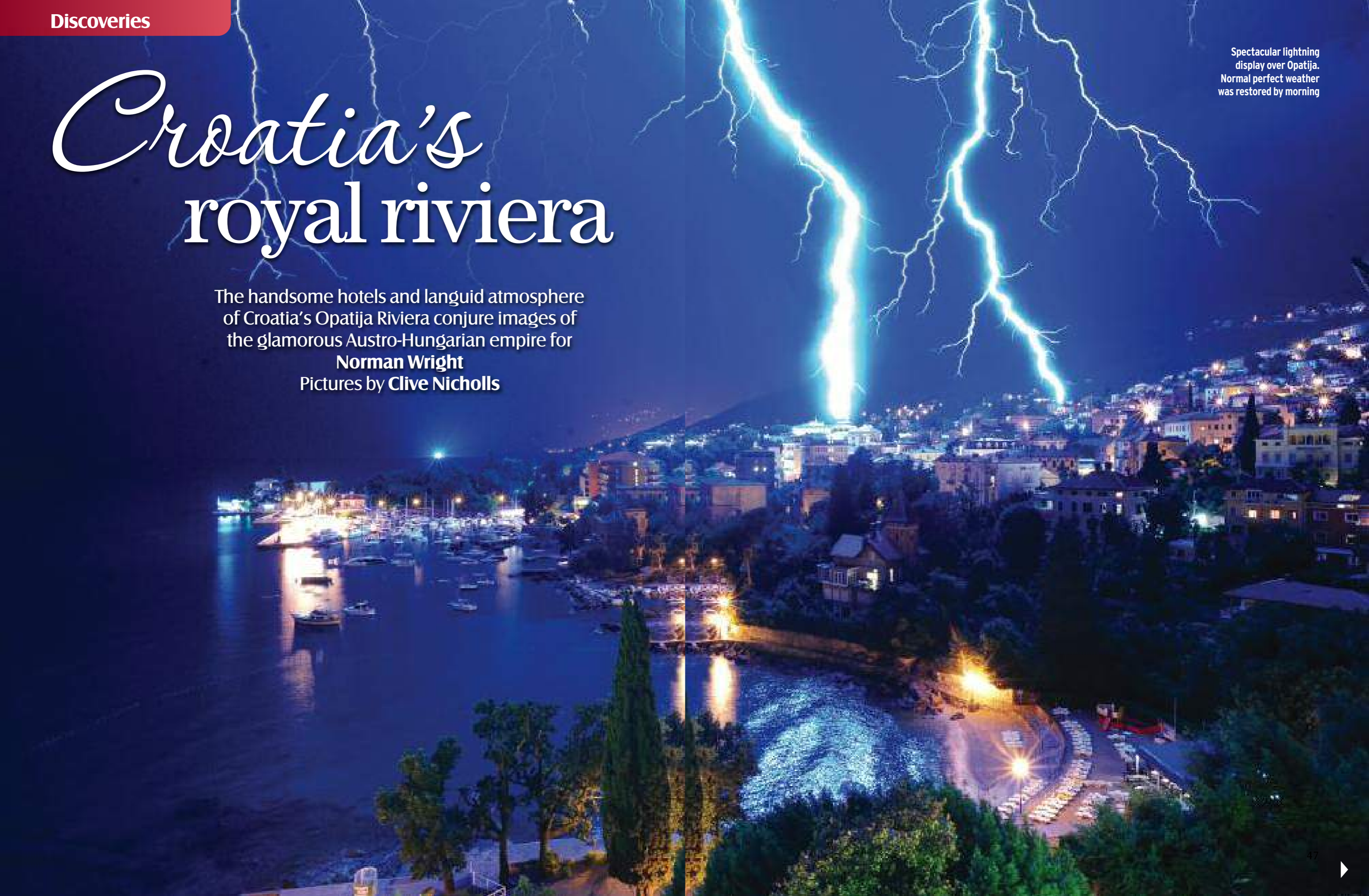


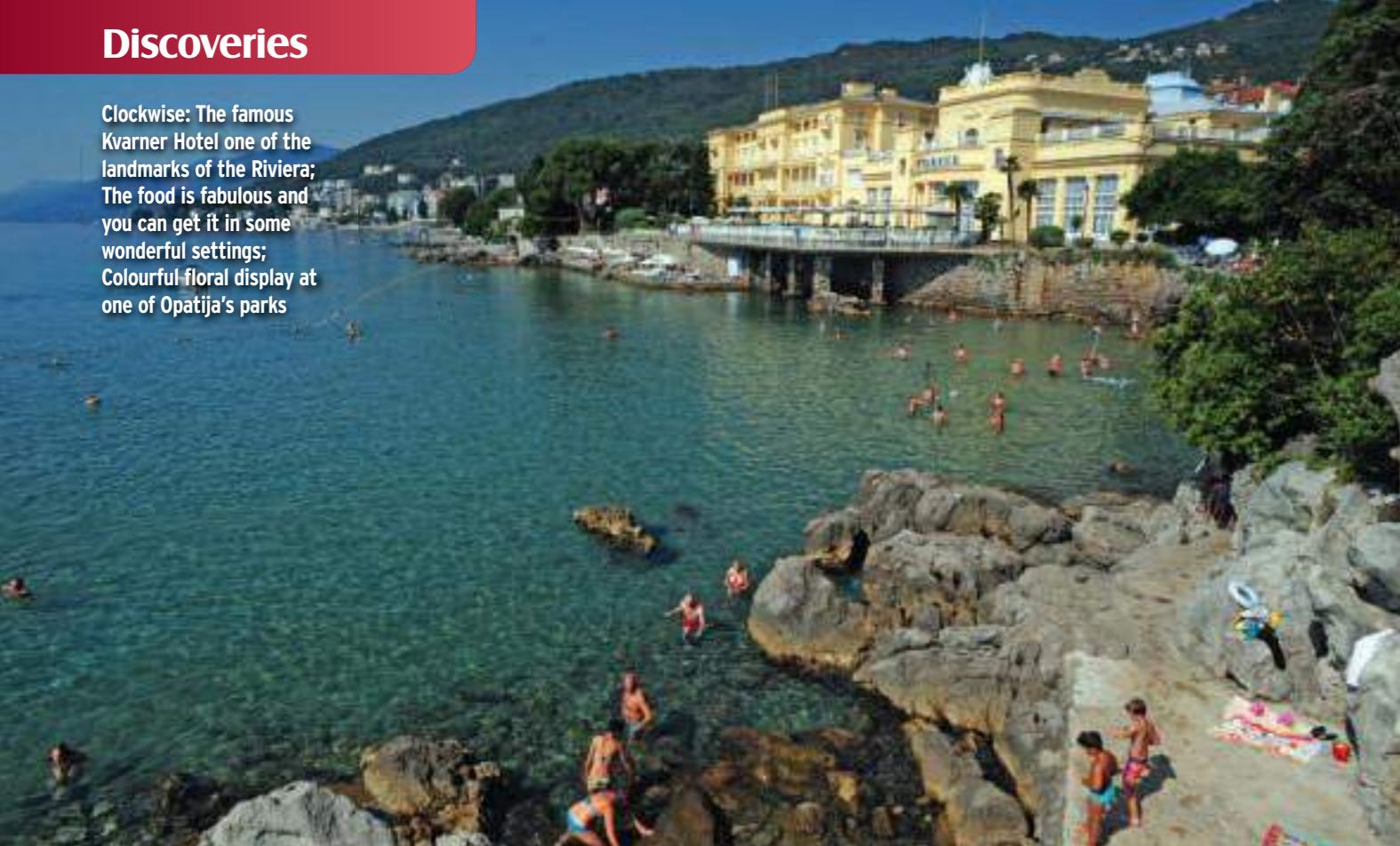
Croatia's royal riviera

The handsome hotels and languid atmosphere
of Croatia's Opatija Riviera conjure images of
the glamorous Austro-Hungarian empire for
Norman Wright
Pictures by **Clive Nicholls**

Spectacular lightning
display over Opatija.
Normal perfect weather
was restored by morning



Clockwise: The famous Kvarner Hotel one of the landmarks of the Riviera; The food is fabulous and you can get it in some wonderful settings; Colourful floral display at one of Opatija's parks



Clockwise: Villa Nova in Lovran luxury boutique hotel and twin to the next door Villa Astra; Everyone visits the market hall in Opatija for that day's meals; Idyllic clear waters typical of the rocky inlets of the Opatija Riviera



ALL THAT was missing were a few white suits, panama hats, parasols, elegant long dresses and a scattering of hussars in officer's uniform, and the scene could have been 120 years earlier at the zenith of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

Sitting on the terrace enjoying a Sunday morning coffee and watching the world stroll by through the immaculate gardens and down the promenade alongside a flat calm,

crystal clear Adriatic, I could easily imagine those days.

The pastel colours of the stately hotels remain, the trees in the park have matured and now offer more shade but the view over to the hazy islands of the Gulf of Kvarner hasn't changed.

Clean sea air, a languid, peaceful feel and that lovely syrupy warmth... It wasn't difficult to see why royalty and the other great and good of the empire decided to turn the Croatian town and the villages along the coast into the Opatija Riviera.

Emperor Franz Joseph, German Kaiser Wilhelm and the Swedish-Norwegian King Oscar II led a procession of composers, artists, actors and personalities of the day like Isadora Duncan to Opatija around the turn of the 20th century.

My coffee was served on the terrace of the famous Kvarner Hotel. You might recognise it from the Eurovision song contest. The Croatian votes are usually broadcast from a party in the fabulous Crystal Hall of the hotel.

By now it was heating up, and down in

the little bays and rocky inlets the sunbathers were taking to the clear, warm waters. There was a lot more flesh on display than in the 1890s – all very respectable for 2013, but enough to have had Franz Joseph's famous whiskers bristling.

The Riviera's main resorts – Volosko, Opatija, Ičići, Ika and Lovran – are connected by the Lungomare, a 12-kilometre (7.5-mile) promenade that winds around the jagged coast. Built between 1889 and 1911, it is now lit and is a flat, comfortable walk especially in the

evening or early morning. You can make your walk as long or short as you'd like and there's a good bus service if you just want to walk one way.

It was pretty hot when we were in Opatija at the height of summer so, after strolling along most of the town section of the path from our hotel, we took a bus to Lovran and walked from the outskirts on the Lungomare along to the harbour and then into the narrow streets of the old town.

Many of the villas on the way have been bought and restored by Europe's nouveau

riche. We called in at the Villa Astra, a six-bedroom boutique hotel with health spa which has been restored by a local businessman Vjekoslav Martinko. The next-door Villa Nova was just getting the finishing touches by the same owner.

Lovran grew from a fishing port in the Middle Ages and its many little restaurants still specialise in the fruits of the sea. We walked up through the little lanes for lunch at the excellent Knezgrad restaurant before meeting a good friend of Choice, the travel writer and expert on



Opatija's famous statue looks out over the Gulf of Kvarner

Left: Where it all started. The Benedictine Abbey chapel of St James in Opatija



Room with a view. Early morning sun on Opatija from our balcony



Things you (maybe) didn't know about the Kvarner region of Croatia

People are talking about the Kvarner region as 'one of Croatia's best-kept secrets'. Julia Berg has a home there and shares some of her favourite aspects

■ **KVARNER BAY SCAMPI** are like Dublin Bay prawns (langoustines) and are as famous in Croatia as Cromer crab is in the UK. Good restaurants far and wide, from Dubrovnik to Zagreb, have Kvarner scampi on the menu

■ **SEA SPARKLER:** Deep down in the sea, off the coast of Krk island, an excellent sparkling wine is made, called Valomet. It's true - the darkness and the quiet make the Zlahtina wine into something special. With respect to the French, we would call it 'Kvarner Sea Champagne'. Fermentation takes place in the bottles which, when raised from the sea, are usually naturally decorated with beautiful corals and shells

■ **NATURE ON CRES:** There are more species of plant, flower and tree on the island of Cres than in the whole of the UK. This is a wonderful spot and a haven for walkers, with seven marked eco-trails through the Tramuntana forest passing abandoned villages, Roman paths, labyrinths and marshes

■ **FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND:** The island of Rab is the only place in Croatia with so many sandy bays - 22, in fact - so come and put your footprints in this part of the Kvarner region. From Paradise beach in Lopar, the sea is so shallow you can often walk out to Lucovac, island making it perfect for families

■ **DRINK MISTLETOE AND LIVE TO TELL THE TALE:** A famous drink from the region is Biska, a brandy made from mistletoe leaves. These Croatians are clever - they know that it is only the berries that kill. It's often enjoyed before or after a meal - well, anytime really.

■ **PROMENADE PROMENADE:** The Kvarner region is the only place in Croatia which has a Lungomare (seaside promenade) 12 kilometres long. You can walk all the way from Lovran to Volosko, passing Opatija on the way. Stop for lunch at Lucica, a beach shack right on the Lungomare, at Icici for the best plate of fresh sardines, salad, bread and a glass of wine for around £5. A favourite spot with locals

■ **FINE DINING:** Some of Croatia's best restaurants are in the Kvarner region, from local konobas (think trattoria in Italy or taverna in Greece) to fine dining, featuring ingredients for which Kvarner is famous - asparagus, scampi, chestnuts, wild mushrooms, cherries and more. There is a new, free, dedicated, 48-page gourmet guide that easily fits into your pocket, website: (www.kvarner-gourmet.com)

■ **GLITTERING CONCERTS:** Festival Kvarner is a series of classical concerts during summer (September for 2014) in the Cristal Hall in Hotel Kvarner, Opatija. It was the brainchild of Austrian Michael Fendre who recalled tales told to him by his grandparents of grand events. The concerts involve Purpur young musicians and are supported by the EU. The event may be special but ticket prices are not, starting at around £10, website: (www.festivalkvarner.com)

■ **100 DOLPHINS** have chosen to make their home in the Kvarner Bay. A colony of more than 100 bottle-nosed dolphins live off the island of Losinj and if you're out on a boat trip there's a good chance you'll spot some.

“It wasn't difficult to see why royalty and the other great and good of the empire decided to turn the Croatian town and the villages along the coast into the Opatija Riviera”

Croatia, Julia Berg, who was spending most of the summer in an apartment in Lovran. Julia has shared her favourite secrets of Croatia on these pages.

In Opatija we were staying at the Hotel Ambassador, a modern resort hotel overlooking a wide bay with sheltered swimming and sunbathing.

Our balcony rooms gave a superb view of the Gulf of Kvarner and the harbour

and then the heart of the town, as well as across to the islands and back to the city of Rijeka. We also got an unexpected and spectacular lightning show one evening. Perfect holiday conditions resumed by the morning.

The weather in this part of Croatia is pleasantly warm for much of the year. Our visit was at the end of July and it was very warm, rather like temperatures back home. It was a short early walk into town along the Lungomare where the locals were already buying ingredients for the day's meals at the market hall, which had a colourful and glorious array of fruit, vegetables, meat and especially fish.

Back down by the sea are the peaceful and shady public gardens and further along the Lungomare the tiny Benedictine Abbey of St James that gave Opatija its name - the word means abbey in Croatian.

The clear waters and the clear air were the properties that made the Riviera one of the first health resorts in the 19th century. That has not changed, as everything - climate, atmosphere, food and heritage - make it hard not to relax.

While the sea takes most of your attention, the narrow coastal area perches at the foot of steep mountains. These are areas of great biodiversity, thankfully protected and preserved within the superb Ucka Nature Park.

You can visit the park on foot from

The tower at 4569 feet at Vokak. The wooden ramp is for hang glider and para glider launches but this tourist probably won't get lift off

Below: A beautiful Ucka Nature Park view



various points along the coast via walking trails. This is for serious walkers as it is a long and steep climb. The highest point is Vokak at 4596ft (1401m).

You can drive into the park and find a network of walking trails a lot higher up, many of which head through wonderful beech woods. This is still country for the fit, not occasional strollers.

On Sundays, Ucka Nature Park, or more precisely Poklon pass, can be reached from Opatija (Slatina bus stop) by the local Autotrolej bus line No 34. The journey takes around an hour. It

departs from Opatija at 9.30am and 2.05pm, and returns from Poklon at 10.30am and 3.45pm.

The variety of habitats makes this park one of the most important in Europe. Highlights for visitors include an array of butterfly species, the spectacular sight of soaring griffon vultures and golden eagles, and the delicate shape and shade of the Ucka bellflower that is unique to the park.

The view from the tower at the summit of Vokak is amazing: you can see across the park and the mountainous country beyond as well as looking down on the islands and coastline of Istria in one direction and Kvarner in the other.

Needless to say, we didn't walk up from Opatija. Park ranger and biologist Marta Blazevic drove us around, and expertly and enthusiastically explained this magnificent park and the efforts that are going in to protect it.

You can take a half-day tour with a ranger, which does include some walking. Full details on this and on the park, its creatures and habitats are on the website: (www.pp-ucka.hr).



Passport to the Opatija Riviera

Getting there

■ Thomson Lakes offers a week's half-board at the four-star Hotel Ambassador in Opatija from £733 per person including flights from Gatwick to Pula and transfers. Flights from Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Leeds Bradford and Newcastle are available at a supplement starting from £20, tel: 0871 2308181, website: (www.thomsonlakes.co.uk)

■ For our stay at the Hotel Ambassador we flew to the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana. Many flights operate from all the regional UK airports either to Slovenia or to Pula in Croatia. Both are a couple of hours from Opatija. The closest airport is Rijeka, which is also a major cruise destination, with many Adriatic cruises calling there offering tours visiting Opatija and the Kvarner coast and islands.

Find out more

■ Tourist information website: (www.kvarner.hr).