



Romance: The church on Lake Bled is a romantic focal point in a fairytale land

Magical Alpine Treasure

Called "Europe in Miniature," Slovenia has it all. The stunning Julian Alps offer a slice of Switzerland, romantic lake Bled with its fairytale castle rising from its center embodies the romance of medieval Europe and tales of knights and chivalry, its small but lovely sliver of coast along the Adriatic is reminiscent of spectacular coastlines in Italy, and its capital of Ljubljana -- with its stunning architecture and crown of towering mountains -- embodies the best of historical European cities.

And that is only the beginning of the treasures to be found in this lovely, yet relatively unknown (at least to most American tourists) country.

The peacefulness of Slovenia's mountain scenery, gently rolling hills dotted with vineyards and picturesque cities are in strong contrast to a history of struggle and strife spanning more than 1,000 years.

History of Struggle and Strife

Once the ancient home of Illyrian tribes and Celts from the north, the Romans conquered the region in A.D. 100 after traversing the Julian Alps (named, in fact, for Julius Caesar). Attila the Hun raged across Slovenia from the east, en route to Italy in the 5th century, pushing Roman settlers to the coast.

Next came the Slavic tribes -- the ancestors of contemporary Slovenes -- in the 5th century followed by the Frankish emperor in the 6th century. The Hapsburgs ruled in the 14th century with an invasion by the Turks, war and economic problems dominating the 15th and 16th centuries.



Color: Colorful sellers and entertainers give a festive atmosphere to Ljubljana's Old Town market

Napoleon made Ljubljana the capital of his Illyrian provinces from 1809-1813. Then, in 1914 following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, it was thrown into World War I. Later it was incorporated into the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which later became Yugoslavia ("Land of Southern Slavs") in 1929. Hitler rolled through the region in 1941 and Josip Broz Tito who took control and ruled following World War II until his death 35



Safe: Ljubljana is a wonderful city for walking

years later.

In December 1990 over 90% of the population voted for independence which it declared in June 1991. This sparked a short, bloody war with President Slobodan Milosevic. The small Slovene defense force resisted for 10 days before Milosevic was forced to withdraw his troops to focus on Bosnia and Croatia. Slovenia was formally recognized as an independent state in January 1992, joining the United Nations later that year, and the European Union in May 2004.

Despite this bloody past, today Slovenia is one of the safest, most peaceful and friendly places in Europe. Coming here is like visiting a private home where you are welcomed as a member of the family.

The country lies in south central Europe, shares borders with Italy, Austria, Croatia and Hungary and enjoys scenery from the Alps in the northern part of the country, the Dinaric Alps in the south, the Mediterranean world in the southwest, and the Pannonian Plain in the east.

City of Many Moods

Sitting right in the middle of Slovenia is its capital of Ljubljana, which is a convenient drive or train ride from more popular stops like northern Italy, Vienna, Munich, Budapest and Split (Croatia).

Crowned by a dazzling hilltop castle and ringed by the emerald-green Ljubljanica River, Ljubljana (the name means 'beloved' in Slovene) offers a wealth of sights, sounds, activities and cultural opportunities.



Flowers: Visiting the flower market in Ljubljana is a delightful way to spend a day

Here café tables that spill into the narrow streets of the Old Town, street musicians entertaining passers-by in Prešernov trg and on the bridges spanning the River give life to jewels of Baroque art and architecture, Art Nouveau mansions and architectural masterpieces of Jože Plečnik. Ljubljana is truly a city with a soul.

While some may argue that the city lacks major attractions like those found in Budapest, Vienna or Prague, Ljubljana's wonderful museums and galleries, atmo-

spheric bars and varied, accessible nightlife make it a wonderful, relaxed place to visit. It is definitely a place where you will want to spend time.

About the only place that can top Ljubljana for sheer beauty is the alpine resort town of Bled, which is renowned for its mild, healing climate and thermal lake water.



FIRE: Medieval players entertain guest at historic Bled Castle

With its emerald-green lake, picture-postcard church that floats on a small island in the center of Lake Bled, fairytale medieval castle perched on a cliff overlooking the city, and its mountain backdrop, Bled is Slovenia's crowning jewel.

Slovenia's Crown Jewel

Unfortunately, many others know this as well, so expect to see a lot of tourist during the summer season. But even with lots of visitors, Bled is a magical place.

Look up and you will see Mt Stol (7,300 ft.) and Slovenia's highest peak, Mt Triglav (9,400 ft.) in the distance. Look out and listen to hear the bells from the

belfry of the little island church. I highly recommend that you book a room with a view of the lake. At night the church on the island is lit along with the castle that stands guard high above. Few places are more romantic.

I stayed at the renovated Grand Hotel Toplice, which is perched on the shore of the lake and offers spectacular views both day and night. Besides an elegant decor and excellent restaurants, the hotel, which was built in the 19th century and has been completely renovated, offers a swimming pool fed by underground thermal waters, a private lido and a host of wellness services that include Finnish, Turkish and infrared saunas, beauty services and massage services.

If you prefer the outdoors, there is golf on one of the most beautiful courses in Europe, hiking, mountaineering, mountain biking, rafting and skiing in winter.

A trip to Bled Castle which sits atop a 400 ft tall cliff above the city is a wonderful way to spend a day. From

here you can visit the museum that houses collections detailing the history of the castle and the area, see a medieval program that includes dancers, fire eaters and musicians and take in a



TREAT: Karst ham is a special Slovenian treat

spectacular view of the lake and city of Bled.

You might also want to drop in on one of the many boutique wineries that dot Slovenia's countryside.

Slovenian wines are rapidly gaining an international reputation, but with a small production it is often hard to find any outside the country. The reds are excellent but I found the white wines which include Malvasia, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Vitzovska Grganja and Pinot Grigio real



VIEW: Bled is a magical blend of fairytale castles, soaring mountains & tranquil lakes

standouts.

For a special treat, pair a bottle of Karst Teran (a full bodied red wine) with delicious dry Karst ham - prosciutto with a unique and distinct aroma and flavor.

People here take this

delicacy seriously. The Association of the Karst Ham Producers, in association with the government of Slovenia, is in charge of checking the production of Karst ham to prevent any commercial abuses and

assure it does not contain additives, it is mildly salted and has been properly aged.

Thinly sliced by hand, there is nothing else quite like it – one more thing that makes Slovenia a magical place.



Glorious Food: Don't miss the many regional specialties

WHERE TO STAY:

Grand Hotel Union

Miklošičeva 1
1000 Ljubljana
Slovenia
Phone: +386 (0)1 308 12 70
Fax: +386 (0)1 308 10 15
E-mail: hotel.union@gh-union.si
Web: <http://www.gh-union.si>

Rates: 194 EUR – 550 EUR

A four-star hotel in the center of Ljubljana and easy walking distance to Old Town and historic buildings. One of the best in town.

Grand Hotel Toplice

C. svobode 12
4260 Bled

Phone.: +386 4 579 10 00
Fax: +386 4 574 18 41
Email:
ghtoplice@hotelibled.com

Rates: 196– EUR – 600 EUR

Located on the shore of picturesque Lake Bled, it offers a spectacular view of the island, the medieval cliff-top castle and the Julian Alps. Be sure to ask for a room with a view of the lake.

Best Western Premier Hotel Lovec

Best Western Premier Hotel Lovec
Ljubljanska Cesta 6 SI Bled,
4260, Slovenia
Phone: 386 4 6204 100

Rates 180–400 EUR

Four-Star hotel offering modern accommodations in the center of charming Bled.

Lipica Stud Farm

Kobilarna Lipica
Lipica 5
6210 Sežana
Phone: +386 5 739 15 80
or
+386 5 739 17 08
Fax: +386 5 739 17 30
Email:info@lipica.org
Web: www.lipica.org

A must-see for any horse lover. But even if you are not a horse fancier, seeing these magnificent animals is a special place.