

Croatia

A holiday at the helm

Want to learn how to sail? Monique Ceccato finds a luxury liveaboard on the Dalmatian Coast the ultimate place to learn the ropes

The whole deck shudders as I cut the engines on our catamaran. Their rumble is replaced by the gentle sloshing of the ocean against the hulls as we make a beeline back towards the Pakleni island chain southwest of Hvar. I shoot a beaming smile at our instructor. We've done it. My yacht mates and I have jumped the mainsail, unfurled the jib and we're

successfully sailing ourselves along Croatia's Dalmatian Coast.

It's a massive feat considering, just six days earlier, the four of us had boarded the 42-foot *Marbella* at Trogir's Marina Baotic as complete sailing rookies. But that's why we joined Nautilus Sailing's week-long intensive – to learn to sail and come out of it with globally recognised ASA 101, 103, 104, and 114 certifications.

There's no time to waste. Our lessons with lead instructor Tim Geisler begin almost immediately after we lay claim to our private double cabins. The first is theoretical – a complete guide to the intricate workings of the delicate toilet systems – and the second is a hands-on scavenger hunt to locate the all-important life jackets, flares and bottle openers.

Soon, practical boating lessons start with the rattle of the ignition and untying of stern lines. "Monique, I'm going to get you to take over at the helm," Tim instructs. It's a cannonball into the deep end but, after a few minutes with the wheel and split throttles, I've mastered the basics of controlling a catamaran.

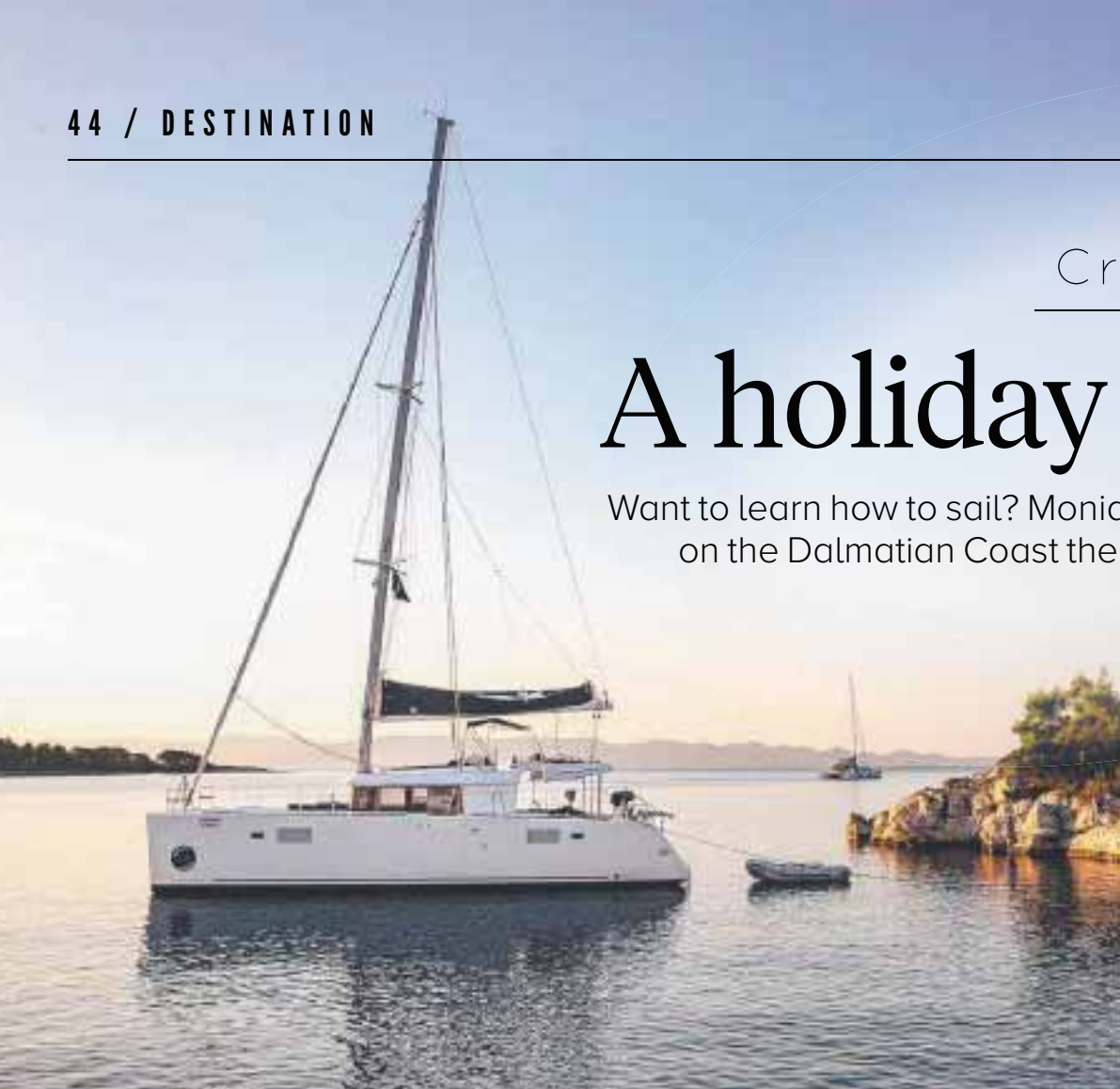
I motor on, navigating us towards our first Mediterranean mooring of the week. It's tucked in at the end of Solta's tapered Šešula bay, flanked by low, shrub-covered cliffs that perfectly cocoon us from the evening breeze. We're still very much fledglings, so Tim takes the wheel while we work on the bow and stern lines. With guidance from the mooring owner, the hulking craft shimmies into place, stern-to-shore, alongside the two other student yachts sailing with us this week.

Though it's uncharacteristically overcast, the afternoon is still pleasantly balmy and our glittering backyard beckons. I dive in off the back of the boat, sending the milling forage fish scattering. The water is tepid and crystal-clear through to the seagrass-spattered sand. "Oh, my gosh, life doesn't suck," Tim says. He's sailed this course many times, but his enthusiasm for it hasn't waned. Looking back at our catamaran in the afternoon's golden glow, I understand why.

Unlike other Croatian liveaboards, this week with Nautilus isn't all play and no work. "Knot-tying 101" kicks off under the late-summer sun, post-coffee and morning dip. Wrapped in a towel, I sit, listen and learn, manipulating a length of rope into a reef knot, a cleat hitch, and a round turn and two half hitches. They're easy enough to complete at a leisurely learner's pace. But, under the pressure of time and the stares of strangers at our next stop at ACI Marina Palmizana, it's a whole other story.

Though we're just 2.4 nautical miles from the buzzing port of Hvar, there's far less frenetic energy to the car-less Palmizana island. The afternoon is slow, spent cooling off at a pebbly cove and devouring fried calamari sold by the kilo at Toto's restaurant. A speeding water taxi offers a change of pace, elbowing its way

Photography: Monique Ceccato



From top: Waking up to a still morning in a quiet bay; the resort island of Hvar; crewmate Mary Beth unfurls the jib; view from Toto's in Palmizana; Konoba Luviji Rooftop.



ESCAPE ROUTE

> Nautilus Sailing runs week-long liveaboard intensives throughout the European high season. Monohull and catamaran sailing courses depart each Saturday (May to October) from Trogir, Croatia. nautilusailing.com

> Singapore Airlines will fly you from Perth to Split's Resnik Airport (via Singapore and Brussels), with the departure point in Trogir a short bus or taxi ride away. Emirates connects Sydney and Melbourne with Rome (via Dubai). From here, it's a 75-minute flight to Split with Croatia Airlines.

Top: The coastal town of Komiza on the island of Vis. Above: Swimming selfie with crewmate Mary Beth.

through a sea of tiny tender boats to drop us at the city's doorstep. We follow the heady aroma of garlic and parsley through Dalmatia's largest public square to the back-alley Konoba Luviji Rooftop. It's the restaurant outpost of the namesake winery with views of downtown and the hillside vineyard from which all of its wines come.

We're in another port city a day later, punctuating our lessons, revisions and testing with more ocean swimming and winery visits. This time, we've moored in Vis. We're just far enough away from the busy Riva to avoid the hubbub of revelling boats, yet close enough to tender in for fresh cherry strudels without missing 8am class. After a busy few days of completing certifications, Tim rallies with the other instructors to postpone the rest of the day's sessions and scooter the island instead.

Our convoy winds through acres of vineyard and dense Mediterranean macchia shrubland as a unified group. We stop periodically, taking photos of Vis and Komiza below and dutifully taste-testing gelato to find the island's best (it's at Pa Ti Odoli). Later in the evening, we bond further as a group, sharing glasses of fruit-forward vugava at Lipanović winery, its wine cellar located deep in a historic World War II military tunnel. It's the last hoorah before backtracking, island to island, until we reach Trogir.

As the sun sets on our final night in Croatia, we welcome the rest of the flotilla aboard for one final evening of camaraderie. A toast is in order: to a new group of qualified sailors, ready and able to charter catamarans anywhere in the world. And to new friends. In true Tim style, he leaves us with a pearler: "See, sailing is about so much more than just those big, white flappy things." I couldn't agree more.

The writer was a guest of Nautilus Sailing.



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