

Church of St John the Baptist, Lake Bohinj

# EUROPE'S HIDDEN TREASURE

Breathtakingly beautiful and far from the madding crowd, Slovenia is a real gem, says Karen Vowles

**G**azing into the crystal waters of Lake Bohinj, it's hard to imagine why this small country is so often overlooked as a holiday haven.

Slovenia has something for all ages, all year round. In winter, the mountains are a mecca for skiers and snowboarders and in summer, the lakes and rivers are buzzing with watersports enthusiasts.

But don't panic, Slovenia suits the laid back, too. It's quite like our own Lake District but with the bonus of being warmer and excellent value for money.

Slovenia is roughly the size of Wales with a population of just two million, and has its own Mediterranean coastline.

The Bohinj Valley, at the heart of the Triglav National Park in the Julian Alps, has some of the most beautiful scenery in the country. We strolled along the stunning Mostnica gorge above Stara Fužina village and were captivated by its stunning turquoise waters.

At Devil's Bridge we were told of an

old legend cursing all who crossed it with madness. Luckily, the locals sent an unsuspecting dog over first to break the "barking mad" curse!

En route we saw a signpost reading Sloncek, which means elephant, and found a naturally-formed trunked rock,



A hay-drying barn in Bohinj

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shaped by centuries of rushing rapids.

Back in the town we soaked up the way of life in this traditional farming region. Wooden houses have dried fruits and sweetcorn hanging outside; pretty Catholic shrines and churches are filled with lit candles; and locals pedal around on bikes – a far more sensible choice for the narrow roads than the car we hired.

The food draws influence from neighbours Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia, and boasts plenty of native traditional mountain food. We had dinner at the Rupa Inn at Srednja Vas, a rustic restaurant where staff wear local costume. I tried a “melt in the mouth” steak with vegetables while my partner had the local speciality, mavzelj, spiced ground beef and pork, breaded and fried, served with buckwheat dumplings, sauerkraut, and potatoes. The meal for two with wine cost a reasonable €40.

We washed it down with a customary shot of schnapps. The most famous, the



The river Ljubljanica flows through Slovenia's capital which, according to legend, was founded by Jason and the Argonauts

pear-flavoured Slivovka, is very strong. I opted for the delicious blueberry-infused Borovničevac – the name of which, roughly translated, means you will roll down a hill if you have too many.

Next stop was Ljubljana, the country's capital. As we hit its outskirts we passed the high-rise buildings that offer a stark view of the nation's political past before independence from Yugoslavia was declared in 1991. It joined the European Union in 2004 and its old currency, the Tolar, was swapped for the euro in 2007.

Ljubljana is so relaxed; intimate yet cosmopolitan with a population of 270,000, including 50,000 students, who provide the place with a more youthful pulse after dark than you might expect.

The old town, the heart of the city, is a mosaic of pretty squares, bridges and cobbled paths. Much of the architecture was designed by Jože Plečnik.

The central market is separated into sections, selling fruit and veg, flowers and clothing. Carnations are the national flower and you'll find plenty of them.

Tourists flock to the Cathedral of St Nicholas to see the ornate, bronze door. Designed by Tone Demšar in 1996, it represents 1250 years of Catholic faith in Slovenia. Inside was buzzing with eager tourists gazing in awe at stunning frescos and paintings. A must-see is the castle; get there by cable car for great views of

## WAY TO GO

**Govc-Vrsnik in Logarska. Tel: +386 3 839 50 16). From 26 euros pppn.**

**Hotel Slon. Tel: +386 (0)1 470 11 00 sales@hotelslon.com) From 98 euros.**

**Hotel Jezero. Tel: +386 (0)4 572 91 00) from 55 euros.**

**Return flights from Stansted from £45.98 at easyjet.com – other airports at airfrance.co.uk – car hire at www.eurocar.co.uk**

**the city and mountains. In Prešeren Square, you'll find a statue of romantic poet France Prešeren and a bust of his muse Julia. She inspired his dedicated sonnets but left him heartbroken.**

**After experiencing city life we headed for the three valleys of the beautiful Logarska region in the Kamnik-Savinja Alps – the perfect place for romance.**



Carnations are Slovenia's national flower

**We walked to the stunning Rinka falls where the water is drinkable and full of minerals. Then, replete after our lunch at the rustic Plansarija Alpine Dairy Cottage, a restaurant with a roaring open fire, we set off for Robanov Kot, which was the perfect way to finish our trip.**

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## Ten things you must do in Slovenia

**1** Go for a swim in Lake Bled. Surrounded by mountains and forests, the lake is also a popular starting point for hiking tours.

**2** Visit the Snovik thermal spa in the Tuhinj valley, which offers an excellent range of treatments as well as indoor and outdoor pools. [www.terme-snovik.si](http://www.terme-snovik.si)



**3** Try kremna rezina, a delicious vanilla-custard cream cake.

**4** Go to the observation point in Kopernik, in the upper Bohinj valley. The breathtaking views of the valley make the 20-minute walk well worth it.

**5** Go wine tasting at the Vinoteka Movia, Ljubljana. You'll be surprised by how good Slovene wines are.

**6** Visit the Alpine Dairy Museum in Stara Fužina in the Bohinj valley for a glimpse of some genuine rural traditions.

**7** Turn your break into an activity holiday by cycling, kayaking and horse riding.

**8** Buy some pure Slovene salt (piranske solin), which grows on algae. The salted chocolate is an acquired taste, so be warned.

**9** Go shopping on a Sunday morning at the flea market on the banks of the Ljubljanica River.

**10** Buy some pumpkin seed oil, a rich, nutty oil made in the Karst area. You'll find it in most of the specialist food shops in Ljubljana.

