



DIOCLETIAN'S PALATIAL CITY

A walled wonder.

by Janice Mucalov

“Where is Diocletian’s Palace?” visitors frequently ask in Split, the second-largest city in Croatia, to which shopkeepers laughingly reply, “You’re in it.” Built by the Roman emperor Diocletian as his retirement residence, the 1,700-year-old palace is no lifeless ruin; it’s the beating heart of Split’s historical inner city. More than 3,000 people live and work within the palace. Its immense walls surround a 10-acre tangle of temple ruins, apartments, museums, hotels, markets, coffee shops, modern boutiques and even an ancient cathedral, all interlaced with pedestrian-only cobblestone alleys.

Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the palace is one of the few cultural monuments in the world where people still go about their everyday lives, where lines of laundry are strung across streets, children kick soccer balls, and cats curl up in doorways. The name *Split*, in fact, comes from the Latin word *spalatum*, which means *palatium* or *palace*.

Known for decentralizing the Roman Empire’s administration (and for slaughtering 150,000 Christians), Diocletian was the first emperor to resign voluntarily. But before he did in AD 305, he commanded an army of slaves to build his retirement retreat, made up of 220 white limestone buildings. He picked prime real estate on a sunny bay lapped by warm, azure waters. Three hundred years later, his palace-fortress was converted into a town by refugees who moved in after their homes were destroyed by invaders. Over time, the city spread out over the surrounding landscape.

The best place to start exploring the palatial city is the famous Riva, the harbourside promenade lined with cafés and white benches shaded by palm trees. Through the Bronze Gate (which once opened directly onto the sea), you descend into a huge underground vault where locals sell arts and crafts. At the far end, steps lead up to the Peristyle, formerly the central courtyard of the

palace. Now the main square and open-air hall for the Split Summer Festival each July, it’s the perfect spot to sip a *kava* (coffee) at one of the crowded cafés and gaze up at the lofty Corinthian columns around you. It’s so atmospheric that it’s easy to imagine toga-clad Romans sauntering past the columns.

On the east side of the square, a black granite sphinx that Diocletian looted from Egypt guards the entrance to what was his mausoleum. In an ironic twist of fate, Diocletian’s remains were apparently tossed into the Adriatic in the seventh century, when the mausoleum was converted into a shrine to St. Domnius, a bishop he had beheaded during his persecution of the Christians. It’s said to be the oldest Catholic cathedral in the world.

On the main doors of the octagonal building, beautifully carved walnut and oak panels from the 13th century reflect the life of Christ. Inside, there are decorative friezes, gold and silver artefacts, baroque paintings and an intricate Romanesque pulpit. And if you climb the Bell Tower, there are great views of the palace in all its decaying and partially restored glory.

You get a sense of the grandeur of what used to be Diocletian’s private seaside quarters by wandering the subterranean chambers beneath, which mirror the layout of the upper floors. In medieval times, the inhabitants threw their garbage down into this netherworld, filling the basement over the centuries. Only in the last 50 years have excavations unearthed many of these enormous vaulted rooms, in which archaeological finds are strewn about.

Outside in the daylight, we wander toward the Silver Gate, beyond which is a bustling fruit and vegetable market. We follow



Diocletian’s Street, nipping into the Gothic townhouse that is the city museum to eye the medieval weaponry, coins and paintings on display. From there, we exit out the Golden Gate, said to be the most impressive of the palace gates.

Just outside, the towering statue of the 10th-century Bishop Gregory of Nin by Croatia’s most famous sculptor, Ivan Mestrovic, catches our attention. Legend has it that rubbing the statue’s shiny big toe brings good luck. We rub the toe—feeling pretty lucky already to be here—then head back through the gate to lose ourselves in this extraordinary palatial city. ●