



1 Fall in love with Slovenia

Visit this south central European country and she'll capture your heart, says Heidi Fuller-Love



Bordering Austria, Italy, Hungary and Croatia, Slovenia boasts a variety of stunning scenery, ranging from lofty mountains and alpine villages to buzzing towns and chic seaside resorts.

On a sunny spring morning, we drove through the vineyard-chequered Vipava Valley to Arkade, a family-run farmhouse restaurant in the pretty hamlet of Crnice, to meet Matjaz Lemut, owner of the acclaimed Tilia Estate winery (tiliapremiumwines.com). Matjaz, who organises tours of the region's wineries,

told us that Slovenia has been producing wines since Roman times.

Now split into thousands of small vineyards, Vipava's innovative vintners are combining classic grape varieties with rare older species to produce some excellent wines, ranging from lively whites like Rebula and Zelen to aromatic reds such as Refosk and Merlot.

The next morning, after a stroll through Vipava town's cheery pastel-coloured cluster of houses standing on the banks of the salmon-rich Vipava river, we headed for Dvorec Zemono (prilozetu.com).

Touted as one of Slovenia's best restaurants, Zemono is situated in a renaissance building, with its original frescos and pillars vamped up with scarlet drapes and gold footstools.

Cannily combining theatre and gastronomy, award-winning chef Tomaž Sršen served us a succession of mouthwatering seasonal dishes wreathed in dry ice, covered in leaves or sprinkled with snow to represent the seasons – and best of all, the bill was about a quarter of what you'd expect to pay for a similar gourmet meal in France.



Lake Bled has hosted the World Rowing Championships four times



bears. "Slovenia is 70% forest," he laughed. "There are bears everywhere – we have so many we sell them to other countries."

MERCURY PRIZE?

The following day, a winding mountain road took us to Idrija. This bustling town, just a short hop from the flora and fauna-packed Idrija Natural Park, is home to the second largest mercury mine in the world. First discovered in the 15th century, mercury was mined here up until a few decades ago when work ceased for health reasons.

After a spooky torchlight tour of the mine's labyrinth of tunnels several hundred metres below ground, we emerged to visit the fascinating museum, which explains the history of the mercury mining industry and displays some stunning local lacework, including a gown made for (former Yugoslavia president) Tito's wife.

That evening, at quirky manor house restaurant Kendov Dvorec (kendov-dvorec.com), we learned to make local speciality potato-stuffed ravioli zlikrofi, which we enjoyed with a few glasses of Klinec Winery's aromatic Quela Merlot.

Arriving in Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana, we pitched on the shaded campsite just outside town and headed out on bikes. Pedal power is an ideal way to discover this quaint, cobbled city – although it's better to take the funicular if you want to visit the 15th-century castle high above town.

For three glorious days we wandered along the city's river walkways lined with brightly-coloured baroque buildings, sat at old-fashioned sidewalk cafés or stopped to admire the magnificent bridges and buildings designed by 20th-century Ljubljana-born architect Joze Plecnik, the man behind the renovation of Prague castle.

One afternoon, we headed for the castle to admire views over to Italy and Austria, then brunch on local gastronomy-with-a-twist at the Gostilna Na Gradu castle

restaurant (nagradu.si/en). We also strolled around Ljubljana's glorious botanical gardens, which have been the home of exotic plants and rare flowers since 1810, and browsed the clutter of ex-Soviet Bloc *tchotchke* (knick knacks) and antiques in the city's straggling flea market.

A snowbound wonderland for winter sports, Bled has plenty of summer charms too, including a picturesque lake with its own tiny island backed by the Triglav National Park, a forest range which we explored while riding elegant Lipizzaner horses.

On our final day, we took a boat to the island. Aliosha, a boat operator whose family has been ferrying visitors across the lake for four generations, told us to ring the bell in the island's church and make a wish.

Well my wish was to return to this lovely, friendly country as soon as possible, so I'll keep you updated if it comes true. ■

Above left: Slovenia is 70% forest

Above: Ljubljana's celebrated Trnovo Bridge by night

Below: prsut producer showing off his dried ham hocks

Bottom: Tatjana, our lovely guide in Goriska Brda



INFORMATION

SITES

A choice of sites in Slovenia can be found in the Club's 2012/2013 *Caravan Europe: Guide to Sites and Touring in Austria, Benelux, Central Europe, Germany, Greece, Italy, Scandinavia and Switzerland*, priced £8.99 to members (non-members £15.99) plus £2.50 p&p. Order your copy at caravanclub.co.uk/caravaneurope or by calling 01342 327410. Sites to consider:

- **Camping Bled**, Kidriceva 10c, 4260 Bled (p602). Call 0038 64 575 2000 or see camping-bled.com
- **Ljubljana Resort**, Dunalska Cesta 270, 1000 Ljubljana (p603). Call 0038 61 568 3913 or see ljubljanaresort.si

Two sites in Slovenia – Camping Bled (as above) and Camping Terme – are bookable through the Club's Travel Service (contact details below). Full details of both sites are available in our 2012 *Ultimate Guide to Continental Caravanning* brochure.

TRAVEL/TOURISM

- **Ferry and sites bookings via the Club** – for site and ferry details and to make bookings call 01342 316101 or see caravanclub.co.uk
- **Tourism** – slovenia.info

Stuffed with fine food, we took a winding road to Goriska Brda, a lush agricultural region close to the Italian border, where figs and olives grow alongside apples and cherries. Here, we met local guide Tatjana Sundovski, who took us on a tour of the narrow alleys, hip cafés and art galleries of Medana, before driving us along a potholed path to the alpine-style farm of award-winning goat breeder Jure Konjar.

As we sat in Jure's soot-blackened kitchen sipping on homemade bread topped with a creamy spread of pungent goat's cheese, I asked him if he ever saw