

A Central European paradise

Slovenia, based in Central Europe, is the place to go if you're looking for a relaxed slice of European romanticism.

By Sarah Hender —

Ljubljana, Slovenia's capital, means 'the loved one' and I can think of no better name for a town that simply drips with charm. In the summer sun, lively outdoor cafes line the banks of the River Ljubljanica in the old town, all of which you can only reach by bicycle or foot in this pedestrian-only zone. In summer, Slovenians joke that there is a festival for something or other most days of the week allowing for much music and laughter to drift from its vine-covered courtyards, with a castle overseeing all of this joyous activity from a treed hill above the town.

After an Aperol spritz down by the river, you are ready to experiment with some traditional Slovenian food heavily influenced by Slovenia's close European neighbours of Austria, Italy, Hungary and Croatia. Ana Ros has put Slovenia on the map by being named the world's best female chef this year for the gourmet cuisine she offers up at her restaurant Hisa Franke of the Soca Valley. Traditional Slovenian food, however, is most notably known for its comfort food of beef goulash (Bokrac) and potato dumplings (Idrijskii Zlikrofi) as well as all kinds of pasta, Wiener schnitzel and sausage. Its proximity to the coast also allows for plenty of fresh seafood. Cakes here are spectacular and include Potica, a log cake of honey and nuts and Prekmurska Gibanica, another type of cake filled with poppy seeds and cottage cheese.

Once part of the former Yugoslavia, there are very few physical remnants of its socialist past. Ljubljana has a prosperous feel; the buildings are an architectural delight thanks to the famed Slovenian architect Jože Plečnik who transformed it by copying the classical Renaissance style which makes for an attractive mix with the many Art Nouveau buildings constructed since an earthquake hit the town in 1895.

Outside of Ljubljana, Slovenian villages are exquisite, too. All look as if they could be the winner of a Tidy Town award, with overflowing flower boxes in the windows of the Swiss-style chalet houses freshly painted in colours of white, pink or yellow.

Slovenia's man-made environment is in perfect harmony with its natural one, as a quick drive into the countryside reveals. Everything that you would like to see is just a 30-minute drive away on smooth roads that wind through forests stretching as far as the eye can see, all circled by a string of mountains.

Slovenia's best-known tourism drawcard is the fairyland that is Lake Bled with its tiny island upon which sits a pretty baroque church in the middle of the turquoise waters of an alpine lake. Visiting in summer, there is plenty of activity on the water, but, again in harmony with the natural environment, it is all of the quiet peaceful kind. Paddle boards and row boats are popular as is the 500 metre swim to the island and back.

Although Bled is a must-see, Lake Bohinj, again only another 30 minutes up the road, is the place you go to get away from the crowds for a peaceful day of boating, swimming and hiking. Fewer tourists' means fewer infrastructures but this is its attraction and although lacking the striking impact of Bled, its environment is just as beautiful and easier to enjoy with more personal space. The lake is larger and is based right in Triglav National Park which you can explore just a few steps from the lake.

One of the country's most unusual natural phenomena is the Postojna Caves, again only a half-hour drive from Ljubljana. Claustrophobia has always stood in the way of exploring caves for me but on hearing that these ones had spacious ballroom-like areas I decided that this was a cave I could handle. They were indeed large and spacious with grandiose natural formations. So as to emphasise the impressive ballroom nature of the space someone came up with the bright idea of adding a chandelier or two which although might sound a touch tacky, does add to all the drama. A 10-minute train ride in an open train takes you deep into the heart of the cave and from there you walk through the dramatic formations inside.

A few kilometres up the road is a castle. Of course, any trip to Europe offers up a castle or two but Predjama is no ordinary



castle. Built inside the mouth of a cave, it makes for a spectacular sight and looks like a place that Dracula would have been very comfortable living in. A walk inside gives an interesting insight into the medieval lives that were lived there with all that that entails including a dungeon for prisoners and a fully-equipped torture chamber. We didn't hang around.

A visit to Slovenia itself should be considered a rite of passage for every European tourist who craves a piece of untouched paradise offering so much to see and do with so little effort.

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