

Slovenia

Europe's Best-kept Secret

Words: Winsor Dobbin } Images: Winsor Dobbin, Visit Ljubljana and Slovenia.info



It may be a mere speck on the map of Europe, but Slovenia is increasingly on the radar of travellers who enjoy an active, outdoor lifestyle.

Bordered by Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia, Slovenia is the tiniest and most affluent of the former Yugoslav republics and one of those rare places where you can be bodysurfing in the morning and scaling alpine peaks in the afternoon. It is dubbed the country where the Alps meet the Mediterranean.

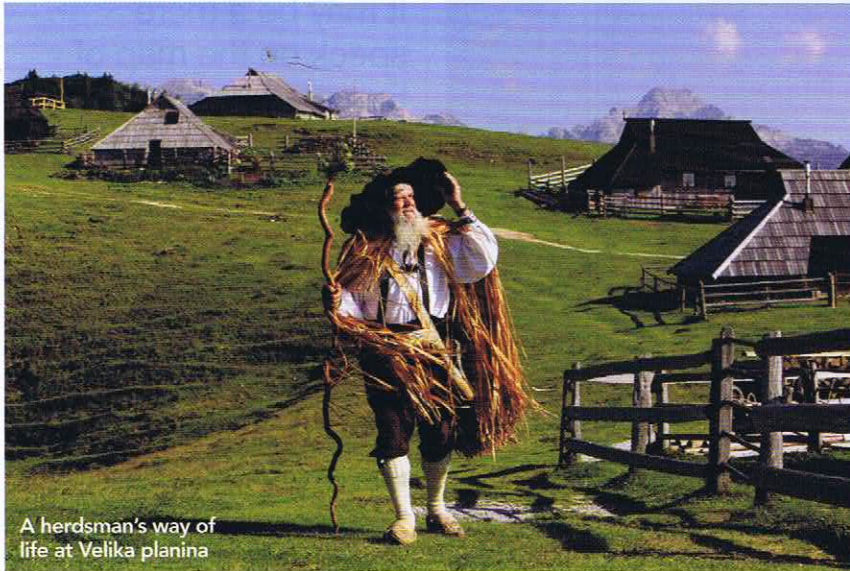
With a population of just two million, Slovenia was recently named in the top 10 European destinations for 2014 by Lonely Planet and has been described as “the sleeping beauty” – and its capital of Ljubljana is a beautiful old city that, unlike Budapest and Prague, is not yet overrun by tourists.

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Slovenia has been independent since 1991 and is a go-ahead little country with good infrastructure where nearly everyone speaks good English.

Ljubljana is within a few hours drive of major cities including Venice, Munich, Vienna and Zagreb, making it an ideal side trip, while the countryside ranges from snow-capped peaks to wild green-blue rivers, with a short coastline on the Adriatic sea.





A herdsman's way of life at Velika planina



Vander Urbani Resort



Cottage cheese at Velika

Just a 30-minute drive outside the capital, and a short drive from the charming old town of Kamnik, is the unique recreation area known as Velika Planina, the perfect destination for walkers, hikers and mountain bikers.

This mountain plateau in the heart of the Kamnik Alps is not easy to reach – but is worth the effort. First you take a cable car to the base station and then walk a steep path for around an hour to the green pastures where local shepherds graze their dairy cattle in summer, but are covered with snow in the winter months.

There used to be a double-seat open cable-car to the top, but it is out of action while locals debate whether to repair or replace it.

So a walk is your only option – and at the summit you'll find a herdsman's settlement modelled on old-style oval-shaped wooden dwellings that are replicas of those destroyed by the Nazis during World War II.

The shepherds still lead a simple life up in the clean high-altitude air and some of them still wear traditional costumes and hand-craft the traditional local Trnec hard cheese, made using wooden stamps to give each cheese a unique pattern.

The settlement is one of only a few remaining in Europe, and is known for its distinct architecture with low-slung roofs covered with pine shingles. There is a small but fascinating museum that re-creates

The rural regions are rugged with a charming rusticity. One local described Slovenia as a nation of "mad mountain men" but Ljubljana is a city of sophistication where the old town, flanking the pretty River Ljubljanica, is a pedestrian zone and you can find free wi-fi almost everywhere.

ACCOMODATION

A good budget option for visitors is the new and well-equipped Plaza Hotel, situated adjacent to one of Ljubljana's main shopping complexes around four kilometres out of the city centre but with free parking. Rooms start from around €70 per night. Plaza Hotel, Bratislavska cesta 8, 1000 Ljubljana. +386 1 243 0000. plazahotel.si.



Kamnik old town



Ljubavnicna River at night



Vander Urbani Resort



Slovenes love their sausages

FLIGHTS

Emirates flies from Australia to Dubai 84 times per week, with daily onward connections to 35 European destinations. Emirates provides 30kg of checked luggage per passenger in economy class and 40kg in business class. 1300 303 777 or emirates.com/au
 For more details on visiting Slovenia check out the slovenia.info website, or visit visitljubljana.com

the traditional way of life of the hardy souls who live and work here. After working up an appetite (some of the climbs are extremely steep), head for the Zeleni Rob lodge and try some local specialities, including sour milk and hard-boiled corn mush sprinkled with pork fat (a dish called *zganeci*), a cabbage soup known as *jota* and a barley broth called *ricet*. Also sample some local cheeses, but make sure to save room for the local dessert speciality: *struklji* (cheese dumplings) with fresh berries.

For the brave, or foolhardy, the plateau is also a starting point for the hikes onto the higher summits in the Kamnik Alps and is popular with cross-country skiers in winter.

On the way back to Ljubljana there are several gorges, waterfalls and springs, and the town of Kamnik, with its Romanesque double chapel of St Eligius, is worth a stop, particularly if the regular market selling organic produce is in full swing.

Make sure to stop into the gorgeous old inn, Gostilna Repnik, with its carriage horses and beautiful gardens to try local dishes like the delicious caramel – veal tripe dumplings and the venison goulash.

Other day trip possibilities include the town of Lipice, home of the famous white Lippizaner horses for over 400 years, the dramatic alpine

resort of Bled with its famous lake with an island (pay attention if driving as Bled is poorly signposted) and the massive stalactites and stalagmites in the Postojna Cave where the ancient graffiti indicates that the first visitors arrived in 1213.

The lively coastal town of Piran, the beautiful Soča River valley and three distinct wine-producing regions are also worthy of note, and all within easy driving distance of Ljubljana.

But any visitor will want to spend a day or two in the capital, an old city full of vibrant young people (the average age of residents is just 30). With just 280,000 city residents, it is an easy city to get around on foot or by using local buses – and the old city is mercifully quiet with all motor vehicles banned.

The Ljubljana Castle, with elements dating back to the 12th and 15th centuries, towers over the city and is most easily reached via a funicular railway. It is home to several trendy cafes and eateries as well as offering spectacular views for those willing to climb a few stairs to the belvedere tower.

The National Museum of Slovenia was founded in 1821 and is also worth a visit, but Ljubljana, with its mix of Baroque and Art Nouveau architecture, is a city that rewards the casual stroller.



ljubljanacastle



Slovenia trout dish Spajza Ljubljana

Walk along the Ljubljanica river and stop to admire local arts and crafts, and sample a wine or beer at one of many local cafes and bars. Or visit the outdoor and indoor parts of the central market to buy some local treats.

Each Friday, in the Pogacarjev Trg square, there is a food market called the Open Kitchen with local and international dishes in sample sizes. It is open from 8am-8pm, and offers the chance to try everything from paella to local pine-needle liquors, which are not for the faint-hearted.

Or for the less actively inclined, pick up a boat at the Breg Riverbank in the city and enjoy a relaxing river cruise past many of the city's major sites (make sure to see the Dragon Bridge and the Triple bridges).

You will eat heartily in Ljubljana, with the locals fond of sausages



Carriage rides at Velika Planina

THE FACTS

Sixt Rent-a-Car has a depot next to the main train and bus stations in Ljubljana with rentals starting from €35 a day.

sixt.si

The funkier base from which to explore Ljubljana is the Vander Urbani Resort, a Design Hotel (*designhotels.com*) with ultra-cool rooms and public areas in the heart of the old town. Rooms cost from €120-280 per night. Vander Urbani Resort, Krojaska Ulica 6, 1000 Ljubljana. +386 1 200 9000. *vanderhotel.com*.

and schnitzels and other warming dishes, while breads, cakes, soups and dumplings all play major roles on local menus. Try the historic restaurant Spajza for dishes including an appetiser of cheek of young colt (maybe not for everyone but horse is a staple in Slovenia); smoked trout with horseradish terrine and veal medallions with local mushrooms (another staple).

There is an all-Slovenian wine list here and you can eat in one of several old rooms, or al fresco in a courtyard next to the former stables.

At the Vander restaurant, also in the old town, try slovenski struklji, dumplings with asparagus, cottage cheese, chives and wild garlic, or maybe fillet of sea bass with clams, wine sauce and celeriac puree (€21) or, for lighter eaters, gnocchi with smoked duck breast and silverbeet (€10).

Other good addresses for wine lovers include the Vinoteka Movia wine bar and the Dvorni, both ideal places to sample a range of local bottles, while other good eating options include TODZ Cafe, Compa, AS Aperitivo, JB, Taverna Tatjana and the touristy but very welcoming Julija. Avoid Sokol – but it is one of very few disappointments you'll find in these parts. ■