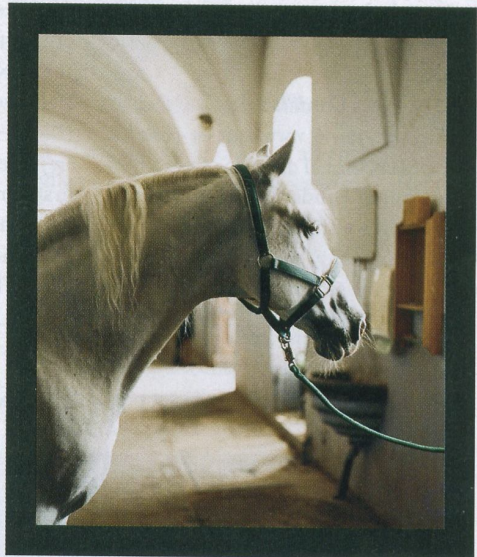
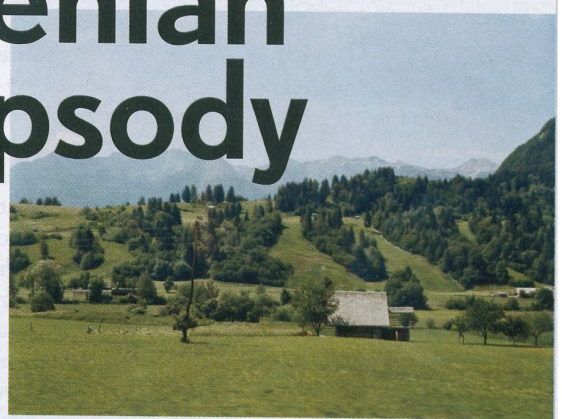
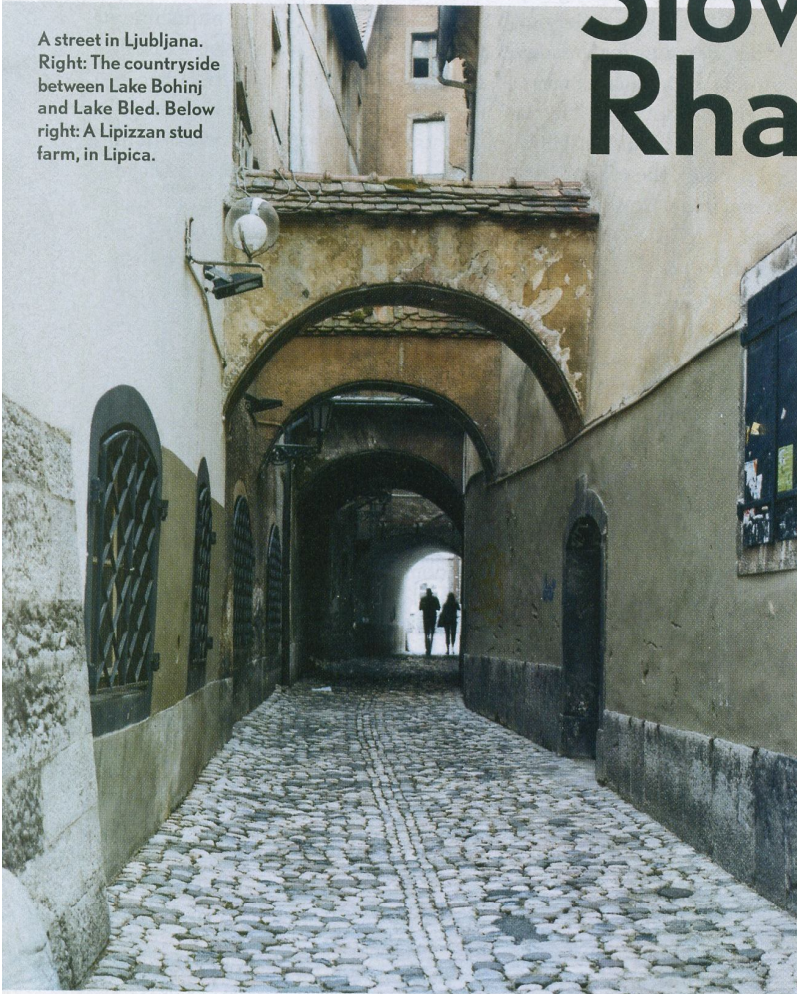


Slovenian Rhapsody

A street in Ljubljana. Right: The countryside between Lake Bohinj and Lake Bled. Below right: A Lipizzan stud farm, in Lipica.



With its award-winning wines, Adriatic coastline, and thermal spas, Slovenia, the richest of the former Yugoslav republics, is coming into its own. **By Hannah Wallace**

IT'S 7 P.M. AS WE DRIVE into Ljubljana, and the light is beginning to fade. Italianate buildings are painted in Easter-egg shades—butter, mauve, coral. Families stroll along the Ljubljanica River eating gelato; students sit in cafés smoking. Somewhere, a cellist is rehearsing a Bach suite. I peer up at the city's medieval castle. Have we stumbled into a fairy tale?

In fact, my boyfriend, Michael, and I are in Slovenia. The small Alpine nation—east of Italy and north of Croatia—first seduced us last fall. Now we've returned for a five-day drive: from Ljubljana, the capital, to the coast, then north along the Italian border (an up-and-coming wine region) to the Julian Alps.

DAY 1 LJUBLJANA TO PORTOROŽ, 66 MILES

Slovenian art has been pushing boundaries since at least the 1980's with the avant-garde collective Neue Slowenische Kunst. Since then, the country has continued to turn out provocative artists with international reputations. Before we start our drive, we stop by Ljubljana's Museum of Modern Art, where I'm »



The Facts

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Mons

Slovenia's first design hotel. 55 Pot za Brdom, Ljubljana; 386-1/470-2700; www.hotel.mons.si; doubles from \$184.

Grand Hotel Palace

43 Obala, Portorož; 386-5/696-9001; www.hotelipalace.si; doubles from \$240.

Palazzo Lantieri

A three-room B&B with an art collection that includes works by Mario Merz, Yannis Kounellis, and Günther Förg. Gorizia, Italy; 39-048/153-3284; www.palazzo-lantieri.com; doubles from \$150.

Hotel Vila Bled

26 Cesta Svobode, Bled; 386-4/579-1500; www.vila-bled.com; doubles from \$230.

WHERE TO EAT

Gostilna As

5A Copova, Ljubljana; 386-1/425-8822; www.gostilnaas.si; dinner for two \$150.

Restaurant Neptun

7 Župančičeva, Piran; 386-5/673-4111; dinner for two \$80.

Gostišče Pri Lojzetu

Dvorec Zemona, outside of Ajdovščina; 386-5/368-7007; dinner for two \$120.

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absorbed by Gabrijel Stupica's Modernist collages and Zoran Mušič's ghoulish etchings of Dachau.

On the A1 highway, which heads southwest from Ljubljana to the Adriatic coast, we pass green fields, cows, and an occasional barn. As we climb the hill toward Trieste, the fertile landscape gives way to rocky cliffs topped with evergreens. This is the province of Notranjska, home to one of the largest cave systems in the world, the 12-mile-long Postojnska Jama. But we bypass the caves in favor of a detour to Hrastovlje to see the Church of the Holy Trinity, a rare example of southern Romanesque architecture that contains a series of Gothic frescoes.

The village of Hrastovlje (population 145) is not easy to find. Like dedicated pilgrims, you must have faith. We turn off the highway just after the 7,158-foot-long Crni Kal bridge and careen down twisting roads, past heather-covered hills and lush pine forests, for 10 long miles.

Inside the church, a local woman switches on an English-language tape that takes us through the frescoes. Painted in the late 1400's by Johannes de Castuo, the pictures served as a *Biblia pauperum*—they taught illiterate parishioners the stories of the Bible. Eventually we are drawn to the spectacular *danse macabre*. Twelve skeletons merrily escort a sampling of humanity—from a naked child and a beggar to a queen and a pope—to an open coffin.

Afterward we drive past the industrial towns of Izola and Koper, then on to Portorož, Slovenia's Atlantic City. We've come not to gamble but to take the waters, at the Thermae Palace Spa and Thalassotherapy Center, known for its sea cures: salt water, mud, and mineral baths.



Alpine Style Clockwise from far left: Hotel Mons, just outside Ljubljana; the hotel's minimalist breakfast room; Franc Strgar—a Slovene who built bridges in Minnesota.

At dusk, we walk to Piran, an ancient town—filled with 13th-century architecture—that juts out into the Adriatic. By the time we reach its marble-paved plaza, Tartinijev Trg (Square), the sun has already set. Kids scramble around, kicking a soccer ball. We stop at Restaurant Neptun for a simple meal of fish, shrimp risotto, and sautéed spinach. I ask the owner's teenage son what Piran means. "Pirate," he says. "You can still find shipwrecks out there, just off the marina."

DAY 2 PORTOROŽ TO GORIZIA, ITALY, 50 MILES

In the morning, while Michael is being pummeled by jets of sea water, I have a "fango pack." The local Istrian loam is rich in microalgae and plankton, and is said to be able to heal a variety of ailments, from rheumatic disease to skin rashes. I'm only hoping for a glowing complexion. A young Slovenian therapist leads me to my own room and tells me to undress. Just as I'm about to ask her what that plastic pipe jutting from the ceiling is for, she turns a valve, and a torrent of hot, viscous mud spurts from it. Fango plumbing! She catches the mud in a basin and pours it over the treatment table. "Lie down!" she orders. It's still hot, so I flinch. "Your first time?" she asks. When the mud has cooled a bit, I let myself sink into it. Then, she slathers my entire front and wraps me in a cocoon of plastic wrap. I'm left to marinate for 20 minutes.

It would take a week to sample all of the treatments here—and many guests do just that. But we want to make it to the Lipizzan stud farm by 2 P.M.

Before World War I, when Slovenia was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the horses bred »



Vintage Slovenia
 Clockwise from above: Aleš Kristančič, the eighth-generation vintner at Movia winery; Bled Island, a popular spot for weddings; Ljubljana's Tromostovje (Triple Bridge).

in Lipica were used by Austria's Spanish Riding school. We arrive in time for a half-hour dressage performance, during which the best-trained stallions prance around to a disco version of *Flight of the Bumblebee*. The studs weave past one another, meet in the center of the field, and then spiral out diagonally, doing a sideways skip. In one *pas de deux*, two stallions execute a rhythmical canter called *changement* (a flying change) and then pirouette. We clap in awe, but wonder how the poor animals can put up with the techno-ballet Muzak.

The drive north from Lipica to the hilltop town of Stanjel takes us through the limestone-rich Karst region, up hairpin turns, past wineries, farms, and blink-and-you-miss-them villages. Stanjel, perched high above the plateau, is one of these. There's nothing to do here except gape at the 360-degree views from the Fabiani Path, named for the architect (and former Stanjel mayor) Max Fabiani. Stanjel is so small that we feel as though we're trespassing.

By the time we reach the outskirts of Ajdovščina, we're starving. I've been looking forward to returning to Gostišče Pri Lojzetu ever since we ate at the restaurant last October. We take our *zlata penina* (sparkling white wine) to the portico, which has

views of the surrounding hills. But we're soon lured back to our table by the scent of freshly baked bread, which we dip in an addictive horseradish sauce. Next comes buttery tuna sashimi from Croatia, followed by goose prosciutto air-dried for 14 days and smoked with herbs. It's sprinkled with shaved white truffles (gathered from a local forest) and served over a silky purée of potatoes. We skip the soup course and move directly on to asparagus risotto with nettles and "natural nuts of the season."

Before we order dessert, I ask our waiter how far it is to Gorizia, the Italian town where we plan to spend the night.

"Twenty minutes," he says. "Where are you staying?"

"Palazzo Lantieri," I reply.

"Ah! Lantieri! This was once his hunting lodge!" he says, gesturing to the restaurant, also known as Castle Zemono. Without realizing it, we've devoted our entire evening to a 15th-century Austro-Hungarian count.

DAY 3 GORIZIA TO THE BRDA HILLS, 15 MILES
 "Sugar is not natural!" says Aleš (pronounced "Alesh") Kristančič, the force behind Movia, »

NEXT DRIVING



(Continued from page 122)

WHAT TO DO

Moderna Galerija
14 Tomšičeva,
Ljubljana; 386-1/241-
6808; www.mg-lj.si.

Church of the Holy Trinity

To make sure the church is open, call Rinter Rozana at 386-3/143-2231. Hrastovlje.

Škocjan Caves

Slovenia has over 7,000 caves; these are the most magnificent—with waterfalls and natural bridges. Škocjan; www.park-skocjanske-jame.si.

Kobilarna Lipica Stud Farm

Lipica; 386-5/739-1580; www.lipica.org.

Movia Winery

Contact Aleš or Vesna Kristančič to set up a wine tasting and a tour of the cellar. If you're a true wine connoisseur, they'll invite you to stay over. 18 Ceglo, Dobrovo; 386-5/395-9510; www.movia.si.

ON THE WEB

National Car Rental

Book on their site for a 20 percent discount. www.avantcar.si.

Slovenian Tourist Board

www.slovenia-tourism.si.

BOOKS

Poetry by Tomaz Šalamun; *Slovenia and the Slovenes: A Small State and the New Europe* by James Gow and Cathie Carmichael.

Slovenia's oldest privately run winery. "If I use sugar, I take the character out." We're sitting on the terrace of Aleš's house, overlooking Slovenia's Brda Hills and Italy's Friuli-Venezia Giulia region. He's just opened a bottle of puro—a sparkling pink Pinot that won't be released until next year. We've already tasted a fruity sivi pinot (Pinot Grigio), a crisp Sauvignon Blanc, and turno, a fruity blend of three white Pinots. I'm starting to feel dizzy. Fortunately, we won't be driving anywhere; the Kristančičs have invited us to stay in one of their spare bedrooms.

Movia is one of Slovenia's best-known wineries, and with good reason. The Kristančičs have been harvesting the same vines since 1820, and Aleš has continued his family's tradition of allowing the grapes to ferment naturally, without introducing sulfites or sugar. Sulfites are added at the bottling stage, but only in small amounts. Aleš and his wife, Vesna, have just returned from a two-week marketing trip to the United States, and as Aleš opens a 1998 bottle of Veliko Rosso (Big Red), he ticks off his favorite restaurants in New York's Meatpacking District, several of which now offer his wines. Aleš's fan club is growing: Thomas Keller and Mario Batali serve Movia at their restaurants; Alain Ducasse, who has visited the vineyard twice, has a few vintage bottles in his personal cellar.

Out on the terrace, we're joined by Franc and Lubi Strgar, two of Aleš's oldest friends. The couple emigrated to the States in the fifties and now splits their time between Lake Bled and Scottsdale, Arizona. Franc had a successful career as a structural engineer in the Midwest. In Slovenia, he likes to drive a Cadillac with Minnesota plates.



Delight for the Senses
Clockwise from far left: The view from Piran, on the Slovenian coast, toward Trieste; Gostišče Pri Lojzetu, a restaurant outside Ajdovščina; the restaurant's chocolate mousse with wild strawberries and cream.

DAY 4 BRDA HILLS TO LAKE BOHINJ, 94 MILES

The next morning, we set out on one of the most spectacular drives of our trip. From the Brda Hills wine route, we head north, tracing the electric-turquoise Soča River. In the distance—but growing closer with each mile—are the craggy peaks of the Julian Alps. Despite Aleš's insistence that we go canyoning in the Soča, we forge past the adventure-sport town of Boveč and enter Triglav National Park. Ten minutes later, we're ascending the 5,285-foot-high Vršič Pass (pronounced "Ver-shitz"—a word I employ as a curse each time Michael hugs a hairpin turn). There are 50 switchbacks (25 on either side), and plenty of oncoming traffic.

Our reward is Lake Bohinj, Lake Bled's wilder and less touristy sibling. Because it's located in Triglav, Bohinj is protected from development. On the north shore, there are stone steps leading to a rocky clearing. I wade in and gaze up at the mountains, which are reflected in the glassy water.

DAY 5 LAKE BOHINJ TO LAKE BLEED, 12 MILES

After a short hike to Slap Savica, the 240-foot waterfall that feeds Lake Bohinj, we press on to Bled. We take a gondola to tiny, tear-shaped Bled Island and each ring the bell in the little Baroque church. Later, from the castle, we have a bird's-eye view of the lake, ringed by snow-capped mountains. I'm suddenly reminded of something Franc Strgar told me. Now that Slovenia is a member of the European Union, its government has begun encouraging high school graduates to work abroad for a few years. "But," Franc said, chuckling, "none of them want to leave Slovenia." I don't blame them. +