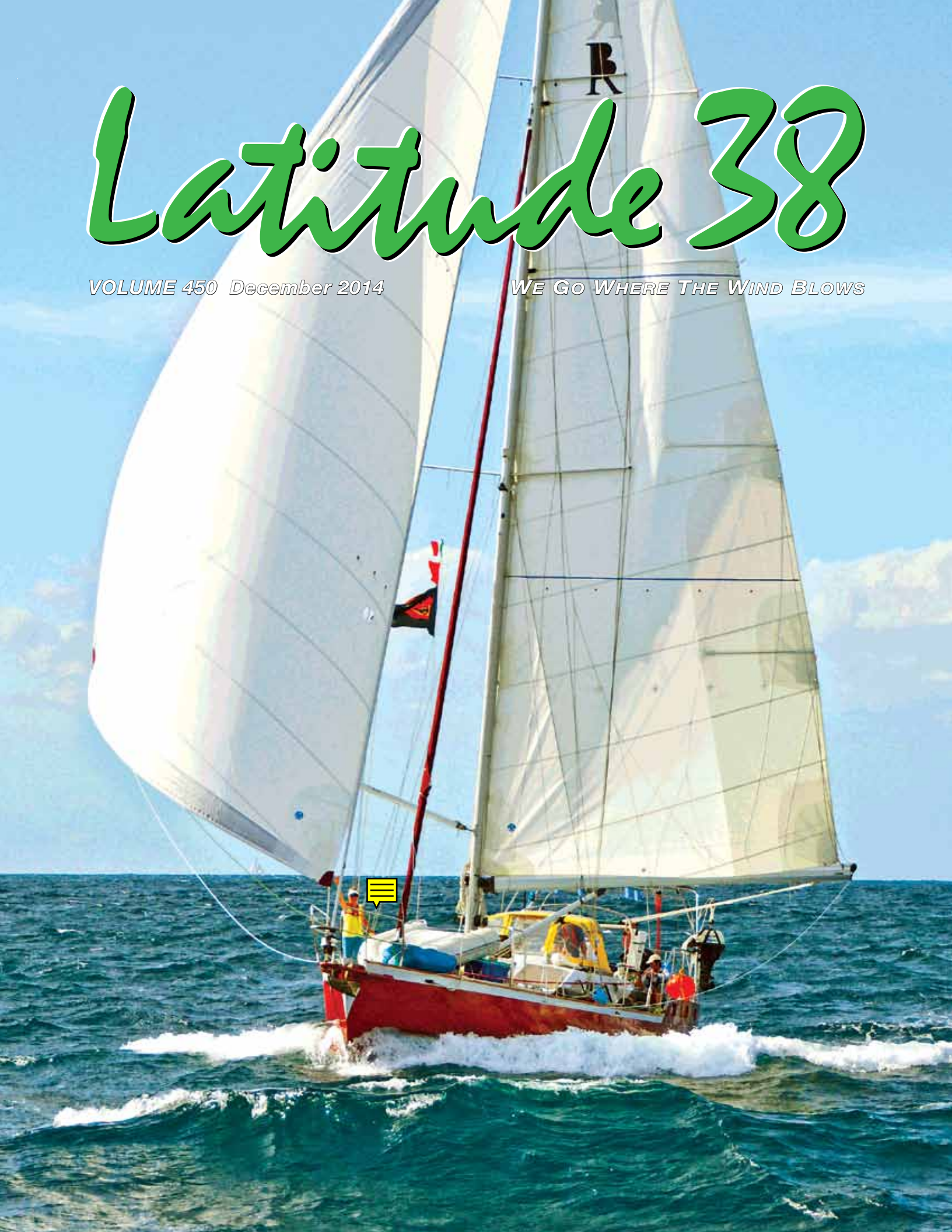


Latitude 38

VOLUME 450 December 2014

WE GO WHERE THE WIND BLOWS



Geja — 1976 Islander 36
Andrew Vik
A Wet and Stormy Med
(San Francisco)

For the seventh straight summer, my salty old Islander 36 *Geja* and I, both hailing from San Francisco, enjoyed an exciting voyage in the Med. Croatia's Dalmatian Coast had been an excellent foreign home to *Geja* for the previous five summers, so I'd already covered much of the Adriatic Sea at least twice. The one region that I'd only visited once was the far northern Adriatic, so this year it was Venice or bust.

From *Geja's* winter home of Trogir, it's 220 miles in a straight

northwest line to Venice. Viewed another way, it's four weeks of casual daysailing up the former Yugoslavian coast. I chose the latter, of course, as the Croatian ar-

The imposing fort at Trogir, Croatia, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Trogir has been the winter home for Vik's Islander 36 for years.



CHANGES

chipelago is dotted with quaint villages, countless anchorages, and several really hot Mediterranean party spots.

As usual, my crew consisted of friends and acquaintances from the U.S. and northern Europe. Typically,



Vilja of Finland, part of the international crew.

two to three crew stay for a week at a time, and I make sure to end each leg in some inhabited location with a nearby airport. This makes for a pretty rigid schedule, but it's worked well over the years. Starting in mid-July, the first of seven weeks went smoothly — despite one nasty little weather system that blew through while we were in the party town of Vodice. *Geja* was secure in the government-run ACI marina when a nasty storm cell hit at 5 a.m., which was not long after my two crewmates and I had turned in after a late night out. I suspect that a lightning strike hitting *Geja* would have really screwed up my summer plans, but we escaped unscathed — and with a freshly rinsed boat. This storm was to be the first of many to pass through during what proved to be an unusually cool and wet summer in the Med.

The storm threat remained for several days, but my crew and I managed to get in some great sailing anyway. We kept the mainsail reefed most of the time as we beat our way up the coast through the Kornati Islands to Zadar, one of Croatia's main coastal towns.

Geja got to chill out in Marina Zadar for two nights — at 70 euros/night — while swapping crew. Staying multiple nights in a place during crew changes

In order to keep up with the grooming standards of young Italian males on the hunt, Vik had to submit to a painful 15-euro 'manscaping'.



gives me ample time to clean house, do a big grocery run, fill the water tanks, and complete other tasks.

The swap-over period also allowed me to have my chest waxed — 'manscaping' — for the first time. It's not that anyone would call my blonde chest hair excessive, but the male 'kids' at the beach parties — particularly the Italians — are so well-groomed that I felt compelled. With my two female crew along for moral support — and for their own entertainment — I found a spot in town where I could have my hair ripped out for just 15 euros. The pain was tolerable and the results smooth.

Week two began nicely with typically glorious weather and pleasant sailing. The first stop after Zadar was the adorable town of Bozava on the island of Dugi Otok. Med-moored to the quay, we were approached by a non-English-speaking senior citizen who somehow conveyed to us that he had some homegrown tomatoes for sale. My crewmate and I ventured up a path to his home, where the dude had not only veggies, but also a cool cellar with huge wooden barrels full of wine from his vineyard. We did not leave empty-handed.

Later in the week, we awoke early to building seas and cloudy skies in the poorly protected anchorage at Silba. We got out of there fast, getting an early start on the 14-mile crossing to the island of Pag. Though it poured on the way, the winds remained from aft for an easy crossing. Pag is host to Zrce, Croatia's most notorious Ibiza-style party place, intentionally located on a remote beach several kilometers from any town. Zrce usually goes off in the high season with its many daytime beach parties. But it was eerily mellow because of the funky weather, and too cold for me to show off my freshly waxed chest.

A couple of days later along the mainland, at the foot of the Velebit mountain range, we spent a night in Zavratica, a fjord-like cove with a submerged World War II wreck. By day it's full of tourists, but we had the place to ourselves for a most memorable night. It turned out to be a spooky spot, with animals rustling around in the darkness and not a single light or other sign of human existence in sight.

This part of Croatia has some really dramatic scenery. The islands of Pag, Rab, and Krk all face the notorious Velebit Mountains. In the winter, the *bora*, a



crazy offshore wind, blows down from the mountains — at times at speeds of over 100 knots! As a result, most vegetation has been stripped from the islands' east-facing hills, yielding a dramatically stark landscape. The town of Baska on Krk has exactly this backdrop.

With another crew swap in Baska, we started the third week with an uneventful motorsail from Baska to Krk Town. It being a Saturday, and with my first male crewmate aboard, we were up for hitting the town. But of course a massive rainstorm blasted through late in the evening, threatening to dampen the fun. What was that, storm number three? We nonetheless managed a decent night out once the rain let up.

Sailing onward into the lake-like Gulf of Kvarner, we came across a small powerboat waving an oar. As we approached, I yelled out, "U.S. Navy at your service!" The guy and girl had engine problems, so we gave them a 20-minute tow to shore.

IN LATITUDES

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY ANDREW VIK



People and places from 'Geja's seventh season in the Med. Clockwise from lower right. Vilja, a fit Finn. Majestic Rab, Croatia. One of the flab-free crew starts to detox after a big night. Looking down at Vurlje in Kornati National Park. The young and the very restless. Vik, looking lost, in the rain at Krk. A great villa at Opatija, Croatia. Andrew Vik. Amazing Rovinj, Croatia. Mari, a well-dressed helmswoman. Another view of Kornati National Park in Croatia.

In the coming days, this local Croatian couple repaid the favor many times over, showing us around and driving me to several nautical shops in search of a new starter battery and other items. I was even invited to eat dinner at the girl's family home, where nearly all the food and wine on the table had been grown or produced at their family farm.

Far in the north of Croatia is the town of Opatija, where we took a berth at the fancy Hotel Admiral. Modern-day Opatija was established as a seaside resort by the Austrians in the late 1800s. The many villas, luxury hotels, and gardens are grand and beautiful, and much different from the architecture found elsewhere in Croatia. It wasn't a bad place to be stuck for two nights as storm number four barreled through, threatening to drop several inches of rain.

Week three wrapped up in Pula, which is near the southern tip of the Istrian peninsula. The port is a half-abandoned dump, but the town boasts an incredible 2,000-year-old amphitheater, much like the one in Rome. *Geja's* marina berth was just a few hundred yards from the amphitheater. Had we stayed there through Saturday evening, we would have heard British rockers Status Quo perform.

While paying up in the marina office to get going with Week four, I came across a Swedish charterer who had lost all his electronics and refrigerator to a lightning strike. The chipper fellow was pretty relaxed about it, continuing his three-week family holiday with the

technologically crippled boat (and, gasp, warm beer).

My crew that week included Rob and Christine Aronen, the only couple allowed to join *Geja*. I'd met them during the 2006 Ha-Ha as they skippered their boat *Nomad* from San Francisco to Mexico. Their sailing, shopping and

Islander 36s have been one of the classic San Francisco Bay designs since the mid-1970s. Few have cruised as far or as much as 'Geja'.



GEJA

CHANGES

cooking skills allowed me to spend more time relaxing. Otherwise *Geja's* summer voyages are marathons, as each week's crew wants to see and do as much as possible. Not relaxing, but it's super fun.

Rovinj, 20 miles up the Istrian peninsula, ranks among Croatia's loveliest towns. And there in the north, in what had been Italy until the end of World War II, the classic Croatian limestone buildings start to take on various pastel hues. Rovinj's multistory residences climb right from the waterline, laundry on lines flailing in the wind above the sea.

After two nights in Rovinj, I was paying the tab in the marina office when, out of nowhere, an intense boom stunned everyone in the marina. It was a lightning strike right overhead, but without rain or wind as a warning. The office girls screamed and dove under their desks as though it were an earthquake. Two of my crew, who had been standing on deck at the time, darted ashore. As folks settled down, my crew and I returned to *Geja* to batten down the hatches just before the rain hit. For two hours we sat in the saloon as rain, wind, lightning and thunder surrounded us. That was storm number five.

After the prolonged storm blew through, we had a great close reach up to Porec, where we spent two nights moored to the quay, including for my birthday. And a bustling quay it was! The hippest lounge in town was a stone's throw from *Geja*, so we enjoyed both superb people-watching and great music. It was a far better spot than any hotel could provide — except when the garbage trucks and street sweepers did their thing at sunrise. The Croatians like to keep things tidy.

In Porec, on our way by taxi to the

Two of Croatia's many spectacular sites: The top is the imposing coliseum at Pula. On the bottom is the lovely harbor at Ravinj.

Saints & Sinners Beach for the afternoon, I almost got the entire crew to get matching henna 'tramp stamps'. It was, after all, my birthday and my wish. Next year, guys, next year. Instead, the crew surprised me that evening with a round of Aperol Spritz, which a waiter delivered right into *Geja's* cockpit. The crew spoiled me well on my special day.

Although Croatia has been in the European Union since 2013, it is not yet in the Schengen Zone. So boats still have to check out when crossing into a European country, which we did when exiting for Slovenia. Once checked into Slovenia, however, we were free to sail on to Italy with no fuss, which we did after just one night in beautiful Piran, Slovenia.

Our next stop? The Venice Lagoon. More next month.

— *andrew 11/13/2014*

GEJA

