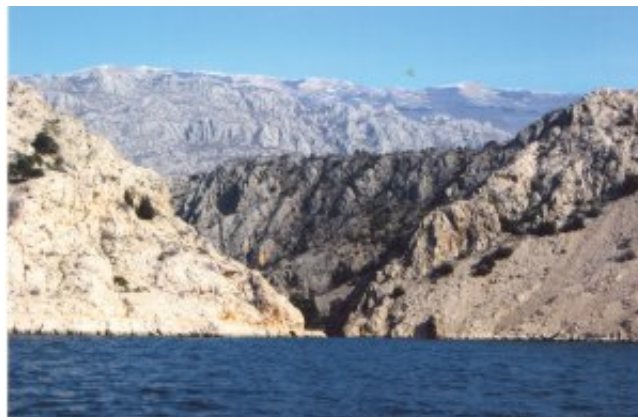


Croatia Double-Header

“That is a very nice mouflon ram, and I suggest you attempt the shot, even though conditions are less than ideal. Since he is lying facing us, your target will be small. But most important, you must hold a few inches into the wind.”

The sage advice from my 35-year-old guide/outfitter Tomo Svetic of Artemis Hunting rang clear in my ears, though I felt a bit uneasy about shooting at a distant target in the harsh wind we encountered.



After using my down jacket to fashion a rest on the rocky berm we lay behind, I placed my 26-inch-barreled, custom-shop Winchester Model 70 in .300 Win. Mag. on the jacket and chambered a Hornady cartridge loaded with the super-accurate 165-grain Interlock SST bullet. I then turned the power ring on my Leupold 3×9 scope to maximum power and snuggled into position. Miso, our local spotter, confirmed the distance was 325 meters.

At the shot, the ram scrambled to his feet, sped across the rocky flat in the company of his companion sheep and disappeared into some nearby brush. Davor and Mate, our other local assistants, agreed with Tomo's pronouncement of a clean miss. “Don't worry,” Tomo offered cheerfully, “there will be other chances.”

We were in the lower elevations of the Republic of Croatia's Velebit Mountains, where they reach the aquamarine waters of the Adriatic near the village of Senj. It was day two of our seven-day hunting program, which included mouflon on the coast and wild European boar inland.

In March 2011, my wife, Sandy, and I flew from our home in Walnut Creek, California, to Croatia via Frankfurt, Germany. We were greeted by a smiling Tomo as we cleared customs at the Zagreb airport. We followed him in our rented car as he drove to a small hotel in Senj, across from the Isle of Pag, our final destination. High winds had forced the closure of the ferry between the island and the mainland, so we spent the night in Senj rather than press on to Pag via a more roundabout route that involved a bridge crossing.

The following morning, we drove to a nearby mountain house that Tomo uses as a base of operation. We transferred our equipment into his 4×4 and set out for the day's hunt. Our three assistants had preceded us in their own truck.



After my shot at the ram missed, we returned to our vehicle and drove on mostly gravel roads through the coastal mountains, stopping occasionally to glass the surrounding terrain. We saw rams, but they usually were at extreme distances, so we returned to the house for a hot lunch and a welcome rest. That afternoon brought more wind, and we decided to call it a day.

Sandy and I drove to a nearby ferryboat landing and proceeded across the choppy water to Pag and its charming seaside resort city of Novalja.

There we checked into the Tonka, a bed-and-breakfast where Tomo houses his clients during hunts. The friendly proprietors, Tonka and Darko Balen, catered to our every request. That evening, Tomo took us to a colorful, local restaurant where we sampled some of the area's unique cuisine, including seafood, cheese, lamb and superb Croatian wine.

After a substantial breakfast at our hotel the next morning, we met Tomo and took the ferry back to the mainland. We proceeded to the headquarters house and once again met up with Miso, Davor and Mate. The strategy this day was to glass during the morning, and in the afternoon look over as much country as possible by cruising along the steep, rocky coastline in a small, open-cabin motorboat. Our departure point for the water portion of the day was to be the town of Jablanac.

The morning glassing proved uneventful; although almost everywhere we looked we could see stone walls that had been built through the ages. We couldn't help but ponder the origins of those unique structures. After a brief discussion, we headed to the boat landing. The harsh winds had subsided and the sea, although far from calm, was quite suitable for our purpose.

After a couple of hours of cruising, Tomo and our three assistants began pointing excitedly to a rocky outcropping high up some steep cliffs. Upon it stood a trophy mouflon ram with full-curl horns and heavy bases. My 10×42 Leica binocular confirmed their sighting and Tomo quickly directed the boat's captain, a local Croatian fisherman, to motor close to the jagged rocks that dotted the shoreline. Getting to shore was a bit tricky because the boat rocked considerably when we stepped onto the rocks. Within two or three minutes, however, I was standing behind a medium-size boulder with my rifle resting on my daypack.

Using gestures, our assistants cautioned me to place the crosshairs of the riflescope low on the ram's body. The shot would be at a steep, uphill angle. The distance was about 260 meters, a range that, under normal circumstances, would pose no problems. But because of the uneven footing where I stood, I was having a difficult time holding the crosshairs on target. I also disregarded the advice of the assistants and attempted to hold the crosshairs midway up the ram's body. This proved to be a fatal mistake. After I squeezed the trigger, we all had the distinct impression that I had shot over the animal's back. In an instant, he whirled and was gone. Although disappointed, I insisted on climbing with Tomo, Davor and Mate up the slopes to look for signs of blood, an obligatory action in such circumstances. We could find no blood or other signs of a hit where the ram had stood, and a search of the surrounding area produced similar results. During our climb and descent through the loose, sharp rocks, footing was precarious and I was glad to be wearing my sturdy Danner Elk Hunter leather boots with stiff Vibram soles.

The ever-cheerful Tomo again offered words of condolence, after which I said to him, "Tomo, if I recall correctly my readings of Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*, Artemis is the goddess of the chase. But, although you thought enough of her to name your hunting company in honor of her, it appears that she has deserted us in our present endeavor." Tomo laughed, and mumbled something about Artemis also being the protectress of wild animals.

We returned to the boat and headed back up the coast, relaxing after the arduous climb while Sandy took photographs. By the time we returned to the boat dock, the day was spent. Once again, luck had eluded us.

The next day dawned with somewhat calmer weather. By the time Sandy, Tomo and I arrived at the headquarters house, our assistants had already been out and spotted a small band of sheep that contained two rams. And they were in a comparatively level area. We were off at once, and soon found ourselves peering intently through our spotting scopes at the two rams we had been told about. Tomo concluded that the ram on the left was the better of the two, although it obviously was not as large or impressive as either of the ones I had missed earlier. We debated whether to try for a larger ram or attempt to collect the representative specimen at hand.

"The situation is almost too good to pass up," Tomo exclaimed. "The wind is down, you have a rock-solid rest, your target is standing broadside and the range is not over 350 meters. I think you should consider taking the shot."

I nodded in approval, turned the scope to 9x and chambered a round. As I did, I thought how nice it would be to have a 4.5–14 power riflescope in place of my trusty old 3-9.

At the report of the rifle, the ram flinched, turned and ran out of sight, taking his mates with him. Through their spotting scopes, Davor and Miso had detected blood streaming down the side of the ram as it turned. They slapped me on the back and offered congratulations. Tomo joined in the celebration and soon we were all jabbering and exchanging backslaps, high fives and handshakes. I silently offered words of thanks to the Powers that Be, as I always do under such circumstances.





We then made our way to the spot where the ram had stood and found a blood trail that led to our downed quarry a short distance away. The remarkable Hornady SST bullet had pierced the heart.

We took a one-day break in hunting to tour the nearby city of Zadar and its surroundings. The next day Sandy and I followed Tomo back to Zagreb, and then eastward to leased hunting grounds in the agricultural fields and forested hills near the town of Daruvar. It is there where Tomo conducts hunts for red stag, wild boar and other game. We were put up in a comfortable, two-story hunting lodge with private bedrooms and en-suite shower and toilet facilities. Tomo introduced us to the pleasant, man-and-wife team that heads up the staff at the facility, and we sat down to a hot meal before retiring for the night.

My aim in this area was to collect a wild boar. For the next two days, I hunted mornings and evenings from wooden blinds on stilts, or "high houses" as they are commonly called in Europe. Sandy was along to photograph events. The blinds overlooked vast agricultural plots that had one or more bait stations containing ears of corn. We saw numerous pigs of various sizes but nothing of trophy quality.

On the afternoon of the second day, due to our limited time in the area and to our hunting commitments in Bulgaria, I elected to shoot a short-tusked young boar that came to the bait station rather than go empty-handed. The bullet struck him just behind the shoulder and he collapsed instantly. (It should be noted that although we had no luck spotting the trophy we had hoped for, many large, trophy boars are taken annually from these blinds.)





And so we concluded our Croatian adventure with Artemis Hunting and its purpose-driven founder, Tomo Svetic. We found Tomo to be friendly, extremely capable and always ready to go the extra mile to ensure success for his clients. Croatia is truly a magic land, steeped in history and filled with endless opportunities for visiting sportspersons as well as nonhunter spouses. In addition to mouflon and boar, there are roe deer, fallow deer, red deer, chamois and brown bear to be had. We cannot wait to return.– *Mel Toponce*

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