

## Black Woods Island: Korčula

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The year 2020 will always be remembered for the COVID-19 pandemic, but in Croatia it will also be remembered for two earthquakes, one in March, the other in December. After the final tremors ended in March, snow suddenly began to fall in the capital, Zagreb. It was an eerie sight in Croatia's normally temperate spring. To people under lockdown, who were facing a pandemic for the first time, the earthquake, then the snow, seemed to presage the end of the world.

Croatia's islands were spared the effects of the first earthquake. Maybe that is because they lie farther south and, like all islands, are set apart from the mainland. As one Croatian writer put it, typically "you do not go to an island by road, you do not approach it on foot. You do not leave an island as you leave a village or a city. You suddenly put on shore, descending on an island like a seagull. You drop off an island just as the island itself dropped off from the shore and just as we disembark from a boat: only over a temporary, narrow and swaying bridge which is and yet is not a bridge."

Similarly, on all my travels to Croatia's islands, I always felt I'd broken free from my own mainland, shrugged off the prim atmosphere and little orthodoxies of academia and shed my former self the farther south I travelled and the farther offshore I went. A recent journey researching a travel book

reinforced these feelings. I was travelling through southern Dalmatia and I arrived on the island of Korčula.

My first destination was the main town, also called Korčula. Founded, according to local legend, by Trojan warrior Antenor in the twelfth century BCE, the town was built on a small peninsula less than 500 metres in length and half that in width, and was packed in its heyday with 6,000 inhabitants. It resembles a smaller version of the walled city of Dubrovnik, with a main street that runs like a spine down its centre and side streets like ribs angled towards the town's tip. Fortified walls with massive cylindrical towers once encircled all of the city and seemed to prevent the crammed buildings from tumbling into the sea. The plague forced citizens to burn parts of the city in the sixteenth century, but Korčula has nevertheless kept its medieval, Gothic, and Renaissance flavour.

By the southern entrance of the city, which is surmounted by the massive Revelin tower with the lion of St. Mark on its outer face, the Biokovo mountains on the mainland seemingly just a few metres distant, a trick of the eye, I climbed a broad staircase and stepped into the old world. Swallows were swooping and screeching through the streets and around the sixteenth-century Sv. Marko Cathedral, which rises high above the tightly packed fray of orange roofs. A warm light of



John McDonald, *Morning On* (2019), oil on canvas, 96 in. x 48 in.

early evening shone against stone walls and flagstoned streets, and I walked around with time on my hands, saw palaces and walled courtyards and chapels like Svi Sveti ("All Saints," 1306), miniature squares, elaborate stone balconies and Renaissance loggias that had survived the fire in the sixteenth century or been built since then. Orange trees, vines, a profusion of potted plants crowding tight lanes were everywhere. A woman through an open window pulled clothes off her line. I heard, when I came in through the main gate, a small group of singers, men in white shirts and black pants, a *klapa*, singing the soulful tune "Proplakat će me zora" ("The Dawn Will Cry for Me"). Their voices echoed against the stone as in a church, the bass turning deeply, lifting the higher voices above the roofs of the city:

The dawn will cry for me  
As will the sky with stars  
So how wouldn't my darling cry  
Whom I have always loved

Far away are my islands  
Far away is my village  
Far away is my darling  
Far away from me my sea.

The voices of the *klapa* ghosting behind me, I went on through the streets and came

across a dilapidated stone house reputed to be the birthplace of Marco Polo (ca. 1254–1324) located on a side street with steep stairs, a plaque, and a ticket collector. The ticket collector was a disinterested old man with spectacles reading a paper who answered, when I asked him why the Italians thought Marco Polo was born in Venice, "How should I know?" I didn't end up going in.

What is apparently known is that a naval battle between Venetian and Genoese forces occurred near Korčula off Lumbarda in 1298 and that Marco Polo was captured by the Genoese in the battle and imprisoned, subsequently dictating his famous travels to fellow inmate and novelist of chivalric romances Rustichello da Pisa. The house in which Polo was allegedly born was given to the Depolo family in 1400, 76 years after Marco's death. It is possible that the original house was destroyed in the fire in the sixteenth century, and that this one is either a replacement or an impostor. In 2011 a museum dedicated to "Marco Polo" was opened by former Croatian President Stipe Mesić in Yangzhou, China, where Polo was an official for Emperor Kublai Khan from 1282 to 1284. Mesić seized the opportunity to reassert the story of Marco Polo's origins in Korčula, to the consternation of the Italians. Wrote one journalist in the *Carriere della Sera*.

If ever proof were needed that the Italian authorities don't know what they are doing, this is it. How could they possibly let anyone kidnap Marco Polo?... Even if Marco Polo had by some chance been born at Curzola (Italo Calvino was born in Havana but no one would dream of calling him a "Cuban writer"), the island that Croats now call "Korčula" was culturally Venetian, as is obvious from the old town, the Marcian Lions over the doors and the cathedral of St. Mark.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, to counter the last part of this remark, I point you to a comment by Rebecca West in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* on the subject of the main cathedral in Korčula. She attributed its strangeness of appearance, likening it to a giraffe, to the architect's need to build in a confined space, and she noted the "troubled intricacy of the ornamentation, loaded with tragic speculations of the Slav mind. For Korčula, like Trogir, is an intensely Slav town."<sup>3</sup>

The second earthquake in Croatia in 2020, on December 29, was even more powerful and destructive than the first. The town of Petrinja, 49 kilometres southeast of Zagreb, was largely destroyed. Online the other day, I learned that people with nowhere to go

were forced to sleep outside in the freezing rain and mud. Hundreds of other quakes and aftershocks followed, and tremors could be felt as far away as southern Dalmatia. Even Korčula experienced the big earthquake of 2020, the worst in Croatia since 1880.

But, as I write, the snow outside my window falling steadily, I feel far away from the island. For one, I have never been to Dalmatia in the winter, when the towns are empty and the tourists are gone and the big grey waves of the Adriatic slam against the harbour walls. To me the island in the winter is an abstraction. It is as though it doesn't exist without me there to see it and bring it to life.

Instead, my own trip to Korčula breathes with my own memories. As I write these words, in the present of the act of writing, I think of my past journey, and I see myself leaving the main town and heading west. I feel the heat of the summer sun, smell the pine forests and the herbs from the fields. The sea is not far.

Along Korčula's coasts are beaches like the famous sandy Lumbarda, as well as other similar bays and coves, like Pupnataska luka, where I asked a local fisherman who was folding his net if the dory just offshore was his and he answered testily, "What the hell is that to you," then when we got into an argument about my right to be there at all and ask a question like that in front of his

house, he threatening to throw my camera into the sea if I took a picture of his boat, me pointing out that people elsewhere in Croatia had always been polite and he answering, "It's because they don't have the sea." I took a swim anyway.

The inland village of Pupnat, the oldest on the island, is around 12 kilometres west of Korčula, a settlement of 400 people set against the hills. Among tall, simple, orange-tiled houses and little lanes are small courtyards covered in vines and decorated by bright flowers, and a fancy villa or two, even with a swimming pool. I saw local men in their white undershirts and loose pants and suspenders and flip-flops talking to each other, a little contentious and standoffish to foreigners coming along with prying questions. A woman was selling olive oil, honey, and bottles of white wine, which she had lined up on a wall near the main square.

paths and country roads of packed earth and cream-coloured limestone. Various herbs grew fragrantly along the way, and cicadas sawed away in the trees. Eventually, the dark blue sea spread out below me, and the mountains of the mainland to the north. This time they didn't give me the impression I could reach out and touch them. In the village itself, when I got there, some tourists were walking lazily through town or lying on the stone pier, but overall the place seemed deserted. Some of the same tall stone buildings I had seen in postcards were still here, along with new villas along the coast. There were no wooden fishing vessels anymore, but many small motorized boats. Where there had been terraces of vineyards there was mostly pine forest. Rašiće gave me the feeling it had retreated in time. The wilderness was encroaching upon it and surrounding it again.

After a swim and a meal, ready to head back to Pupnat, I came across some elderly men playing bocce on a dirt court. There were five or six of them standing over the balls discussing something, while another sat on the side observing. They wore white undershirts or short-sleeved collared shirts and shorts and sandals. When I got closer I could tell they weren't discussing something; they were arguing over the position of the balls, it seemed, whether a dark metal ball or its white counterpart was closer to the jack.

The tall skinny guy with a thatch of white hair, who seemed to represent the black ball, said to a short guy with bandy legs and round glasses, "It's obvious if you look."

"I am looking and nothing is obvious to me."

"That's because you are looking at it from the wrong angle, come over here and you will see better," the tall man said.

"Why would I go over there when it is the same as over here, didn't you study geometry in school?" the little guy answered.

"I studied it same as you! Listen, take that bicycle off your nose, maybe that will help you see better."

"I know how you did in school, so don't talk to me. And I can see fine, don't you worry."

"Then just go get the stick and we will measure the balls," the tall one said.

"We've gone over this before," the little guy answered – he was starting to move around on his short bandy legs in agitation – "the stick is bent and is not to be trusted. We need a new stick."

The tall man threw up his hands. "Like this we will go on forever. I say we start again."

The little guy eyed him a moment, then answered, "Why would we start again when it is obvious."

"I am looking and nothing is obvious to me," the tall one said. And so on it went. I left them there arguing with each other, and began my journey back to the car.

The earthquake is not ending in Croatia. Hundreds of tremors shake the town of Petrinja. A woman I know informs us on her Facebook page that she has travelled to the town and brought food to the animals, like the dogs left chained in abandoned yards. The countryside around Petrinja in January, with its spectral and skeletal winter trees, is brown and dismal. How different from the summer. How different from the island I came to know on my trip a few years ago.

I found myself on the main road that cuts inland through mountainous wooded terrain and flat fertile plains. I came to Smokvica, a town around 30 kilometres from Korčula, positioned on the flanks of a big hill which is covered by deep woods of black pines. At the base of the town are vast fields covered by vineyards, gardens, and olive groves. There are 600 acres of vineyards, two million vines, and 70,000 olive trees.

Smokvica isn't a tourist hot spot, nor are its buildings architectural masterpieces, yet to me it was still a striking sight. Its band of terracotta-roofed houses and tawny stone fronts along ribbons of streets runs parallel with the hill; the parish church steeple points

out of the fray. Cézanne's cubistic paintings of southern French villages, buildings piled on top of each other, came to my mind.

Like many inland island towns in Croatia, Smokvica can be hot and stuffy when the summer sun bakes the streets all day, and I thought of the sea on the other side of the mountain.

But there were things to do in Smokvica that delayed my journey to the coast. I came across a winery, one of a number in town, with three wine barrels on a wooden wagon outside, and traditional tools of the wine trade and farming inside. On thick wooden tables were bottles of wine and herb brandies. The grape variety for which Smokvica is best known is *Posip*. Indigenous to the island, *Posip* is a thin-skinned grape high in sugar and prone to early ripening; it is susceptible to the late summer sun's scorching heat, so the proximity of the sea and its cooling winds are vital.

I went down to the fields for a closer look at the vineyards below Smokvica. In no rush, I dawdled on the roads and paths through the plain. The heat had dropped off and the light had faded as the sun began to set. An aroma of vines and reddish earth, accentuated by the sun having beaten on them all day, rose around me. I saw white, oval *Posip* grapes, light golden-green, as well as some dark blue, tightly packed *Plavac mali*. In between

vineyards were olive groves and gardens and pockets of tall untended grass from which poppies and other flowers grew wildly. Low rock walls ran along the curving paths. On this late afternoon I saw no one else, and I sat on a stone in an olive grove and took in the sights and smells. There was nowhere I had to be, no pressing demands on my time, and even the call of the sea on the other side of the hill was somehow muted. Travellers, when they came to the islands, were invariably drawn to the coast and to the sea, but here, in this inland agrarian world, there was much beauty and peace, and I felt as though I were on an island inside the island. 📍

#### NOTES

1. Slobodan Novak, "Introspective Mirror," in *The Adriatic Archipelago Telling Tales*, trans. Stipe Grgas (Split: Hydrographic Institute of the Republic of Croatia, 2010), 129.
2. Gian Antonio Stella, "Croatia 'Kidnaps' Marco Polo," trans. Giles Watson, *Corriere della Sera*. April 22, 2011, accessed November 27, 2016, [http://www.corriere.it/International/english/articoli/2011/04/22/stella-croatia-marco-polo.shtml?refresh\\_ce-cp](http://www.corriere.it/International/english/articoli/2011/04/22/stella-croatia-marco-polo.shtml?refresh_ce-cp).
3. Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey through Yugoslavia* (New York: The Viking Press, 1941), 211–212.