

SCRATCHING THE ITCH!



Simon Barr with his first left and right on quail



Sporting journalist Simon K Bar reports on a cheap, yet exciting holiday in Croatia shooting quail

(Top Middle) Tiny little buggers but a superb game bird that provides a real challenge

(Top Right) Tomo Svetic (Artemis Hunting) and Ivan Silic await a flush of quail

(Bottom) Astra the springer retrieves one of many quail he flushed for the guns

Despite two years of tough economic times, I am someone that needs their shooting itch scratched. Smaller budgets meant my pheasant syndicate has been reduced to a couple of walked-up days. So I decided to combine an overdue holiday with some good value shooting. After speaking to several sporting agents – the choice was clear – Croatia.

Croatia offers a host of sporting opportunities at reasonable prices. You can fly from Luton with Wizzair for as little as £40 return, and - if booked well in advance - Ryanair fly from Stanstead for similar prices. I chose to fly to Zadar in the south at the end of August and spent a few days on the Dalmatian coast.

The pearl

I arranged an outing of walked-up wild quail over pointers with Tomo Svetic (Artemis Hunting Ltd). Tomo has been organising hunting trips here for the past five years and spends around seven months of the year in-country. He says: "I grew up hunting all over Croatia, so I know

the terrain, laws and native wildlife inside out." The country, which is known as the 'Pearl of the Adriatic', has much game from deer to bear."

Tomo had arranged for me to shoot quail at the splendid 140-year old Zelendvor estate near the city Varazdin. We stopped in Zagreb on the way to collect my hunting licence from the Croatian Hunting Federation headquarters. "Licences are mandatory and cost €60 but do last for 12 months and can be arranged in advance," explained Tomo. Whilst there, I was invited to visit the fascinating on-site hunting museum by the curator.

The day commenced with an early start so we could arrive on the hunting ground for 6am. "Dawn is when the quail are at their most plentiful having rested the previous night on their annual mammoth migration, fleeing the colder Balkans and Russia to winter in the cosier climate of Egypt and north Africa," explained Tomo.

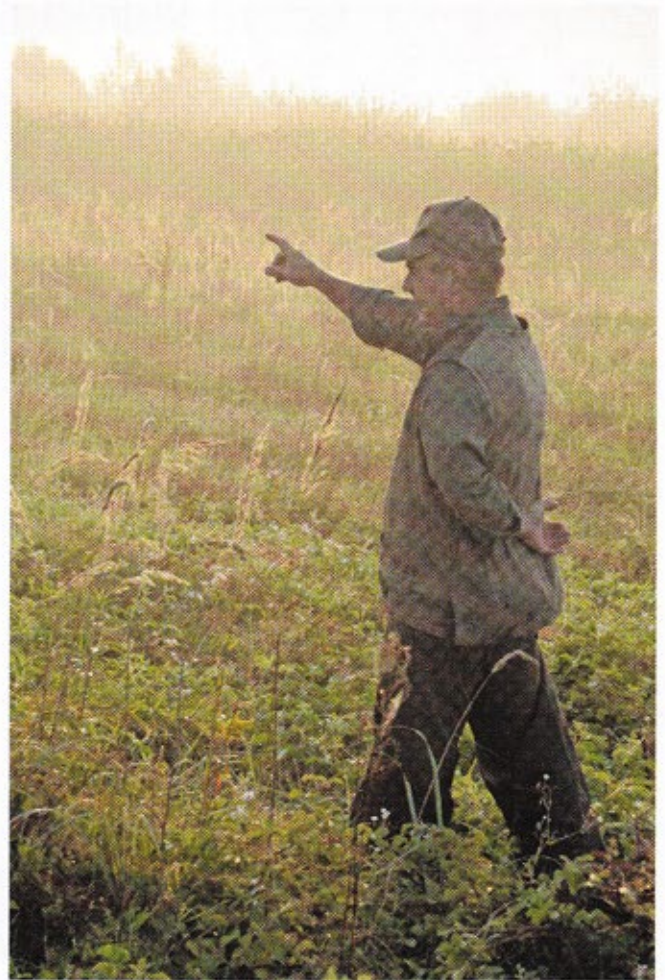
We arrived at the Zelendvor estate to be greeted by Ivan Silic (head director). We were promptly fitted with our shotguns (Blaser F3, 12-bores) and made ready for the

off. Our guide for the day was Marijan and the two dogs – Astra, an English springer and Tony, a Brittany spaniel.

Of dogs and guns

The sunrise was blushing the sky with pale pinks and oranges which was a fine setting for the morning's shooting. Metre-wide rides had been cut through the meadows of wild grass leaving ample cover for the quail to rest in as they stopped off on their journey south. "We also offer driven pheasant and partridge seven days a week throughout our season which is from 15 September to the 15 February," said Ivan proudly as we got in line at the start of the first series of rides. Ivan briefed us on safety and particular attention was given to dogs as an Italian team of guns had peppered poor Tony with shot the year before.

As we set off we could hear the faint sound of quail calling and before long Tony stopped and pointed 20 yards ahead of us. "Get ready, this will be low and fast," called Tomo down the line to me. Marijan ushered Tony forward gently and a brace of quail cocks exploded from



the cover, one left and one straight ahead of me. I had never seen wild quail before so had no idea of what to expect. The birds are about the size of small partridge and extremely swift. Checking there was not a dog in hot pursuit; I fired both barrels but regrettably missed the rapid low target. Looking to my left I could see Ivan had taken his bird with ease. We continued up the ride as I collected my thoughts and told myself to remember to swing through next time.

First quail ever

I redeemed myself with the next bird; it darted to my right and was taken by my first barrel falling into the long wet cover. Astra picked it and brought it to Marijan's waiting hand, who was pleased that I had chalked my first ever quail. The morning continued and the excitement increased – we brought down most quail that the dogs got up for us. It felt strange to be wearing a t-shirt and lightweight trousers on a walk-up shoot, but I was on holiday.

The birds were flying well and presenting some challenging shots, though never got higher than head height. This was fast and hugely

enjoyable sport in a wonderfully different environment than I have ever shot in. On several occasions we heard quail calling from behind us so had to turn back and stalk quietly back allowing Tony to find what we had missed. "The quail move around on the ground a great deal when you are out so you never know quite where they will fly," translated Ivan for Marijan. After three marvellous hours we headed back to the vehicles to count the bag – 35 quail to three guns, which in my mind is a respectable morning's walk-up for wild birds. "The bags are usually between 25 to 50 depending on the time of year, but we have done well," said Tomo.

Counting the cost

We returned to the lodge to have some breakfast and to conduct the post-mortem of the shooting. Included in the days booking was another walk-up in the evening, food and a night's stay at the estate that has facilities for up to 23 guests. There is also a comprehensive sporting clay layout, which I got stuck into in the afternoon before the evening. We shot a bag of 25 quail, which

was followed by an almighty feast of our quail shot that morning.

The overall cost of one day's quail shooting which includes two walk-ups, a night's accommodation, food, transfers, gun hire, shooting permit, guides and dogs was €300. There was a charge of €6 per bird and €0.5 per cartridge which split between three people was an additional €90 each as there is a minimum booking of three people.

Converted back to pounds, the shooting had cost me £350 and the rest of the week's holiday roughly £400 all in, so well within my budget. The quail season starts on the 1 August so next year if you are after a good value summer holiday with masses on offer for families and non-shooters alike coupled with some fantastic early sport, I couldn't recommend Croatia more highly. Tomo drove me to Zagreb airport the next morning so I could get my flight back to Stanstead, my shooting itch had been nicely scratched and I was already planning the next trip back.

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(Top Left) A thrilling morning bag of 35 walked-up quail

(Bottom Left) Tony the Brittany spaniel works the cover

(Right) Marijan the head keeper moves his dogs down the first series of rides