

# The sunny side of the Alps

Slovenia is only a few hundred kilometres across,  
but this spectacular central European country seems  
to have it all. By ANDREW THOMPSON



The Pilgrimage Church of the Assumption of Maria occupies a small island on Lake Bled

I stood on the small stone bridge on the edge of Lake Bohinj and looked across the glistening body of water. It stirred gently in the mid-morning sunlight, the sound of the soft lapping on the shores the only discernible noise in the pristine valley. Down and to my left, a couple tiptoed gingerly over the stony sand, awkwardly transporting a two-person dugout canoe to the water's edge. Below me, small fish basked in the shallows, and as I turned I saw an elderly couple walk arm in arm through the tall grass of the glacial valley. Around me, the Julian Alps rose up to clearing blue skies, all but their very tips covered in emerald forests. I felt as if I'd walked into a tourism brochure with the saturation turned to maximum.

Only a day earlier, I had been in the lively Hungarian capital of Budapest. The gruelling sunrise-to-sunset commute from Budapest to Bohinj had required three trains, four stations, and a single regional bus ride. But as I stood on the bridge taking in my new surroundings, the previous day's travels seemed a small price to pay.

I looked across to the far side of the lake, and then to the path around its circumference cutting a line through dense trees. I knew exactly what I had to do, and strode off with a renewed sense of vigour.

Though this was my first visit to Lake Bohinj, it wasn't my first trip to Slovenia. Two years earlier, I'd ventured into the country on a whim when a traveller in Vienna urged me to journey south, to a mysterious city called Ljubljana and a picturesque lake called Bled.

'Sounds interesting,' I said dismissively to my beer. 'But I'm taking the train to Venice.'

Like a dealer showing his wares, he pulled out his phone and showed me a photograph he'd snapped of a church on a perfectly positioned island.

'It's called Lake Bled,' he said. 'It's like nothing you've ever seen.'

And so, two days later, rather than fighting with crowds along the canals, I'd found myself rowing a wooden boat across turquoise waters to that very church on the island, wondering why

this small corner of Central Europe was still somehow flying below the mainstream tourism radar.

Slovenia's low profile may have something to do with its complex past. Historically, the region played a very important trade role between Asia and Europe, formed part of Yugoslavia, and was drawn into a handful of devastating wars.

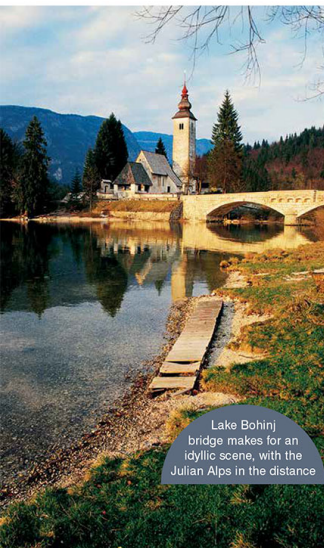
The name Slovenia, which means the 'Land of Slavs', first appeared on regional maps around 1918, but the country as it is today only came into being in 1991, after a 10-day war against the Yugoslav People's Army for independence. This makes it one of the newest countries in Europe.

Slovenia has always been at a crossroads of sorts between the Slavic and non-Slavic worlds, sharing close ties to both Western Europe and other Yugoslavian countries and yet, until recently, never really forming a true identity of its own.

Today, Slovenia is a peaceful country nestled between Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia, with a small sliver of coastline on the Adriatic. It's part of the European Union and trades with the euro, and yet it also shares most



## I circumvented the hike back and hopped aboard a nearby electric wooden tourist boat



Lake Bohinj bridge makes for an idyllic scene, with the Julian Alps in the distance

similarities with its eastern neighbours, yet to fully buy into the EU dream.

Until recently, people would look at you with suspicion when you mentioned you were going to Slovenia; many still probably think you mean Slovakia. A traveller once thought I'd said 'Syria', and wished me luck in the conflict. But thanks to its natural beauty, welcoming population, good infrastructure and competitive prices, it's fast coming into its own as a leading tourism destination.

The country's most prominent mountain range, the Julian Alps, towers upwards of 2 000m and covers roughly 4 400 km<sup>2</sup> across to Italy. The peaks offer skiing holidays at a fraction of the cost of other alpine siblings further west, but late summer, in my books, is the perfect time to go.

In peak summer, the Bohinj basin bustles with adventure-seeking tourists, but in mid-September, I was alone for much of my meander around the lake. Only the excited chatter of occasional canoeists, and the terrified whoops of paragliders above, broke the otherwise gentle sounds of nature.

At the far end of the lake, I found a waterfall and a view of the U-shaped glacial valley, and I stood there reflecting on this unique location and the several hours' walk it took to reach this point. I circumvented the hike back and hopped aboard a nearby electric wooden tourist boat that transported me back to my starting point in a matter of minutes.

Early the next day, I was back on the train and heading towards the capital. Slovenia's rather compact size and good infrastructure make it easy to navigate by train, bus or private car. The train ride was brief and scenic, and skirted the popular Bled before pulling into the inspiring contradiction that is Ljubljana.

On first appearances, the outskirts of the capital are rough and unwelcoming. Graffiti-covered carriages and buildings greet you as you alight from the train. Any tourists who were to accidentally walk through the Metelkova district next to the station without initially understanding its context may feel slightly uneasy. But this autonomous social centre – essentially an illegal urban squat in abandoned military



barracks used for parties and various informal art installations – juxtaposes quite perfectly with the cobbled streets, beautiful bridges, peaceful pedestrianised zones and medieval architecture that define the mainstream heart of the city.

Ljubljana's charming car-free centre is small and best explored on foot or bike. Bars, cafes and restaurants line the serene Ljubljana River, and it's peaceful enough to hear the chatter rising up from the numerous outdoor terraces and bustling markets. The lack of motorised traffic, combined with intriguing architecture, orderly food markets and omnipresent castle on the hill, helps transport you back to an altogether different era.

Four nights in the capital disappeared rapidly. On previous trips, I'd made a point of targeting the recommended museums and attractions, but this time I found myself walking the quiet back roads and empty paths up to the castle and in the lush Tivoli City Park; taking early morning runs along the misty river; drinking coffees on the terrace of the city's only skyscraper; and making idle small talk with the diverse young crowds at the city's cafes, bars and restaurants.

Ljubljana can be described as spotless, vibrant and liveable. If it were not for a hotel booking on the coast, I may well have spent another week, or four, there. But my non-refundable booking kept me moving along and so, on a gloomy

Sunday morning, I made my way back to the station. I boarded a train and rode it through hazy valleys until the end of the line. When the train terminated, I walked across the road and hopped on a bus that hugged the coastline all the way to the small Gulf of Piran.

Piran is a medieval town with dark, narrow streets and cramped uniform houses resting just centimetres above the blue Adriatic. The town's history and location have made it a melting pot of cultures. It was part of the Venetian empire for more than 500 years, and you'll still hear a perceptible mixture of Italian and Slovenian spoken on the streets. These days, it's firmly established as the jewel of the expansive 47 km-long Slovenian coastline.

Like any good seaside town, there's really not all that much to do there. A walk along the old walls offers panoramic views of the labyrinthine town below, and on a clear day, the shores of Italy across the seas. Most evenings dish up postcard-worthy sunsets over cocktails and plates of the freshest seafood.

## Piran is a medieval town resting just centimetres above the blue Adriatic



Days in Piran are best spent enjoying the seaside setting by swimming, diving and snorkelling in the crystal clear, tranquil ocean. Convenient steel hand railings and steps help you down the last half-metre towards sea level, and you can cavort with an array of aquatic life visible for several feet around you in the pleasantly buoyant saline water, before leaving wet footprints through the town all the way back to your hotel door.

This was exactly how I decided to spend my final morning in Slovenia. The day dawned completely still and cloudless. I took a leisurely meander through the abandoned alleyways right up to the water's edge, slipped into the cool, clear ocean and floated on my back, wondering how long it would be until I could once again no longer resist the pull of this rather remarkable little country. ●