

## Just the Two of Us

Traveling as a single parent comes with challenges. But as **Anja Mutic** realizes during a mother-son trip to the Croatian island of Hvar, the opportunities for deep connection make it well worth the effort.

The pool at Maslina Resort, on the island of Hvar, in Croatia.





M

AMAAAAA!" MY SON, Kweli, screamed as a baby donkey named Matilda bit his big toe. By the sound of his cry, I thought the animal had taken a generous chunk—one that might necessitate an emergency speedboat trip from the island of Hvar, where we were staying, back to mainland Croatia. Thankfully, Kweli was just shaken up, and his toe only lightly nipped, but Matilda's overzealous

greeting wasn't an ideal start to what was supposed to be a relaxing getaway.

The preceding year had been relentless, between family health issues and COVID lockdowns, which had confined me and my six-year-old to our Zagreb apartment for more than two months and eliminated the possibility of travel, my primary beat as a writer. Around the time restrictions started to ease, I caught wind of Maslina Resort, a new beachfront property with 53 rooms and villas on the laid-back northern coast of Hvar—an island I've visited frequently since the early 1990s. I immediately booked a five-day escape to help us decompress.

Our adventure had begun with a jolt, even before the encounter with Matilda. We'd driven four hours from Zagreb to a dock outside the coastal city of Split, where the resort's custom-crafted Colnago 45 TS speedboat was waiting for us. Kweli dug right into the cookies and sugarcoated orange peels the crew provided, and we woohoo-ed as the boat bumped through the waves—until we hit a big one that left Kweli rattled and seasick for the rest of the one-hour voyage.

After reaching the island, we climbed into the golf cart that would take us the six minutes to Maslina. As the resort's

larch-wood façade emerged from forests of Aleppo pine, both Kweli and both of us began to relax. By the time we checked in to our room, with its peaceful palette of grays and greens and panoramic views of the azure Adriatic Sea, the big wave had become a hazy memory.

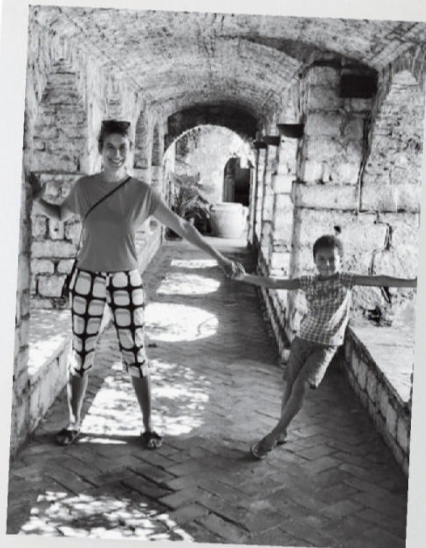
Somewhat ironically, our first order of business was spending some time apart. As a single mom, unbroken stretches of alone time top my list of requirements for a proper vacation, which is where Maslina's complimentary kids' activities program came in. Kweli could spend much of the day occupied by the toys and art projects in the playroom, leaving me free to stare at the sea.

One afternoon he made pizza with the restaurant's chefs; I unwound with an integrative reflexology massage at the garden-to-skin Pharamatiq Spa. The next day, he joined a handful of other kids to roam the property's lush grounds and snap artsy Polaroids, while I had a Reiki session. "Your solar plexus—the chakra that governs identity, personal freedom, and choice—is blocked," the therapist said as our time came to an end. "You may be neglecting yourself." The observation felt spot-on.

That evening, Kweli and I read a book on our giant bed, snuggled together on top of the plush mattress, which was made from seaweed and coconut fiber. I left the sliding glass doors open and the soft curtains billowed in the sea breeze. Kweli fell asleep next to me, content after his off-menu dinner of chicken nuggets and fries; I drifted off soon after.

Around 2 a.m., I bolted awake with the feeling that my heart was about to burst out of my chest. No stranger to panic attacks, I began to breathe slowly, visualizing calming images to bring me back to the present. But even after my heart slowed, something else kept me awake. Guilt is motherhood's middle name. There I was, at a gorgeous resort where my son was treated like a prince, and I had generous blocks of time all to myself. We were safe and spoiled, just as millions around the world were living without food and shelter. So many people long for

From left: The author and her son, Kweli, at Tvrdalj Castle, in the town of Stari Grad; Kweli pets a donkey at a farm on Hvar.





children they can't have, yet here I was, desperate for a break from parenting.

Both motherhood and travel have a way of expanding your heart and profoundly shifting your perspective, perhaps because you're often forced to leave your comfort zone behind. For a single parent, the one-on-one dynamic adds to the intensity of the experience. Your child looks to you for approval and a sense of safety. In a dual-parent setting, that responsibility plays out like a game of ping-pong. In our family unit, it's just me—and the pressure doesn't dissipate when we're on the road.

There's tremendous satisfaction in witnessing Kweli discover the world, and joy in being the one to shepherd these discoveries. Whether he's chasing shadows at a light exhibit at the MAAT Museum in Lisbon, chatting with chipmunks at the zoo in Barcelona, or learning archery in the mountains near our home, standing by Kweli's side as he tries new things and sees new places has been nothing short of extraordinary.

At Maslina, my son had befriended another boy, who was with his mother and father. I noticed with a pang the way they took turns watching over the child, gently reprimanding him if a boundary was crossed; if Kweli misbehaved, I had to be the enforcer every time.

The next morning, a tiny thorn got wedged into the sole of my son's foot. In theory, it should've been an easy fix—I simply had to pull it out with tweezers. But it turned into two hours of Kweli crying on our room's sun-dappled loggia, as if I was about to perform an amputation. I tried to muster all the patience and empathy from the deepest crevices of my soul until—boom—a full-on meltdown of my own, complete with screaming, tweezer-throwing, and, worst of all, the threat of no more sweets.

Once the thorn was finally out, we were able to move on, and Kweli still had dessert later that day. (So much for



▲ Family suites at Maslina include spacious courtyards.

◀ A view of Maslinica Bay from one of the resort's pool suites.



## In travel and in parenthood, presence trumps perfection.

consistent parenting.) We went to Maslina's pebble beach for a stroll along the bay and a swim in the clear sea. My son loved splashing in the water, which was atypically nippy for late September; I did not. But we bonded nonetheless, both squealing when we felt the seawater hit our skin. We made the easy 30-minute walk to Stari Grad, a stone-clad settlement said to be one of the oldest towns in Europe. We wandered around the grounds of Tvrdalj, the fairy-tale castle built by Renaissance poet Petar Hektorović, with a fishpond in its inner courtyard where a school of gray mullets was swimming. We gorged on lavender ice cream from a patisserie along the seafront.

On our last afternoon, we toured Maslina's organic garden. My son planted begonias and basil. We had a taste of supersweet stevia leaf and learned about plans for the garden's growth.

As I looked back on my own plans for an ideal holiday, it hit me that, in travel and in parenthood, presence trumps perfection. Kweli had quickly forgotten the brief blowups, both mine and Matilda's. All he cared about were the simple things, like dips in the pool and the sea, sugary snacks, and, most importantly, our time together. Panic attacks, donkey bites, and mommy meltdowns aside, it was exactly the reset we needed. 🌍

*maslinaresort.com; doubles from \$426.*