

VODNJAN/DIGNANO

Geographical Characteristics

Vodnjan/Dignano, a small town in the south-west of Istria, today includes Galižana, Peroj, Barbariga and Gajana and with its 6,441 inhabitants occupies the area of 105.6 km². Vodnjan, situated 11.7 km from Pula and at 135 metres altitude, is located on 44°58` parallel of northern latitude and 13° 51' meridian of eastern longitude.

The area of Vodnjan belongs to Mediterranean climate with an average air temperature of 14 °C. This type of climate is characterised by warm summers and rainy winters, March and summer months being the driest part of the year, while October and November are the months with highest precipitation. Average amount of precipitation during a year is 848 mm. Prevailing wind directions are north-east (bura), south-east (jugo) and south-west (garbinada or lebić), and west and east winds are also frequent.

History of Vodnjan

Ancient Romans, after having defeated the indigenous Histri, (2nd century B.C.), have permanently settled in these parts by engaging in tourism. They knew how to use the advantages of this area: soil and climate are suitable for agriculture, primarily for olive and wine growing. In the 2nd century B.C., the territory of Vodnjan was given to guardianship of a certain Attinivs. At the time, Vodnjan was known as VICUS ATTINIANUM, the name from which ADIGNANI, DIGNANO most likely originates. The Croatian peasants are responsible for its Slavic transcription, since they used to carry the baskets loaded with their own products and run to the marketplace...first to Dinjane, then Vodnjane and finally to Vodnjan. In historic records Vodnjan is mentioned already in 932 at the time of Pietro Candiano to whom Istrian towns gave amphorae "of good wine" in return for protection. The first written record of Vodnjan dates back to 1194 in a court decision mentioning Poponis de Adignanis. After the downfall of the Roman Empire, life in Vodnjan continued under the rule of the Ostrogoths (Barbarians) and the Byzantine Empire. The first destruction happened in 751 when Vodnjan was attacked by the Langobards and the Avars, and Charles the Great brought the reign of feudalism. The area around today's Vodnjan was rich with firewood, livestock, crops, quality oil and wine, which all contributed to its development. The legend says Vodnjan developed out of the association of seven fairies which were a part of Pula's colonial property. In order to survive the constant feud between the Patriarch of Aquileia and the Venetians, the seven villas (Vodnjan, Mednjan, Guran, Saint Quirinus, Mandriol, Saint Michael of Banjole and Saint Lawrence) organised into one town: today's Vodnjan. In an effort to gain at least a limited autonomy, the people of Vodnjan decide that they would benefit more if they succumbed to the Venetians, under whose rule they remained until the fall of the Serenissima (1797). Having gained considerable importance, in 1330 Vodnjan separates from Pula and gets its own Venetian governor. The Statute of Vodnjan, which regulates private and public law, dates back to that time and cultural surroundings (XIII century). It is an elaborated and improved version of one previous statute (written probably in 1212, when Vodnjan and larger surrounding villages joined into one parish). Its value was confirmed by its long existence and the fact that its provisions remained in effect for more than four centuries, until the Austrian rule. After the fall of Venice, during the Austrian rule, Vodnjan once more became a part of Pula. From 1805 to 1813 Istria was in the transitional period under Napoleon, and from 1814 to 1918 it is again under the Austrian rule and, due to its strategic geographical position, became even more significant as an important traffic junction. The First and Second World War brought on big changes, and it is only in 1993 that Vodnjan was once again granted the status of municipality, which today includes Galižana, Peroj, Barbariga and Gajana. Inside its historic nucleus, the town preserved its characteristic medieval appearance with nooks and winding narrow streets, with cobble roads and facades made of cobble stone, old streets still markedly recognisable by their Gothic-Venetian (palace Bettica), Renaissance and Baroque style as well as numerous churches rich with memories and artefacts. The town is spreading and reaches the periphery without visual infringement of urban settlements shadowed by the highest bell tower in Istria.

Vodnjan's Cultural Guide

PARISH CHURCH OF ST. BLAISE IN VODNJAN



The construction of this three-nave basilica with a semicircular apse, presbytery, transept and a choir started in 1761 at the site of an early Romanesque three-nave basilica destroyed in 1760. The church was built according to the model of the Church of St. Peter in Castello. It was consecrated in 1808, but not completely finished. Its size, 56.20 x 31.60 m and its 25 meter high cupola make it the biggest parish church in

Istria. Likewise, it is the church with the highest bell tower (62 m), similar to that of the basilica of St. Marco in Venice. The bell tower was built in 1815 according to the design of Antonio Porta from Trieste, and was completely finished in 1882.

On the neo-Baroque facade of the church visitors are welcomed by five saints: “the host” Saint Blaise, Saint Peter and Saint Lawrence to the right, and St. Paul and St. Quirinius to the left. The statues, all of them in natural size except for the statue of Saint Blaise which is bigger, were constructed by brothers Trevisan, Andrea and Giovanni, the sons of the self-taught and widely known painter Venerius from Vodnjan.

The interior of St. Blaise is a Baroque space divided by arched arcades on pillars, holding nine altars from 19th and 20th century with ornately decorated incrustations, marble and oil paintings of saints of great art value. The church has an extremely valuable inventory partially presented to the public in the museum which is an integral part of this sacral building.

MUMMIFIED BODIES OF SAINTS

Vodnjan's Parish Church of St. Blaise keeps 370 relics belonging to 250 different saints. In addition to a thorn from Jesus' crown, a piece of the veil of the Holy Virgin, a piece of Jesus' cross and many others, special attention is drawn by, behind the altars in a dim light of glassed sarcophagus, three preserved bodies (mummies) of saints: **St. Leon Bembo** (Venetian, chaplain in the Doge's Palace), **St. Giovanni Olini** (Venetian, considered a saint already during his life) and **St. Nicolosa Bursa**, as well as the body parts of the Roman officer St. Sebastian, Constantinople's martyr St. Barbara and the penitent St. Mary of Egypt. The bodies are completely preserved and not embalmed or hermetically closed which is still a real mystery for scientists.

The body of St. Nicolosa Bursa (the head of Benedictine monastery St. Servolo near Venice) is the most preserved mummified body in Europe, and her skin is elastic to this day.

