

Approach

The Church of the Assumption on Bled Island in Lake Bled

HOW TO GET TO: SLOVENIA

An insider's guide to a tiny country that has big charm. **By Jennifer Dorroh**

EIGHTEEN YEARS AFTER declaring independence from Yugoslavia, the tiny, picturesque Alpine nation of Slovenia is firmly planted in Europe. Not only did it attain European Union membership, but it also took the reins of the EU's rotating presidency for the first half of 2008. Yet despite its emergence on the world stage, and although it is wedged among

high-profile destinations such as Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Croatia, Slovenia remains largely undiscovered by stateside travelers.

Slovenia offers pristine surroundings, few crowds, and enormous value, as well as a population that loves making the most of its great outdoors. A trip that includes the picturesque capital, Ljubljana, as well as the

sparkling lakes and rugged Julian Alps in the west, is the perfect city-country combo and offers a comprehensive glimpse of this nation.

Roughly the size of New Jersey and home to two million people, Slovenia is nearly 55 percent forested land. The alpine regions in the west give way to lush river valleys in the east. The official language is Slovene,

but English is widely spoken in the capital and at most establishments that cater to travelers (you'll want a phrase book when traveling outside Ljubljana; pronunciation is difficult, but people will love it if you try).

Surrounded by so many historic centers of European power, Slovenia has seen its share of occupiers: Austro-Hungarians, Turks, Italians,



and Germans, among others. Along the way, the country has absorbed something from each of its conquerors. Pasta and sauerkraut carry equal weight in the repertoires of home cooks, and many Slovenes can converse in Italian, Croatian, German, and English.

In 1991, after 10 days of fighting, Slovenia became the first of the six Yugoslav republics to break from Josip Broz Tito's Communist state. Although Slovenia played a minor role in the ensuing Balkan conflicts (passionate and entrepreneurial, Slovenes actually led the way in postcommunist private enterprise), tourism remained scant. Tourists have since gradually started to visit the region, and a clutch of small, smart hotels and innovative restaurants have sprung up to meet them.

Ljubljana presents an unusual combination of old-world eastern charm and a surprisingly modern look. An 1895 earthquake devastated the city center, and the dazzling Art Nouveau structures built in its wake came to define the city's style (a prior quake in 1511 yielded a similar stylistic shift from medieval to baroque architecture). Most first-time visitors begin their trip in this eclectic capital, situated close to the center of the country. Its population of nearly 300,000 is spread across 100 square miles, but Stara Ljubljana (the old town), where the city's most alluring sights lie, is just about one mile across. The willow-lined Ljubljanica River divides the old town, on the south side, from the rest of the downtown area. Plan on about three days to take it all in.

Taxis and buses are plentiful, but the best way to get a feel for the city is to walk around, since many of the narrow medieval streets in the old town are closed to traffic. The Art Nouveau refinement of the **Grand**

Hotel Union (*Miklošičeva cesta 1; from \$300/night; 386/1-308-1270, gh-union.si*) makes a wonderful base for exploration and a great place to start a city tour. Across the street is the salmon-colored landmark Cooperative Bank, with bold zigzags framing its windows, while a few doors down stands another star attraction—the over-the-top Centromerkur building, built in 1903 by Ljubljana businessman Feliks Urbanc. The flower-shaped glass awning over the grand

Adjacent to the square is the cotton candy-pink 17th-century Franciscan Church of the Annunciation, one of the city's older structures.

Stop at **Café Tromostovje** for coffee before you cross the iconic Triple Bridge, the giant stone balustrades and lamps of which were designed by Jože Plečnik, a Vienna-trained Ljubljana native who devised many of the city's landmarks during the early 20th century. Butchers, bakers, and fishmongers keep shop in

who, according to mythology, slew a dragon nearby—have guarded Dragon Bridge since 1901. Looking west along the river you'll see the baroque St. Nicholas Cathedral and, beyond that, 16th-century **Ljubljana Castle** (\$7; 386/1-232-9994, *ljubljanafestival.si/en*), built by the Hapsburgs. Reach its fortifications and museum via a funicular tram (\$3) or on foot up the steep and verdant Castle Hill.

Back down along the cobblestone streets of the old town, stop to savor tea



Slovenia's colorful capital, with Ljubljana Castle perched on a hill

entrance is once again in full bloom, thanks to an ongoing restoration led by Urbanc's grandsons.

Close by is the heart of Ljubljana, Prešeren Square, named for 19th-century Romantic poet France Prešeren, considered the country's greatest bard; the seventh stanza of his signature poem, "Zdravljica" ("The Toast") is the national anthem.

the Plečnik-designed **Central Market** (*Vodnikov trg and Pogačarjev trg; 386/1-300-1200, jh-lj.si*), east of the bridge. At the open-air booths, locals fill wicker baskets with produce, flowers, and a smooth, sweet honey liqueur called *medica*.

Just beyond the market, four bronze Art Nouveau dragons—a reference to Jason of the Argonauts,

and walnut-filled pastries beneath the vaulted ceilings of the café **Čajna Hiša** (*Stari trg 3; 386/1-421-2444*) and to taste handmade chocolates like the golden praline at chocolatier **Čokoladnica Cukrček** (*Mestni trg 11; 386/1-421-0453, cukrcek.si*). The old town is also home to Ljubljana's first boutique hotel, the charming **Antiq Hotel** (*Gornji trg 3; from \$100/night;*



Houses fronting the Ljubljanica River



The Baroque Robba fountain, Ljubljana

386/1-421-3560, *antihotel.si*), which has a private terraced garden in back.

North of the old town in the Metelkova neighborhood, a museum quarter is taking shape. Set close to the central train station, many buildings there served as military barracks first for Austria-Hungary, then for Yugoslavia until the 1990s. Artists

were the first to move in when the spaces were vacated, and now some of these structures are being transformed with steel and glass additions into galleries and museums. Here you'll find the **Slovene Ethnographic Museum** (*Metelkova 2*; \$6; Tues.–Sun., 10 a.m.–6 p.m.; 386/1-300-8700, *etno-muzej.si/en*) bursting with folk art, including colorful masks for Pust, Slovenia's version of Carnival. **The National Museum of Slovenia** (*Prešernova 20*; \$4; Tues.–Sun., 10 a.m.–6 p.m.; 386/1-241-4400, *nms.si*) opened nearby in March 2008.

Set aside an evening to attend a performance by the renowned **Slovenian Philharmonic Orchestra** (*filharmonija.si*), founded in 1908 by local musicians rebelling against the German cultural domination of the time. Today, it boasts a diverse program of classical and avant-garde works, an international roster of musicians, and a lovely performance space on scenic Kongresni Trg.

With a climate and topography similar to that of the Bordeaux region in France, Slovenia has a long

winemaking tradition and even claims to possess the world's oldest continuously producing vine, *Stara Trta* (old vine); located in the eastern town of Maribor, it's more than 400 years old. Since the end of Communism, a creative, organic-focused winemaking culture has emerged, quickly gaining fans among oenophiles worldwide. Sample Slovenia's best native wines at the old-town wine bar **Vinoteka Movia** (*Mestni trg 4*; 386/1-425-5448). Try the excellent John Dory at **Špajza** (*Gornji trg 28*; 386/1-425-3094), though the restaurant really specializes in haute-cuisine takes on a traditional Slovene favorite, horse.

AFTER A LONG weekend in the capital, plan at least three days to take in Slovenia's western Alpine region. First, sample two gorgeous glacial

lakes, then head to a quaint outpost in the majestic Soc̃a Valley and, finally, into the mountain paradise of Slovenia's Julian Alps.

Start your journey by driving or taking the train about 30 miles northwest of Ljubljana to the town of Bled, on a lake nestled among foothills. Sapphire-blue Lake Bled was formed some 14,000 years ago as glaciers receded north through Europe. Today, it brims with rowboats, gondolas, and swimmers from spring through fall. Perched above the lake on a rocky peak is **Bled Castle** (386/4-572-9782, *blejski-grad.si*), extensively restored in the 1950s and worth a visit. Established around 1010 when it was part of the Holy Roman Empire, its cylindrical towers and conical roofs took shape in the 16th century under

MAKING IT HAPPEN SLOVENIA

GETTING THERE

Austrian Airlines (*aua.com*) offers flights from major U.S. cities to Vienna, where you can transfer to an hour-long connecting flight to Ljubljana. If you prefer to drive, be sure to stop at a gas station to pick up a mandatory vignette sticker (\$46; valid for six months) to enter the country. There is daily train service between Vienna and Ljubljana and from Ljubljana to destinations like Bled, Bohinj, and the Julian Alps region (*slo-zeleznice.si*). Driving to the mountains takes a bit longer, but the views are spectacular.

WHEN TO GO

Spring, summer, and fall are all good for hiking and city sightseeing. Winter brings a Christmas market to Ljubljana and downhill skiing to the resort town of Kranjska Gora in the Julian Alps. The fall is probably most welcoming since the weather is mild, airfares are low, and tourists are scarce. To get a taste of Slovenia's rural culture, plan an autumn trip to coincide with the Cow's Ball festival in September, when Bohinj's cattle return from summer pastures bedecked in



wreaths, or the November feast of St. Martin, which marks the christening day for the season's new wine. Families celebrate with a seven-course meal featuring roasted goose and sweet red cabbage.

WEB RESOURCE

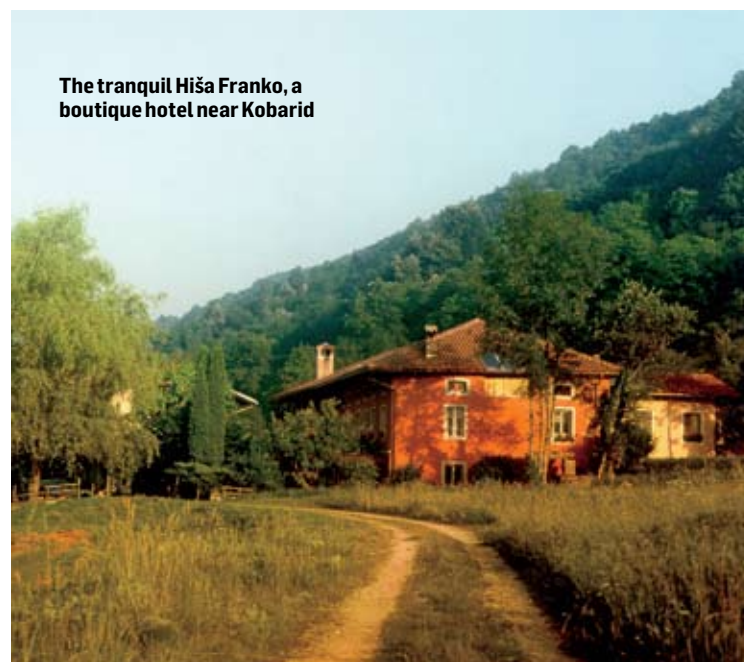
Official tourist site: *slovenia.info*

CURRENCY

As of February 2009, one U.S. dollar buys .77 euros.

COST CALENDAR

High season lasts from June through August.



The tranquil Hiša Franko, a boutique hotel near Kobarid

Austro-Hungarian rule.

Lake Bled surrounds Slovenia's only natural island, where ancient Slavs once worshipped Ziva, their goddess of love and fertility. Since the Middle Ages, Bled Island has been home to the Church of the Assumption, which you can reach on a traditional rowboat called a *pletna*. Inside, children ring the church bell for good luck. At the water's edge, have lunch (try regional dishes like Karst-style gnocchi in a cheese basket) at the aptly named **Panorama Restaurant** (*Grand Hotel Toplice, Cesta svobode 12*; 386/4-579-1275, *panorama-bled.com*). About 15 miles away is Slovenia's largest glacial lake, Bohinj. Rent a kayak or rowboat for the afternoon, take the cable car at the Vogel ski area to panoramic hiking trails, or simply stroll along the shore.

From the nearby town of Bohinjska Bistrica, take the auto train through the mountains (the impressive 4-mile tunnel was completed in 1906) and into Slovenia's rocky western realm. About an hour west of Bohinj lies the

pristine Soc̃a Valley. Its fairy-tale mountain landscapes and the turquoise Soc̃a River served as a backdrop for the 2008 film *The Chronicles of Namia: Prince Caspian*. The site of fierce World War I battles, the Soc̃a Valley is now a tranquil, little-known region of the Alps and a haven for those who love adventure sports. Local outdoor enthusiasts will tell you that to be a true Slovene, you must climb the nation's highest peak, the 9,393-foot-high Mount Triglav, and they'll encourage you to conquer it, too.

The small village of Kobarid offers a unique, relaxing place to use as a base for exploring the valley. The best bet for a stay there is **Hiša Franko** (*Staro Selo 1*; from \$145/night; 386/5-389-4120, *hisafranko.com*), a farmhouse restored as a boutique hotel. It has an excellent slow-food restaurant, where the menu changes with the season, and its wine cellar boasts hundreds of Slovene labels. On request, the chef will pack a gourmet box lunch (including Slovene wine) for guests to take on hikes along the Kobarid Historical

Trail, a mountain path that starts in town, crosses the electric-blue Soc̃a River, cuts through old battle trenches, and ascends to the ruins of Tonoc̃ov Grad, an ancient Roman settlement, before snaking by the clear blue-green pool at the foot of the Kozjak Waterfall.

Kobarid is where Ernest Hemingway spent his time during World War I, and it provided the setting for his novel *A Farewell to Arms*. It was the site of the famous Battle of Caporetto (the Italian name for Kobarid), in which the Austro-Hungarian army routed the Italians in 1917. The battle is remembered in graphic detail at the **Kobarid Museum** (*Gregorčičeva 10*; \$7; 386/5-389-0000, *kobariski-muzej.si*), which also has a few of Hemingway's papers.

Take the Kobarid Historic Walk to the Italian ossuary, where more than 7,000 Italian soldiers were laid to rest after the battle. The approach is lined with relief sculptures of the stations of the cross, while the hilltop marble memorial surrounds the Church of St. Anthony, which was consecrated in 1696.

Across the valley from Kobarid lies Bovec, the gateway to Triglav National Park. The park takes up most of northwestern Slovenia and is rife with outdoor-sports opportunities, including excellent skiing, hiking, rafting, and more. Inside the park you'll find the simple and lovely chalets of **Pristava Lepena** (*near the town of Soc̃a*; from \$70/night per person with breakfast; 386/5-388-9900, *pristava-lepena.com/en*). Sample local specialties like *strukelj* dumplings and grilled trout at the restaurant there. The owners offer horseback riding on nearby trails, as well as pony rides for children, and will help you get into whatever outdoor adventures you desire, especially if you've decided to do as the Slovenes do and climb Mount Triglav after all.

COMBINE WITH A TRIP TO VIENNA



Hotel Altstadt

Vienna's Hapsburg splendor and grand scale make it the perfect complement to Slovenia's verdant Alps and laid-back capital.

TO STAY:

The boutique **Hotel Altstadt** near the museum quarter features several rooms designed by Italian star architect Matteo Thun (*Kirchengasse 41*; from \$196/night; 43/1-522-6666, *altstadt.at*). Charming, historic **König Von Ungarn**, near the cathedral, was once home to Mozart (*Schulerstrasse 10*; from \$285/night; 43/1-515-840, *kvu.at*).

TO EAT:

The chic restaurant at the Museum of Applied Arts, **Osterreicher im Mak**, tempts guests with a wide range of traditional dishes such as beef in aspic and Wiener schnitzel, as well as modern ones, like roasted rabbit on tarragon polenta (*Stubenring 5*; 43/1-714-0121, *osterreicherimmak.at*). Taste the classic Viennese chocolate cake, Sacher torte, at the **Café Sacher** (*Philharmonikerstrasse 4*; 43/1-514-560, *sacher.com*).

TO DO:

Explore the imperial splendor of the gorgeous **Hofburg Palace**, home to the Austro-Hungarian ruling family for six centuries (*Michaelerplatz*; \$13; 43/1-533-75-70, *hofburg-wien.at/en*).