weight in tasty, tentacled molluscs), I decided to walk the 8km to the town of Lumbarda, which has a succession of protected yacht moorings and a skerrick of sandy beach.

Along the way I passed rows of grapevines, heavy with fruit sweetening in the sun. Croatia's wine industry is still making the transition from government control to competitive private enterprise, and many of its best wines are now being produced on Korcula.

After four days on cat-infested Korcula, the good ship Marko Polo (the famous explorer was born and raised on the island) hove into view, and I embarked for the four-hour cruise to Dubrovnik, celebrated jewel of the Adriatic.

This famous walled city has more than a touch of Venice about it, thanks to its arresting architecture and the feeling of being assailed on all sides by the sea. As in Venice, the overwhelming impression is of being in the middle of an elaborate movie set — an impression reinforced by the fact that, on any given day, tourists far outnumber the 5000 people who reside inside the walls.

It's impossible to look at Dubrovnik without considering the damage inflicted upon it during the Balkans war. The city was shelled by Serb forces for three months in 1991, with 80 per cent of buildings sustaining damage. Most of the rebuilding is complete, using limestone from local quarries to preserve the city's historic appearance so, from ground level, the damage is barely noticeable. A circumnavigation of the walls leaves no doubt as to the pounding, the elevated view revealing hundreds of new-looking red tile roofs.

Croatia's Dalmatian coast is enjoying a boom in visitors, as well as the dubious honour of having become the latest favourite of the jet-set and movie stars.

Barely 15 years after Croatia emerged as an independent country following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, its people already exhibit an impressive confidence that's due in no small part to pride in this glorious coastline. After all, how many places can boast that a Roman emperor liked the place so much, he made it his home?

FACT FILE

GETTING THERE: The cheapest option is to fly to a European hub city such as Frankfurt or Paris, then fly to Croatia. Lufthansa and Croatia Air both offer flights from various European hubs to Croatian cities including Split, Dubrovnik, and the capital, Zagreb.

FERRY: Jadrolinija is the largest ferry operator along Croatia's Dalmatian coast; see www.jadrolinija.hr/ for timetable and fares.

GETTING AROUND: Buses or hire car best alternatives.

COST: Croatia is marginally less expensive than western European countries, including accommodation which is cheaper but less salubrious. Expect to pay $50-$80 per night for a private room or pensione. Large hotels in Split and Dubrovnik, but elsewhere they remain scarce.

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