

■ Slovenia is known to be home to more than 8,000 caves. The Postojna Cave is the largest cave system in Slovenia and is located near Postojna. This 20,570m network of passages, galleries and chambers has been created by the Pivka River and is the most visited show cave in Europe. Today, a cave train takes visitors on a tour of the caves.



WET N WILD



■ If rafting has been on your mind recently, read right on. Women on Wanderlust (WOW), a travel club that organises tours for women, has a 3-night and 4-day rafting trip to Rishikesh on offer. The journey will begin on November 27, ex-Delhi. At Rs 15,500 per person on twin sharing basis, the package includes accommodation in luxury tents, meals as per itinerary, transportation from Delhi to the camp (and back) by air-conditioned coach, activities as per the itinerary and taxes. The camp is located between Byasi and Kaudiyala, about 35km from Rishikesh. You'll ride some thrilling rapids on the mighty Ganges and get to relax on the silvery beach by the camp and spend the evenings by a bonfire — the recipe for a perfect holiday. The last date of booking is 15 November. Call 9891655054 or mail to me@wowsunitra.com.



A view of Bled Castle from the lake



WAYFARER ▶ Slovenia mesmerises with its scenic beauty, warm people and well-preserved traditions, says **Kalpana Sunder**

Fairytale land

Primoz, our Slovenian friend, brings us a gift of just-plucked apples from his garden. An apple tree in the yard is *de rigueur* for every Slovenian home and we've been the recipients of many such friendly gestures travelling through this pint-sized country.

We're experiencing the joys of rail travel using the Eurail select pass in Slovenia and Croatia. There are smiling station masters standing outside spotless stations with geraniums in window boxes, and Austrian-style architecture. Enthusiastic crew from Slovenian railways shadow us, making sure our needs are met. The obvious bonuses of train travel are the breathtaking panoramas from the windows — scythe-cut hay drying on *kozolec*s or traditional stands, turquoise lakes, rolling green hills and chocolate-box pretty villages, as if touched with a magic brush. Ljubljana, the Slovenian capital has a Bohemian vibe with a huge student population.



Church of the Assumption in Bled

the surrounding forests and mountains almost perfectly. The locals are proud of it and have stringent standards and rules about its maintenance. All around are palatial homes of the rich and famous of Slovenia.

The Triglav National Park surrounding it has hiking, cycling and horse riding trails. We drive up to Bled Castle which is a storybook castle complete with ramparts, towers, a moat and Disneyesque red conical brick roofs. It used to be the residence of the Bishops of Brixen and has been haphazardly added to over the years. It also has a reconstructed working printing press from Gutenberg's time.

You can make your own souvenirs here on handmade paper with the castle seal, under the tutelage of a master printer. The wine cellar has a medieval looking man in a cassock helping you to fill and cork souvenir wine bottles. You even get a certificate attesting the fact that you bottled the wine.

But the highlight of the castle are the rewarding views of the lake, mountains and the island. I tear myself away from all the historical exhibits and plant myself on a stone parapet. It's a to-die-for bird's eye view of the turquoise waters, the lone island and the wisps of clouds around the Julian Alps.

We have lunch at the palatial Vila Bled, Josef Tito's former summer residence and now a four-star hotel on the shores of the lake. It's surrounded by a lush garden with brilliant flowers. Tito is said to have entertained famous personalities like Kruschev and Indira Gandhi here. Post-lunch it's a trip to the island. Only wooden boats called *pletna* are allowed on the lake rowed by muscular men belonging to around 20 local families which have been in this trade since Maria Theresa's time.

The Church of the Assumption here is Bled's most alluring sight — evidence suggests that it was a Stone Age burial ground. Tradition calls for the groom to carry his bride up the 99 steps to the church — obviously a stern test of fitness.

The church has a 'wishing bell' in its 15th century belfry. Legend has it that a woman's husband was killed by brigands and the body was thrown into the lake. The distraught widow had all her gold cast into a bell and sent it to the island. Unfortunately the boat sank in a storm and the devastated widow became a nun and went away to Rome. The Pope, having heard of this story, then sent a consecrated bell to Lake Bled and said that anyone who believed in God and rung it thrice would have their wish come true!

As I catch hold of the rope, I am a little tense as there are people watching. I relax, close my eyes and ring the bell for some divine help. Letting go, I hear the peals bouncing off the countryside, echoing and re-echoing.

Listening to the chimes of the bell, I realise that among other things, Bled and I have an unfinished date. For I haven't tasted the signature local cream cake with a crispy crust made from butter dough, filled with vanilla cream, topped with whipped cream and a dusting of icing sugar. A return trip to Slovenia is just what I need!

Photographs by author

Ready reckoner



- **Getting there:** Fly to Ljubljana from Frankfurt by Adria Air. From Ljubljana, Bled is 55km away.
- **Staying there:** To stay at the Hotel Mons in Ljubljana, go to <http://www.hotel.mons.si>.
- **Wine and dine:** Go for wheat dumplings in cream sauce, steaks, Italian dishes like *gnocchi* with spinach or *tagliatelle*. At Bled, try the local cream cakes and wines like Teran and Rakija.
- **Web watch:** www.eurailtravel.com.



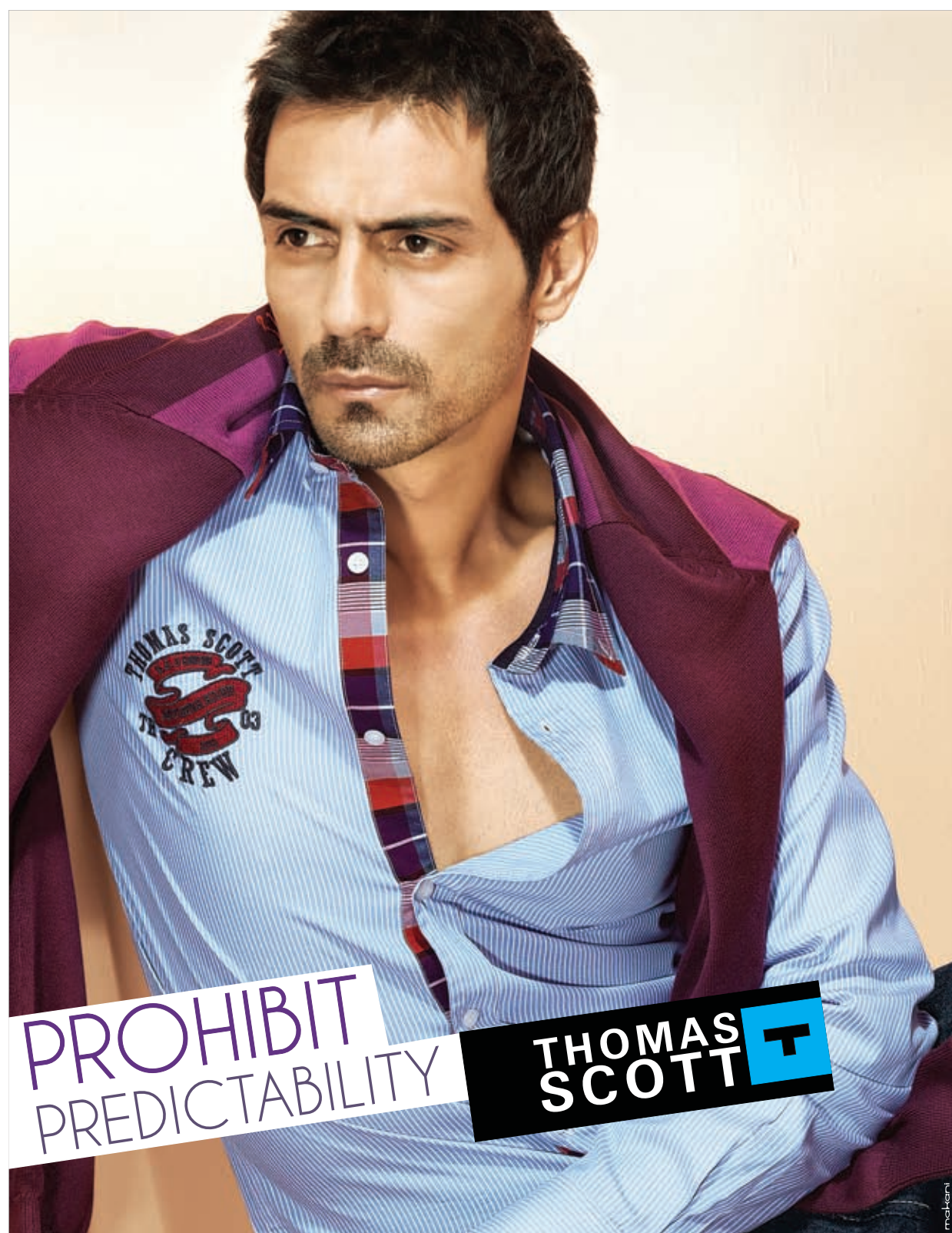
Bled Castle is a tourist hot-spot

We spend many mornings at Preseren Square with its bright pink Franciscan church and walk over the myriad bridges that this city is famous for. Open markets filled with luscious local produce, brightly painted wooden toys, sacks of dried herbs and bottles of wild honey keep us busy. In this remote corner of Europe, we meet Nisha, a Gujarati who runs the only Indian restaurant here, Namaste. She is warm and friendly and her life history, amazing. She traces her background from her father's arrival here as the first Indian student in Ljubljana and her mother opening an Indian store called Sariko which has several branches today.

We travel out of Ljubljana to Lake Bled

Bled, the most enduring image of Slovenia. My first view of the glacial Lake Bled almost has me looking for my glass slippers. This is the stuff that fairytales are made of. A glassy emerald lake, it's ringed by forests, with a picture-perfect island perched in the centre. There's a Baroque church and a forbidding medieval castle on a rock crag overlooking the lake on this island — the castle is almost like a protective guardian watching over the entire scenario. Like in a magnificent amphitheatre, on all the sides are the snow-streaked Julian Alps along with Mount Triglav, the triple-peaked symbol of Slovenia. In 2004, Bled celebrated its Millennium — it was awarded to the Bishops of Brixen in 1004.

In the 19th century, Bled was a spa resort acclaimed for its curative properties and Alpine air, and a refuge to cure migraine, obesity and insomnia popularised by Swiss healer Arnold Rikli. Bled was also a watering hole for the aristocratic elite of the Austro-Hungarian royal families who had retreats here. Lake Bled carries the reflections of



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My favourite holiday

BADSHAH MOITRA, actor

My vacation at Kanha (Madhya Pradesh) has been the best ever. We took a road trip and when we reached there at night, we had to actually navigate our way through the jungle towards the only light we saw. Thankfully it turned out to be the forest department's guest house. The nights there are quiet, only broken by the calls of wild animals. The most amazing experience, however, was to see a tiger up close. It was on the prowl and since there were plenty of deer around we would have seen a hunt, had it not been for the intrusion of more cars which drove the animals away. We also saw a herd of about 800 deer race across the jungle. What a sight it was!

