

Most Memorable: Blue Cave Boat Tour

Waiting for our flight back to Boston, a young woman finishing a European vacation with a friend asked me: “What was the best thing you did?”

We’d seen and done too much to make this an easy question to answer.

Rather, I think I’ll start this series of articles on our 2023 trip to Italy and Croatia with the most memorable thing. And this is probably the first story I’ll tell anyone that ever asks about this trip. (*itinerary attached*)

We’d signed up for the Blue Cave Boat Tour out of Dubrovnik, Croatia. Apparently, there’s also a Blue Cave Boat Tour out of Split. Different cave, but the same advertising poster (confusing).

We were being picked up outside the garage of the Hilton Imperial, a stately-looking affair, and the oldest hotel in the city. (The whole *Game of Thrones* cast stayed here.)



Before the day, I’d received several heavy-handed emails stressing the need for punctuality - and we anxiously complied. Good thing because we’d never have found the tour’s starting point otherwise.



A black van pulled up (a bit late) and we piled in with two other newly met couples for the ten-minute ride to a marina. Five identical (sleek white fiberglass) motorboats were stacked side-to-side to take 10 each of the now assembled 50 guests.

We were passed across the rear decks, stepping around the boats’ large, gray Honda outboard engines, to parcel us out between the waiting “skippers”.

Ours was a cocky, young guy I’ll call Eddie. His English seemed excellent; his attitude a bit too self-assured (or maybe careless, as it turned out).



Two signs on the boat indicated: "Tip is not included."
So, I at least trusted that he'd have our safe return to be in his best interest.



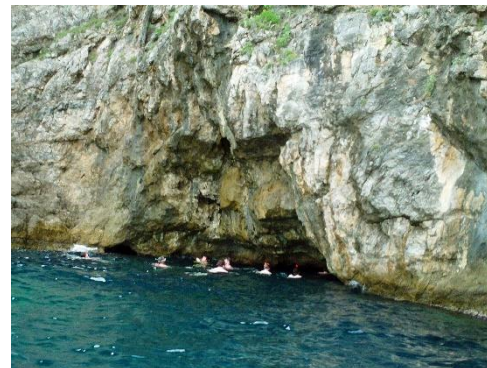
Out of the harbor, he revved the engine, and we bumped hard across the waves on what was fortunately a pretty calm Adriatic Sea.

There are three stops on the regular tour – the Blue Cave, an assortment of other caves, and a beach. The various Blue Cave Tour boats rotate among these destinations. (Because the sky was overcast, the passengers chose the option of visiting the quaint harbor town on tiny Lopud Island instead of the usual beach.)



Our little group of new acquaintances consisted of a middle-aged couple from Canada, a doctor and his wife from Charleston, and four young guys from Dublin.

First up was the Blue Cave. Captain Eddie told us there were actually two caves, a small one and a large one. From the boat, you see only craggy overhangs in the rock face just above a choppy sea. Virtually all of both cave openings are under water.



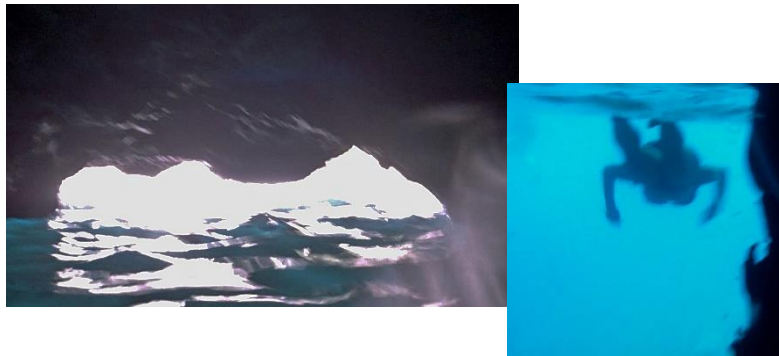
Masks and snorkels were available, but I passed, finally jumping in after my wife armed with a water camera.

Eddie said that on cloudy days like this one, the water appears less blue, but it was blue enough to appreciate the effect.



Without fins, I moved slowly over to the bigger cave not really knowing what to expect. Peering in the water under the rocky edge, I could see a dark opening just beyond. Though the water laps the top of the cave entrance, its mouth is wide enough that you can tell a few strokes will get you in.

And inside, the ceiling quickly rises. You find yourself treading water in a large, and deep, open space lit just enough through the narrow crack above the water entrance. Definitely, kind of neat.



The Irish kids did both caves - small and large – they said the smaller was rather tight. (A few of our group did neither.) My wife and I were just as pleased with accomplishing the one, and then managing to pull ourselves out of the sea up a narrow ladder bouncing in the waves.

Of course, this little spot hadn't gone undiscovered by other tour boat companies.

And when we arrived at the second cave site, we found the same bunch of boats and swimmers. Not too, too many, but we weren't alone.



There were three caves at this second spot.

Off to the right, Eddie described the cave with the tallest opening to go far in with a sloping floor leading to a little beach where you could sit and relax. "A good place to drink a beer."

The middle cave, he said, was small and quite dark.

The last, nearer the outer edge of the inlet, he described as a tunnel that you could make out light passing the length of. As you went further in, he said, the water becomes shallow enough to walk on the bottom, but the tunnel narrows. Then there would be two spots where the rock ceiling becomes a wall and barely any light from the other end shows at the top of the notch. (At least, I thought that's what he said.) Here, you have to dive down a bit and go a few feet underwater. After you're through the tunnel, you swim around to the opening of the inlet and back to the boat.

I hadn't realized, but the Adriatic is extremely salty and consequently swimmers are particularly buoyant (which is fine unless you find yourself trapped in a hole underwater).

I say to Eddie: "What do you think, can we do the tunnel cave?"

He says: "Sure." Should I have been a little less certain of his English? We're obviously older people, overweight and hardly in athletic physical condition.

But, okay. It sounded like a doable challenge. (I don't drink beer, and I hate sitting on a beach even if it's at the back of a sea cave.)

Eddie said we'd have forty minutes this time compared to the thirty minutes we'd had at the last caves. Then he said something about having to come and get us if any of the group was late returning. And then - in a jocular way - something about not wanting to go to jail.

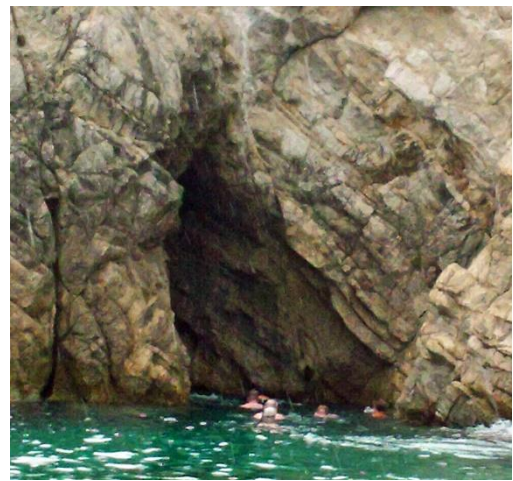
Funny guy?

So, we're off.

I took the lead as we arrived at the tunnel entrance. Looked okay. Did I see light at the other end? I'm not sure I really looked for it.

I moved ahead of my wife with a few others from another boat behind us. (Where did they all go?)

Just as Eddie said, the bottom quickly sloped up and you could see a narrow sandy path through perfectly clear water.



Quickly, the surrounding rock started blocking the opening visible ahead.



When I got to the narrowest point, I looked down in the water under the rock and could see bright light shining through a short passage. But unlike Eddie's description, there wasn't any light above showing end-to-end of the tunnel. No doubt, I should have been a little more suspicious of what he'd said was ahead.

This was it then. I was always a good swimmer in my youth. Eddie said we could do it no problem, didn't he?

Down underwater I go. Maybe I should have taken a deeper breath. Because pretty fast it was gone. Or maybe it rushed out when my back was driven up against the rough ledge above and my arms and legs scraped the rocks on both sides of this shrinking passage closing in around me.

I see the light just ahead, but I'm stuck, wedged in, trapped, and no way to go back - a bit of real panic and clear thoughts of drowning and actually dying in this hole under a mountain of rock in some far away country called Croatia.

It probably didn't help that I was holding my little water camera in one hand trying to video this whole soon to be possibly life ending disaster.

But then I said no - not today - and somehow managed to pull, crawl, tug, kick my way through to the other side and the light - and air!

Now, it was my wife's turn. She's a more regular swimmer these days. A onetime swimming instructor and camp lifeguard. I couldn't see her on the other side of the rock, but I called back to her that this was tough, and I'd almost drowned. She heard me.

Was I supposed to tell her to go back and not try it?

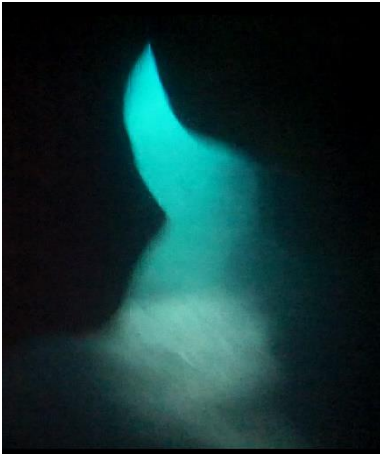
So, I'm waiting there. A little too long! But just before I'd start panicking - up she pops. I guess she'd had her own near-death experience but at the time she seemed less shaken than I felt.

Through the first one of these tough spots. Too late to go back. (I certainly couldn't have risked colliding in that hole with someone going forward - we'd both probably drown.)

No choice but to go on. The second couldn't possibly be worse, could it? Well, it wasn't any better either.



The same near-death experience, the same crisis moment and the same blissful relief and exhilaration in living to see another day.



Eddie didn't even seem fazed when I chastised him for letting two like us do this tunnel without even a substantial warning. (Maybe he'd had a few second thoughts earlier when he commented about going to jail. Maybe it was his English.) And still so in shock, I gave him his tip at the end of the tour anyway.

It turned out that we were the only ones in our group to do the tunnel. Even the Irish boys didn't try it.

So, what was the most memorable thing I did on this trip?

How can you beat feeling like you're going to die twice inside five minutes and living to tell about both?

Steve Glovsky can be reached at TravelsWithTwain.com.



ITALY and CROATIA 2023

Day 1

Travel Day

Day 2 – Arrive Milan

Arrive Milan-Malpensa: 9:55 A.M.

Metro to Cadorna or Centrale depending on time.

check bags at hotel if arrive early enough:

Storage Reserved - Bounce option – Cadorna

Lunch: **Peck** (deli)

Duomo rooftop (stairs or elevator) – Reservation

1:00 P.M.

Segway Milan

3:00 P.M.

Buy 24 Hour Metro pass

Opera - Teatro Alla Scalla

8:00 P.M.

Day 3 – Milan and Genoa

Luggage Storage

(9 A.M. to 4 P.M.)

Best of Milan and The Last Supper – Walking Tour – City Wonders

10:15 A.M.

Pinacoteca Ambrosiana

2:00 P.M.

Train to Genoa

4:05 P.M.

Arrive: 5:44 P.M.

FREE TIME FOR WALK

Dinner Genoa

8:30 P.M.

Day 4 – Genoa and Pisa

Breakfast (hotel)

Rickshaw tour (hotel pick-up)

10:00 A.M.

Train to Pisa

12:10 P.M.

Arrive: 2:04 P.M.

Pisa Luggage Storage

(2:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M.)

Explore Pisa Tour – Leaning Tower climb

3:00 P.M.

Dinner Pisa – FREE TIME

Train to Florence

9:01 P.M.

Arrive: 10:26 P.M.

Day 5 – Florence

Breakfast (hotel)

Bargello Museum

8:30 A.M.

Uffizi and Accademia Tour

10:00 A.M.

FREE TIME FOR SHOPPING

E-Scooter: Sunset Tour

4:15 P.M.

Dinner Florence: Antica Trattoria “da Tito”

7:30 P.M.

Day 6 – Florence

Breakfast (hotel)

Horseback Ride and Tuscan Winery Tour

9:00 A.M.

Pasta Making Dinner

7:30 P.M.

Day 7 – Florence and Ancona

<i>Bounce</i> (bag storage)		8:00 A.M.
Duomo Tour with Dome Climb		8:45 A.M.
Train to Ancona		1:20 P.M.
	<i>Arrive:</i>	<i>4:31 P.M.</i>
Dinner Ancona		
Overnight Ferry: Direct Ferries	Check-in by:	5:30 P.M.
	Depart Ancona:	7:30 P.M.

Day 8 – Split

	Arrive Split:	7:00 A.M.
Walking Tour of Split		9:30 A.M.
FREE TIME		
Somebody Feed Phil:		
Climb church tower		
Kruscic Bakery (onion roll) – 11thc convent		
Lavender shopping		
Diocletian Palace – sphinx: gift to Diocletian from Egypt		
Oldest cathedral in Europe		
St. Burek (alley) spinach or meat in filo dough		
Kantun Paulina – Bosnian chavappi - oldest sausage sandwich		
Gelateria Emiliana – Lavender lemon gelato		
City Bike Tour		2:45 P.M.
FREE TIME		
Dinner Split: Adriatic Sushi & Oyster Bar		8:00 P.M.

Day 9 – Split and Hvar

FREE TIME		
Krilo Ferry to Hvar	Depart Split:	11:45 A.M.
	Arrive Hvar:	12:35 P.M.
Guided Sea Kayak		3:00 P.M.
Dinner Hvar		
Gelato Roma: Lucy (waterfront) Phil		
Nonica: cakes and cookies		
Picnics: Konzum supermarket		
Hike To Hvar Fortress (self-guided)		Open until 10:00 P.M.

Day 10 - Hvar and Dubrovnik

Breakfast (hotel)		
Krilo Ferry to Dubrovnik	Depart Hvar	8:40 A.M.
	Arrive Dubrovnik:	11:55 A.M.
DUBROVNIK PASS		
Bounce: Luggage Storage		<i>(Noon to 10:30 P.M.)</i>
Phil: climb church tower		
FREE TIME		
Old Town and Ancient City Walls Tour		3:30 P.M.
Dinner Dubrovnik: Restaurant Nautika		7:30 P.M.

Day 11 – Dubrovnik

Cable Car Tour 9:00 A.M.
Jewish Heritage Walking Tour 11:00 A.M.
Dubrovnik Synagogue
Blue Cave Boat Tour 2:30 P.M.

FREE TIME

Dinner: Mala Buza Bar at sunset

Day 12 – Dubrovnik and Rome

Breakfast (hotel buffet)
Pool and Beach
Reserved Airport Transfer 1:40 P.M.
Croatia Airlines Depart Dubrovnik (DBV): 4:00 P.M.
Arrive Rome (FCO): 5:15 P.M.
Hotel: Hilton Rome Airport
Dinner Rome: Da Romolo alla mole Adriana 8:00 P.M.

Day 13 – Boston

Travel Day
Hilton Breakfast
Flight Depart Rome - FCO: 10:30 A.M.
Arrive Boston: 2:00 P.M.