

A Resort in Ruins

— The Rise and Fall of Kupari —



by Duncan JD Smith

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Tourist buses race along the main highway which slips around the edge of the Bay of Cavtat, a short hop down the coast from the Croatian city of Dubrovnik in the direction of the border with Montenegro. Most of these buses are ferrying new arrivals from Čilipi Airport to Dubrovnik; the vehicles barely drop a gear as they

ABOVE: The empty shell of the Hotel Kupari, in the Croatian resort of the same name, dwarfs its predecessor, the Grand Hotel, seen at the bottom right of the picture (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

pass through villages like Kupari. Everyone wants to visit Dubrovnik, especially now that the damage inflicted during Croatia's War of Independence (1991–1995) has been repaired. Elsewhere, however, the memory of that conflict lingers — and nowhere more than in Kupari. At the end of a side road here, opposite the Auto Camp, are the bombed-out remains of a once hugely popular holiday resort.

This part of the Croatian coast is known for having some wonderful bays. Dubrovnik's pros-

RIGHT: Our map shows the location of Kupari on the coast just south of Dubrovnik. This fragment of Croatia south of the Neum Corridor is disconnected from the rest of the country. Travellers using the Adriatic Coastal Highway (the 'Magistrale') pass through the Bosnian town of Neum to reach Dubrovnik and Kupari in Croatia. The letters 'RS' stand for Serbia and 'ME' for Montenegro respectively (map scale 1:7m).



perity was founded centuries ago on its harbour; Mlini and Srebreno five miles south have more recently traded on the quality of their beaches. In 1919, neighbouring Kupari did likewise by allowing a Czech investor to build the Grand Hotel on the shoreline. Having seceded a year earlier from the doomed Austro-Hungarian Empire, Croatia was a part of the nascent Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The elegant architecture of the Grand, a confection of stuccoed brick with neoclassical flourishes, was a tangible reminder of the time both countries spent under Habsburg rule.

Fast forward to the 1960s and Croatia is part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Its president, Josip Broz Tito, is the country's supreme military commander and deems Kupari's sandy bay ideal as a holiday resort for the Yugoslav People's Army. As a result, over the next twenty years five huge hotels containing over 1,600 beds are built for officers and their families. In total it costs the present-day equivalent of half a billion euros.

Compared to the nostalgic style of the Grand, the new concrete hotels were purely functional. First up was the Goričina, which opened in 1962 with 160 beds. It is the first to hove into view as the visitor approaches the resort along the coastal path from Srebreno. In architectural terms, however, the most striking hotel is the Pelegrin built a year later on the Dubrovnik side of the bay. Its 400-plus bedrooms are contained within an inverted Brutalist ziggurat designed by Sarajevo-born architect David Finci. A series of ramps provided vehicular

access to the various levels of the hotel and a great staircase led directly from the lounge to the beach. Its uncompromising style attracted considerable attention and several awards when it was unveiled.

Next came the eponymous Kupari built in 1978, which brought with it another 550 beds. Situated alongside the Pelegrin, its hillside-hugging blocks echo so many hotels thrown up along the Spanish *costas* around the same time.

Those visiting Kupari on the cheap stayed at the caravan park and campsite on the main road,

Kupari's Hotel Pelegrin took several direct hits when the resort was shelled by Yugoslav troops in 1991 (photo © Duncan JD Smith).





LEFT: Rubble and rafters on the staircase of the former Grand Hotel in Kupari (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

which together could accommodate a further 4,500 holidaymakers. At the other end of the price scale, several stylish villas were erected away from the main resort towards Dubrovnik, where Tito himself could enjoy the Croatian coast in seclusion. It was here that he entertained visiting

grandees, including German Chancellor Willy Brandt, who came as part of his efforts to reconcile West Germany with the countries of Eastern Europe. With security in mind, the president and his officials had exclusive access to an 800-metre-long underground bunker. A later high-profile visitor to Kupari was Mikhail Gorbachev who in March 1988 met with Yugoslav leaders in the resort.

Last on the scene in Kupari was the Goričina II hotel built next door to its namesake in the early 1980s. Adding 350 more beds, it was a response to the buzz surrounding the Winter Olympics in Sarajevo and the fact that the Yugoslav government had now opened up Kupari to foreign tourists, mainly from Germany and Scandinavia. The bold red porch and basement discotheque were indicative of the age. Kupari also became a

SOCIALIST ARCHITECTURE IN YUGOSLAVIA

The story of Kupari, just like the architecture of the resort, captures something of the entire Yugoslav experience. This is a country which like Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic has slipped from the map of Europe. Yugoslavia inherited much from the Habsburg world including the distinctive style of the Grand Hotel in Kupari.

In the third quarter of the last century, under Tito's leadership, Yugoslavia defied the division of Europe into East and West, pursuing its own socialist path independent of Soviet influence. In that period — and thereafter until the eventual dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s — the country developed its own very distinctive (and sometimes highly eccentric) architectural style.

Socialist Yugoslavia has often been described as “one of the most complicated countries in the world” — an apt summary of a land with multiple languages, alphabets, faiths, constituent republics and nationalities. That complexity was mirrored in the country's eclectic modernist architecture. In sports stadia, civic buildings, monuments and above all in hotels, the Tito period spawned some extraordinary designs — some of which, such as the facilities for the

Sarajevo Winter Olympics in 1984, were not completed until well after Tito's death.

Yugoslavia escaped from the drab monotony so often associated with the architecture of eastern Europe in the 1950s and thereafter. Even the different republics in Tito's federal state had their own distinctive architectural themes. Everywhere in Yugoslavia, architects occupied an ideological space which lay between East and West, and the fruits of their efforts are seen in the successive waves of buildings at Kupari. The architecture of Tito's Yugoslavia is comprehensively explored in a beautifully illustrated book called *Modernism In-Between: The Mediator Architecture of Socialist Yugoslavia*. The book was published in 2012 by JOVIS.

Visitors to Kupari with an interest in Yugoslav architecture can see in nearby Dubrovnik some distinctive Yugoslav buildings from the pre-Tito period. The Serbian architect Nikola Dobrović designed an extraordinary series of villas and hotels in and around the city in the 1930s. Not all have weathered well, but the best of these buildings attest to the fluency and ambition of the avant-garde in Yugoslavia in the years leading up to the Second World War. ■

much favoured venue for out-of-season academic conferences. Under grey skies, while the resort was lashed by winter rain, there were colloquia and seminars on robotics, radiological protection, mechanics and mathematics.

WAR-TORN TIMES

Despite its successes, Kupari's glory days were numbered. Increasing ethnic tensions in the wake of Tito's death in 1980 began tearing Yugoslavia apart, and in June 1991 Croatia declared independence. Until international recognition of the Republic of Croatia's sovereignty a year later, the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav People's Army did everything to prevent it. The Croatian War of Independence or Homeland War (*Domovinski rat*) was the result.

Whilst the media reported in great detail the bombardment of culture-rich Dubrovnik by the Yugoslav People's Army, it all but ignored what was happening in Kupari. With the hotels emptied of guests, a small Croatian police force was left guarding the resort. On 4 October 1991 Yugoslav naval vessels began firing on the hotels and within three weeks Yugoslav troops had recaptured Kupari. Not until May 1992 did a counter-attack return Croat forces but by then the damage had been done. In addition to the gaping holes caused by the naval bombardment, all valuables had been removed and phosphorous bombs used to torch the interiors.

Other than for a few years in the late 1990s, when the Croatian Army set up a base at Kupari, the hotels have stood abandoned. Anything removable — from window frames and sinks to copper pipes and floor tiles — has been 'liberated' by locals. Even today bangs and crashes echo through the empty buildings as the last items are salvaged. The result is a set from some dystopian science fiction film made all the more bizarre by the fact that people still come here to sunbathe. Especially poignant is the Grand's rubble-filled main staircase, the Kupari's empty swimming

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War has left its mark on the former Grand Hotel in Kupari, located south of Dubrovnik on the Croatian coast (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

pool and the view towards the Goričina through the shattered windows of the Pelegrin.

Since the Croatian Army's departure in 2001 there have been several attempts to revive Kupari because of its enviable position so near to the airport. The most recent was in early 2016, when a consortium of local investors received a 90-year lease on the site from the local government. It is now their intention to create a high-end resort, with two five-star hotels at its heart. They will have to have deep pockets though because all the old hotels, with the exception of the listed Grand, must be demolished. Until such financing is in place, the ruins at Kupari will remain a sobering reminder of an all too recent war in Europe. ■

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