

# Nation's best kept secret

The idyllic island of Korcula has culture and charm in abundance, writes **David Kootnikoff**

CROATIA



Korcula is a fairy-tale destination full of delightful surprises. Photos: Yuko Kootnikoff

A gentle breeze stirs the napkins on our table, as the full moon rises over the Adriatic Sea. After a day on the road driving from Dubrovnik, my wife Yuko and I had arrived in Korcula just in time for a dinner of fresh seafood and a chilled bottle of the local wine Posip, a golden, dry white from Smokvica.

Korcula is a sparsely populated island off Croatia's Dalmatian coast. Marco Polo was born and spent his formative years there before moving to Venice and exploring the world, including Kublai Khan's China. Korcula was then part of the Venetian Empire.

Too often overshadowed by Dubrovnik to the south, Korcula is a fairy-tale destination chock-full of stone archways, boutiques and narrow, winding lanes. We began exploring, starting with the tower gate at the entrance to the old town. We found a table along the seawall and enjoyed a drink while Obeci, across the water on the mainland, glimmered in the distance.

Korcula is the only place in the world where the Moreska dance is still performed with real swords. Originating in Spain in the 12th century, it celebrated the Moors' expulsion from Aragon and is believed to have been brought to Korcula via southern Italy in the 16th century. Once a showdown pitting Christians against Moors, it has since been tidied up and all the religious triumphalism watered down for modern consumption.

Today, it's black versus red, both sides battling it out for the hand of a lovely maiden in distress. The Moreska started with a dramatic entrance by the leader of the blacks engaged in a heated argument with a princess. It soon became clear that the princess was being held against her will. The red side then entered and a battle ensued, an ornate and gruelling costumed dance with miniature swords between two sides made up of about 20 men.

After almost 30 minutes, the reds finally humiliated the blacks and won back the princess. As the crowd erupted into cheers, it felt like a fitting conclusion to one of Croatia's best-kept secrets.



The traditional Moreska dance is performed with real swords.