

# The Blue Cave in the Vis Archipelago Paradise, Croatia's First UNESCO Geopark in the Adriatic

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The island of Vis in the Adriatic Sea (Croatia) is a central Adriatic island. This is a small island (89.72 km<sup>2</sup>) but it has a large maritime zone (6,601 km<sup>2</sup>) featuring geologically very attractive open-sea islets known for having rich fishing grounds. The Vis Archipelago was officially declared a UNESCO Geopark on April 18th 2019. This was the first area of the Croatian Adriatic to be included in the Global UNESCO Geopark Network. This paper presents the world-known monument of nature in the Adriatic Sea—the Blue Cave, a sea grotto of exceptional beauty on a small islet of Biševo in the Vis Archipelago Geopark. The author links the Blue Cave's discovery to the beginning of tourism in Dalmatia, and he presents a few interesting commentaries and impressions of the Blue Cave by various visitors, especially in comparison to the more widely known Grotta Azzurra on the island of Capri near Naples (Italy).

*Keywords:* Blue Cave, island of Vis, UNESCO, Adriatic Sea, island of Biševo, 10 last paradises of the Mediterranean, Geopark Vis Archipelago

## Introduction

In April 2019 the UNESCO Commission on Geoparks included a new member among the existing 147 geoparks of the UNESCO Global Geopark Network: the Geopark Vis Archipelago. The central goal of this aspiring Geopark's program was based on global valorization of geological, natural, and cultural heritage of the Vis Archipelago area, both tangible and intangible, as it was specifically shaped in response to the demanding conditions of survival.

Prior to this, the Vis Archipelago was noticed for its unique beauty and preserved biodiversity in 2003, when the World Wildlife Fund declared it one of the 10 last paradises of the Mediterranean.

The Vis Archipelago encompasses the mid-Adriatic maritime zone, including the island of Vis which is its central point, and a number of smaller islands. Total surface area of the island territories is less than 100 km<sup>2</sup>, but together with the maritime zone, the archipelago covers 6,601 km<sup>2</sup>. The island of Vis (89.72 km<sup>2</sup>) has a population of 3,617 inhabitants, according to the latest census.

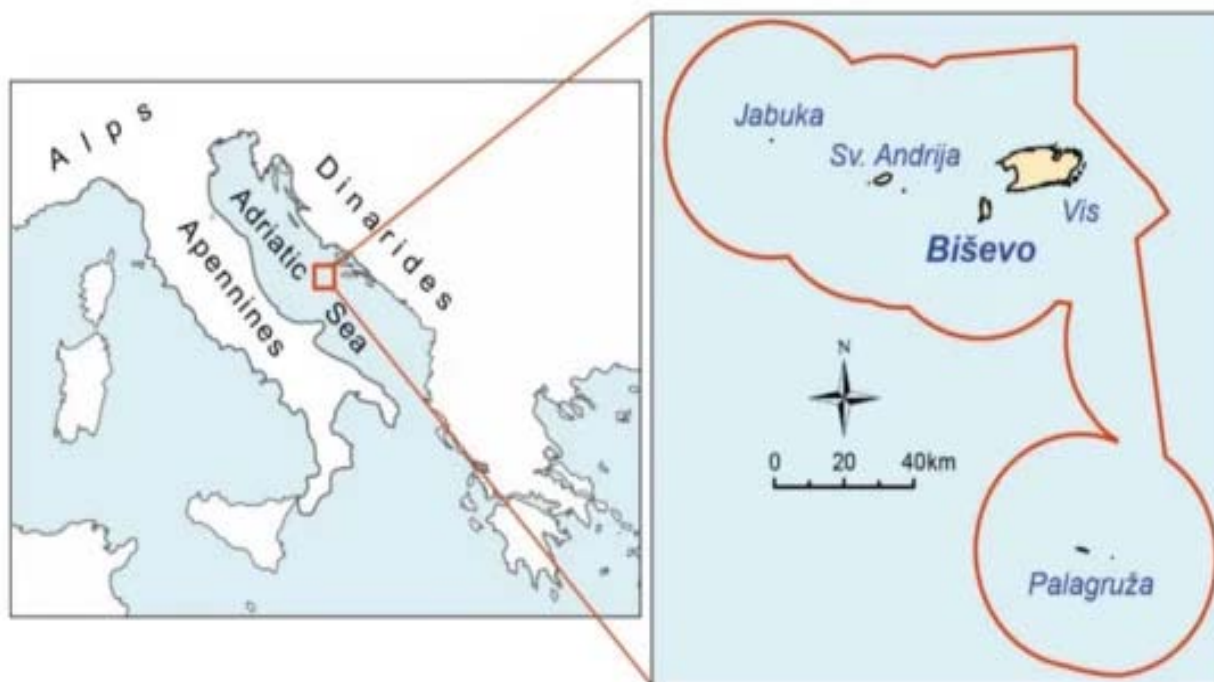


Figure 1. Map with the location of the Adriatic Sea (on the left), along with the UNESCO Geopark Vis Archipelago area outlined in red (on the right), showing the position of Biševo Island (Croatian Geological Institute, Zagreb).



Figure 2. The island of Biševo, five nautical miles in the distance, as seen from Komiža (Ivo Pervan).

### The Secret of the Vis Archipelago

This entire area, with the greatest concentration of natural monuments in Croatia (a total of six), was declared a military zone after the World War II and as such partially or completely off limits to foreign visitors. Vis thus remained a *terra incognita* to the world until recently, in spite of its central position in the Adriatic. Situated at the crossroads of ancient maritime routes, Vis was the farthest inhabited island, first populated by the Greeks in the 4th century. During World War II, Vis was the only European territory not overrun by Hitler's army, an impenetrable Mediterranean bastion.



Figure 3. Portrait of Eugen Freiherr von Ransonnet-Villez (Mario Davidenko).

The oldest urban community in Croatia, the Greek town of Issa (397 BC), was founded on the island of Vis, making it the birth place of urban civilization on the eastern Adriatic coast. The Greek colony of Issa was first to implement the use of money, and it was widely known for its art of winemaking, and highly developed literacy, poetry, and theater.

### Discovery of the Blue Cave on the Island of Biševo

On Thursday, August 7, 1884, the Viennese daily *Neue Freie Presse* published a story titled *Die blaue Grotte der Insel Busi*. This article, written by Eugen Freiherr von Ransonnet-Villez, sparked a massive interest of the Austrian public for the natural beauty of the coast and islands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The article broke the news about the sensational discovery of a natural phenomenon in the Adriatic—the Blue Cave on the island of Biševo. This cave's luminous beauty, as Ransonnet-Villez argued, far surpassed that of the more widely known *Grotta Azzurra* on the Italian island of Capri, then believed to be the most beautiful sea grotto in the world.



Figure 4. Underwater stone arch in the Blue Cave (DinkoBožanić).

Eugen Freiherr von Ransonnet-Villez was a man of many interests. In addition to being a talented painter, he was also a speleologist with a special interest in biology, particularly the biologically diverse seas around the open-sea islands hiding rich marine life in the dark caves and channels. The credit for being the first to take

successful underwater photographs went to the French biologist Louis Boutan in 1893, however, the story published by the Viennese newspaper *Neue Freie Presse* in 1884 may point to a different conclusion: that the oldest known underwater photographs had actually been recorded in Biševo's Blue Cave nine years prior to Boutan. Ransonnet-Villez needed these photographs so he could transfer onto the canvas the magic beauty of Biševo's temple of light—the Blue Cave's submerged world, as well as to document the unusual and wondrous marine organisms in the waters of this insular open-sea territory.

### **The Viennese Tourist Club in the Blue Cave**

In 1885, a year after the story came out in the Viennese daily, a hundred members of a Viennese tourist club arrived in Biševo to see this miracle of nature up close and personal. Although the foundation of the Hygienic Society of Hvar in 1868 had marked a modest beginning of tourist-oriented activity in Dalmatia, Ransonnet-Villez's discovery of the Blue Cave was the key event to start organized tourism in Dalmatia.

Steamboats crowded with tourists from European capitals flooded the fishing town of Komiža in the end of the 19th century. The steamboat journey from the port of Split to the town of Komiža included a brass band from Split which provided entertainment to the guests on this leg of their journey. In the morning of the following day, the merry crowd would sail into the port of Komiža, where ten fishing boats waited the steamboat to tug them to the Mezuporat Cove on the island of Biševo. Once on Biševo, the visitors would board these small oar-powered boats in order to enter the Blue Cave. As the excursion came to an end, the steamboat was again tugged back to the port of Komiža.

### **The Most Beautiful Sea Cave in the World**

Elementary school teacher from Komiža, Mr. Petar Kuničić, wrote the following in his *Guide through the Vis Archipelago*: “Not before long, tourists from many cultural capitals flocked the island to admire the outstanding beauty of nature (...) In 1891 Archduke Albrecht, a distinguished scholar, visited the Blue Cave and said this to Komiža's mayor Mr. Petrić: ‘I visited this cave of yours and I am thrilled you have something so beautiful, more exquisite than Capri's Blue Grotto’” (Kuničić, 1932, pp. 25-26). Mr. Kuničić had witnessed first-hand the reaction of the tourist elites of his day to the most beautiful sea cave in the world. Many renowned visitors from European capitals flocked to Biševo to see this sensational discovery by a Viennese painter.

### **An Underwater Palace of the Sea Fairies**

A well-known writer at the time, Mr. Josip Poljak, wrote the following about the Blue Cave: “When we gaze at the sea, we are enchanted by that breathtaking azure, that light shade of blue reflected off of the sea floor. An entire spectrum of fine shades of blue that we can imagine, can be seen here, in this small and secluded pool of water. It is as though a large opal gemstone sits somewhere down below, reflecting the most heavenly colors. The surface glitters with a myriad of shades: from the clear blue to the deepest ultramarine which turns into a pure sapphire blue, which then slowly lightens into a brighter shade as it nears the cave opening. Sea washing against the rocks is of a soft and transparent blue. The rocks within the cave's chamber feature fine hues of red, pink, yellow, green and blue, frequently merging into each other (...). This place so enchants and captivates the visitors, that it may seem to them a sort of underwater palace of the sea fairies” (Poljak, 1928, pp. 21-22).

### **Biševo's Blue Cave "More Beautiful Than *Grotta Azzurra* on Capri"**

A visitor to the Blue Cave, Mr. D. Tomić, wrote down his impressions: "Biševo's Blue Cave was visited by hundreds of thousands of people, among whom there was also a large percentage of intellectuals, poets, writers, painters etc., of all ethnicities and from all continents, and they all spoke of the cave with exceeding flattery. I had the opportunity to visit the cave in the company of a well-known German writer, Mr. T. Keiser. He told me that he had visited the famous grotto on Capri just ten days before, but that the Biševo cave was far superior in beauty and authenticity (...). Biševo's Blue Cave not only surpasses the one on Capri in Italy, but is without a doubt the most beautiful of its kind in the whole world" (Tomić, 1933, p. 9).

### **A Breathtaking Beauty**

In 1950, a visitor to the Blue Cave, Mr. Ante Grimani, wrote the following about it: "This place leaves us breathless, mesmerized, you can almost hear us cry out: wonderful... amazing... magnificent... I never set eyes on something this beautiful. We are in an enclosed vault and the air is satiated with an opal blue fog, a silverish mist of sorts. Underwater pearls, the corals, the patterns on the sea algae, all the colors you can imagine surround you from all sides. All this beauty shivers, moves, it is all so full of life. Creatures from stories and myths are suddenly animated and you can almost see them moving across the walls, waving at you, calling out for you. (...) And the sea? Oh, the sea...its deep lilac color, covered in pearls and gemstones, gradually turns into liquid silver near the vaulted ceiling. Sometimes it is of a milkish color, other times of silver, and then again, a pure blue crystal. Our small boat pushes ahead, creating waves which spill over, droplets fall quietly from the oars like small tears, sparks, or shiny jewels (...). We jump into the water. Endless shades of colors light up as tiny drops splash into the air and fall onto the water as silver rain. Our bodies in the water are silverfish at times, and golden or blue at other times. Our joy bounces off of the walls of the cave, it lights up the rocks, paints the air. All of this has to be seen, because no words can describe it" (Grimani, 1950, p. 13).

### **Painting in the Blue Cave**

Mr. Ransonnet-Villez returned to Biševo in 1890 in order to capture this unforgettable luminous blue of Biševo's Blue Cave on canvas. He hired local artisans Ivan and Vicko Marinković to construct a wooden deck in the cave. The deck was to be fastened onto a rock wall and fixed to stand out slightly above the surface, providing Ransonnet-Villez a secure ground from which to paint the fascinating scene. But in order to make this endeavor possible, in order to be able to differentiate the various color schemes in the Blue Cave, he also needed sunlight on his canvas. Ivan and Vicko Marinković came up with an ingenious solution—a system of mirrors which reflected sunlight from the outside into the interior, and onto the canvas. Ransonnet-Villez soon took up work and was so wrapped up in the Blue Cave's magic that on one occasion, as he painted in the throes of creativity while trying to capture that elusive play of the shimmering blue light on his canvas, he failed to notice that the southern wind had been steadily picking up outside the cave. The waves were soon big enough and there was danger they might completely close off the south-facing entrance to the cave. Biševo's fishermen hurried to warn him of danger and helped him exit the cave at the last minute. Petar Kuničić wrote the following: "The Blue Cave faces the southeast. The cave entrance, also used by boats to access the cave, is low and narrow, and when the southern wind picks up, the sea rises and blocks the entrance. So, if you find yourself in the cave on such an occasion, you would be trapped inside. This is what almost happened to Ransonnet-Villez, as he painted inside the cave with the help of artificial light and mirrors. During strong

southern winds the sea level rises and pushes through, closing off the entrance to the cave chamber. These gurgling sounds of the roaring sea sound like sea monsters on the inside—as the sea drops sprinkle the surrounding rocks” (Kuničić, 1932, p. 40).



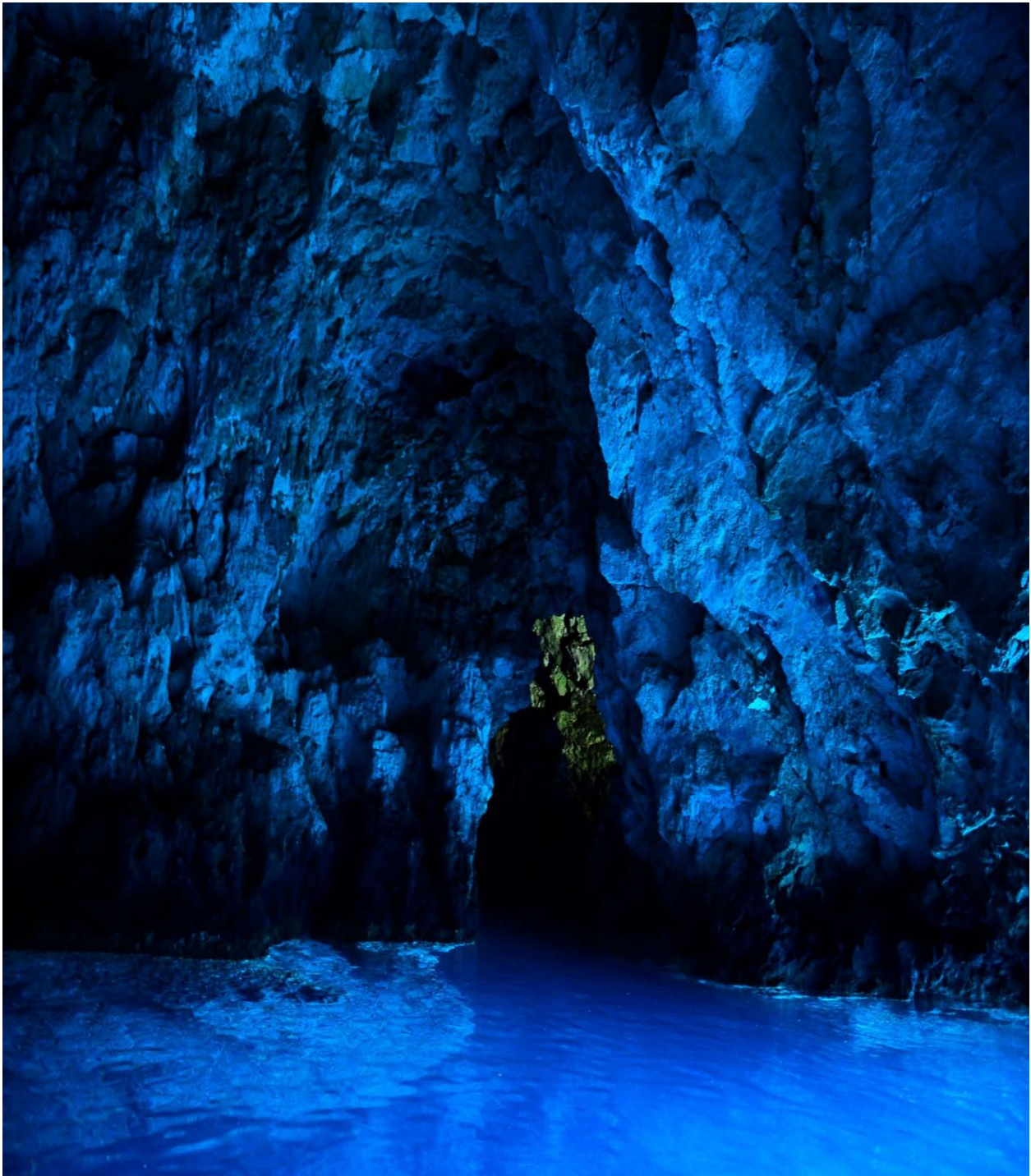
*Figure 5. Sunlight reflected from the seabed (Ivo Pervan).*

### **We Ought to Bow Down Before the Heavenly Beauty**

Here we are before the gates of the Blue Cave, this enchanting temple of the mythical sea-god Nereus and his Nereids. When entering through his gates, we ought to bow our heads down, not only because of the low ceiling but also to show respect for the heavenly beauty awaiting us at the end of the dark tunnel. Can those of you familiar with Homer’s *Iliad* recall that miraculous liquid into which the sea goddess Thetis immersed her son Achilles while holding him by his heel? Where in the world is this miraculous water which protected Troy’s greatest hero against all wounds? What is this miraculous water that made Thetis’ son invincible in battle? Where is this sea temple in which the mother of Achilles hid Dionysus from the persecution of King Lycurgus? Where in the world is this miraculous blue water in which the daughters of the sea-god Nereus—the sea nymphs Nereids—bathe?

### **Sea Turned Into Liquid Silver**

Many who have had the chance to visit the Blue Cave on the small open-sea island of Biševo know the answer to these questions. As we leave behind a bright summer day and enter the dark tunnel of Biševo’s Grod Balun cliff we soon encounter that deep blue beauty which flashes at us from the sea, that color which turns all objects and bodies immersed in it into liquid silver.



*Figure 6.* Various shades of blue dominate the Blue Cave (Ivo Pervan).

And we know for sure that we have entered a mythical place, that we have crossed over, on a small boat, from the real world to the supernatural domain, into a mysterious abode of a sea deity. This is a different world entirely, it floods us with novel sensations, we feel tremendous power. We are greeted by a sudden explosion of the sea's intense blue, and our eyes rest on the underwater stone arch, which glitters as if covered by a thousand gems: sapphires, opals, onyxes and pearls, emeralds and amethysts, a wondrous jewel-decked underwater

bridge connecting the walls of this spacious stone shell. We are taken in by the sound of dripping water and the steady rhythm of drops bouncing off the smooth surface of the blue sea. While listening to this music of silence, we suddenly desire to belong to this beauty, to somehow make it our own, etch it into our memories, our dreams. We now know we will exit this temple of beauty as different people than the ones who entered. We will remember this truth many times in our life—each time when our mind brings to life the images of the heavenly blue color of the healing waters within the Grod Balun cliff on the island of Biševo.



*Figure 7.* Portrait of Greta Garbo (Mario Davidenko).

### **The Watermelon for Greta Garbo**

Countless visitors have visited the Blue Cave since 1895, even some world-famous ones. There are many

stories, legends, and anecdotes that tell us of these visits, but many more were forgotten and lost in the throes of time. We will recall one of such stories which survived in the collective memory.

In August of 1935, Mr. Frane Torre who was the president of the then Town Embellishment Society in Komiža, received a letter informing him that the famous Hollywood actress Greta Garbo was about to arrive in Komiža and had planned on visiting the Blue Cave.

When Greta Garbo arrived in Komiža, Mr. Torre told her about the unique Blue Cave on the island of Biševo, and about the Viennese painter Ransonnet-Villez who had discovered it, and world-known people who had visited it.

When they entered the Blue Cave, Greta Garbo was so excited that she just kept repeating: “O my God, o my God, o my God!”

But Greta was clueless about the surprise which Mr. Torre had prepared for her: at one point he reached into his bag for a knife and a large watermelon which he proceeded to cut open, so as to supplement Greta’s visual experience with sweet tastes of the red melon. However, as he cut open the watermelon, its usually red content appeared blue and he apologised to the actress for having served a rotten watermelon. As soon as they exited the cave the watermelon’s natural red color became clearly visible, prompting Mr. Torre to ask Garbo: “Do you know which color the watermelon was inside , before I cut it open?” To this she replied: “Of course I knew. All watermelons are black inside before you cut them open, and red once they are cut open. But only your watermelon was also of a blue color!”



Figure 8. A sandy beach in the hidden cove Sarbunora on the west coast of Biševo (Ivo Pervan).

### Discovering the Secret of the Three Miracles

Before the end of my story about the Blue Cave in the UNESCO Geopark Vis Archipelago, I will tell you about two great miracles that happened in the past, and one which could happen in the near future.

#### The First Miracle

Twelve thousand years ago, the sea level rose one hundred and twenty meters, turning the mountain peaks into present-day Adriatic islands. One cave on the Biševo mountain, where wild beasts lived, was thus transformed into an incredibly beautiful seacave, illuminated by sunlight which enters through the underwater channel, making the sea appear like liquid silver.



Figure 9. The “library” toponym on the north coast of Biševo (Ivo Pervan).

#### The Second Miracle

The second miracle occurred in 1884—when Mr. Ransonnet-Villez, an Austrian-born painter and adventurer, after having crossed half of Asia and many Mediterranean islands on foot in search of beauty, set out on a journey through Dalmatia with the intent to discover the charms of its natural beauty. His quest finally landed him on the island of Biševo, where he got the first glimpse into the beautiful blue temple of the sea goddess, enclosed within the Grod Balun cliff. This discovery would soon turn this mysterious and inaccessible sea cave, a hidden gem with a mythical aura, into the greatest tourist attraction frequented by European social elites at the time when the word *tourism* was still an unknown thing in these areas.

#### The Third Miracle

The third miracle has not happened yet, but could happen very soon as the consequence of rising global

temperatures. This miracle could happen in case of a 1.5-meter sea-level rise. The last decade (2011-2020) was the warmest decade since the beginning of temperature records. If temperatures keep rising, as the scientists predict, the entrance to the Blue Cave could become completely closed off in the near future.



*Figure 10.* The entrance to the Blue Cave—150 cm in height (Ivo Pervan).

The Blue Cave today is still accessible and open for public visitation. However, due to the expected sea-level rise, this unique Adriatic natural phenomenon which we are still privileged to enjoy, may soon become completely closed off.



Figure 11. Detail from the Sarbunora Cove (Ivo Pervan).

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