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PRESTIGE
HOLIDAYS

New life for the 'Nice of the Adriatic'

*Julia Warren reports on a festival that
aims to bring back the glory days of a
Croatian resort beloved of the Viennese*

Next month, the Croatian resort of Opatija will resonate to the sounds of a musical event which aims to recall the glory days of somewhere once termed the "Nice of the Adriatic" by the great and the good of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

The event – a concert featuring music by Mozart, Dvorak and Bartok – will be held on April 23 in the Crystal Ballroom of the Hotel Kvarner, a grand old establishment that was built soon after a railway link was established between Vienna and Opatija in 1873. And it will feature musicians from Austria playing in the Orchestra Academy Ossiach, an ensemble based in the south of Austria with direct links to the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

The idea for the concert – or rather a series of concerts to be held as part of the Festival Kvarner this year – came from Michael Fendre, a

36-year-old Austrian with a passion for music and vivid memories of the tales of his grandparents detailing how they attended concerts, partied and fell in love in Opatija.

On a whim, two years ago, Fendre got in his car and drove the four hours from his home near Salzburg to the place he had heard so much about. And he too fell in love with it.

"It was a sunny day in October, I parked the car and walked along the seafront and I just kept repeating to myself: yes, yes, yes," he says.

Fendre decided there and then to try to establish a music festival in Opatija that would recapture the spirit of its long-gone youth.

After much blood, sweat and tears, his dream will finally be realised next month – in the year that Croatia celebrates the 20th anniversary of its independence. "Opatija is now assured of her proper place in history," he says.

The town is replete with history. That first train from Vienna, with its



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ladies in crinolines and men in formal suits, steamed into Matulji-Opatija station on June 25 1873. The Austrians had arrived to claim Opatija as their very own bathing resort, a kind of "Vienna-on-Sea".

At first they stayed in elegant villas, but within a decade the company that built the railway line from Vienna had constructed the Grand Hotel Kvarner.

This part of modern-day Croatia, now known as the Kvarner region, was under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the half century leading up to the First World War and Opatija was the darling of resorts for bathing or taking the waters, rest and recuperation, music and dance – and love affairs.

The Viennese dispatched their orchestras and pastry chefs, the glitterati whirled and twirled long into the night at famed "Kristal" balls, the Royal families of Europe dropped in, and Mahler, Chekhov and Puccini came to find inspiration and glamour.

In addition to Fendre's festival, visitors to Opatija today can find plenty of other links to that golden past.

The Villa Angiolina, a buttermilk-coloured villa built in 1844 by a local businessmen as an opulent holiday home, now houses the Museum of Tourism containing a collection of old postcards, newspaper cuttings, holiday brochures and paraphernalia telling the story of Opatija's heyday.

As I walked through Angiolina Park, which runs from Marsala Tita, the town's main road, down to the sea, little seemed to have changed. There are palm trees, camellias and exotic shrubs – one minute it feels truly Mediterranean, yet turn 90 degrees and you see perfectly manicured Viennese-style gardens nestling demurely by the fountain.

It is this contrast which gives Opatija its special charm today.

Walk the tree-lined Lungo Mare seafront promenade and you will pass villas built for and named after ladies: Viktoria, Carmina, Julija are all here, some of them shuttered, awaiting the arrival of their masters and mistresses, others being spruced up with a fresh lick of paint ready for the season.

This feels like the old Opatija, but head up to Marsala Tita and a wave of designer boutiques, salons and cocktail bars confirm that we are well and truly in 2011. This is another part of the charm of Opatija, the gentle coupling of old and new.

Until recently most visitors to the town were themselves hardly in the first flush of youth, but that too is beginning to change with an influx of younger couples and families, particularly from the country's capital, Zagreb, a 90-minute drive away.

They are here for the top quality seafood, ice cream salons and spas. Taking the waters may have been replaced by olive oil and honey body rituals, but the spa tradition lives on, nowhere more stylishly so than in the Five Elements Spa located in the revamped Hotel Ambassador (a Seventies block that nevertheless remains something of an eyesore).

The well-trodden Lungo Mare links Opatija with Volosko to the east, a pretty white fishing village which was once Croatia's tuna capital and, to the west, the evergreen Lovran, named after the laurel tree, where there are more beautiful Belle Époque villas. Further afield lie the treasures of the Učka Nature Park and the wild, unspoilt island of Cres (25 minutes by ferry).

Opatija feels like a place getting ready to party again.

Before I left, I tracked down Silvija Novak, the Festival Kvarner manager who came here eight years ago as a tourist from inland Croatia and has stayed ever since. Over coffee

she looked me in the eyes and said (in perfect English): "You know, everyone has heard of Dubrovnik, but sometimes it feels like we are forgotten here in Opatija."

Michael Fendre hopes his festival will begin to rectify that.



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Opatija basics

Love Croatia by **Essentially Prestige** (01425 480400; www.prestigeholidays.co.uk) offers seven nights in Opatija at the four-star **Hotel Admiral** from £639 per person; £709 at the

five-star **Ambassador**, departing on April 20. Price includes return scheduled flight from Heathrow to Rijeka, return transfers and accommodation on b&b basis in a sea-view room

(two sharing) and complimentary tickets for the **Festival Kvarner** concert on April 23. There will be more concerts in June and October. **Further details:** www.opatija-tourism.hr.



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GUIDO BAVIERA/SIME



Clockwise from above:
Opatija has many
grand Habsburg-
era buildings; the
Orchestra Assembly
Ossiach practising in
the Crystal Hall of the
Grand Hotel Kvarner;
an old postcard
depicting the resort
in its heyday



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