



EUROPE'S ALLURING GREEN SCENE

Meet sLOVEnia

Lasko, Slovenia

(All photos courtesy of Slovenian Tourist Board - Slovenia.info)

By Stacey Marcus

Allow me to take a few moments to introduce you to the latest love of my life, the lovely and lush country of Slovenia, a land of fairytales and forests that stole my heart for six days. You may remember it as part of Yugoslavia or know Slovenia as the birthplace of the First Lady of the United States, but you must travel to this verdant land to appreciate its magic. Slovenia connects the Alps, the Mediterranean and the Pannonian Plain in accessible distances. You can easily pair a trip to Slovenia with a visit to Austria, Hungary, Croatia or Italy. But you just may want to stay for a week, a while, or forever.

One of the primary reasons for my passion for this tiny country which is about the size of New Hampshire, is that it is full of diversity and surprises. Did you know that the noble white Lipizzaner horses hail from Slovenia? Or that Slovenia is home to Predjama Castle, the largest cave castle in the world? It seems almost implausible that a landscape dotted with ancient castles and steeples is just 26 years old. Join in a journey through the mountains filled with grazing pastoral animals, ribbons of greenery and breathtaking scenery.

THE GREEN SCENE

The first thing one notices about Slovenia is the the color green. I just learned that in 2015, the **Slovenian Tourist Board** developed the *Green Scheme of Slovenian Tourism*, a

special program used to assess the sustainable operations of Slovenian destinations and operators according to international criteria. Here are some quick stats about Slovenia and its green scene:

- Nearly 60% of the country is covered in forest.
- More than 1.2 million trees are planted every year.
- More than 40 Parks and Reserves are home to some 24,000 different plants and animals.
- Slovenia is the first country in the world with a sustainability rating.
- In Ljubljana (the capital of Slovenia) car traffic is restricted in the city center, freeing it up for pedestrians and cyclists to enjoy.

GETTING THERE

The trip to Slovenia from the states is seamless from any major city with a quick layover and short flight to the capital city of Ljubljana. We rented a car as we wanted to see different regions of the country. (If you are taking your own car, be sure to get a vignette sticker to drive on the motorways.) The trick is to keep your eyes on the road as meadows and mountains beckon you to feast in their green glory.

Kompas Holidays International (www.kompas.net) offers an unforgettable 7-day "Experience Slovenia" tour, featuring a comprehensive overview of this magnificent destination.

Back to the journey...What is a trip to Slovenia without a drive through the Alps? Although I wanted to stop and snap photos of the endless



Picnic in Zalec



Above: Green Views, Solcavsko, Slovenia

Left: Thermana Lasko Spa

Bottom right: Traditional Slovenian Handicrafts

SNAPSHOT OF SLOVENIA

Currency: Euro

Population: About 2 million

Language: Slovenian, but most people also speak English

Travel: A quick two hour flight from London

Terrain: Take a dip in the sea after breakfast, climb mountains before dinner, and enjoy the green scene 24/7

Report Card: A Plus for affordable, active, Adriatic Sea, affable, alpine mountains, Alps, alluring... www.slovenia.info

fields of green in the sparkling sun, my practical husband wanted to head to our first stop in the Logar Valley before we were ascending the mountain in darkness. You definitely want to make the trek up the mountainous road in daylight. The ride to **The Plesnik Hotel** (www.plesnik.si) in the Logar Valley is an exhilarating fusion of hairpin turns and infinite scenery. Nature lovers, hikers, bikers and wellness zealots will squeal with delight upon arrival. The family-owned eco-friendly boutique hotel has a great vibe, friendly and wellness centered, and features 32 renovated rooms outfitted with natural materials. The real beauty of the property is its perfect placement, a panoramic lens to a nature lover's paradise with spectacular views of Alpine peaks and the Palenk waterfall.

While in the Logar Valley, be sure to take a ride along Solčava Panoramic Road. For those folks who don't believe in fairytales, one ride along this trail with jaw-dropping views of peaks, valleys and farmlands will have you believing in magical dragons.

GLAMPING AND THERMAL SPAS

Our next stop was the Terme Olimia. The award-winning destination offers many forms of accommodations to enjoy including hotels, apartments, camping and glamping. We had a blast staying at the **Glamping Olimia Adria Village** (www.terme-olimia.com). I would highly recommend this experience for families as you get to enjoy all the comforts of a boutique hotel, count the stars with the kids, and walk to Thermal Park Aqualuna.

Since we were traveling solo, we had the pleasure of a private wine tasting at Virstain Wine Bar and a romantic dinner at Gratiola. A highlight of the visit was experiencing the myriad saunas. A couple of points of interest: Slo-

venia has 87 natural thermal and mineral water springs. When you visit the country, you must be sure to drink the water and savor its pureness and healthful benefits. You must also immerse yourself in it. We had planned to spend a short afternoon at the saunas but were fascinated by the myriad speciality saunas and programs offered. Note to self - when visiting the co-ed saunas, be prepared to spend lots of leisurely time immersing yourself in the experience, which, by the way, is in the buff!

FAIRYTALES AND CASTLES

Lucky us! The next stop on our journey was **Otočec Castle Hotel** (www.grad-otocec.com), a Relais & Châteaux property, located on an islet in the middle of the Krka River. Our superior suite, one of the 16 stunning rooms and suites, included a reception room and meeting area, a lovely vestibule and a spacious bedroom fit for The King and I (the queen).

We were treated to a carriage ride around the property which included a swan show followed by a ride around the village. We adored seeing the village homes brimming with flower and vegetable gardens. A friendly gentleman brought out a bottle of wine and toasted to our time in Slovenia. While I see no reason to ever leave the castle, we learned that bespoke experiences can be easily arranged, such as canoeing on the River Krka with dinner in Kostanjevica cave, a romantic getaway and bear observing in Kočevje region, or ballooning around the region and a picnic in nature.

GLACIAL GLORY

Ending a trip to Slovenia at the Lake Bled is ideal. Shimmering beneath the Julian Alps, Lake Bled is a slice of nirvana for poets, artists, lovers and of course, rowers. The **Grand**





Above: Hot-air ballooning in Slovenia

Left: Dragon Bridge, Ljubljana

Bottom right: Boating, Kostanjevica na Krki



Ljubljana is friendly for its residents and visitors alike. Its footprint was inspired and developed by architect Jože Plečnik. Be sure to stroll along the Ljubljanica River, pop by the farmer's markets, enjoy a coffee at one of the many cafes or stop by one of the area museums.

Piran and Salt Pans: The most beautiful town on the Slovenian coast thrived with the help of salt. The Piran salt pans, where the world-class fleur de sel (flower of salt) is still produced today using age-old methods, were the reason why the picturesque Mediterranean walled town, with its church with a view and cultural attractions, flourished.

Postojna Cave: Cave exploration is a treasured tradition in Slovenia. The most visited tourist cave in Europe is located where the proteus or olm offspring are once again hatching. The cave railway has been operating at the cave for 140 years and is connected to Predjama Castle, the largest cave castle in the world.

Hotel Toplice (www.sava-hotels-resorts.com) offers many spots to enjoy a front row seat to Bled Castle and majestic church steeple. Guests can simply breathe in the alpine air, row around the glacial lake or enjoy a picnic lunch at the boathouse. Legend says that if you ring the church bell, all your wishes come true. You will wish for just one more day in this fairytale country!

THREE MUST-SEES IN SLOVENIA

Ljubljana: A visit to Slovenia would not be complete without a stop in its capital Ljubljana. Be sure to stop by Trivoli Park, Triple Bridge, the Central Market and Dragon Bridge. Lunch atop Castle Ljubljana at Strelec Restaurant and enjoy Slovenian delicacies exquisitely prepared by Igor Jagodi, one of the top Slovenian chefs. Named the European Green Capital of 2016,

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