

Unknown Europe

Secret Slovenia

Slovenia has a serious identity crisis! Not many know where it is. But the Brits who have already discovered this secret gem in the former Yugoslavia are keeping it to themselves, says Nick Bateman

Lake Bled

A good starting point is the capital Ljubljana which is served by the national carrier Adria Airlines as well as easyJet. The backdrop to the airport of imposing mountains hints at a promise of beauty that awaits every step of your holiday in Slovenia, and it only gets better.

Ljubljana is not a large city, with only 300,000 residents, and is split between the old and new towns. While legend claims the roots of the city were laid by the fleeing Argonauts, historians tell us that this city was founded by the Romans in around 1AD.

The old town has a lot of charm and plenty to see. The baroque buildings that line the river to the east, Ljubljana Castle, the three bridges and Tivoli Park are all a must if you only have a day (which in truth is all you need). The River Ljubljana separates the old town from the commercial side to the west. The difference between the baroque buildings and modern buildings when crossing over the river shows a town of contrasts.

The city sparkles on a Sunday morning when there is a flea market set up on the banks of the river. The market attracts many interesting local characters as well as tourists who browse up and down the cobbled streets in search of a bargain. Haggling for something you do not really need, such as a portrait of Tito or a glockenspiel is all part of the fun. If your feet can't dance anymore to the beat of the market there are many cafes close by to sit and people watch. However, Eastern Europeans like to play heavy rock music and this sometimes can anaesthetise the experience.

In the summer it is hot and can reach 35 degrees and therefore the sensible way to reach the castle is by a tourist train that you pick up just by the three bridges.

Ljubljana Castle offers fantastic views over the city towards the cathedral and beyond. Ljubljana has ten castles in total, of which five are open to the public. The new town is not really worth a visit, but the state buildings and embassies may offer an alternative view of the city. A one-hour boat trip along the river is an excellent way to finish the day. These leave from Ribji Trg pier and offer another viewpoint of the capital.

A thirty-minute car journey or one-hour train trip away is the magical lake and town of Bled which stands on the fringes of the Triglav National Park. Most of the four and five star hotels and best camp sites face Lake Bled. There is an enchanting island, with a church as its sole resident, in the middle of the lake.

This can be reached by hiring a rowing boat or you can let the locals do the hard work by taking a traditional Pletna boat. On the north side of the lake stands Bled Castle, Slovenia's oldest, dating back to 1011. If you feel the castle is too far to walk to there is a little tourist train to take you there. In the summer there are frequent music concerts in the grounds of the castle so, with the backdrop of the Julian Alps, it's a place to relax.

Lake Bled is beautifully clear with some areas set aside for swimming and fishing. The water is cool and refreshing. In winter it freezes and you can skate on the surface.

To walk around the lake takes around an hour and a half and there are plenty of little bars facing the water to break your journey. Or if you are feeling romantic there is a rather touristy horse and cart that will take you around.

Bled has, of course, a lot more to offer than just healing waters and fairytale castles. Horse riding, white water rafting, mountain biking, rock climbing and, in the winter, skiing can all be found within minutes of the town centre.

Another lake well worth visiting is the glacial lake of Bohinj in the heart of the Triglav National Park, which is only 40 minutes by car from Bled. A cable car ride up Mt Vogel is the starting point for over eight mountain treks for varying abilities, from beginner to the more advanced adventurer. One walk will take you over the mountains to the old Yugoslavian and Italian border where you can still see the remains of military occupancy. In the winter the area lends itself to skiing, which is perfect for beginners and families. For adrenalin junkies there is paragliding, (you can learn to fly in five days), caving and rafting.

Also within forty minutes of Bled is Kranjska Gora, which lies in the heart of the Sava Valley and is close to the borders of three countries. A renowned centre for walking and horse riding, as well as the biggest ski jump in the world, this area attracts visitors in and out of the ski season.

Not everything is get up and go in Slovenia. The coastal towns of Portoroz and Piran on the Adriatic a day trip away. In the east of the country is the city of Maribor which sits on the Drava River in the Pohorje Hills. This has become something of a little Britain, with secluded forest houses being snapped up by visitors from the UK and is worth a visit if you can spare the time.

I was wonderfully impressed by Slovenia. It's not only extremely cheap

but has breathtaking scenery, making it appealing to all pockets and all ages. The ability to go head first down a swollen river and the next moment enjoy a picture postcard setting means I will be returning. However, with the advent of the Euro next year, I fear this best kept secret may suffer the consequences of mass tourism, but perhaps this orchid amongst buttercups of Eastern Europe just might retain her charm. ■



Ljubljana



Covered market

Fact file

- ◆ Crystal Lakes (tel: 0870 403 0543 or www.crystallakes.co.uk) offers holidays to Lake Bled from £343, based on bed and breakfast accommodation in a 3* hotel with return Gatwick flights and transfers. A weeks half board stay at the 4* Hotel Golf costs from £471, with return Gatwick flights and transfers. 0870 403 0543 or visit www.crystallakes.co.uk
- ◆ Bled Rafting organizes rafting, canyoning, mountain biking and paintball. Rafting takes place at 10am and 2pm from April till October and costs from 23 euros per person for a 10km rafting session down the Sava Dolinka. To book or for details, tel 00386 41 67 80 08, email info@bled-rafting.si or visit www.bled-rafting.si
- ◆ For information about Slovenia visit www.slovenia.info or call the UK tourist office on 0870 225 5305.