

Welcome to Split

By Marina Vukušić

Welcome, ladies and gentlemen.

Please, settle comfortably in your seats, as we are about to begin our journey in a few minutes. We are going to travel to some of the most interesting places in Split, the second largest city in Croatia, famous for many great things, such as sports, the first cathedral, wearing ties and many more. Split, known as Asphalatos and Spalato in ancient times, is a Mediterranean city surrounded by the beautiful Adriatic coast, numerous islands and many picturesque places, just like the one we are going to talk about today. Are you excited? I surely am.

Our journey begins in the very south, at the heart of the city. Asphalatos, which is the original name of this town, is the location on which Diocletian built his palace and from which medieval and present-day Split arose. Bounded by four gates on each side, Diocletian's Palace stands, old and full of stories. It is one of the best preserved monuments of Roman architecture in the world. This harsh stone landscape, enriched only by vines and olive trees, is where the Roman emperor Diocletian came from – a poor scribe family – and also where he decided to die. The history and oral storytelling tradition of the inhabitants of the surrounding villages are incredibly intertwined, telling both of the life and death of Diocletian and his family. And what people have believed and narrated for centuries is often as valid for historiography as the reality of the facts themselves. But the palace is not the only thing that can be seen in the south of Split, there is so much more than one big palace and much more than one evil emperor. So, make yourselves comfortable because our journey is just about to begin.

We will take our first steps into Diocletian's Palace. Diocletian had chosen this place to build the palace because he was born in Salona, just a few miles away. With its almost rectangular walls, the palace still shines today, and somewhat resembles a military camp - the so-called Castrum. The palace also had its own water supply system about 9 kilometers long, which is still one of the longest and best preserved in Europe. Although it was originally built as the emperor's mansion, no one, not even the emperor Diocletian himself, could have imagined that life would still exist inside the palace for so many years after his death. Over the centuries, the inhabitants of the palace, and then the oppressed citizens of Split, adapted these spaces to suit their needs, so the buildings inside and the outer walls with towers greatly changed their original appearance, but the outlines of the imperial palace are still very visible today. The palace itself contains many attractions that were once an integral part of everyday life, and here we can easily list a few. One of the most impressive is the Cathedral of St. Domnius, which was actually built as a mausoleum for the famous emperor. There is an attached bell tower that was added in the 13th century, which is considered to be the most authentic Dalmatian medieval building. When we climb to the top, we see the beautiful view of the whole city, but I can't guarantee that while at the top you won't be attacked by a few seagulls which are very used to people and therefore prone to

stealing food and leaving unwanted gifts. In addition to the bell tower, there are the four gates of the palace - Golden, Silver, Iron and Bronze, as well as the Temple of Jupiter, which many claim is one of the most beautiful European monuments. The central square of the palace - the Peristyle, is a monument itself. Also, we must not omit the famous basements inside the palace, which are one of the best preserved ancient complexes of their kind in the world. The basements are also some of the most intriguing parts of the palace, and were built to match the level of the southern part, which was residential, with other parts of the Palace. The walls served as the foundations of the imperial residential buildings, so the shapes of their rooms matched the shape of the buildings that disappeared above the surface. They were probably used for storage, perhaps even served as a dungeon. Today they are used as fair and exhibition spaces, and the popular television series Game of Thrones was also filmed in them. Due to all these great beauties and historical values, Diocletian's Palace was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979. If we start listing the buildings that are among the most fascinating in the world, Diocletian's Palace could easily be ranked among them. Today, the palace forms the very centre of the old part of Split where people still live, and perhaps this is what fascinates every tourist who ventures through the narrow streets that have been here for more than 1700 years. Today, Diocletian's Palace is the heart of Split and more than 3,000 people live within these historic walls. Along with the residents and tourists walking by, another picture which catches the eye are curious grannies leaning on the window frames - who take the role of surveillance cameras, as well as many feathered "bombers". Hence, mind your step...

Now, let's move on from our pigeons, as Split has many more interesting places and things to see. With numerous restaurants, bars and shops, the area has been living to its fullest as it did 1,700 years ago, and the lifeblood of city life is still the main square called the Peristyle. The Peristyle has been in continuous use for more than seventeen centuries. At the Peristyle and below the Cathedral of St. Domnius, there is a stone beauty, a sphinx made from African black granite. It has been proudly standing here for thousands of years and, dating back to the rule of Pharaoh Thutmose III, it is considered to be one of the oldest objects in Split (over 3,000 years old). It had been guarding his tomb for 18 centuries, and it has been in Split for about 1,600 years. Its arrival was enabled by Emperor Diocletian, who was fascinated by Egyptian culture. According to an urban legend, the American industrial magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt wanted to purchase the sphinx, but his offer was declined.

After Diocletian, various exiled Roman nobles and rulers roamed the Peristyle for more than a century and a half. In the seventh century, by order of Archbishop Ivan Ravenjanin, many pagan statues and ornaments were taken out of the Mausoleum across the Peristyle, and thrown into the sea, while the bones of the Salonitan martyrs Saints Domnius and Anastasia were brought in.

Over the following centuries, up to the present day, a large number of VIPs and other dignitaries, artists and writers have strolled across the Peristyle. However, we have to ask ourselves whether the current appearance of the former imperial square is authentic, as major interventions were carried out between 1956 and 1961. Today, due to its excellent acoustics and central position, the Peristyle is used as an

appealing venue for many important events. This is the place where you can enjoy the most famous traditional performance of Verdi's Aida during The Split Summer.

A few minutes' walk from here, there is Josip Juraj Strossmayer Park, the central park of Split. It is also known as Đardin, and is located near many other landmarks that we may have already come across, more specifically, at the main entrance to Diocletian's Palace called the Golden Gate. Between the Palace and the Park we can see one of the most popular landmarks in Split - the monument of Gregory of Nin. A must-do thing is definitely to stroke his huge toe (already worn out due to rubbing) and make a wish.

Not far from the cultural heritage of the city of Split, we turn west into the green oasis, the lungs of the city, the very gift of Mother Nature: Marjan. The peninsula is full of flora and fauna, endemics and specific features of this area, but Marjan itself does not lack cultural heritage nor historical sights. One of them is the Mestrovic Gallery, which has been located at the address Šetalište Ivana Meštrovića since 1952. The exhibition space was once Meštrović's residence. The building itself is an artistic monument and exhibits numerous works by one of the most successful Croatian artists of all time. Many old churches are scattered around Marjan. One of them was the church of St. Benedict, after which the popular neighboring beach Bene was named. Today, only a part of the walls has been preserved, from which one can see the shape of the church from the 11th or 12th century. But the most interesting, of all the small churches, is probably the church of St. Jerome with the accompanying hermitage, the cave in which the hermits took refuge when they sought peace. And while the church is relatively easily spotted among the surrounding trees, the hermitage is carved into the rock and is so 'fused' that it is barely noticeable at first. The church and the hermitage are connected by stairs, which are also partly carved into the rock. Let us also mention that today's church and the hermitage of St. Jerome date back to the 15th century, when the idea of hermitage experienced a new revival.

Having explored Diocletian's Palace and the Peristyle, and having cleared our lungs along the long paths of Marjan, it's time to head somewhere where we can finally take a break after this long walk around the city. The next place on our route is the fruit square. And no, no, we won't be eating any fruit if you've already thought of satisfying your hungry stomach. Officially, the space is called Trg braće Radić, but the name Voćni trg (fruit square) is more often used. Although there is no trace of fruit today, there used to be stalls selling – you guessed it – fruit, after which the whole square got its name. There are numerous narrow streets leading from here, but no worries about getting lost, as all of them on the right are heading to the same place, the most famous promenade in Split that you cannot miss – Riva. Split's waterfront took its present form at the beginning of the 19th century, when Split was ruled by the French. One hundred years later, indigenous plant species were replaced by palm trees, and a new major change came in the late 20th century, when the Riva was finally closed to traffic. Today, the waterfront is the main city promenade, a place where you stop to talk to friends or sit down for a coffee after a tiring day at work or a long tour of Split.

Finally, we have to mention the meaning of the most famous word in Split that every local understands – “fjaka”. Fjaka is a slang term which describes a relaxed state of body and mind, a sweetness of doing nothing. And to enter this state (if a walk on the Riva is not enough), we can go to our final destination for today and take a walk on Žnjan, a place with many beaches and an amazing sunset that heals the soul in the evening.

The gentle breeze from the south that passes between us is already saying goodbye, along with the rays of the sun. Dear ladies and gentlemen, I truly hope that you have enjoyed your tour of Split. Due to receiving an abundance of information and all this walking, you are now allowed to slip into “fjaka” state, and let yourself feel like a true Dalmatian.