

Memories of Croatia and Slovenia
Voices From The Heart Tour 2007
By Marti Santoro

Someone once said about the Voices From The Heart trip to Ireland in 2001, that the journey began long before our actual departure. The same can be said about our 2007 trip to Croatia and Slovenia. However, nothing really prepared me for the spectacular natural beauty and range of emotions that I experienced during this concert tour. Echoes of the beautiful music still bring to life so many precious memories of those 11 days touring with Joanne, 130 women from the chorus, world-class musician and friend Randy Armstrong, our professional documentary film crew and Christine Pelham, our travel coordinator.

In my mind, one of the clearest memories we will always share as a chorus is seeing Dubrovnik for the first time. Our buses approached this walled city from the cliffs above. Sitting like a gem in the azure Adriatic, we looked down on an unforgettable view of this magnificent and ancient walled city. Memorable to us all was touring inside its ancient walls and performing at midnight in the moonlit main square. The women of Klapa Ragusa preceded us on the night of our first performance, a fabulous evening, a night full of surprises. One surprise was to find Voices member Suzie Bright in the audience. Not traveling with us, Suzie arrived in Dubrovnik on her own to surprise us at our first and second concerts. At Joanne's invitation, Suzy joined us in singing "I Feel Like Going On". It was a delightful beginning to our adventure.

In Dubrovnik, tour guides told us of the harrowing experience the residents suffered during the war of the 1990's. Like most residents, our guide was trapped for months in the city, without food, water or the necessities of life with bombs falling all around, destroying this treasured city. We saw only small remnants of the destruction and I marvel how the city has been preserved and repaired to become the cruise ship and tourist Mecca it is today. This reality brought to mind the importance of the purpose of our fundraising efforts for Croatia through Adopt-A-Minefield. A visit to the border with Bosnia near Dubrovnik and singing with nervous armed guards nearby, brought us a jolt of this reality when compared to joyful boat rides along the Adriatic or walking the polished limestone thoroughfares in the city, climbing the wall or visiting structures built in Roman times. This city is one of a kind and like Croatia itself, we realized how complex it is in many ways.

After the exhaustion of cross-Atlantic travel and touring the city in the heat, what a treat it was to enjoy the cool, clear waters of the Adriatic at our resort hotel (minus the sea urchins!). Dinner with the chorus and enjoying the variety of cuisine, punctuated by singing and sharing the lovely sunsets from the hotel veranda, our three days in Dubrovnik came to a close.

The Dalmatian Coast highway to Split, our next destination and a popular seaside resort, was beautiful. In Split, Diocletian's ancient Roman Palace and the surrounding area were fascinating. Gelatos (ice cream), helped to cool us in the heat of the day, which became

known as the place where the chorus “split in Split.” Matching travelers to four hotels with their luggage and getting everyone to the concert on time left most chorus members with many stories to share over and over again. The concert, on yet another perfect moonlit night set by the sea, introduced us to the popular group Klapa Sinj. Their wonderful voices filled the square with harmony so beautiful that I purchased one of their cd’s to bring me back to the magic of that night in Split. What lovely music in charming surroundings.

Since watching a PBS “Nature” special, the Plitvice Lakes National Park and World Heritage Site was a side trip in Croatia that was very exiting for me. For many, it will bring forth thoughts of “wet and wild.” Walking through the park, rainy and cold as it was, I was not disappointed. Not an easy climb on slippery walkways, the miles of waterfalls, caves and lakes were a natural phenomenon that thrilled me. To think that it was to be destroyed by landmines during the recent war is beyond comprehension! I took some of the best pictures I’ve ever taken in this place and will never forget the experience. If only our hotel had a hair dryer!

Our next stop in the Village of Perusic in the mountains away from the Dalmatian Coast was the most emotionally moving experience of all for me and the whole group. Circling around Joanne to sing to the villagers at the farm designated to receive funding for landmine clearance, moved us all to tears. The simplicity of the place and the complexity of what we had accomplished all came together in our heartfelt singing. The gratitude and amazement felt by our hosts touched us all beyond what we could ever imagine, while sharing the local “grappa” drink with our hosts warmed more than our hearts.

Returning to the Adriatic coast, the resort of Opatija was another beautiful gem perched on the Adriatic. Our concert on the grounds of the Trsat Monastery included performances by Jeka Primorja chorus and Klapa Luka. While waiting for the moment to go on the stage at this beautiful site, I will never forget the vision of the chorus gathered in silence around the cloistered courtyard with hundreds of candles reflecting on women’s faces seated at the shrine. Perhaps the silence gave us all time to reflect and enjoy a few moments of peace before performing. It must have energized us because the “afterglow” party following the concert was particularly lively. Music and merriment flow joyously at our “afterglow” parties! Such fun.

The Roman ruins of Pula provided us with yet another extraordinary backdrop for our performance and benefit concert in that city, sponsored by the Red Cross. A huge sign in the square welcomed us to Pula. Touring this ancient city, with its Roman amphitheater, was fascinating. Finding “personal preparation space” prior to the concert was an example of how we became amazingly flexible on this trip. An especially energetic audience joined us in singing, even dancing, perhaps because we performed with a fantastic group called Rondo Histriae. Yet another lively evening of socializing followed our concert, with champagne corks popping everywhere.

Portoroz, Slovenia, was our final destination and our seaside resort hotels were perfectly located for rest, relaxation, a final dip in the Adriatic or time to enjoy a large range of

activities. Many women waited patiently for family and friends to arrive from Boston to join us in Portoroz. Our last concert took place in the charming nearby town of Piran at the Tartini Theater. Sadly for several singers, because of a cancelled flight, some family members did not arrive in time for our grand finale. At this final concert, Slovenia's favorite female singer Regina joined us, helping to add to the excitement of this last venue. With pictures of Portsmouth as a backdrop, Randy Armstrong's music specially dedicated to the chorus moved us all. Randy's enormous talent and support for Joanne and our drummers was appreciated tremendously. Joanne led us through the final notes to echo our farewell to this extraordinary concert tour and the people and places that touched our hearts.

Under the glow of a perfect Adriatic Sea sunset, and with family and friends gathered around us at our last group dinner, the chorus thanked our Slovenian tour guides who befriended us and took care of us through all kinds of adventures. We celebrated, congratulating one another for another successful concert tour. Our 11 days of togetherness over, we packed our precious memories and either made ready to return home or prepared for additional "deviations" of exciting travel in Europe.