



Out there

A collection of twelve previously unpublished features from the team that brought you Lonely Planet magazine, ready for when it's time to head out and see the world again

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An aerial photograph of a tropical beach. The beach is a long, narrow strip of light-colored sand, tapering to a point. It is surrounded by clear, turquoise water that transitions into a deeper blue. To the right of the beach is a dense, lush green forest. A small, white, triangular structure is visible on the beach near the forest. The overall scene is serene and picturesque.

HEART OF STONE

Famed for having the Adriatic's most photogenic beach, the Croatian island of Brač also possesses extraordinary architecture and a centuries-old mystery to rival The Da Vinci Code – and it owes it all to the local stone

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At nine o'clock on a warm summer's morning, the musical clink of metal on stone echoes from the open windows of Pučišća's stonemason school, a grand limestone building that overlooks the sapphire water of the town's tiny harbour.

Inside, 20 or so students, aged from 15 to 18, are hammering, chiselling, and polishing chunks of the local limestone. Sunlight catches on particles of limestone dust hanging in the air. The works-in-progress range from rough cubes, fresh from the quarry, to huge lion sculptures, and a Gothic window-frame that looks like it belongs in a medieval church. The techniques the students use would all be recognisable to the stonemasons of antiquity: what makes the school special is its focus on traditional hand tools. Fifteen-year-old Vanessa Martinić grips a fierce-looking toothed implement called a zubatka in her carefully manicured hand. She's using it to shape a block that will eventually end up as a fruit bowl.

There's nothing traditional about Vanessa, or her friend and classmate, Gabriela Tomić, with their part-shaved hairstyles and faintly American-accented English. But they both seem enthused by the painstaking techniques and the sense of connection it gives them to the material. 'When you work with stone, you get this feeling, and you just go with it,' says Gabriela, as though she's talking about kite-surfing. She chases an outline on a tile with a tiny chisel. 'I think it's in our genes,' explains the school's principal, Dr Tamara Plastić. 'Everyone who is born here is attracted by stone — so am I.'

By here, Dr Plastić means Brač: an island that lies just off Croatia's Dalmatian coast, a 40-minute boat-ride from Split. Limestone quarried on Brač has been coveted for millennia. Soft enough to cut, but hard enough to polish, it has a silky sheen that's often mistaken for marble. In Škrip, the island's oldest continuously inhabited town, ancient sarcophaguses dating from the 4th century AD lie discarded along the main square — commissioned, and then rejected by demanding Roman clients. A few yards away, 79 year-old Rajka Metlitić, calls me over to her konoba — the limestone cellar beneath her house — and offers me a glass of her homemade walnut liqueur. The cellar is dark and cool, even at midday, and full of bottles of her wine and oil, and jars of honey. In one corner, she shows me the limestone basin that once stored her olive oil — it looks like a mini sarcophagus.

Brač's ubiquitous limestone has formed the geography,



built the economy and shaped the lives of the island's inhabitants for thousands of years. It's a principal export, a building material, and a means of self-expression. Limestone presses squeezed the local olives and grapes — and limewash sealed the stone tiles of the islanders' roofs. Bricks are used to build the wood-fired outdoor ovens where the islanders cook their most famous dish, peka, but when I tried this hearty meal of roasted meat and vegetables, it was served on a gleaming table of polished limestone. Most famously, Brač limestone was quarried and shipped over the water to build Emperor Diocletian's 4th-century palace in Split. To say the islanders are proud of their stone would be an understatement. The newest winery on the island — housed in a limestone building on the waterfront in Bol — is called Stina: stone in the local dialect. Locals will tell you that Brač limestone from Pučišća was used to build the White House in Washington DC. The evidence for this is slim, but I don't recommend contradicting them — their love of stone manifests itself in ways that are not wholly rational.

Just a few hundred yards from the stonemason school in Pučišća stands a tiny 15th-century chapel. Inside, local sculptor Josip Radić is showing his remarkable creations to a party of visitors who've disembarked from a cruise ship. Entirely self-taught, 51-year old Josip began sculpting after a medical condition forced him to retire early from a career in the army.

As I shake Josip's hand, I feel the crushing power of his grip. His right hand is covered with thick callouses and his right forearm is hypertrophied from hours of stone-work. Josip uses pliers and dental tools to cut limestone and shape it into tiny models of religious buildings. A series of belltowers stand in the shadows of the chapel, but pride of place is given to his masterpiece: a scale model of St Peter's Basilica in Rome. He removes its cloth covering with a flourish. It's an astonishing achievement, weighing 200 kilos and accurate to the last detail. Josip finished it six months earlier, having worn out three pairs of pliers in the process. 'Stone has a very beautiful smell,' he says. 'It smells like roses when I work.' But he tells me he's had his fill of it for now. 'I built it for five years and two months, but for seven years I was thinking about it every night. I was thinking only about this, and now I need a rest for two or three years.' And then? He lowers his voice: 'Maybe my next project will be Notre Dame — before the fire.' ➡



Student stonemason Vanessa Martinić. Opposite: Tools at the stonemason school in Pučišća. Previous pages: Zlatni Rat's pointed beach



A Brač limestone visage carved at the stonemason school. Opposite: The view across Pučišća harbour from near the school



ISLE OF MASONS

Looking east from above Zlatni Rat beach over the water towards the peak of Sutvid on the mainland



B

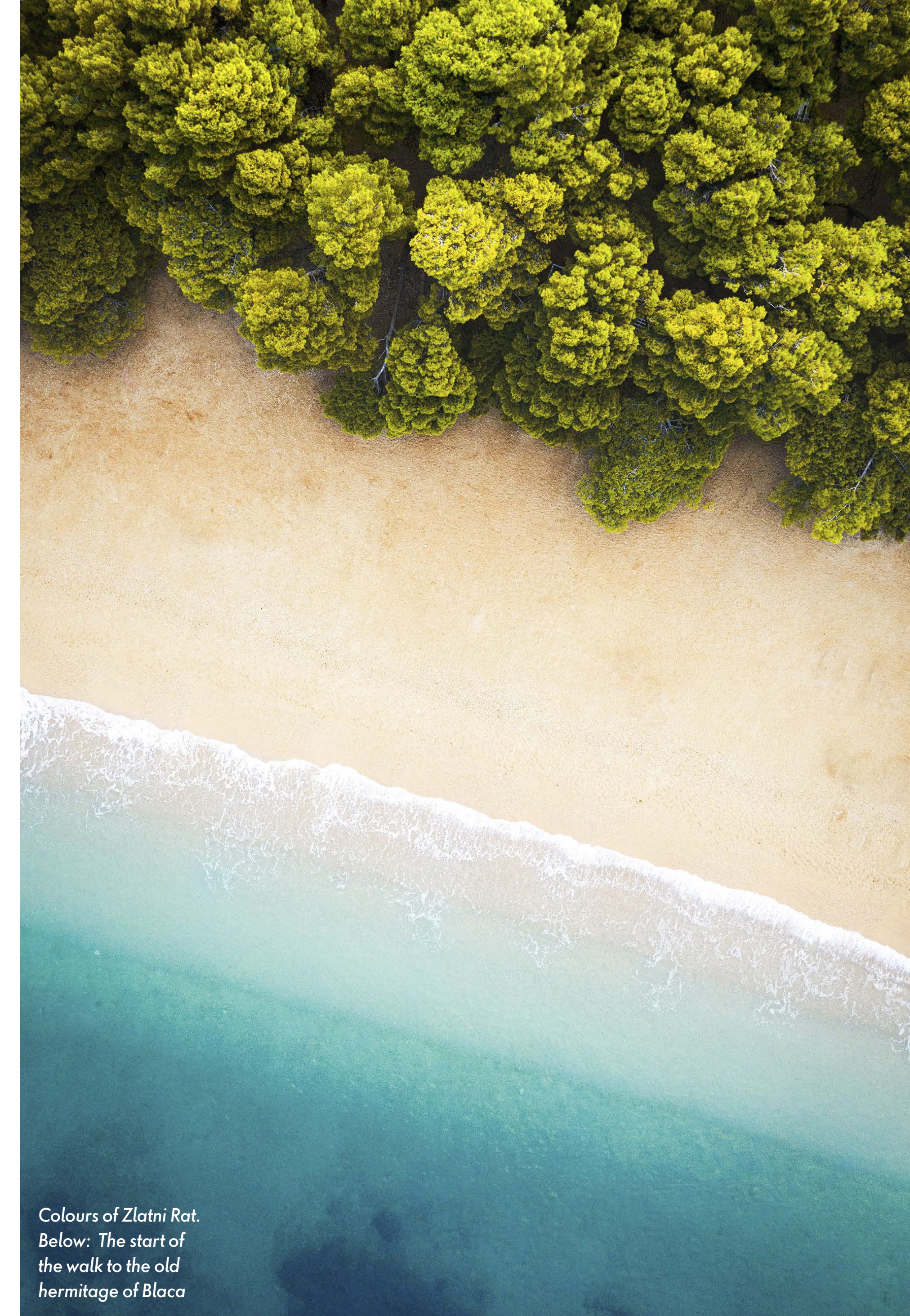
rač's most recognisable limestone structure is best seen from altitude. At ground level, Zlatni Rat — the Golden Horn — on the western edge of the town of Bol is a lively pine-shaded beach with good parking, bars and restaurants. But from the top of Vidova Gora, the island's highest point, you can see that it's more than just a beach: Zlatni Rat is a found sculpture. Its extraordinary natural geometry would have satisfied Vitruvius himself, the classical master of proportion. Millennia of rainfall, erosion, wind, and sea currents have worked in concert to produce a spit of fertile land that's covered with smooth limestone pebbles. Emerging from a green triangle of pine trees, it points out into the Adriatic like a gold arrow. Around it the seawater deepens from sapphire to royal blue. It's utterly captivating. The tip bends left in summer and right in winter, according to the prevailing wind, and at certain rare times a circular puddle appears at the end – an event of enough significance to be mentioned on Croatia's television news.

Brač's abundant limestone and its distance from the mainland have made it a place of sanctuary for people fleeing the conflicts that historically convulsed Croatia. A ten-minute drive from Vidova Gora, I park my rental car and set off to find one such refuge. The route takes me down a steep footpath into a narrow valley that buzzes with the sound of cicadas. After 20 minutes of walking, I see it: an austere and angular structure that seems to have grown from the steep cliff behind it. This is the former hermitage of Blaca.

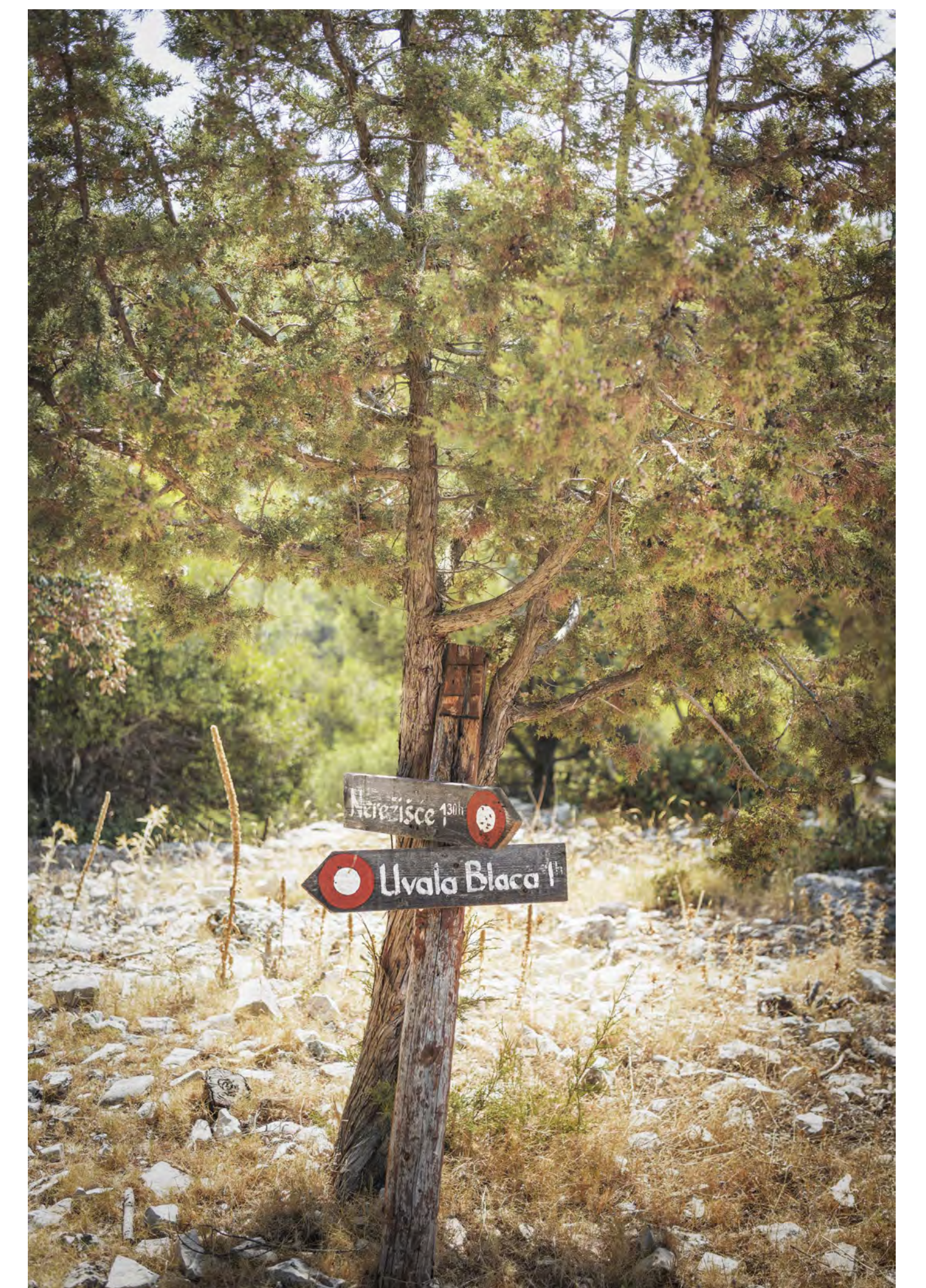
Inside its shaded entrance courtyard, 23-year-old Tonijela Vranjičić is selling her homemade honey, wine, and olive oil to a visiting group of French hikers. She tells me that she and her family are the custodians of Blaca. Her grandfather worked for the last hermit to live here and she's steeped in the place's history.

Tonijela explains that the three monks who founded the monastery fled to the island from the mainland to escape the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century. Their first refuge was a limestone cave. Gradually, they acquired the land around it and, assisted by generations of local workers, chiselled out limestone from the valley wall and constructed this grand stone structure with rich vineyards and olive groves around it. At one point, Blaca Monastery was wealthy enough to own its own ships for exporting wine and olive oil across the Adriatic to Venice. The last hermit to live here died in 1963 and Tonijela's family have been looking after the building ever since.

Tonijela tells me she's torn between continuing the family tradition of caretaking or embarking on a legal career in Split. 'Blaca means everything to me,' she says with a sigh. 'It's the past of my family. It's an amazing ➡



Colours of Zlatni Rat.
Below: The start of
the walk to the old
hermitage of Blaca





Blaca hermitage was built into the cliffs of a south-coast valley in the mid-16th century, and inhabited until the last monk died in 1963.



Tonijela Vranjčić and her family help to look after Blaca. Right: Enigmatic figures carved into the rock at Zmajeva Špilja

place—nearly 500 years old now. They started in 1551 and built it all over 300 years.’

The hermitage is only reachable on foot, making it feel distant from the troubles of the 21st century. Wandering round, you understand why Tonijela might feel torn. The fireplace in its kitchen is still used to heat the building when she and her family are in residence. There are four centuries of soot on its high limestone walls. The rooms of the last hermit, Nikola Miličević, are preserved just as he left them — with his furniture, precious piano and letters. There’s also an open diary that contains an entry from 19 April 1912 recording the sinking of the *Titanic* – five days after it happened.


Most mysteriously of all, Brač’s limestone chronicles a bizarre chapter from the island’s past. A strenuous 40-minute walk from the village of Murvica on the south coast of the island, up a steep path that winds through pine trees and wild figs, stands the Zmajeva Špilja – or Dragon’s Cave. Behind a padlocked gate, accessible only during guided tours, are a series of weird stone carvings that defy easy explanation.

Standing in the narrow cave, high up on the hillside, there’s a distinctly uncanny atmosphere. Ivy and fig vines dangle from the rock vaulting above me. There are nooks for sacred objects and tiny cells which must have once been bedrooms. Faces are sculpted in reverse into the limestone walls – in darkness, candlelight makes them stare eerily out of the rock. On the cave’s western wall, a series of unsettling images culminate in a sinister sculpture of a large snake.



Local tour guide Zoran Kojdić has spent over 20 years researching the history of the cave obsessively. During our three-hour visit, he lays out a mind-bending theological mystery story that combines elements of *The Da Vinci Code* with the horror film *The Wicker Man*.

Kojdić believes that the worship of Slavic gods persisted on the island of Brač much longer than anyone suspects. He tells me that priests would come from the mainland to try and enforce ideological orthodoxy on the islanders, who were hedging their bets worshipping both the old and new deities. Well into the 20th century, he says, locals would make pilgrimages to island chapels sacred to St Vitus, where they would sacrifice lambs. The sacrifices, Kojdić argues, were pagan rites in heavy disguise, and St Vitus really a stand-in for Perun, the Slavic thunder god. According to his interpretation, the Dragon’s Cave, while ostensibly a Christian chapel with carvings inspired by the Book of Revelation, is in fact a memorial to Perun’s nemesis: the snake deity Veles. ‘Veles will find a way to disrupt your life,’ says Kojdić, with a spine-tingling matter-of-factness. ‘But it would be wrong to think of him as evil. He’s also the god of fertility.’

Just outside the gate of the cavern, there’s another altar that stands in the open. It’s been aged by the elements until it looks as white and rough as old coral. A pair of mysterious eyes gaze out from a rudimentary face in the altarpiece. Kojdić tells me no one knows who it represents or to which of many possible gods it’s sacred. But it seems enough to think of him simply as the god of stone. 

MARCEL THEROUX travelled with support from the Croatian National Tourist Board. He is the author of several novels including *The Secret Books*, published by Faber and Faber.

MAKE IT HAPPEN

BRAČ

MORE INFORMATION

Find out more about Brač and the region of Dalmatia centred around Split at croatia.hr and visitbrac.com.

Getting there and around

Brač has a small airport with summer flights to the Croatian capital Zagreb, and a handful of other European destinations, though not the UK. The airport at Split, on the mainland, is a much bigger access point. From the port of Split, Jadrolinija (jadrolinija.hr) runs car ferries and catamarans to Brač's largest town, Supetar, as well as to Bol on the far side of the island. For the most flexibility, it's best to have a rental car on Brač. If you would rather not pay to bring your car on the ferry, rent one from local travel agencies in Bol or Supetar, including atlas-supetar.com and boltours.com.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

1) If you're travelling to Brač via Split, make time to wander the remains of Diocletian's Palace – the historic centre of the city was built in the ruins of this Roman imperial residence. Just west of here, **Konoba Varoš** (konobavaros.com) offers a typically Dalmatian menu led by pasta and seafood dishes for a lunch while waiting for your ferry to Brač.

2) It's just a short stroll down to Bol's harbour from **Villa Giardino** (villagiardinobol.com), a boutique hotel with a look that's both classical and contemporary, with its Venetian-style windows and restrained colour palette. Plans are afoot to add a pool to its resplendent back garden, but in the mean time if swimming up to an infinity horizon is a holiday essential, a more radically modern alternative is **Lifestyle Hotel Vitar** on the western edge of town (hotelvitar.com). And if you're after a villa rental of your own, you can browse options at adria-bol.hr. For this trip, our team also stayed at **Villa Oliva 2** on a hilltop above Zlatni Rat beach.

3) In the inland village of Donji Humac, you'll find spit-grilled lamb and a variety of one-pot 'peka' dishes at Konoba Kopačina (konoba-kopacina.com). Opt for a table on the panoramic terrace if you can. Back in Bol, **Ribarska Kućica** is right on the seaside just east of the town centre and serves dishes such as grilled cuttlefish and seafood pasta (00 385 95 902 9844).

4) Above and to the west of Bol, **Vidova Gora** is not just the summit of Brač, at 778 metres it's also the highest point of any Adriatic island. A sealed road reaches the top, from which views take in Zlatni Rat and the island of Hvar across the channel. The pointed beach at Zlatni Rat is a mile by road west of the centre of Bol.

5) Enquire at Bol's tourist office (bol.hr) about tours to the remote former hermitage at **Blaca**. Whether you're getting to the area by the rough road or by boat excursion, there will be a hike of a mile or more to reach the monastery. The tourist office can also help with tours of **Zmajeva Špilja** (Dragon's Cave), or you can call Zoran Kojdić directly on 00 385 91 51 49 787. If you want to visit the stonemasons' school in Pučišća, it's also best to enquire in advance (ss-klesarska-pucisca.skole.hr).



Clear water in Bol's fishing harbour. Right: The terrace at Ribarska Kućica. Opposite: Lovrečina Bay on the north coast of Brač



Walking to Blaca from the inland trailhead. Left: The restaurant at Villa Giardino in Bol

