

Destinations

by JAX FAX

Travel Advisor's Guide to
Worldwide Destinations

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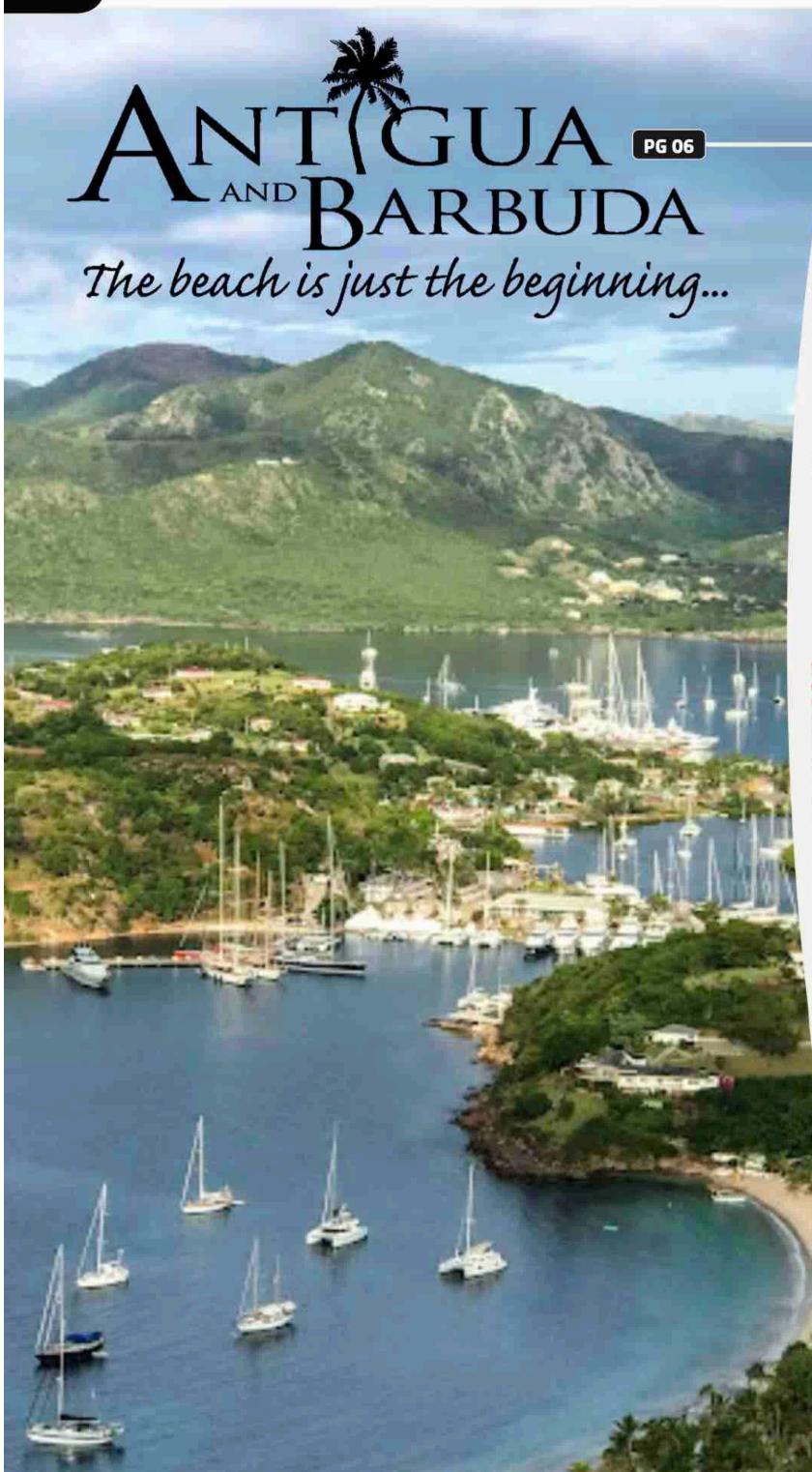
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DESTINATIONS®

by **JAXFAX**

www.jaxfaxmagazine.com

Published by

Jet Airtransport Exchange, Inc. (JAX)
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Member of ASTA—American Society of Travel Advisors; ATA—Africa Travel Assoc.; NTA—National Tour Association; CHTA—Carib. Hotel Assoc.; CTO—Carib. Tourism Organization; PATA—Pacific Asia Travel Assoc.; USTOA—U.S. Tour Operators Assoc. "Destinations by JAX FAX" (ISSN0279-7984) is published bi-monthly by Jet Airtransport Exchange Inc., 4 Oxford Rd. Bldg. A, Milford, CT 06460. Periodicals postage paid at Milford, CT, & additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to Destinations by JAX FAX, 4 Oxford Rd. Bldg. A, Milford, CT 06460. COPYRIGHT 2024. All rights reserved. Printed in U.S.A. No part of this publication may be reproduced in print or electronically without permission. Direct requests to the Publisher, Destinations by JAX FAX, 4 Oxford Rd. Bldg. A, Milford, CT 06460 or E-mail: Doug@jaxfax.com



Printed in the USA

VOL 53 NO 11/12

NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2024

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The village of Komiža, Vis

By Thomas Strodel

and local wines, including varietals from the Bugava grape, cultivated for over 2,500 years.

Vis Town is often the first stop for visitors arriving by ferry or catamaran from Split or other nearby islands. With a laid-back atmosphere, it's a town where old meets new, offering plenty for visitors to see and experience. You can explore British fortifications, remnants of Venetian influence, and even ancient Greek and Roman ruins, each revealing a different chapter in the island's storied past.

KOMIŽA - GATEWAY TO THE FAMOUS BLUE CAVE

Komiža, located on the island's western side and just a short drive from Vis Town, retains its fishing village charm with narrow streets, a picturesque harbor, and historic stone houses. It also serves as the gateway to the famous Blue Cave on the nearby island of Biševo, where sunlight filters through an underwater opening, creating a captivating blue glow. These landscapes are part of the Geopark Vis Archipelago, one of Croatia's two UNESCO Geoparks, renowned for its remarkable rock formations, some of which date back over 220 million years.

VIS ISLAND ROLE IN WWII

While Vis Island now offers a peaceful es-

Vis Island in Croatia: Where History Meets Coastal Beauty

Located in the Adriatic Sea off Croatia's Dalmatian coast, Vis Island attracts travelers with its crystal-clear waters, secluded beaches, and historic charm. Known for its two primary villages, Vis Town and Komiža, this remote and idyllic island offers visitors a retreat steeped in both natural beauty and rich history. While it's now a quiet haven for those looking to escape from the

crowded tourist hubs of mainland Croatia, Vis has a fascinating WWII story that significantly shaped its place in history.

The island's serene atmosphere, combined with its unique geological features, makes it a must-visit destination for travelers seeking more than just sun and sea. While exploring the villages, you can indulge in local cuisine, featuring fresh seafood, traditional Dalmatian dishes,

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Blue Cave on the island of Biševo

cape, it played a pivotal role during World War II. After Italy's surrender in 1943, Vis became the only island in the Adriatic not under Nazi control. The island's airfield, situated in a protected valley and built atop a vineyard, quickly became a critical lifeline for Allied operations. At the height of the war, damaged bombers and escort planes returning from missions over Germany and Austria would make emergency landings on the short strip, earning Vis the nickname 'the last hope' for Allied pilots in the Adriatic theater. Croatian historian Danijel Frka adds: "Vis was more than just an airfield; it was a lifeline. Pilots knew if they could just reach Vis, they had a chance to make it home." Frka estimates that during its brief period of operation, the airbase was instrumental

in saving over 4,000 lives.

The airfield's strategic location allowed it to serve as a hub for emergency landings and supplying crucial resources to the Allied forces. Its rapid construction in just seven days was a testament to the island's importance in the war effort.

This summer, as the world commemorated the 80th anniversary of the Normandy D-Day landings, Vis Island also honored the 80th anniversary of the first Allied airman killed on the island, Second Lieutenant John Jay Ki Chon Kim, along with the 11 Partisans who died alongside him. Kim, a P-38 Lightning fighter pilot, had escorted bombers to Austria and landed on Vis for fuel and repairs, but tragically lost his life in a crash shortly after attempting to depart, a disaster that also claimed the lives of the Partisans. His nephew, Kailand Kim, attended the memorial ceremony, sharing his thoughts about finally seeing his uncle's sacrifice honored. "Though I never knew my uncle, coming here closes a circle for me. It allows me to understand where he died and why his story matters," Kailand says.

The 80th anniversary event was sparked by Jeff Peck, the nephew of American airman Sgt. Morris Peck, who died near Vis Island in 1944. Determined to honor the American and British airmen who relied on the Vis airstrip during

WWII, Jeff reached out to Steve Rukavina, President of the National Federation of Croatian Americans Cultural Foundation (NFCACF), for support in organizing the commemoration. Their efforts helped bring the event to life, ensuring that the sacrifice of these airmen would be properly recognized.

The ceremony, attended by local dignitaries, veterans, and families of those who served, featured a solemn wreath-laying, presentations, and tributes to the fallen heroes. A memorable moment was the arrival of a Black Hawk helicopter, which delivered Commander of the Croatian Air Force Major General Michael Križanec and U.S. Colonel Scott McLearn, the current U.S. Senior Defense Official and Defense Attaché (SDO/DATT) to the event. The arrival, facilitated by Bob Mathers, who formerly held the position of U.S. SDO/DATT in Croatia, represented the ongoing strength of U.S.-Croatian relations. "The Black Hawk was symbolic of the cooperation between our two nations," Mathers commented, "connecting the sacrifices of WWII with the modern-day partnership between Croatia and the United States."

WWII ARTIFACT COLLECTION

The memorial site sits on land owned by local farmer and historian Velimir

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WWII Planes on the Runway on Isle of Vis

Mratinčić, who has dedicated over 20 years to collecting WWII artifacts from the island. "It's my way of keeping this history alive, ensuring future generations understand what happened here," Mratinčić said. He has also played a pivotal role in preserving the memory of those who served and died on Vis by protecting the land where the airfield and memorial now stand. His artifact collection, ranging from plane fragments to personal items left behind by soldiers, offers a tangible connection to the past. Mratinčić hopes to expand the site with a Vis WWII Memorial Center, currently in the planning stages, to showcase his extensive collection and further enrich the island's historical narrative.

Following WWII, Vis transitioned from an active Allied base to a strategic military site during Yugoslav rule. The island was heavily fortified and remained closed to foreign visitors for over 40 years, effectively shutting it off from the outside world. It wasn't until 1989, after the collapse of Yugoslavia and Croatia's path to independence, that Vis was reopened, allowing the island to begin its transformation into the serene tourist destination it is today. Despite its quiet present, remnants of its military past still linger, offering visitors a glimpse into its com-

plex history. Alongside these historical tours, the island's natural beauty, pristine beaches, and delicious local cuisine make Vis a unique blend of culture, history, and relaxation.

Vis Island is easily accessible from North America by flying into Split or Dubrovnik via major European gateways. From Split, travelers can take a scenic ferry ride to Vis, approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes, where the island's beauty and history await.

For more information about visiting Vis Island and exploring its WWII landmarks, contact the **Croatian National Tourism Office**. www.croatia.hr



80th anniversary of the first Allied airman killed on the island

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