (Standard options are also available.) Palacinke (crepes filled with walnut, jam or chocolate) are a local sweet treat, as are fluffy doughnuts filled with jam from the island's citrus fruit. During the summer, vendors sell fruit and fresh cobs of hot corn on the beach. Local wineries provide wine at \$10 per litre.

will take us four hours to complete.

The health benefits of Losinj date back to the 1880s, when the son of Dr. Conrad Clar recovered from severe scarlet fever after spending three weeks on the island.

Researchers began investigating the area's exceptional air qualities attributed to the island's combination of Mediterranean and mountain/plain climate and, in 1892, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy at the time proclaimed Mali and Veli Losinj to be natural climatic health resorts.

Simicic says 40 percent of guests come to the island for health reasons, seeking refuge from stress, fatigue or respiratory issues. In fact, a recent study published in 2013 in local literature showed that after only 10 days, island visitors saw improvements in their lung function.

My mother is a prime example. She has severe asthma and emigrated from Croatia in her teens. She first heard of the island from a friend almost two decades ago and decided to check it out. She found it so beneficial that she and my father have been coming back ever since, and they purchased an apartment there 15 years ago. Over time, the wonders of Losinj's walking trails have been introduced to all of our family.

Though I've visited the island before, this particular trip helps kick-start a much-needed return to walking and an overall focus on good health. As a self-employed writer for the past two years, my days have turned into long, sedentary stretches perched in front of my laptop, with the neck pains and extra pounds to prove it. But the trails in Losinj remind me how good it feels to get outside and put one foot in front of the other. *HR*