

"Cities cannot be all about buildings!" is for breathless people living in matchbox towns. In the little capital of Slovenia, buildings breathe and colours strike up the fire.

■ BY KALPANA SUNDER



Robert Harding/Inalpicture

# Ljubljana

Slovenian poet France Prešeren, whose verses were adopted as the country's national anthem, is an unlikely hero. He was a lawyer who sat for bar exams six times. He fell in love with Julija Primic, the daughter of a merchant, and pined for her with unrequited love for three years, until he realised his folly. He later sired three illegitimate children with his companion Ana. He had a

severe drinking problem and died prematurely of a liver disease. A semi-nude carving of his muse Julija was a local scandal, and members of the prudish clergy wanted to cover it up. Today, Prešeren Square — with a statue of the poet, who also adorns the Slovenian €2 coin now — is the focal point of Ljubljana, the pint-sized capital of Slovenia and a favoured meeting point for locals.

Opening image: Prešeren Square, which is the central square in Ljubljana, is an important meeting point for cultural and political activities. The rose pink building in the distance is the Church of Annunciation.

Top: Plečnik's picturesque waterfront with narrow, tree-lined paths.

Right: The Triple Bridge across the Ljubljanica river connects the city's medieval and modern halves.



Image courtesy Ljubljana Tourism

## SET IN STONE

There is an emerald green river and ornate bridges bound by tall medieval buildings in candy colours. There is the rose pink Church of Annunciation, its steps abuzz with groups of students who form a sizeable part of this city's population and are the flag bearers of its thriving art and culture scene. There are all the other charms you tend to associate with a quaint European town with less than 3,00,000 inhabitants. But Ljubljana's trademark is undoubtedly its stunning architecture.

If you want a history lesson, the city's heady cocktail of architectural styles from Baroque to

Gothic, neo-Classical, and Art Nouveau can be a splendid guide. Long ago, it used to be Napoleon's capital, till a deadly earthquake in the year 1895 wrought devastation and destroyed almost all its buildings. The Austrian architects and builders, who did the renovation, introduced the style of Art Nouveau buildings from Vienna, which is inspired by elements in nature such as flowers and plants. Between the World Wars, well-known architect Jože Plečnik remodelled the city in his eclectic style. His influence was so strong in shaping the contemporary image of this city that many call it 'Plečnik's Ljubljana'. Today, the city is a veritable pastiche of styles, which somehow remains pleasing to the eye. The river, the lacy



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**THIS CITY IS KNOWN FOR ITS BRIDGES, WHICH ARE MORE SHOWPIECES THAN JUST CONSTRUCTIONS TO KEEP YOUR FEET DRY. WE SEE THE MOST POPULAR ONES ACROSS THE LJUBLJANICA, A RIVER THAT FLOWS THROUGH THE CENTRE OF TOWN.**

Top: Dragon Bridge. Originally named The Jubilee Bridge of the Emperor Franz Josef, it was given its unofficial name for its four dragon statues. Seen in the background is the Church of St. Nicholas.

Right: Between 1743 and 1751, Italian sculptor Francesco Robba designed the Fountain of the Three Carniolan Rivers (now known as the Robba fountain) to symbolise the three rivers of Carniola — Ljubljana, Sava, and Krka.

bridges, and the handsome buildings seem to complement each other.

The omnipresent motif, Castle Hill, a military post in Roman times, is a 15th-century fortress looming large over the labyrinth of medieval streets below that can be reached by a funicular. The river is lined with buildings in wood and stone, painted with pinks and yellows and topped with verdigris-stained copper roofs. Wrought-iron balconies, faded facades, and arched doorways keep the cameras whirring. Plečnik's waterfront design is attractive with tree-lined paths, open-air cafés, and stone balustrades. This city is known for its bridges, which are more showpieces than just constructions to keep your feet dry. We see the most popular ones across the Ljubljana, a river that flows through the centre of town. The flamboyant, Venetian-looking Triple Bridge, with its ornate Renaissance balustrades and string of street lamps, is the main bridge connecting the Prešeren Square to the town. Originally just one bridge, the architect built two bridges on either side of it so that it could accommodate traffic and people.

The iron and concrete Dragon Bridge has an enchanting story behind it: When Jason and the Argonauts arrived here after stealing the Golden Fleece, they found a dragon, which Jason slew. Today, four dragons crafted out of sheets of copper — with spiked tails, spiked wings, and evil eyes — guard the bridge. The dragon is also found on the city's coat of arms

and on innumerable souvenirs. The bridge is the stomping ground of lore. According to legend, if a virgin walked on the bridge, the dragon would wag its tail!

The concrete riverbanks with terraces were part of Plečnik's design to tame the river, which was prone to frequent flooding. Today, weeping willows, flowering trees, and bright artwork by children brighten the stark concrete. Lining the river and following its gentle curve are the dramatic colonnades of a riverside arcade, crafted out of marble and designed by Plečnik, used now as a craft market. The recently opened



Image courtesy Ljubljana Tourism

Butchers' Bridge, which is made of glass and connects pedestrians to the local market, is a contemporary take on Plečnik's vision. With glass and granite flooring, small bronze sculptures of animals, and statues of heroes from Greek and Christian mythology, this is a counterpoint to all the other classical bridges in town.

**TALES OF THE TOWN**

The Baroque part of Old Town features the Town Hall and a fabulous fountain of the three Carniolan Rivers by Francesco Robba. It is said



Image courtesy Ljubljana Tourism

Anticlockwise from top:

Ljubljana Cathedral, or the Church of St. Nicholas, is easily recognisable with its green dome and twin towers.

Ivan Vurnik incorporated traditional forms of Carniolan peasant art in an essentially Art Nouveau structure to design the Commercial Cooperative Bank.

Hauptmann House, at Prešeren Square, was one of the many Baroque-styled bourgeois palaces built to replace the medieval houses that were damaged and ruined in the 1895 Ljubljana earthquake.



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that Robba was inspired by the Bernini fountain in Rome's Piazza Navona. The rivers are personified by Triton pouring water from a jug. With cobbled lanes, shady piazzas, faded red and ochre facades of palaces, and gargoyles staring down from buildings, this part of the city has a very Italian feel. Blessed by Pope John Paul II, the Church of St. Nicholas used to be the church of fishermen and boatmen. Today, the pink marble, the stucco and striking frescoes on high ceilings

by Gulio Quaglio, and the stunning bronze doors stand as a resplendent reminder of 1,250 years of Christianity in the country.

A walk down Miklosiceva Street reveals a series of Art Nouveau buildings with their eclectic geometric motifs drawn from nature. The Commercial Cooperative Bank, a visually stunning building, was designed by architect Ivan Vurnik and his wife Helena. They say that Vurnik asked his wife to help him and she painted this building in hot pink with swirls of geometric patterns in vivid shades of blue, white, and red. The first department store of the city, Centromerkur, is housed in an Art Nouveau building, with a statue of Mercury — the God of trade and commerce — above the main façade. A personal favourite is the Hauptmann House built in 1873 (dubbed as the 'little skyscraper' by the locals), one of the few buildings to have survived the great earthquake of 1895. The vibrant façade with patterns and coloured ceramic tiles in blue, green, and red tones was probably influenced by the fact that the then owner was a paint merchant. But then, Ljubljana is that kind of city...where poets and sellers of paint merge for posterity in a riot of stone, stories, and colour.



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**LJUBLJANA SUMMER FESTIVAL**

The Ljubljana Summer Festival, during July and August, is the best time to visit the city and enjoy musical concerts, opera, and theatre and ballet performances in different venues, ranging from churches and open courtyards to old monasteries.

Visit [www.ljubljanafestival.si](http://www.ljubljanafestival.si) to know more.