



AllWays Traveller

Slovenia

www.allwaystraveller.com

Small and yet perfectly formed for the visitor

Slovenia is a small, southern central European, country bordered by Italy, Austria, Croatia and Hungary.

In 1990 Slovenia was the first to break away from the then Federation of Yugoslavia, following an overwhelming desire by its people to forge democratic independence.

And apart from the '10 day war', during which Yugoslav troops tried and failed to bring Slovenia back into the fold, the country avoided the violence and horror as Yugoslavia collapsed.

Slovenia has flourished, since independence, joining the European Community and NATO and adopting the Euro as its currency.

And, today, Slovenia offers the visitor a flavour of all of the best that Europe has to offer.

This includes part of the Alps, a short stretch of Mediterranean coastline, large swathes of forest and lakes and wild Slovenian brown bears.

Ljubljana, the capital, combines culture, heritage and a vibrant lifestyle while beyond are smaller medieval towns and rural communities.

Slovenia is also known for its spa resorts, offering the ultimate in health and wellness.

Ashley Gibbins

Managing editor
AllWays traveller



The start of a lasting affair with Slovenia



By Ashley Gibbins

Slovenia, the name itself is one that Disney could well have conjured up for one of its romantic, timeless, picture perfect lands.

And, once off the A1 motorway that still follows the old Roman route that took trade and travellers from the Mediterranean through Ljubljana and into Austria, this is more or less what you find.

Those who promote Slovenia will tell you it is the only country with 'love' in its name, and a capital whose name translates as 'beloved'.

All that Europe can offer is here

If one had to list Europe's attractions for the traveller, most can be found here in Slovenia.

Small, 'bite-sized' bits of them granted, but all easily enjoyed during a short stay.

One will need a car to get around, but the country roads are in very good condition and pleasantly peaceful.

It makes driving a pleasure, particularly with the 'sat nav' taking away the stress of driving in somewhere new.

OK, while this might be fine promotional 'puff', we really fell for Slovenia during this our first, four day visit to the country, which was spent in the Dolenjska region.

Our love affair with this delightful country and her warm and friendly people has begun and, back home in the UK, we already have a longing to get reacquainted.

Ljubljana : the cultural core



Ljubljana, which is recognised as one of Europe's finer, cultural capitals is easily walked.

It has an architecturally historic, 'old town' heart and a vibrant dining and entertainment scene.

As Slovenia's international gateway, it makes for an ideal city break location, and one that is the next on our list.

A rural, more peaceful way of life



Leave Ljubljana and one finds a more serenely rural peaceful way of life and stunning natural beauty.

Medieval towns



There is a procession of small medieval towns and villages and farming communities.

I can believe it when I am told Slovenia has more tractors, per head of population, than any other country.

The Dolenjska region



On this our first visit to Slovenia we opted for the Dolenjska region, which has the Krka and Temenica rivers, weaving their way through rolling hillsides dotted with vineyards, small, lovingly preserved churches and grand castles and monasteries.

As with much of Slovenia there are also broad areas of birch forests and many hiking, nature, cycling and horse riding trails.

The region's capital is Novo mesto, the cultural, educational and economic centre of the region.

The open air museum Pleterje



This 'living village' from the mid-19 Century comprises a collection of rescued cottages, barns and farm buildings.

Together with livestock including hens, goats, a wolf and ferrets.

Pleterje provides a wonderful insight into the Slovenian way of village life between 150 and 200 years ago.

What was meant to be a fleeting, 20 minute stay turned into a hugely enjoyable 90 minutes thanks to the enthusiastic commitment of the team there.

www.skansen.si

The Cistercian abbey, Kostanjevica

The Cistercian monastery in Kostanjevica na Krki was founded in the 13th century.

The now former monastery, which has the largest arcade courtyard in Central Europe, houses the gallery of Božidar Jakec.

The park surrounding the abbey is a sculpture park known as Forma Viva and has works by international artists.

The Dolenjski Museum



The Dolenjski Museum, in Novo mesto, offers visitors a unique opportunity to view its exhibits which cover life in Slovenia from the Neolithic period.

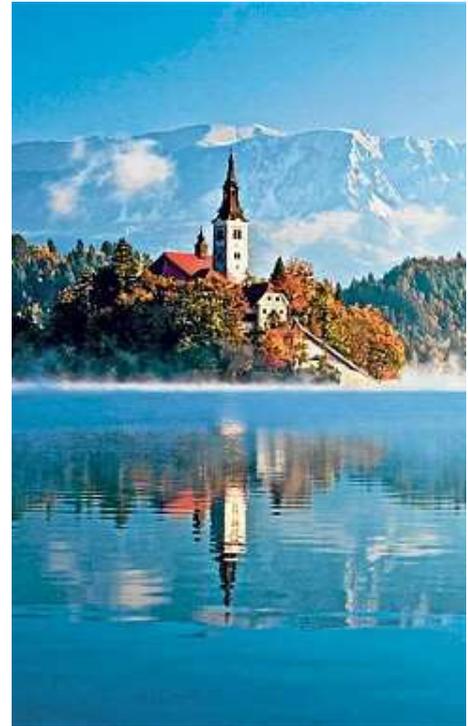
The most stunning aspect of the collection is the Iron Age female grave finds from Novo mesto, with amazing examples of metal, glass and amber jewellery and trinkets.

Also on display are metal weapons, bronze helmets and armour and decorated pottery vessels.

For visitors to Novo mesto, the Dolenjski Museum really is one place to include on the itinerary.

www.dolmuzej.com

Lakes and forests



Small and compact has to be the case for the Slovenes because a large part of their country is pine forest interspersed with crystal clear lakes and flowing rivers.

The Alps



Slovenia takes in a small part of the Alps, enough for a days hiking during the spring or summer months or a days skiing in winter.

On the Med



Slovenia also has a Mediterranean coastline.

OK just 42km of it sandwiched between Italy and Croatia, but more than enough to enjoy colourful Italian-style fishing villages and spend a day or two on the beach.

The vineyard cottage experience



One way to experience the beauty of the Dolenjska region of Slovenia - to very best effect - is to enjoy a couple of nights in a vineyard cottage.



There are 40 available for rent in the region.

And while some of the properties are 150 year old, others have been purpose built.

What they all offer is rustic accommodation, in a truly rural location, that is idyllic and full of character.

There is also fabulous scenery and a gently sloping vineyard on the doorstep.

It is the vineyard that makes these cottages something special and which allows guests to appreciate the wonderfully fruity Slovenian 'house' wine in the cellar.

This is likely to be Cviček, one of Slovenia's most distinctive wines

What better way to become one with this environment.

A glass or two can be enjoyed whenever with an honesty box for payment.

A vineyard cottage also makes for a perfect base from which to walk, cycle or horseback ride through this truly beautiful part of Slovenia.

The local owners of each vineyard cottage provide a welcome to guests, and will advise on the trails or route to take when out and about.

They will also recommend a choice of restaurants when dining out.

And one is also sure to meet so many friendly locals during a stay.

We are already planning a return visit to a wonderful little hillside cottage we viewed on this trip.

www.zidanice.si

Rolling pasture and hillsides



What remains is rolling pastures and gently sloping hillsides where every home seems to have its own vineyard.

Brown bears



Slovenia is one of the few countries in Europe with a thriving wild brown bear population, one used for the re-introduction of brown bear into Italy, Austria and France.

The largest population of the brown bear is found in the forests of the Kočevje, Bela krajina and Notranjska regions.

Bear safaris take visitors on trips to spot these majestic creatures.

Castles



Slovenia is also a land of castles with Bled Castle, Ljubljana Castle, Predjama Castle and Celje's Old Castle the most popular.

Caves

Slovenia has a collection of stunning caves with tourists thronging to the Postojna Cave and the nearby Škocjan Caves, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Several other caves, including the Vilenica Cave, are also open to public.

More information :

www.slovenia.info

Nights in the home the Knights of Otočec



By Ann Mealar

In complete contrast a vineyard cottage, the 13 Century Castle Otočec, which is surrounded by water (as all good castles should be), was built for the medieval Knights of Otočec.

Sitting on the river Krka it remained, for centuries, the fortified residence for a succession of Slovenian nobility.

Now a five star hotel, and a member of the Relais & Chateaux portfolio of luxury properties, the Castle Otočec offers the most stylish accommodation and dining in as unique a setting as one could hope for.

Castle Otocec looks as if it belongs in a fairy tale

A small, but grand medieval castle surrounded by water and complete with turrets, arches, balustrades and amazingly thick, original stone walls.

Situated amid a fork in a flowing river, I half expected King Arthur's sword to cut through the glassy water and disturb the white swans that glided serenely by.

However, this wasn't *Olde England*, this was Slovenia, the Dolenjska region, with its green, forested and incredibly beautiful land.

A suit of armour standing close to reception was a welcome surprise and the stone floors and passageways created the right castle atmosphere.

The rooms were nicely furnished with all one would expect from a quality hotel, but it's the location and beautiful views that make Castle Otocec special.



Relaxing in the gravelled courtyard, sipping one of the delicious cocktails and listening to birdsong really is a pleasant way to unwind and chill out.

Fine dining is the order of the day with opportunities to eat inside or out.

The dining room is comfortable and impressive with its brown leather chairs and benches; open brickwork; dark wooden ceiling; candles; fresh flowers and oversize wine glasses.



Dining in historic style at Castle Otočec

We enjoyed the seven course tasting menu which was delicious and beautifully presented.

Dishes included: creamy wild garlic soup with honey; Zander (a fresh water fish) with nettle mousse – nettles are very popular in Slovenia, and taste wonderful; lamb chop on a herb crouton and roasted suckling pig with mustard sauce and spring vegetables.

Each dish was tasty and looked lovely. Excellent Slovenian wine was served with each course.

The following evening I enjoyed beef steak with truffle sauce and Ashley had bass from the Adriatic Sea that was expertly filleted at the table.

We also tucked into homemade ice cream and gibanica, a traditional Slovenian dessert of nuts, apples, ricotta cheese, honey and poppy seeds.

Quails eggs, smoked salmon, caviar and crayfish

Breakfasts were equally interesting and varied with a great selection of fine foods including quails eggs, smoked salmon, caviar and crayfish as well as eggs, bacon, cheese, fresh fruit, nuts, cold meats and omelettes to order.



There are many cycling and walking routes close to the hotel (bikes can be hired) so there is plenty of opportunity to burn off the calories.

Or you can enjoy a leisurely game of golf on the nearby course.

Whatever you choose, Castle Otočec is the ideal place to relax, unwind and enjoy everything it has to offer.

www.terme-krka.com/us/en/destinations/otocec.

Getting fit and healthy in Slovenia : Terme Krka's Smarjeske Toplice Spa

The real deal of the spa world

By Ann Mealor

When I was told we were staying at a spa hotel, I thought massage, facials, sauna. However, Terme Krka's Smarjeske Toplice Spa offers so much more for those looking for a complete 'body beautiful' experience.

Set in the magnificent forests of the Dolenjska region the Spa is built around a natural thermal water spring.

This comes continuously from the ground at 32 degrees and has traditionally been used to help ease aches and pains.

The Spa has an excellent medical team and offers rehabilitation programmes for those recovering from operations.

It can also be enjoyed by the leisure visitor who wants to relax and enjoy the dining, luxurious sauna, steam rooms, walking trails, cycling, Pilates etc.

However, what really made this Spa stand out for me were the specially designed Detox and Slim packages for those wanting to lose weight or just feel better in themselves.

Seven, ten and fourteen night programmes are available and the service offered is extremely thorough and professional.





The detox

For the detox programme, guests are encouraged to prepare themselves at home one week before arrival to help the body adjust to a fresh juice diet.

For both programmes, the first visit for guests is to the Spa doctor to check all is well before the diet starts.

Getting fit

Then it's onto the Fitness Specialist for a whole body check including height, weight, muscle mass rating, fat rating and muscle mass balance.

A fitness test is then taken on the exercise bike, with heart monitor, to assess individual fitness levels. It is then off to the nutritionist, who works out the weight or fat loss.

Calorie controlled cuisine

Working closely with the chefs, she designs a special calorie controlled or detox diet for each individual which is prepared using fresh, local ingredients.

All those on the *Slim or Detox* programme eat breakfast, lunch and dinner in the Fontana restaurant, which has a Japanese, Zen like feel with views over the forest and a small, pretty terrace on which to relax.

We ate a delicious lunch and dinner in the restaurant and it was hard to believe that the beautifully presented starter of orange, strawberry, shredded courgette and cheese, followed by pan fried sea bream on mixed vegetables was part of the slim fast programme.

The Slim and Detox programmes include planned exercise, therapy and relaxation treatments.

Ashley and I really enjoyed the Nordic walking, the scenery is stunning, and we had a very good massage in the Spa.

Other activities include water aerobics, Pilates, training with a personal instructor and cardio cross training in the fully equipped gym.



Relaxation and body treatments are also included in the diet plan including a wrap up with essential oils and vitamins.

The nutritionist visits at meal times, to find out how guests are getting on, and is always there for those who want to talk to about their diet or how they are feeling.

Before leaving the *Slim or Detox* programme, everyone is given a final consultation on the exercise and diet that should be continued at home.

I was very impressed with the professionalism and the personal attention throughout.

And those on the health programmes soon get to know each other and give support and encouragement.

It is no wonder that many of the people I met at the Spa return on a regular basis as it's the ideal place to recharge your batteries and get into shape.

www.terme-krka.com/us/en/destinations/smarjeske-toplice



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www.allwaystraveller.com



The International Travel Writers Alliance

The International Travel Writers Alliance is the world's largest association of professional travel journalists.

www.itwalliance.com

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