

TRAVEL

BELOVED, EASTERN EUROPE

Once locked behind the Iron Curtain, Slovenia is now firmly on the tourist trails of Europe, and Ljubljana is its crown

Kalpana Sunder



Slovenia offers travellers the chance to see incredible sights like Predjama Castle, built into a cave opening



In Slovenia's capital Ljubljana, a gothic statue guards Dragon Bridge — a must-visit sight for all tourists



No one knows how to pronounce it; Slovenia, whose capital it is, is often confused with Slovakia. But Ljubljana (lew-blee-ahna) is a microcosm of Europe, a melting pot of different cultures, that's easy on the pocket and beguiling, having made a smooth transition from Communism to capitalism.

The city has a Bohemian vibe in the air with a great café culture — a quarter of the city's residents are students. People grow apples and grapes in their small gardens; in fact everything grows marvellously in this soil and we are amazed by the multi-hued flowers, fruits and vegetables that we see all around!

Our local guide, Martin, tells us, "The name that you must remember here is Joze Plecnik." He is the most celebrated Slovenian architect with his own unique eclectic postmodern style. He redesigned the medieval old town and combined various elements in spite of Communist strictures. The Triple Bridge with its graceful balustrades has his imprint as well as the Central market.

Locals congregate at Preseren Square with its pink Franciscan Church; buildings in ice-cream colours and students sitting on its steps indulging in some people watching. There are cameos at every corner, painted faces and bizarre costumes, students on skateboards, a Red Indian belting out pop songs, and a Mexican band. Gelatos are

omnipresent, reminding us that Italy's around the corner. Shops spill over with wild honey — which is the local delicacy — and bags of gourmet sea salt from the pans on the Adriatic coast. It's fascinating that the central focus here is not the statue of a politician or a leader, but a poet. It's the statue of Slovenian poet France Preseren whose verses were adopted as the country's national anthem. His eyes are locked on a carving of Julija Primic (his muse), about whom he wrote sad poetry, as he had an unrequited love.

Visible from every place in town is Castle Hill and a 15th century fortress looking down benevolently at the medieval streets below that can be reached by a funicular — it's the perfect place for a bird's eye view of the city. The old town has 17th and 18th century buildings, and hums with souvenir shops selling painted beehive panels (which Slovenian farmers used to traditionally decorate their bees' homes with), wine cellars, art galleries, antique shops and a slew of cafés with people sipping kava or coffee.

The earthquake of 1895 razed the greater part of this town. Austrian builders who renovated the city after the quake brought Art Nouveau with its motifs derived from nature and geometry. We walk through the Art Nouveau neighbourhood on Miklosic street. The Co-operative Credit bank building is the most striking one with multi-coloured patterns and stunning interiors, stained glass

and chandeliers.

According to folklore, the founder of this city was the Greek prince Jason with his companions, the Argonauts. They stole the Golden Fleece and sailed from the Danube into the Sava and then the Ljubljana River. Here Jason encountered a fearsome monster, which he slew. This dragon is represented on the city's coat of arms and is a local symbol. The Dragon Bridge is a local icon that depicts four copper dragons with their jaws agape guarding the entrances. Local legend has it that if a virgin walks on the bridge, then the dragons will wag their tails!

The open market between the Triple and Dragon Bridge is a sensory overload with the warm colours of oranges, apples, plums and peaches and dried herbs in open sacks. Locals shop for hams, sausages and sauerkraut. Art and music seems to be the leitmotif. There's an explosion of colour and sound with a Hare Krishna group singing their way through old town. The end of Communism has opened up a creative Renaissance. We hear about the new Museum of Contemporary Art and even an old jail being reborn as a hip and happening hostel. The original bars of the jail are intact with additions like murals by local artists.

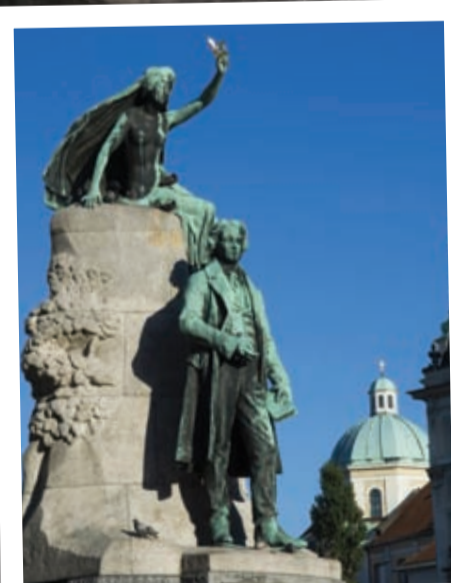
Throughout the year, this city hosts a plethora of festivals, including one catering to contemporary jazz music, an international theatre festival, a graphic arts festival and even a film festival. There are colourful kayaks hanging on ropes and bridges like garlands and we wonder

why. Martin tells us that Slovenia is hosting the World Championships in Kayak and Canoe Slalom and this is a preview.

The Slovenes love their cars; there are BMWs, Mercedes, Audis and the like — no small cars here! Petra Stusek, from Ljubljana Tourism tells us that even celebrities are just ordinary people here. We see a popular actor cycling his way through town; you can even catch the president of the country shopping at the local mall!

The signature street food seems to be *burek* (imported from Turkey), that's made of filo pastry stuffed with cheese, meat or even apple... A typical Slovenian meal is heavy on meat. We have one at the rustic Gostilna Sestica which has been around since 1776. It's a traditional setting of polished wood, greenery and old world charm. Steaks, *afjar* (a purée of roasted red pepper, tomatoes and aubergines), and the ultimate comfort food, a dessert called *gibinica*, are on the menu. It's a scrumptious concoction of flaky pastry with fruits, nuts, poppy seeds and cheese.

Floating along the green, slow-flowing Ljubljana River is a totally different experience. Large display boards on the banks of the river are like an open-air art gallery with paintings and children's drawings. Plecnik's magic again — we see stone steps like terraces ascending from the rivers and weeping willows,



France Preseren, a poet, is portrayed with his muse in the eponymous Preseren Square

which seem to be a favourite with locals. On our last night we have a Slovenian dinner with Natasa Valek, from the Slovenian tourist Board, and her charismatic husband. He's a professional golfer and we're surprised to learn that this small country has eight golf courses. In the past he has been a boxer and a skiing champion.

They are foodies and a common love for food unites us. We are touched when we realise that they are celebrating their first wedding anniversary that night. That's the defining point for us; the thought that someone would want to share such a special occasion with six strangers from across the world! Befitting a city whose name means 'beloved' in Slovene!

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