



The island's high central plain, which nestled between the ridges of the hills.

The Rokis

“Arsehole!”

Terry Kavanagh emerged unsteadily from a dense thicket hot, sweaty and pricked by thorns and continued down the steep hillside. The curse he had just muttered was in no way directed at the owner of the garden into which he had inadvertently stumbled, but simply at his own poor choice of short cuts. The old woman looked up at the ruddy-faced Englishman from the bed where she was busy gathering vegetables. Terry offered a brisk “Good afternoon!” by way of apology and was quickly on his way, not waiting long enough to find out if he had been understood.

His ill-chosen route had, nevertheless, offered him a stunning panorama of the broad harbour, whose deep blue waters shimmered in the sunlight and which was surrounded by steep hills of broken down terracing and thick scrub. As he penetrated deeper into the town, the monotonous drone of the work going on to rebuild the ferry dock grew louder. In short time he descended narrow stone steps between imposing Venetian-era townhouses and arrived at his destination, the town's main hotel, the Tamaris. At least, he thought, his general sense of direction had not let him down.

Soon he had booked a room for the night, and was sitting at an outside table on the town's bustling harbour front, enjoying a Rothmans, and waiting for the sun to disappear behind the hills across the bay. Now in his mid-sixties and grown rather stout, he shifted heavily in his seat as the waiter brought him a bottle of beer before settling back to idly watch the people coming and going. Beyond the yachts ranged along the quayside, directly opposite him, was a small peninsula called Prirovo on which stood a Franciscan priory and church. The bell tower chimed six o'clock.

He flicked through his guidebook to Croatia, searching again for a passage which, when he first came across it, had tantalised: “Vis spent a brief period of time during the early 19th century under the British, who saw it as an ideal base from which to confront Napoleon's Adriatic hold, and also introduced the game of cricket, a peculiarity which has remained until this day.”¹

Terry had known of the island's historical association with the British for a number of years: the Royal Navy had fought one of the last major naval battles of the Napoleonic Wars off Vis' – then known as Lissa – north coast. The revelation that cricket had once been played on the island had, by contrast, been news to him. Having more than a passing

The Ascent of Mount Hum

interest in the game, he had begun to doubt what he read. He well knew that cricket is played on Corfu, indeed had himself played there some twenty years earlier for a Commonwealth XI against the only cricket club in the Ionian Sea. But on Vis? In Croatia, or communist Yugoslavia as it once had been? How could that be on an island closed to outsiders for over forty years? So vague and unresolved had the entry in the guidebook been that it appeared almost an afterthought, and although he had arrived on Vis the day before with other priorities uppermost in his mind he had managed, through a huge slice of good fortune, to solve the mystery quite satisfactorily.



The day before, he had taken an afternoon ferry from Split. Even for early May, the temperature had been comfortably warm, the day lucid in that Mediterranean way. Vis lay thirty miles south-west of Split in the Adriatic Sea, and the ferry would navigate between some of southern Dalmatia's more picturesque islands before reaching its destination two and a half hours later. Terry felt his sense of anticipation rising. He had long held a desire to go to Vis and, at long last, was about to realise it.

The last time he had been in this part of the world was nearly forty years before in the 1960s, when Croatia was one part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. He had been working in odd jobs in Scandinavia since the previous year and was on a trip through central Europe with three friends. In Split, Terry found out that passage to Vis was impossible on the grounds that the island was a base of the Yugoslav military, open only to close relatives of its inhabitants and off limits to foreigners. A measure of tourism had been allowed on the Dalmatian coast as part of a programme of economic liberalisation instigated by President Tito, but such largesse did not extend to foreigners taking snapshots of sensitive military installations. Terry understood, grudgingly. He had other places to visit.

Along with his three friends he was on his way overland to India. They were consciously following in the footsteps of Tim Slessor and colleagues of the Oxford & Cambridge Far Eastern Expedition,ⁱⁱ who had driven all the way from Britain to Singapore in seven months in 1955. Like that earlier Combined Universities' venture, the McNastie World Tour (named

The Rokis

after the Horace Silver classic *Filthy McNasty*, and an obscure character from the Hancock's Half Hour radio programme) undertaken by Terry and company had been inspired by notions of adventure and cultural exchange, but unlike the Oxbridge boys who, thanks to some cannily won sponsorship, travelled in two well-equipped Land Rovers, the McNastie party had made the trip by the somewhat more limited means of a single 1959 Volkswagen Combi. Amazingly, after having travelled more than 4,000 miles over some of the roughest terrain on Earth, the VW was still working by the time they reached Delhi, and managed to make it as far as Kathmandu. There they had managed to sell it on (at over 100 per cent profit) to an eager citizen scant minutes before its engine gave up the ghost, prompting angry scenes and a hasty retreat by Terry and the others.

The Vis ferry started its slow progress out of the harbour, dwarfing the yachts and sailing boats that crowded the small marina nearby. Seen from the stern of the boat, Split sat hugging the coast under the gaze of forbidding mountains, a ridge of craggy rock broken by scrub that marked the beginnings of the interior. As the city receded, he tired of the view and wandered round to the port side. Presently the boat threaded its way through the narrow strait between Šolta and Brač, islands of gently sloping wooden hills with a ribbon of rocky beaches at the foreshore.

From there the boat had passed the western extremity of the island of Hvar before heading out into the Viški kanal, where its destination soon became visible, though Terry struggled to see it at first beyond the mass of the boat's bridge. As they neared, though, he got more of an idea of Vis' size and shape as it sat there squat and unlovely on the open sea. The remotest of Croatia's permanently inhabited islands, covering an area of some fifty square miles, it made for a marked contrast with the other, larger islands the boat had passed, their undulating hills replaced by a rugged, sea-girt rock covered in scrubby vegetation.

The ferry made for the inlet – guarded by an islet on which sat a lighthouse and ruined stone buildings – on the north of the island. The huge natural harbour ran for about a mile long and half a mile wide. The small town which hugged its parabola was shaded by stony hills on which lay strewn scree from the dilapidated terraces of abandoned vineyards. Small stone houses with terracotta roofs ringed the harbour-side. Below the level of the road, fishing boats were tied up against tiny jetties.

The boat did not penetrate deep into the harbour but turned to star-

The Ascent of Mount Hum

board to make landfall in a bay off the western shore, below a couple of hills atop of which were ruined fortifications. To the south he could see a Venetian church on a peninsula jutting out into the bay. The boat had landed some way out of town. As he disembarked he was told by a steward that the landing stage was only temporary while the original ferry dock in the main part of town was being dredged and rebuilt. Though half a mile away, the noise from the reconstruction was clearly audible. A small, old-fashioned looking bus was parked nearby to take the ferry passengers into town before travelling on to the other side of the island. On a whim Terry decided to reverse his original plan and first visit the town of Komiža, on the west coast.

The bus trundled up a small hill past an imposing, but ugly, concrete hotel from the 1960s, and into Vis town. A large number of yachts were moored up, a sign that a certain well-heeled type of tourism was flourishing on the island. As the bus reached the centre of the port and a triangular area of parkland lined with palm trees, it turned right and chugged up a steep incline out of town to the south. Presently it made a short descent to a crossroads beyond a run-down industrial site before beginning a steady climb across the top of the island. After nearly five miles of vineyards – some worked, others not – isolated farmhouses and the occasional ruined church, the bus turned a corner between two substantial peaks to reveal the town of Komiža below.

The bus descended to sea level via a number of hairpin turns and came to rest not far from the town's main square. Dominating the town was another large church, and the hillsides were again studded with abandoned terraces. Komiža sat in an impressive natural harbour four times the width of Vis town's and bound by two horns of headland. The harbour arced from north to south, its graceful sweep broken only by the addition of a long concrete breakwater. Terry took a walk along it. Beyond, some five miles distant to the south-west, he could make out the island of Biševo, about whose wondrous blue grotto he had heard so much.

Halfway along the mole he stopped to look at a stone plaque mounted on the inner wall. It was written in both Croatian and English: "IN MEMORY OF THE BRITISH SEAMEN WHO SAILED FROM THIS HARBOUR IN SUPPORT OF THE LIBERATING FORCES AND WHOSE RESTING PLACE IS THE SEA." Above the inscription was the seal of the British Veterans' Association, and below it the dates

The Rokis

1943-1945. He knew of the British wartime association with the island, when it was an Allied base supporting Tito's *Partizani* movement, and was glad to see the contribution of the British armed forces still recognised.

Walking back into town, which seemed much smaller and more compact than Vis, he noticed more yachts ranged along the mole and fishermen attending their boats and mending nets. Komiža, it was clear, was still a working fishing town.

He settled at a table outside a bar called Speedy. Given the pace of life he was witnessing, it seemed optimistic to expect speedy service, so he sat and watched the comings and goings with amused detachment. It seemed a quiet sort of place. Then, just after five o'clock, everything began to change. The pace quickened as the harbour-side started to fill with people stopping by to chat and pass the time. This would be the Dalmatian equivalent of the Italian *passaggiata*, or perhaps it was the more universal currency of the after-work drink, with which he was all too familiar. He watched as young men and women larked and flirted and waited for the sun to go down. He had other plans, chiefly finding a bed for the night.

A tourist bureau was close to the bus stop, and he thought he would enquire there. The dark-haired woman behind the counter had a relaxed air, but was efficient enough in securing him an en suite first-floor double room in a nearby apartment – impressive view of the whole harbour included – at a very reasonable rate.

Leaving the young of Komiža to their fun, Terry made his way from the main square through some narrow alleyways to a fish restaurant called Bako that overlooked the bay. Seated in the shade of a robust vine, he soon found himself choosing a lobster from an aquarium tank inside the restaurant before tucking into some local squid, washed down with a glass of the local white wine, the Vugava. The wines of the island had a good reputation, viticulture having been practised on the island – which the ancient Greeks called Issa – for thousands of years, and this one did not disappoint. It was full and rich with a honeyed sweetness, closer to a dessert wine than anything else.

Deciding it was time to turn in for the evening, he left to watch the sunset from the balcony of his apartment. Out to sea he could see the last few boats returning from their fishing trips. Or were they boats coming back from an excursion to Biševo and the *modra špilja* or Blue Cave? He had wanted to go there, but the lady at the tourist bureau had informed

The Ascent of Mount Hum

him that the grotto is seen at its best either side of midday when the sun is in a certain position. Perhaps tomorrow, he thought, though the lady had told him the weather outlook was not too promising. Once the sun had dissipated itself into the vast expanse of the sea and he had written his diary entry for the day, he turned in for the night.

The following morning Terry awoke feeling well-slept and refreshed, but ravenous. Ordinarily never a huge eater first thing in the morning – he preferred a good lunch and an equally fortifying dinner – he took this as a sure sign that his body knew it was on holiday. There was a price to pay, however, for staying in an apartment – and that was the necessity of foraging for breakfast. However, he had no sooner stepped out of the door and walked a hundred yards than he found a small bakery nestled between a good-looking café and a grocer’s shop. A few minutes later, and armed with fresh bread, *pršut* or prosciutto ham, cheese and a bottle of peach nectar he was sitting at an outdoor café table helping his breakfast down with a couple of strong *espressi*.

The forecast winds he had been warned about at the tourist bureau the day before had indeed arrived, so there would be no boat trips out to the Blue Cave today. This was a disappointment. For all its charm, Komiža was too quiet a place out of season, and with the Bako and other restaurants only open in the evenings, he felt it was time to move on and explore some more of the island.

He had first read about Vis’ connection with the Allied war effort in Fitzroy Maclean’s account of his part in military operations in the Western Desert and the Balkans.ⁱⁱⁱ Towards the end of the Second World War British commandos had made sea-borne raids on the German-held mainland from Vis town and an airfield had been set up in the hinterland for refuelling Allied bombers on their sorties into the Yugoslav interior. There was also a cave halfway up the island’s highest peak in which Tito had made his temporary headquarters in 1944. It would be worth, he thought, spending the morning discovering what remained of the island’s wartime activity before moving on to Vis town.

The woman who had been so helpful the day before was again on duty behind the counter of the tourist bureau. Terry explained his interest. The woman listened, nodded, and told him that her son Antonio would drive him up to the cave in the bureau’s minibus, for a nominal sum. This seemed generous. Antonio told Terry that there wasn’t that much to see at

The Rokis

the cave, so first drove him up to the former Benedictine monastery and church of St Nicholas – the large church he had seen on arriving in Komiža – above the town. Although of little interest to him, he quickly realised it was a “must see” for any tourist, and thus a “must show” for any tour guide. Set on the hill of Muster above the town to the south-east, the monastery’s bell tower dominated the surrounding landscape, rising up above the wine terraces. Croatia had been Christianised from the islands inwards, starting at Biševo and Palagruža in the 9th century. The Benedictines had built their abbey in the 16th century by which time the Dalmatian coast and islands had become a part of the Venetian Republic. Terry bit his tongue out of politeness while Antonio did his tour-guide thing.

Up from the monastery was the “old” coastal road to Vis town that rose nearly a thousand feet before dropping through the villages of Podhumlje and Podšpilje, a loose aggregation of farmhouses in the south of the island, where the wine growers lived and worked. At Podšpilje the minibus took a left turn towards the village of Borovik, climbed a further 300 feet and stopped by a sharp bend. They got out and walked up a flight of stone steps on the side of Mount Hum, the island’s highest point. About halfway up was the cave.

Antonio had been right: there was little to see. The cave, still known as *Titova špilja* (Tito’s Cave), was boarded up and surrounded by barbed wire. Terry asked why the islanders didn’t do more to exploit the late marshal’s presence on the island. Wouldn’t some bright spark be interested in opening the site up as a commercial proposition? Antonio didn’t have an answer, but Terry found that intriguing in itself. Were memories of communism still too recent? He thought twice about bombarding Antonio with too many questions.

They walked back down to the minibus. Antonio asked if there was anything else that Terry would like to see. He answered that he wouldn’t mind seeing what was left of the Second World War airfield. This suited Antonio well as the site was farther along the road, in Plisko Polje. As they drove along they soon dropped into the island’s high central plain, which nestled between the ridges of the hills. Vineyards stretched from east to west.

Antonio stopped the minibus outside a restaurant and winery and indicated that the airfield was on the owner’s land. Terry thanked Antonio for his chauffeuring, paid him the agreed sum and a gratuity, and said

The Ascent of Mount Hum

goodbye. Hauling his travel bag over his shoulder he made his way down a concrete ramp into a small field, past a sign that indicated the restaurant was called Konoba Roki's, and carried on towards a modest farmhouse with shuttered windows, set in luscious vineyards.

There was movement from one of the farmhouse's small outbuildings. A man not many years Terry's junior was pottering about inside. Close by were outdoor tables and chairs, and in a corner a large heap of dried out vines. Several cats played skittishly around the outbuildings and fences. The man was tall, well-built and tanned. A crop of silver hair sat atop his head, his face was fringed with a short white beard. He was dressed for work in the hot midday: an open collared shirt and jeans. Terry caught his attention.

"Mister Roki?" he asked. The silver-haired gentleman acknowledged him in perfect English, in an accent that sounded familiar. Terry explained his purpose.

"I've been told that the airfield is on your land." The man smiled a smile that suggested Terry was not the first to come this way and make the same enquiry.

"Come up to the house," he said in an accent with an Australian twang. As they walked up to the farmhouse the man introduced himself as Niko. They went into the courtyard, which also doubled as the outdoor dining area of the restaurant. Niko called to his wife, Valerie, and further introductions were made.

"We were just about to have some lunch. Would you join us?" Valerie asked. Terry said he would be delighted, and soon the three of them were ensconced under a leafy vine that formed a natural canopy over the courtyard, sharing a farmhouse stew and a bottle of his hosts' homemade wine, and swapping stories.

Valerie was, it turned out, born in Hackney, in East London. Her father was from Islington, her mother from Malta. Nik, as she referred to her husband, was born on the island, though they met each other in Perth, Australia, where both were living at the time.

Niko asked about Terry's interest in the airfields. Had he served in the Royal Air Force himself? He had, in the late 1950s, as part of National Service. Niko was just old enough to remember the British airmen on the island, and the bombers taking off and landing nearby, during the war. The airfield Terry wanted to see was visible from the entrance to the prop-

The Rokis

erty. After lunch they could take a little walk and have a look at it. This suited Terry well.

After the war ended and the island had become a Yugoslav naval base, Niko left for Australia, where there was demand for workers. The island suffered in the time it was closed. The population fell as people took their chance of a better life elsewhere. A number of inhabitants made their escape illicitly, by boat across to southern Italy. Later, after the restrictions were relaxed, entire families upped and left for the United States, Canada and Australia. The staple industries of the island, such as wine growing, suffered greatly.

Had Terry ever been to Australia? He lit a Rothmans and told them the story of what happened after he and his three friends had left India. From Delhi they went on through Burma, then Thailand and on to Singapore.

"I was staying in a youth hostel in Bangkok. I was just about to take to my bed for the night, when I heard this voice from a corner of the room: 'Not only is the place full of Nips, we have the Hun as well!' My hair was a lot fairer than it is now, and this bloke had mistaken me for a Kraut.

"Bloody hell! A Londoner!" he said, when he found out where I was from. The man's name was Ted Bates, and we got on like a house on fire. I told him my plans and we agreed to meet at the Sydney Cricket Ground during the third test in 1966. What a game that was! Boycott and Bob Barber put on over 200 for the first wicket, Edrich got a century as well. Australia were all out for 221 in the first innings.

"When I met Ted on The Hill, the Aussies had one wicket left to avoid an innings defeat. I went to get some drinks. When I got there the barman had a mouth on him like a steel trap. I said: 'Two beers, please.' Silence, so I decided to have a little fun. 'What do you think of the game then, Aussie?' Quick as a flash he said: 'I think if you put us in again you'd still beat us by an innings. Now take your beers and fuck off!'"

Terry found the Rokis convivial company. They listened with interest as he told them about his other travels, which included some time in Bali, running a pub on the Falkland Islands and a number of years as a journalist in Athens. At some point the conversation steered back to the subject of cricket. Though Niko had watched the game when he and Valerie moved to Melbourne, he himself had not played it since he was a schoolboy. They returned to Yugoslavia in the early 1970s when their son Oliver was four

The Ascent of Mount Hum

years old. At first they lived in Split but soon moved back to take over the farmhouse at Plisko Polje, which had been in the family since the time of Niko's great-grandfather.

"Did you know," asked Valerie, "that cricket was played on this island?"

"So it said in my guidebook," said Terry. "What's the story?"

Valerie spoke at length of a neighbour of the Rokis who worked in the town museum in Vis and had very recently shown them a copy of a biography of a 19th-century Royal Navy captain stationed on the island during the Napoleonic Wars. It contained a reference, taken from a letter home to his family in England, to the British seamen playing cricket by the harbour to pass the time between engagements with the French. The Rokis' neighbour, though not exactly familiar with the game, knew enough to think that they would be interested in its small place in the island's history. They were. Terry's curiosity was aroused:

"In my guidebook it suggests that cricket is still alive on the island. Is that true?"

"Ah, that may have been down to me," Niko sighed. "A few months ago a young lady came to the restaurant. She was writing a travel book on Croatia and as we talked about the British and the cricket I let slip that we were thinking of starting up a cricket club here. She must have thought it interesting enough to put in the book."

"And are you," Terry asked, "starting up a cricket club?"

"You really need to speak to Oliver," Niko replied, "but I don't know when he's due back. You might have to wait."

It was gone four o'clock by the time Terry left the Rokis' farmhouse. Mellowed by the excellent wine, he enjoyed a lift in the back of a flatbed truck drawn by tractor as one of the Rokis' employees, a young man with a friendly smile by the name of Stanko, drove him the few miles from the village and on to the road that snaked around the hills above Vis town. Halfway around the steep, winding road Terry told Stanko he did not mind getting out and finding his own way.

"Are you sure?" Stanko asked. It was no problem to take Terry all the way into town. Terry was adamant that he did not want to put Stanko to any trouble, so the two parted company. Terry said goodbye and walked down a path that went off at an angle to the main road. The route into town was somewhat circuitous. The sun beat down quite fiercely, and

The Rokis

three-quarters along the way he decided to take the quickest available way down and shortcut across fields and then somebody's back garden.



The bell tower chimed six o'clock. Outside the Tamaris, Terry lit another Rothmans and put away his guidebook. It was behind the Franciscan priory on the Priovo peninsula, Valerie had told him, that the British had played their cricket games in the early 19th century. Terry wondered what a spectacle that would have made to the islanders at the time. Did any of them try to learn the game?

He decided to go for a walk and find something to eat. Turning right from the Tamaris he followed the road north until it rose to disappear behind harbour-front houses on the way to the suburb of Kut. After a few minutes' walk the road reappeared twenty feet above the bay, and he passed a small stone church and a large defensive battery set in expansive grounds with huge palms, where a pair of ancient cannon kept ominous watch over the bay. Farther along it he found a high-walled garden with a wooden sign that indicated a restaurant called the Villa Kaliopa.

Terry entered the garden and saw tables and chairs set out among bamboos, palms, pines and statuary, all decoratively connected by a series of stone paths. The setting was romantic, but there were no other diners and the evening air was beginning to chill so he opted for a table indoors, up half a dozen steps at the top of the garden. The interior was dimly lit. Huge plate-glass windows looked onto the garden itself. The waiter, who dressed casually, was in attendance in a flash, his manner courteous and efficient.

Terry asked for the menu. The waiter told him he wouldn't need one. This set alarm bells ringing, but Terry soon realised he was actually talking to the restaurant's owner:

"All I need to know is if you want meat or fish for the main course."

Terry replied that he would prefer fish but didn't want a huge meal. The owner then proceeded to reel off a number of starters that were available: fish soup, cheese and *pršut*, monkfish carpaccio. It was all a bit too much to take in. At the owner's suggestion Terry settled on some fresh prawns prepared in a special sauce.

"If you don't like it then you don't have to pay," the owner assured

The Ascent of Mount Hum

him. Terry was already warming to the restaurant and its charismatic owner with the prominent nose, and deep set, sad-looking eyes. He was absolutely right about the prawns and their special sauce. They were succulent, the sauce rich, and delicately spicy with an underlying hint of curry. A half carafe of chilled Vugava was an admirable balance to the prawns. Terry complimented the owner on a superb meal and invited him to join him at table.

Goran Pečarević, as he introduced himself, did so and asked Terry what brought him to Vis on his own. Terry relayed his long-time interest in the island, and mentioned his visit to the Rokis.

“Oliver is a good friend of mine. He runs a good restaurant, works hard.” They chatted for an hour or more. Goran was forthright on what he saw as the island’s future, after a long period of neglect. A benefit – one of the few – of the island being closed for so long was that his generation now had an opportunity to develop a kind of tourism in harmony with the island’s traditions. Of course they had fallen behind the other nearby islands in the intervening years. Hvar, Brač, and Korčula had all prospered while Vis had been held back, but they didn’t want an island overrun by tourists, like some kind of Adriatic Majorca. Besides, Goran continued, the town’s infrastructure couldn’t handle it in its present state. New roads and sewers cost money, and Croatia was not a rich country. The yachts and sailboats brought regular money in, and they had been coming here since the end of the 19th century, and would continue to do so. Only the concrete Hotel Issa across the bay catered for the package-holiday trade, and that was minimal. Here was, Goran said, the perfect chance to do things on their own terms.

Over a glass of herb-flavoured brandy Terry listened, fascinated and impressed by Goran’s vision. He was clearly something of an entrepreneur. The Villa Kaliopa was considered to be in the top ten restaurants in Croatia, and Goran was also renovating a Venetian merchant’s house just around the corner and turning it into a bar. The islanders of his, and Oliver Roki’s, generation were the ones making things happen. Terry concluded that Goran, at the very least, didn’t want for energy. Presently he decided it was time to go back to the hotel, so Goran presented the bill. For a restaurant with such a high reputation and food of such quality, it was surprisingly moderate in price. As he walked back through the darkened streets of Kut, Terry reflected that he had enjoyed himself so much that he

The Rokis

didn’t care what the meal cost.

The drilling of the ferry dock appeared to go on round the clock, so there was little need for an alarm call the following morning. Terry took a breakfast of espresso and a Rothmans on the terrace of the Tamaris before heading off to explore more of Kut.

His guidebook told him the island’s main museum was not far away, behind the grounds of the battery he had passed the previous evening. It being Sunday, though, the museum was shut. He would have liked to see the prize exhibit, a 3rd-century BCE bust of the Greek goddess Artemis – unfortunately a copy, the real one being safely locked away in a vault somewhere.

He strolled on past the Villa Kaliopa and into the main square of Kut, where builders were hard at work on Goran’s new bar. Everywhere he went in the neighbourhood he saw people unloading stone or fixing new roof tiles, working on their houses to get everything ready for the holiday season. Beyond the square, to the north, the road rejoined the harbour-side and, once past the last houses, dwindled into nothing more than a dirt track leading to a peninsula by the harbour mouth. It was now quiet. The scent of orange blossom filled the air. Small lizards scurried across his path looking for darkened corners. On the peninsula, which boasted an unmatched prospect of the town, stood a grand detached residence, once the mansion of a wealthy merchant family from Hvar but now, criminally it seemed, unoccupied.

Farther on through some trees, beyond a small chapel, lay a rectangular walled cemetery. The graves were those of British servicemen from either the Napoleonic wars or the Second World War. Terry paid his respects at a memorial plaque hung on one of the walls. Written in both English and Croatian, it bore the words: “IN MEMORY OF THE BRITISH FORCES WHO FROM THIS ISLAND OF VIS GAVE THEIR LIVES IN COMRADESHIP, SUPPORTING TITO’S ARMY OF LIBERATION, 1943-1945. FROM BRITISH WAR VETERANS 6 SEPTEMBER 1999.”

The cemetery was close to the northern shore of the island where Terry, discovering a small, secluded bay and a shingle beach, decided on an impromptu dip in the clear waters. Walking back into Kut he passed some high-walled, vine-covered arbours. Reached from the road by steep stone steps, they concealed some attractive looking two- and three-storey

The Ascent of Mount Hum

apartment houses. Farther on, off the main square and not far from Goran's restaurant, he discovered another garden restaurant, smaller and in less grand a setting than the Kaliopa, but still charming enough.

He sat outside, shaded by lemon and lime trees, and toyed with a superb squid risotto. Yet again the owner-proprietor was on duty and was only too eager to strike up a conversation with his guest. Zoran Brajčić was of medium height and brawny. He was born on the island but had spent forty years away in Zagreb, and had been drawn back through homesickness and a desire to help build the island up again. The island had only been re-opened to foreign tourists since 1988 but already there were warning signs of undesirable change. Property on the island was becoming sought after by foreign investors looking for second homes, and some islanders were already selling out. A lot of people's incomes were dependent on letting their apartments out to visitors during the summer months. If more of that property fell into foreign hands there was a danger of the island losing its identity. It was a question of balance, and Zoran hoped there was enough island to keep everyone happy.

Terry pondered this as he walked back to the Tamaris for gin and tonics on the terrace. The next day he would be leaving. The islanders he had met were proud people, and he had been struck by a sense of them trying to make up for lost time. From his brief glimpse they seemed determined to try to shape the future of this small island community in a way that few people anywhere bother to any more. They lived in a magical place that in some ways belonged to another time, and whose forty years of near-isolation had bred something like a sense of injustice. Their aversion to exploitation by outsiders struck a chord and appealed to Terry's sense of fair play, though looking at it realistically he knew they had a fight on their hands to preserve what they had. Perhaps he could help them in some way?

He recalled the day before at the Rokis' farmhouse when, after lunch had been cleared away, Niko's son had turned up and, over another glass of wine, they had talked about cricket. Oliver was in his early thirties, tall and well-built like his father, olive-skinned, with a thick mop of dark curls on his head and a beard trimmed in a straight line across his chin. He spoke rapidly and was quick-witted. He had never played cricket in his life, but that didn't seem to bother him. He talked enthusiastically, and Terry found the enthusiasm infectious.

The Rokis

"We have a climate here that's good for ten months out of twelve," Oliver said. "We could get English cricket teams coming to play in the winter. That would really give business a boost in the low season." Terry smiled at the fact that Oliver had, with entrepreneurial zeal, immediately leapt on the economic benefits before considering the practicalities.

"But do you think you could raise a team on the island?" Terry asked.

"For sure, why not?" Oliver replied, and Terry found it hard to disbelieve him. They drained their glasses. It was time to have a look at the airfield. The three of them – Terry, Oliver and Niko – wandered down past the outbuildings to the edge of the vineyards. Niko pointed out how flat the ground was there.

"They pulled up some of the best vineyards and olive trees on the island and levelled the earth. Look, you can still see the posts that marked the edge of the runway."

Terry looked, and saw a series of twenty-foot high poles set at intervals of about fifty yards on either side of the vineyard. They were painted with alternating red and white stripes, not unlike a traditional barber's pole. At the airfield's – or vineyard's – nearest edge was a rectangular area of land not under cultivation, overgrown with tall grass.

"It has potential, don't you think?" Niko asked.

Terry agreed. He could see what Niko was driving at. The land was flat enough and the area could be made into something with a bit of work.

"It would take a lot of effort," Niko continued, "And I'd have to talk to some of the other villagers about the land. Who knows? Given time, then why not a pavilion as well?"

It was an ambitious plan, Terry told them, to convert this end of the vineyard into a fully functioning cricket pitch, but the ambition was admirable.

"Do you think it's too small to play on?" Oliver asked. Although it was difficult to tell the exact dimensions, Terry was upbeat:

"Certainly not. It looks a perfect size."

"Of course, if we get a team together there's the problem of who we would play," Oliver said. Terry's eyes twinkled.

"My pub in Cambridge has a cricket team."

It was quickly settled. Next year. July and August were high season, so some time either before or after that would be ideal. Even if the pitch at Plisko Polje was not ready in time they would find a place to play on the

The Ascent of Mount Hum

island come what may, Oliver was certain. They shook hands on it and Niko, smiling, said: "I don't think you'll have a problem coming over and getting a game."

NOTES:

- i Foster, Jane. *Croatia Handbook*. Bath, Footprint Handbooks, 2001, p 233
- ii Slessor, Tim, *First Overland. The Story of the Oxford and Cambridge Far Eastern Exhibition*. London, The Companion Book Club, 1957. Reprinted in 2005 by Signal Books, Oxford
- iii Maclean, Fitzroy. *Eastern Approaches*. London, Jonathan Cape, 1949

