

How Did Dubrovnik's Aristocracy Spend Their Leisure Time in Their Countryside Villas?

As the English philanthropist John Lubbock once wisely wrote, "Rest is not idleness, and to lie sometimes on the grass under trees on a summer's day, listening to the murmur of the water, or watching the clouds float across the sky, is by no means a waste of time."



Dubrovnik's aristocracy in Sorkočević villa

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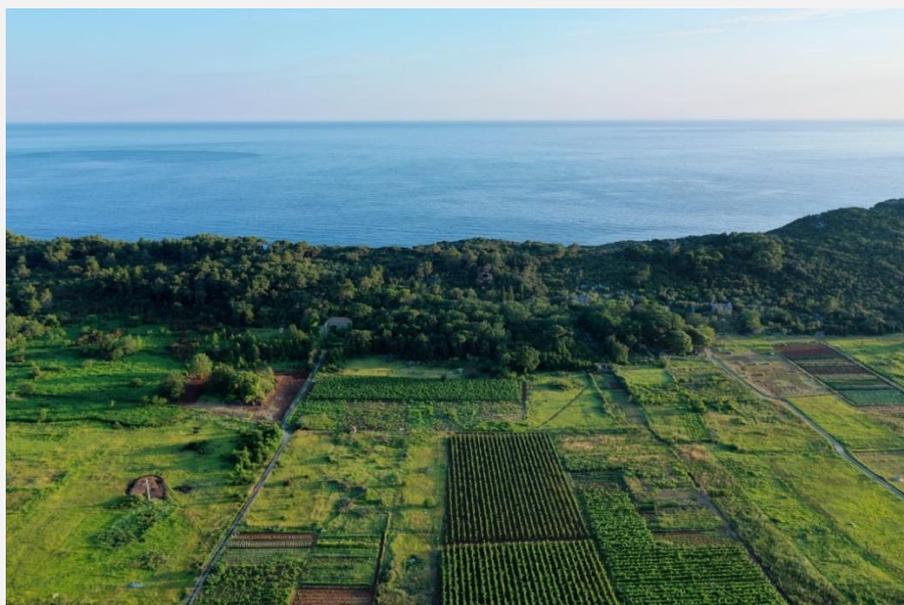
Getting back to the land was a win/win situation for Dubrovnik's nobility

There is something very noble and indeed worthy about getting back to the soil, a fact that was not lost on the aristocracy of the Republic of Dubrovnik. And escaping the suffocating narrow cobbled streets of the Old City of Dubrovnik and finding relief in their countryside villas was also the perfect excuse to get back to nature. These stunning summer residences were a place of refuge from the heat and crowds but also centres of agricultural activities. Fruit, vegetables, honey, olive oil and wine were all harvested in and around the estates. However satisfying this

must have been it was far from a hobby, and the term summer residences hides the fact that the land and indeed the villas were used all year round, come rain or shine. Landowners were always there at harvest time to supervise the work in the fields. And the philosophy behind these estates was not only to provide food for the family but also to reap the benefits from trade. It was basically a win/win situation, as the owners would reap the rewards in more ways than one.

Gardening has a higher purpose

A wise man once said that "if you have a garden and a library then you have everything you need." And in their countryside villas, the nobility of the Republic of Dubrovnik didn't only discuss business or supervise the work in the fields. They also had some free time to dedicate to the things that made them happy and refreshed their souls, such as fishing, going for a walk or reading. It was also not unusual to see a noble man getting his hands dirty and working on his land. In the Renaissance, working on the land was considered to have a higher purpose and many landowners truly enjoyed doing their gardens. The famous philosopher and author, Nikola Gučetić, considered that families who lived from the land were the happiest ones.



View on the fertile fields on the island of Šipan

Creativity born from the surrounding nature

In the villas and their salons, gardens and pavilions cultural and social life flourished just as much as the luscious gardens and fields that surrounded them. These very gardens and impressive landscapes inspired many to paint or to compose songs. Creativity was born from nature. The calm country settings of the villas became an ideal place for the gathering of poets, philosophers, writers and other intellectual circles. During the balmy summer months, it became customary to invite guests to the summer residences, where owners could enjoy the company of their friends and dine with food grown in their own gardens. They spent their time in deep conversation, singing, dancing or playing social games such as cards. During these congregations they would often discuss business affairs, as well as arrangements of the marriages between their sons and daughters, that would bring their families even closer together.



Performance in the Rector's Palace in Dubrovnik

Some of the most luxurious villas of that time even had their own private theatres that would play host to the comedies, dramas and plays. One of the rare preserved examples of these "home theatres" is still alive today in the Villa Skočibuha on the island of Šipan, near Dubrovnik.



Villa Skočibuha from the 16th century



"Home theatre" at Villa Skočibuha

Women held three corners of the summer home

These were different times than today, equality certainly wasn't a buzzword, instead clearly defined roles were in play. While men were mostly concerned with business affairs, women were instead dedicated to the education and raising of their children. If truth be told there probably wasn't a more family friendly environment than out in the fresh air of the country with the olive trees as your backdrop. But it wasn't all fun in the sun as education was taken extremely seriously. Apart from the learnings of their mothers the children would also have instructions from a priest. Many summer residences had their own private chapel, normally dedicated to the protector of the family, and a small dwelling for a priest. And these priests would not only look after the spiritual matters but would also jump in and help with the children's education. And as a break from caring for the children and home, it is true that a woman holds three corners of a home, the noble woman of the times of the Republic of Dubrovnik would indulge in pastimes such as knitting, painting and poetry. They would also often row their small boats to visit their friends and cousins, who also lived in their villas on the mainland. A privilege they had only when out in the country.



Small boats used for transportation from one villa to another one

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