

# Slovenia: Small but Beautiful

Good things come in small packages, and Slovenia undoubtedly fits that expression. Encompassing an area of a little over 20,000 sq. km (7,700+ sq. miles), the country more than compensates for its lacks in physical size with its extraordinary diversity.

Due to its compactness, virtually any sight is just a daytrip away. Hike in the Alps one day and then bask in the sun on the Adriatic Coast the next. Go rafting or kayaking on the thundering mountain rivers in the morning and then spend the afternoon sampling the sumptuous wines in the many vinotekas lining the lush green hills. With so much diversity in such a small area, Slovenia makes an ideal holiday or short break and literally has something for everyone.

Tucked neatly between Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia this small Central European country offers a wealth of diversity when it comes to landscape, beauty, lifestyle and history. It was ruled by the Austrian Empire for hundreds of years before joining the former Yugoslavia after the First World War. In 1991 it was the first to break away and, thankfully, managed to escape the war that ensued across its southern borders. Since then, the economy has been going from strength to strength, and in May 2004 Slovenia joined the European Union.



The easternmost edge of the European Alps form the northern and western borders with Austria and Italy, while the Adriatic Sea provides a short, yet fascinating, stretch of coastline. Western Slovenia, from the coast to the foothills of the Alps retains a distinctively mild sub-Mediterranean climate thanks to the warm winds that blow in from the coast.

However, on occasions that warmth can be counteracted by the fierce and bitterly cold Burja wind that howls from the northeast, dropping down from Nanos Mountain, near Postojna, and causing rapid drops in temperature.

Much of the western region is karst, a vast world of limestone where huge, intricate cave systems have been carved out by erosion over millions of years, and fertile soils and an abundance of sunshine provides ideal conditions for winemaking. Add to that a scattering of medieval castles, ornate gothic churches and charismatic villages where locals eagerly await to serve you home-cooked food and it will soon become apparent why visitors keep coming back.

**Ljubljana**, Slovenia's capital city may pale in comparison to other mightier European cities, yet this is its charm. Strolling through the center, it feels more like a large town than a capital city. This, however, doesn't mean that it lacks the sophistication and attractions of its European neighbours. With its hilltop castle standing guard over the city center and old town, its plethora of exquisite architecture (much of it designed by Slovenia's most celebrated architect, Joze Plecnik), and the bars and cafes that spill out onto the patios outside, Ljubljana somehow manages to be a peaceful small town as well as a vibrant and exciting city. The castle is 1000 years old. Its most visited feature is the pentagonal tall tower. A narrow spiral staircase winds its way up to the top, where you will emerge to a panoramic, breathtaking view of not only the city, but also of the surrounding alpine mountains.

Ljubljana is also conveniently located in the middle of the country, which means that virtually everywhere in Slovenia is just a short drive away. For now, we will head west and sample the delights that this region of undulating karst hills and plateaus has to offer. The coast is just an hour's drive down the motorway, but don't just wiz through; there is plenty to keep you occupied in-between.

As you head west you will not fail to see the sign for **Postojna Caves**, a vast underground cave system carved out by millions of years of limestone erosion. 42% of Slovenia is karst, and in this region, there is a network of underground tunnels. The largest and most famous are at Postojna. Stretching a total of 21 km, of which 5.2 km are now open to tourists, this is the most extensive cave system in Slovenia.

Every year millions of tourists visit this stunningly beautiful underground formation, carved deep into the heart of the limestone hills. The 1.5-hour tour will take you through a fascinating world full of large, colorful stalactites and stalagmites, and the many mysteries of this underground world. You will also learn about the unique olm or "human fish" which is an amphibian endemic. It is an odd creature that lives in dark pools inside the caves and defies all the logic of human nature. It's 25 cm long and completely blind (not that it needs eyes as it lives in total darkness). It has pigment-less skin and a long tail fin to propel itself through the water, but despite this it also has four legs. It has gills for breathing underwater, but also lungs for breathing out of water. Scientists have never been able to figure out how they reproduce, and they can live up to 100 years.



A short drive from Postojna is the magnificent and imposing sight of **Predjama Castle**. Wedged tight into a crevasse halfway up the edge of a 123-meter cliff-face that protrudes dramatically into the surrounding valley, this daring piece of architecture is four stories high.

The first castle was built here around the 12th century, but the restored structure you see today dates from the 16th century. A century before that, Erasmus (Erazem of Predjama), the castle's most famous occupant lived here. A headstrong and rebellious knight, Erasmus rebelled against the Austrian emperor Frederick III and eventually killed his kinsman. Thus enraged, the Austrian leader commissioned the governor of Trieste to capture and kill Erasmus. This is where the impregnability of Predjama Castle was truly put to the test.

For a year and a day Erasmus was besieged in his fortress. But, much to the dismay of his adversaries, he continued to survive and taunt the attacking soldiers by pelting them with cherries. They couldn't figure out how he was getting his supplies. Unbeknownst to the soldiers, Erasmus knew of a secret tunnel leading from the castle, which allowed him to travel to the nearby village of Vipava and collect supplies, including hoards of fresh cherries when the season was ripe.

But it seemed that the soldiers were to have the last laugh. With the strategic placement of a small signal flag, a servant of Erasmus was bribed to reveal when his master was in the outhouse. Unfortunately for Erasmus, the toilet, situated on the top floor and at the very edge of the castle, was the one place that wasn't so impregnable. When the moment came, the flag was placed there by the treacherous servant. A single cannon ball was launched, and the errant knight was literally caught with his pants down.

Guided tours of the castle are available daily during the summer, and you'll be shown around by an enthusiastic young guide dressed in medieval attire, seemingly under the delusion that he is Erasmus himself. Erasmus was said to have been buried where a large linden tree grows just outside the entrance to the valley. According to legend, this tree was planted by the knight's sweetheart on the spot where he was buried.

In order to obtain supplies, Erasmus used a secret exit from the castle itself, but this was sealed at the beginning of the 17th century to stop thieves entering. From this cave extends a large underground network of tunnels carved out over millions of years by a stream called Lokva. This stream emerges in the town of Vipava, 13 km (8.4 miles) away (known locally as mini Venice owing to its 25 bridges).

The sub-Mediterranean climate also provides ideal conditions for **winemaking**. Vineyards sprawl across the hills the Vipava Valley and Goriska Brda hills on the Italian border. The region's soil is known as Terra Rosa, and from it the ruby red Teran and Refosk wines are produced. The soil here is a lovely deep red, and the reason for this is the amount of iron released when the limestone dissolves. Slovenian wines are rarely exported. But this isn't necessarily a bad thing. To sample these unique wines is just one of many reasons to visit the area. There are plenty of tourist farms and restaurants offering degustation as well as the famous Karst ham (Prsut), air-dried, matured and served in ultra thin slices; a perfect compliment to the wine.

The **Vipava valley** stretches through the heart of the Karst region, and some sections can often be closed off to large vehicles due to the ferocity of the Burja winds. The most noticeable characteristics of the area are the limestone houses that are protected by the government as cultural monuments. Another unique feature is the heavy stone roofs and chimneys supported with limestone slabs to help protect against the Burja.

The Karst region covers most of western Slovenia and also stretches to the coast. Before you arrive at the coast though, there's another set of caves to explore: the **Skocjan Caves**. Although not as large, they are far more spectacular than Postojna. The caves were carved out over millions of years by the Reka River, which still gushes through with the almighty force that can be heard echoing through the great caverns as you walk through. The highlight of the tour is crossing the river on the 45-meter-high Hanke Canal Bridge.



The nearby village of **Lipica** would probably be passed by if not for the Lipica Stud Farm. This holy of holies of equine breeding is said to be the original source of the world-famed thoroughbred Lipizzaner horses whose glistening white coats and gentle, graceful dancing have earned them an international reputation. You can take a tour in a traditional carriage, watch them perform at the daily show and visit them up close in their stables.

A quick hop from here and you'll find yourself on Slovenia's short, yet impressive stretch of coastline. The wonderfully ornate architecture left behind by the ancient Venetians is most prevalent in the small town of **Piran**, while the modern affluence of Portorož sits just around the corner but seems like a world away. Piran sits on the tip of a narrow peninsula, and its narrow streets provide a cool respite from the heat of the Adriatic sun, eventually leading up to the Church of Saint George where you can climb the bell tower for a magnificent view across the red-tiled roofs that sprawl across town to the glistening waterfront. After all that exhaustion, you can take a seat outside one of the many cafes and restaurants along the waterfront and relax after a long journey.

### **Increasing attractiveness**

Since Slovenia entered the EU its attractiveness as a tourist destination has been steadily increasing. Favourable weather, investments in tourist infrastructure and improved quality of tourist services resulted in word-of-mouth advertising, which is helping to attract more and more tourists every year. The Slovenian government also decided to accelerate tourist development through substantial promotional investments. The perception of Slovenia as a transit country is changing. Nevertheless, Slovenia still has to improve its tourist offer to retain as much as possible those guests whose final destination is Croatia. (Euromonitor.com)

### **Domestic tourists are important**

Increasing spending power on the one hand and rising demand for health and wellness holidays on the other hand resulted in growth in domestic tourism in both volume and value terms. Domestic tourists have also become more demanding, looking for value-added services in terms of organized sports activities, wellness programmes or cuisine. However, Slovenians still generally prefer to spend holidays in neighboring Croatia due to its beautiful coastline. (Euromonitor.com)

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