

Slovenia

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Diane Covington-Carter

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Welcome to SLOVEenia, the only country with LOVE in its name.

When my husband informed me that he wanted to travel to Slovenia to compete in an international masters rowing regatta held on Lake Bled, I responded with, “OK, that sounds fun. But where is Slovenia exactly?”

A few minutes on Google brought up phrases describing Slovenia as, “the undiscovered pearl of Central Europe” and Lake Bled as “a jewel in the Alps.” Sounded good to me.

I discovered that Slovenia is a small (12,597 square miles) and very beautiful country located in southern central Europe, bordered by Austria to the north, Italy to the west, Hungary to the northeast, Croatia to the southeast and the Adriatic Sea to the southwest.

In other words, it is tucked in and almost hidden among its more famous neighbors, but from the photos we saw, the tiny country packs so much beauty and wonder into its size that we were excited to experience it first hand.

Ljubljana

We flew to Ljubljana, the capital city. Our first impression, as we checked into our hotel after the long journey, was how the friendly hotel staff spoke excellent English. When we commented on that, they proudly told us that they begin learning English at age 8 and that most Slovenians speak it well.

For visitors, this means that you can relax and enjoy yourself, instead of struggling with sign language. We also learned that their “new” country gained its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991.

We’d booked two nights in Ljubljana to relax and explore the town before heading to Lake Bled for the rowing. The vibrant university town has a low-key vibe, with outdoor cafes along the river where you can sit and watch the world go by.

The center of town, a pedestrian-only area, makes it easy to stroll, enjoying the colorful architecture, the Gothic cathedral and the music of local street musicians.

You can cycle along the river on a rented bike, part of their bike-sharing program or enjoy a river cruise along the Ljubljanica River. Or hike up to the 900 year-old castle, with views of the city and surrounding area, a museum, a café and two restaurants.

Ljubljana earned the European Green Capital 2016 title for its well-preserved green spaces and a forward-thinking strategy for sustainable development. It also received a 2015 Tourism for Tomorrow award.

Lake Bled

Rested and refreshed, we picked up a rental car and left Ljubljana for the one-hour drive to Lake Bled. (You can also take a bus, train or taxi, if you would rather not rent a car.)

Slovenia is about 621 square miles larger than New Jersey, but with a population of only 2 million, (compared with 9 million in New Jersey). As we drove through the countryside, we could feel the spaciousness in the rolling hills and valleys, small farms and bright summer flowers outside cottages in rural villages. There was a feeling of old world Europe and also the power and peace of nature all around, of mountains, rivers, lakes and dense forests.

We'd booked a week in a pension at Lake Bled, as my husband would be rowing in the regatta for almost a week. Our small apartment had a kitchen, bedroom, bath and a tiny balcony with a view of the lake, for 70 euros a night. The owner lent us each a bike, which we thoroughly enjoyed, as the lake has a bike and walking path all around it. The car was handy for evening events and for grocery shopping, but during the day, we biked to and from the rowing venue and town.

In Bled in the summer, a must is a dip in the clear and clean water of the lake, which I did on several occasions. And here are some other 'must enjoy' fun activities:

— Visit the island on a traditional "pletna" boat, rowed by a local. (Think Venice.)

Legend has it that a temple of the ancient Slavic goddess of love Živa, used to stand in the location of today's Gothic Assumption of Mary Church on the island. After you climb the 99 steps to the church, be sure to make a wish, then ring the 16th century bell three times.

Follow the narrow, winding stairs up to the clock tower and watch the inner workings of the ancient clock as it chimes the hours. Enjoy the views of Bled from the island before the return trip in your pletna.

— Step back in time at the 12th century castle.

Set high on a cliff over the lake, the castle offers an expansive and bird's eye view of Bled and the region beyond. Plan to explore all its nooks and crannies, including having a souvenir page printed in the vintage manual printing works, exploring museums, visiting a smithy or enjoying a meal or snack at the restaurants. In the summer months, actors in traditional costumes re-enact sword fighting, archery and other events.

— Savor culinary treats.

Don't miss the famous local delicacy, the Bled Cream Cake ("kremšnita") made using a 60-year-old original recipe. More than 12 million pieces of this dessert have been sold in Lake Bled so far.

Lake Bled is located within the Julian Alps and if you hear the word Alps and think of high peaks, mountain meadows, sparkling lakes and rushing rivers, you will be right. Visitors and locals enjoy hiking, cycling, biking and water sports in the summer, and

skiing and other winter sports in winter. For any fitness level or interest, take the aerial tramway up the mountain for an exhilarating treat.

Lake Bled and rowing

The World Masters Rowing Regatta, which included 5,000 rowers from 46 countries and 1,000 competitive events over five days, went off without a hitch. Every three minutes, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., a new group of rowers launched in their events.

Bled lived up to its reputation as a top-notch destination for competitive rowing, (and my husband tucked four new gold medals into his suitcase.)

After our refreshing week in Lake Bled, we passed vineyards and farms and so much green as we drove to Slovenia's tiny coastline and the towns of Portoroz and Piran on the Adriatic Sea, for our last two days in Slovenia.

We were visiting off season, so Portoroz, a coastal town with wide beaches set up with beach chairs under umbrellas, was quiet under a fall sky. But we enjoyed walking along the shore and sampled excellent Italian seafood dishes, a nod to the proximity of both the Adriatic Sea and Italy so close by.

In neighboring Piran, the sun lit up the main central square that borders the port, filled with fishing boats. You could feel the Venetian influence in the alleyways that climb from the square up the hills from the Adriatic. On a walking tour, we learned about the history of the town and the importance of salt harvesting in the heritage of the area.

Our guide reminded us again of the pride the locals take in their country's independence from Yugoslavia. "We are a young country," she said. "Only 26 years old. But we are happy and so proud to be Slovenians."

After our two nights on the Adriatic, we turned in our rental car and took a shuttle to nearby Venice, about three hours away. After an evening enjoying the dramatic, ancient buildings along the Grande Canal and dinner near St. Mark's Square, we flew the next morning to Marseilles, to begin a seven-day bicycle trip along the Canal du Midi in Provence.

That will be part 2.

If you go:

Because of its central location, a visit to Slovenia can be included in many European itineraries. Ljubljana sits half way between Vienna and Venice, for example, or is on the way to neighboring Croatia.

Note: be sure to check your rental car agreement about whether or not you can cross the border into other countries or if that will cost you a fee. Because we rented our car in Slovenia, it would have cost us \$50 to cross the border to Croatia or Italy.

Diane Covington-Carter is an award-winning writer who writes frequently for the Napa Valley Register. www.dianecovingtoncarter.com