



{ Shown here: Ljubljana's colorful riverfront.

Above right: The famed church-topped island in Lake Bled. }

All Photos Courtesy of Laura Scillano-Rosen.



## Slovenia by Car

THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIAN REPUBLIC'S PETITE SIZE AND ENORMOUS BEAUTY MAKE IT IDEAL FOR A ROAD TRIP

BY LAURA SICILIANO-ROSEN

“Why do you come here?” is a question you may hear often in Slovenia, posed, strangely enough, by its otherwise proud inhabitants. One peek at any corner of this former Yugoslavian republic, which borders on Italy, Croatia, Austria and Hungary, is enough to unleash a deluge of replies: Though comparable in size to Massachusetts, Slovenia boasts a surprisingly varied, immensely beautiful geography. Forest and woodland cloak more than half the country; its mighty mountains, idyllic lakes, vineyards, karst caves, flowering villages and hilly countryside will undoubtedly prompt comparisons to Switzerland or even New Zealand. But Slovenia’s personality – born of a dynamic past perhaps best illustrated by those senior citizens who, with the euro’s adoption, have seen five different currencies in their lifetimes – is all its own, and with more travelers discovering its place on the map, it’s quickly growing as a year-round European destination.

The country’s diminutive size, enthralling landscape and well-maintained roads make it ideally experienced by car, allowing for comfort, adventure and travel by whim. English is spoken in most touristed areas, but chance local encounters or intentionally mislaid plans are never farther than the next narrow back-road turnout. You’ll need, of course, a good map and about a week at your disposal.

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**DAYS 1 & 2: A Cosmopolitan Capital**

Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana ("Loob-lee-yana"), ranks among Europe's most alluring cities – a miniature Prague or Paris with a dreamy storybook setting, wooded hilltop castle and all. Sixteen miles south of the country's only international airport (in Brnik), Ljubljana is an ideal spot from which to embark on a road trip. Car rentals are available at both the airport and in the city (see sidebar); because much of Ljubljana's compact Old Town is pedestrian-only and easily walkable, you may want to take a taxi or bus to the city and rent a vehicle there.

The city's Old Town is bisected by the green-hued Ljubljanica River, a canal-like waterway with tall concrete embankments, gracefully overhung with weeping willows and lined with burgher houses and buzzing cafes. The western, more modern side of the river, signposted "Ljubljana Centre," is marked by Art Nouveau architecture, university buildings, business hotels and museums, culminating in leafy Park Tivoli. East of the river is the city's medieval core, rising to the castle and branching out in slim alleyways from Stari trg (Old Square), Mestni trg (Town Square) and Gornji trg (Upper Square). The three squares form an uninterrupted cobblestone path that winds past Italian and Slovene restaurants, wine bars, art galleries and lovely baroque houses, their ages gently revealed in peeling facades and weathered wooden shutters.

Ljubljana is a city made for aimless wandering. Snag an inviting riverside table for an early-evening drink – try the local *Lasko pivo* (beer), or a wine from one of Slovenia's three major winegrowing regions. Cross and re-cross the river on each of its short bridges, the star of which is Triple Bridge, built by Ljubljana's celebrated architect Jozef Plecnik and consisting of one vehicular and two pedestrian bridges.

Come morning, browse the open-air market in Vodnikov trg, where you can pick up fruit, crusty bread, prosciutto and cheese for a hilltop picnic. From Old Town, Ljubljana castle can be reached on foot (15 minutes), by tram or via a newly constructed funicular. Check out the dazzling views and explore the courtyard, ramparts and tower, as well as the interior art exhibition areas, before settling down on a bench or grassy patch for lunch. For more art, you can head west across the river to the commendable National

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Gallery; for something edgier, take a free tour of the Hostel Celica, a former military prison renovated by more than 80 artists into a hip hostel with aesthetically designed “cells” – it’s a work of art in itself, and the space doubles as a funky gallery.

### DAYS 3 & 4: Lakes & Mountains

Bidding nasvidenje to Ljubljana’s charms, head 45 minutes north on the motorway to Bled. At the town’s photogenic heart rests exquisite Lake Bled, enclosed by foliage-swathed hills and the dramatic Julian Alps. Bled Castle towers above on a craggy cliff, looking straight out of a fairy tale, while in the lake, the bell tower of the Church of the Assumption pierces the sky from its perch on a tiny green island. You might stroll the lake’s 3.75-mile perimeter, but the ultimate Bled experience is to hop on a piloted, gondola-like pletna and visit the island. According to legend, the ancient Slavs worshipped the goddess of love and fertility here; today, climbing the church’s 99 steps to ring the 1534 “wishing bell” is said to bring good luck.

Afterward, it’s a 30-minute drive, skirting the mountains and Sava Bohinjka river, southwest to Bohinj valley, a cluster of tiny meadowland villages around Slovenia’s “other” glorious lake. The bucolic landscape here is prettily punctuated by traditional wooden hayracks and small knots of quaint, flower-boxed homes, from which the smoky scent of firewood wafts. Bohinj is also a gateway to the spectacular Triglav National Park, so get a restful sleep – a morning hike in the Julian Alps is in order.

A tip to gain elevation (and magnificent views) fast: Catch the half-hourly Vogel cable car from Lake Bohinj’s western shore, where you can also pick up trail maps. The whole valley, including the lake, is almost always blanketed in thick, early-morning fog, and the cable car permits a stunning ascent, zooming nearly a mile above it in minutes.

You can wander the grassy ski paths at the top, but to go further afoot, consult the ski center for help choosing a suitable route, from an easy 30-minute walk to an exhilarating six hour clamber up one of the park’s peaks.

Post-hike, fuel up both body and car before hightailing it south. You can stick to the highways – by backtracking east to Bled and south toward Ljubljana – or you can take the more adventurous (some may say risky!) route along the narrow, undulating roads that wind delightfully between Bohinj and Kranj, just north of Ljubljana. Both routes lead to the capital, which you’ll bypass to continue south and west (two-three hours; follow signs for Postojna, then Sežana). Destination: Divača, a small town about 10 miles east of Italy in Slovenia’s Kras region.

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**DAYS 5: Cave Country**

The Kras, or Karst, region is known for its exceptional landscape, riddled with caves, sinkholes and eroded limestone formations. But of the 7,000-plus caves in Slovenia, two are especially celebrated – Postojna and Skočjan – and only the latter is protected as a Unesco World Heritage site. Because it's harder to reach by public transport, Skočjan Caves, 10 minutes from Divaca, also tends to be less crowded.

The remarkably complex cave system is experienced on a 90-minute group tour. Guides lead groups past impressive stalactite and stalagmite formations, through vast, slippery chambers and into the caves' uniquely spectacular highlight – a cavernous underground chasm through which the Reka-Velka river rushes and tumbles, and which visitors cross via a skinny foot-bridge high above. Dimly lit by the snaking walkway, the enormous subterranean gorge would make an appropriately spooky lair for some fantastical creature.



Reentering daylight, you may choose to quickly detour northeast for a drive through the Primorje wine region, known for its rich Teran wine and marked by gorgeous backyard vineyards – look for “vinska cesta” (wine road) signs, which encourage visitors to stop by for a tasting. You'll need about 90-minutes to reach the country's southwestern tip, and the pretty Venetian seaport of Piran.

**DAYS 6 & 7: Shades of Italy**

Tiny Piran, located 118 miles east of Venice, often seems more Italy than Slovenia, with its haphazardly laid, red-roofed houses jutting into the sea, crooked alleyways and lingering scent of garlicky fish. The medieval seaport's visual and cultural resemblance to Italy is rooted in a complicated history: For centuries, beginning in the 13th, this region was controlled by the Venetian Republic, followed by the Austrian Empire and then, between the world wars, Italy again. Piran's slow pace is perfect for idly wandering the slender peninsula of Old Town, some of which remains lined by ancient defensive walls.



{ Riverfront dining in Ljubljana. }



A good spot to begin your exploration is Tartinijev trg, a wide, polished square set back from the picturesque marina. The city's center for centuries, it's home to Town Hall, the courthouse and a number of white-shuttered burgher homes, the loveliest being the red, gothic Venetian House. Soaring above it is the 1608 bell tower of St. George's Church, a small-scale model of Venice's San Marco Campanile. From the square, follow the narrow cobblestone streets into Piran's greatest attraction – its crowded, medieval heart. Strung with laundry and guarded by neighborhood cats, the quiet alleys and antique homes, painted in faded pastels and adorned with flowers, exude an air of elegant ruin.

Tempting restaurants, heavy on fresh seafood and Italian standards, line the waterfront, where dinner for two – grilled squid and spaghetti Bolognese – costs about \$15 without drinks. Outdoor tables afford expansive views of the glittering Adriatic Sea, passing boats and a few immodest sun-seekers – the jetty's flat parts are suitable for sunbathing, and there are even a few ladders built into the rocks for sea access. For something more closely resembling sand, follow the footpath that leads down from St. George's Church to the peninsula's northern edge, where there's a small, pebbly beach.

Like elsewhere in Slovenia, Piran is what you make of it. You can scuba-dive a wrecked WWII seaplane, negotiate a fishing excursion with the guys at the marina, or simply fall into those daily local rhythms of strolling, shopping, eating and drinking. Allow plenty of time to return to Ljubljana – imbued with a meandering spirit, you'll want to make plenty of detours. 