

Getting Started

Slovenia is a dream destination for many reasons, but among the most obvious is that it requires so little advance planning. Tourist literature abounds, maps are excellent and readily available, and the staff at tourist offices, travel agencies, hotels, train stations and so on are almost universally helpful and efficient. And most speak English very well. Yes, Slovenia is so well developed and organised that you don't have to plan much of anything before your trip; almost everything can be arranged on the spot.

But this is fine only if your budget is unlimited, you don't have an interest in any particular activity, period of architecture or type of music, and you'll eat or drink anything put down in front of you. Those who have a limit as to the amount they can spend while travelling, or want better value for their money will benefit immensely from a bit of prior knowledge and careful planning. And if you have specific interests – from white-water rafting and mountaineering to bird-watching and folk music – you'll certainly want to make sure that the things you expect to see and do will be possible at the particular time of year when you intend to travel.

WHEN TO GO

Every season has its attractions in Slovenia. Snow can linger in the mountains until late June and even July, but spring is a great time to be in the lowlands and flower-carpeted valleys (though it can be pretty wet in May and June). At the same time the days are getting longer, the theatres and other cultural venues are in full swing, off-season rates still generally apply and local people are not yet jaded by waves of summertime visitors.

Summer (mid-June to sometime in September) is the ideal time for hiking and camping, but it's also the peak season for visitors, making accommodation (and a restaurant table) in Ljubljana and on the coast hard to come by without advance booking. September can be an excellent month, with plentiful local fruit and vegetables, shoulder-season tariffs in effect again and the tourist

For more specific information about Slovenia's climate, see p274.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Unless you plan to do some serious hiking or engage in sport, you don't have to remember any particular items of clothing for Slovenia – a warm sweater (even in summer) for the mountains at night, perhaps, and an umbrella, especially in spring or autumn. In general, Slovenian society dresses casually (though a bit smarter in Ljubljana than the provinces) when it goes out on the town. Besides taking the obvious (for visa information see p285) other items you may wish to include are:

- a swimsuit and thongs (flip-flops)
- a compass to help orient yourself in the mountains
- a torch (flashlight) if you intend to visit any caves
- an adapter plug for electrical appliances
- tea bags (since Slovenes drink buckets of the herbal variety but not the black stuff)
- sunglasses and sun block, even in the cooler months (those rays in the mountains can be fierce)
- a penknife, with such essentials as a bottle opener and strong corkscrew
- binoculars for when trekking or viewing detail on churches and other buildings

masses home and back at work. You can still swim comfortably in the Adriatic in September, but by mid-October most of the camping grounds have closed down and the days are growing shorter. Autumn is beautiful, particularly in the mountains of Gorenjska and Štajerska, and it's the best time for hiking and climbing (though October and November can be rainy).

Winter (December to March) in Slovenia is for skiers. It can be very cold and, away from the mountains, often quite bleak. At the same time, winter sees museums and other tourist sights closed or their hours sharply curtailed. Skiers should bear in mind that Slovenian school kids have winter holidays for about 10 days between Christmas and just into the New Year and again for a week in the second half of February.

COSTS & MONEY

Although prices are increasing, with imported items costing as much as they do in the rest of Europe, Slovenia is cheaper by as much as a third than neighbouring Italy and Austria. At the same time, everything costs at least 33% more than in nearby Hungary. Croatia has always been more expensive than Slovenia.

If you stay in private rooms or guesthouses, eat at medium-priced restaurants and travel 2nd class on the train or by bus, you should get by on under €50 a day. Travelling in greater style and comfort – restaurant splurges with bottles of wine, a fairly active nightlife, small hotels/guesthouses with 'character' – will cost about twice as much in the capital but an average of €75 to €80 in the provinces. Those putting up at hostels or college dormitories, eating *burek* (meat- or cheese-filled pastries) for lunch and at self-service restaurants for dinner could squeeze by on €30 a day.

READING UP

There's no shortage of books on Slovenia, but travellers writing diary accounts of southeast Europe have usually treated Slovenia rather cursorily or not at all, as they made tracks for 'more exotic' destinations like Croatia, Bosnia or even Serbia. In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, her classic (and, at over 1000 pages, rather longwinded) look at Yugoslavia between the wars, Rebecca West allows Slovenia and the Slovenes fewer than a dozen brief references.

We know that a few other great writers did make it here, and there's documentation to prove at least one did. In Ljubljana's train station, for example, a brass plaque to the left of the staircase leading down from platform No 1 tells us that no less than James Joyce, together with his new paramour Nora Barnacle, spent the night of 19 October 1904 in Ljubljana. What the inscription fails to mention is that the couple, who had met just four months earlier and were on their way to teach English at Berlitz in Pula, had caught the wrong train.

Recommended reading:

The Making of Slovenia (Marko Štepec, ed) This succinct history of Slovenia in the 20th century, published by the Museum of Contemporary History in Ljubljana, is illustrated with many rarely seen photographs.

Questions about Slovenia (Matjaž Hvalič) This rather naff, 95-page book in oversized vest-pocket format will tell you the differences among Slovenia, Slovakia and Slavonia, what *koline* (pig-slaughters) are and just what makes Slovenes tick.

Slovenia 1945: Memories of Death and Survival after World War II (John Corsellis & Marcus Ferrar) This is the harrowing story of the forced return to Slovenia and execution of thousands of members of the anti-Communist Domobranci (Home Guards) after WWII.

Slovenia from the Air (Matjaž Kmecl et al) This trilingual coffee-table book has the standard wow-factor photographs of Slovenia's lakes, coast, towns and, of course, mountains from on high, and may even have you considering the ascent of Triglav.

HOW MUCH?

100km by train/bus
€5.50/9

Bicycle rental (per day)
€4.20-5.45

Bottle of ordinary/quality Slovenian wine
€4.20/8.35

Cup of coffee in a café
€0.75-1

Ski pass (per day)
€15.85-24.60

TOP FIVES**Festivals & Events**

Slovenia marks red-letter days with festivals and special events throughout the year. The following are among the best:

- Kurentovanje (p235) in Ptuj in February
- Lent Festival (p242) in Maribor in June
- Ljubljana Summer Festival (p78) in July
- Rock Otočec (p277) near Novo Mesto in July
- Cows' Ball (p122) in Bohinj in September

Natural Wonders

In a land of hundreds of natural wonders – from ice caves and disappearing lakes to virgin forests and cobalt-blue rivers – it's difficult to narrow the list down to five. It's certain, however, that most travellers won't soon forget any of the following:

- Vršič Pass (p131)
- Škocjan Caves (p151)
- Logarska Dolina (p256)
- Soča River (p134)
- Vintgar Gorge (p118)

Outdoor Activities

Perhaps more than any other country in Europe outside Scandinavia, Slovenes are attached to the great outdoors (p43). We recommend:

- skiing in the Maribor Pohorje (p245)
- hiking in Triglav National Park (p128)
- kayaking on the Krka River (p199)
- horse riding at Lipica (p162)
- taking the waters at Dolenjska Toplice (p201)

Slovene Architecture of the Twentieth Century (Dr Stane Bernik) The quintessential guide and pictorial companion to modern and contemporary architecture across Slovenia, with everyone from Maks Fabian to Nande Kropnik represented.

Slovenia: My Country (Joco Žnidaršič) With Slovenia so diverse and physically attractive, there's no shortage of picture and art books on the country and this is the best: a heartfelt but never cloying paean to the photographer's homeland.

INTERNET RESOURCES

E-uprava (<http://e-uprava.gov.si/e-uprava/en/portal.euprava>) The 'State Portal of the Republic of Slovenia' has information about and links to just about anything you could want to know about the country – from today's pollution indices to how to trace your Slovenian roots.

Government Public Relations and Media Office (www.uvi.si/eng) Full of facts and figures about Slovenia's politics, economy, culture and environment.

Mat'Kurja (www.matkurja.com/eng) The 'Mother Hen' site is a vast directory of Slovenian web resources.

Najdi (www.najdi.si) The most popular search engine in Slovenia (mostly in Slovene).

Slovenia Times (www.sloveniatimes.com) Website of the independent free newspaper that comes out every two weeks.

TRAVEL WIDELY, TREAD LIGHTLY, GIVE SUSTAINABLY – THE LONELY PLANET FOUNDATION

The Lonely Planet Foundation proudly supports nimble nonprofit institutions working for change in the world. Each year the foundation donates 5% of Lonely Planet company profits to projects selected by staff and authors. Our partners range from Kabissa, which provides small nonprofits across Africa with access to technology, to the Foundation for Developing Cambodian Orphans, which supports girls at risk of falling victim to sex traffickers.

Our nonprofit partners are linked by a grass-roots approach to the areas of health, education or sustainable tourism. Many – such as Louis Sarno who works with BaAka (Pygmy) children in the forested areas of Central African Republic – choose to focus on women and children as one of the most effective ways to support the whole community. Louis is determined to give options to children who are discriminated against by the majority Bantu population.

Sometimes foundation assistance is as simple as restoring a local ruin like the Minaret of Jam in Afghanistan; this incredible monument now draws intrepid tourists to the area and its restoration has greatly improved options for local people.

Just as travel is often about learning to see with new eyes, so many of the groups we work with aim to change the way people see themselves and the future for their children and communities.

Slovenian Association of Historic Towns (www.zdruzenje-zg-mest.si) Great help in guiding you through the numerous town sites.

Slovenian Landmarks (www.burger.si) General and detailed information along with some 360-degree tours of Slovenia's towns and cities, museums and galleries, castles and manors, caves and waterfalls.

Slovenian Tourist Board (www.slovenia-tourism.si/) The Slovenian Tourist Board's ambitious but user-unfriendly site has information on every conceivable sight and activity in the republic.

STA (www.sta.si) News and views from the Slovenska Tiskovna Agencija (Slovene Press Agency).

Telephone Directory of Slovenia (<http://tis.telekom.si>) Nationwide telephone directory.

ITINERARIES

CLASSIC ROUTES

MOUNTAINS MAJESTY

One to Seven Days/Gorenjska Round Trip

What Slovenia has in spades is mountains, and they are 'just up the road' from Ljubljana.

From **Ljubljana** (p59) head north on route No 211. Before Medvode, detour through colourful **Škofja Loka** (p97). Head north along route No 210 to the historic town of **Kranj** (p101) and follow the road to Bled, passing through 'bee town' **Radovljica** (p105). Spend the night in picturesque **Bled** (p110) or carry on to the quieter and more atmospheric **Lake Bohinj** (p118).

From either place rejoin the main road and make tracks for the ski centre **Kranjska Gora** (p125) and the **Vršič Pass** (p131) in **Triglav National Park**. The road down will deposit you in Primorska's **Soča Valley** (p134). Following the Soča River will bring you to the activities centre of **Bovec** (p134) and the WWI battlegrounds around **Kobarid** (p138). From here follow route No 102 through Tolmin to **Idrija** (p144). Ljubljana, via Logatec and Vrhnika (route No 409), is only 55km to the northeast.

This unbelievably scenic, 329km circuit takes in some of the most attractive scenery in Slovenia: lakes, historic towns, mountain villages and the very mountains themselves. Although very safe except in the most inclement of weather (when it shuts), the Vršič Pass is *not* for the faint-hearted.



KARST & COAST

Two to Seven Days/Ljubljana to Primorska

This itinerary combines the best of two worlds: the evocative and sunbaked region of the Karst and the historic (although sometimes a little brash) Slovenian coast.

From **Ljubljana** (p59), follow motorway A1 to **Postojna** (p183). If you're not too caved-out after a visit, continue on to Divača and the awesome **Škocjan Caves** (p151). By then you'll need to take some R&R at the bucolic oasis that is **Lipica** (p161).

The fastest way to get to the Slovenian coast from Lipica is through Italy, just south of Trieste. If you'd rather stay on Slovenian soil, return to Divača and head south along the motorway (or follow alternative route No 10) to **Koper** (p164), a cheaper place to stay on the coast than the other Venetian towns. Follow the coastal road to **Izola** (p168), with a minor detour to **Strunjan** (p171) and its country park, **Piran** (p171), and eventually **Portorož** (p163), with all types of accommodation for different budgets. To the south along the coast is **Sečovelje** (p180) and its famous salt pans, a relaxing antidote to Portorož. A spur road just before the Croatian border follows the Drnica River and links up with route No 11 heading back for Ljubljana. At the Rižana exit head south for the Karst village of **Hrastovlje** (p162) and its wonderful church. Motorway A1, some 8km north of Hrastovlje, will take you back to the capital.



This 310km tour takes you through the Karst region – stopping at Slovenia's two most famous caves – and carries on to the coast before looping back up through the Karst.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

GOING POTTY

Prekmurje, lacking both mountains and coast, is a Slovenian 'neither fish nor fowl' but its great expanses of plain are unusual, and reminiscent of neighbouring Hungary.

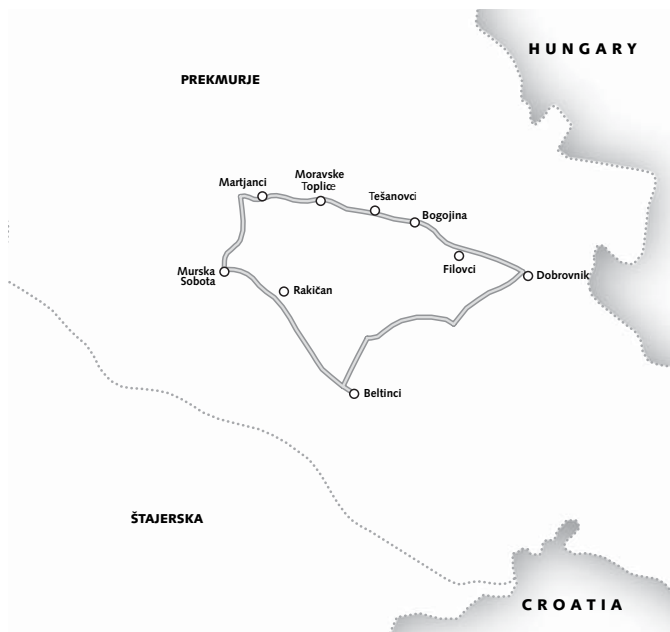
From **Murska Sobota** (p265), head north along route No 232 and from **Martjanci**, with its important Gothic church, go east along route No 442 to the thermal spa of **Moravske Toplice** (p269). **Tešanovci**, a couple of kilometres east, is noted for its *lončarstvo* (pottery).

About 2.5km further east is the village of **Bogojina** and its **Parish Church of the Ascension**, which was redesigned by Jože Plečnik around 1926. To the original Romanesque and baroque structure, Plečnik added two asymmetrical aisles and a round tower. The interior is an odd mixture of black marble, brass, wood and brick; the oak-beamed ceiling is fitted with Prekmurje ceramic plates and jugs, as is the altar.

Filovci, another 2km beyond Bogojina, is famed for its *črna keramika* (black pottery). The **Bojniec Workshop**, 200m southwest of the main road, invites visitors to watch them work and sells wares.

Carry on southeast to **Dobrovnik** (p270), which has a couple of decent roadside *gostilna* (innlike restaurants). From here route No 439 leads southwest to **Beltinci**, known to philatelists as the place where one of the 1918 provisional stamps was overprinted on Hungarian stamps by the Serbian occupation forces during WWI. Today there is also a significant Roma minority living here. Murska Sobota and its well-renovated 16th-century castle are just 8km to the northwest.

This 40km trip, which can be done either by car or bicycle, follows a stretch of the so-called potters' road, running southeast from Moravske Toplice. To the north are the low-lying Goričko Hills covered in vineyards – while not Prekmurje's most important wine-growing region the hills are lovely nonetheless.



One Day/Prekmurje round trip

TAILORED TRIPS

WINE & WATER

If you're like us, you know that a sauna and/or a soak is the perfect treatment for a little too much of the good life. So why not combine the two – wine and water (thermal, that is) – and detox as you indulge?

The wine regions of **Posavje** and **Podravje** (p50), running almost the full length of eastern Slovenia, are delightful areas to visit from both scenic and wine-tasting points of view. They also happen to be as awash with thermal water as they are with wine.

A mere 18km beyond the charming **Bizeljsko-Sremič wine region** (p215), which effectively ends at Bizeljsko and is noted for its medium-dry whites and reds and for *repnice* (caves for storing wine), is the thermal spa of **Terme Olimia** (p226). Its healing waters are full of magnesium and calcium, and its attractions lie in both its curative powers and its recreational appeal. However, if you prefer something a little less of-this-century, go the extra distance to **Rogaška Slatina** (p228).

Located some 15km further north, it overflows with magical 'olde worlde' charm, not to mention its very own 'drinking cure' (water this time).

The **Haloze wine region** (p238), celebrated for its pinot blanc, sauvignon and riesling, begins a mere 18km southwest of **Ptuj** (p232), where you'll find **Terme Ptuj** (p235).

The **Jeruzalem-Ljutomer wine district** (p238) begins at Ormož, due east of Ptuj. Were you to travel some 25km northeast along routes Nos 230 and 439, you'd come to **Terme Banovci** (p267), a spa with Slovenia's only naturist camping ground. But the shy and/or chilly may want to move on to the more reserved spa town of **Radenci** (p268), a modest 15km up the road.



Snapshot

On 1 May 2004 Slovenia joined the European Union but about the only difference you could tell at the time was that the electronic 'count-down' board in Miklošičeva trg had got stuck on '0 Days to Go'. Now you'll see the change every time you reach for your wallet. Welcome to Euroland.

Since then a new government has also been installed, this one a coalition led by Prime Minister Janez Janša of the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), who was a gadfly to the Communist honchos in the 1980s.

At the same time, former Prime Minister Janez Drnovšek, elevated to the presidency in 2002, has undergone a radical change. Once a dry, conservative political technocrat, the president has experienced some sort of epiphany, mutating into a fervent peace-and-love figure. Along his 'road to Damascus', Drnovšek detoured at Darfour to present a peace plan for the region, then moved on to Bangalore in India to meet with Ravi Shankar and to Lake Titicaca in Bolivia to chant along with shamans.

As a result, Drnovšek blew his annual travel budget within six months, so the Finance Ministry cut him off, refusing him any more funding for further trips. Complaining that the government was trying to control him, he left to form his very own Movement for Justice and Development, prompting an outpouring of speculation in the press.

More worrisome for many is the increasing role – both political and economic – of the Roman Catholic Church in Slovenia, epitomised by the elevation of Ljubljana's archbishop, the conservative Dr France Rode, to the role of cardinal in March 2006. Several political parties have proposed that Christian religious instruction be made compulsory in schools, and the Church continues to press for restitution of property seized after the war that's worth more than €233 million – a politically unpopular issue here despite the Church's significant influence within Slovenia. Indeed, in 2005 plans to build a mosque in the capital were stalled when it turned out that part of the land the city had proposed for sale to the Muslim community was subject to an ownership claim by the Church. The Church agreed to forgo its demand – if the city compensated it.

The first new member state to hold the presidency of the EU in 2008, it remains to be seen whether Slovenia will lose its unique role as conduit between Western Europe and the Balkans in the process of all this EU-ising. Will Slovenia find a new role for itself in the New Europe or content itself with becoming an economic satellite of Austria and Italy, just another nice, well-to-do social democratic republic?

FAST FACTS

Population: 2 million

GDP per capita: €16,980;

GDP per capita at purchasing power parity: €19,600

Inflation: 2.5%

Unemployment: 10.4%

Size: 20,273 sq km (0.2% of Europe's total land mass)

Average size of household: 2.8 people

23 December 1990:

88.5% of the Slovenian electorate vote for an independent republic

Slovenia's national anthem: *Zdravljica* (A Toast to Freedom), written by poet France Prešeren in 1844

The Author



STEVE FALLON

Steve has been travelling to Slovenia since the early 1990s, when a well-known publishing company at first refused his proposal to write a guidebook to the country because of 'the war going on' (it had ended two years before) and an influential American daily newspaper told him that their readers weren't interested in 'Slovakia'. Never mind, it was his own little private Idaho for a good 10 years. Though he hasn't reached the top of Triglav yet and *še govori slovensko kot jamski človek* (he still speaks Slovenian like a caveman), Steve considers at least a piece of his soul to be Slovenian and returns to the country as often as he can, for a glimpse of the Julian Alps in the sun, a dribble of *bučno olje* and a dose of the dual.

My Favourite Places

How one goes about choosing the very best of paradise is anyone's guess, but if I really and truly had to choose my favourite spots in Slovenia they would run the gamut from mountains and rivers to towns and churches. Starting at the top, the **Vršič Pass** (p131) stands head and shoulders above the rest, and leads me directly down to sunny Primorska and the bluer-than-blue **Soča River** (p134). **Ljubljana** (p59), **Ptuj** (p232) and **Piran** (p171) top the list in the history league tables, but there's something special about 'second' towns like **Škofja Loka** (p97), **Radovljica** (p105), **Idrija** (p144) and **Kobarid** (p138) that let the imagination soar. In a country of magnificent houses of worship, I count my favourite churches in **Bohinj** (p119), **Hrastovlje** (p162) and **Ptujska Gora** (p237).



LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are independent, dedicated travellers. They don't research using just the internet or phone, and they don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage. They travel widely, to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more – and they take pride in getting all the details right, and telling it how it is. For more, see the authors section on www.lonelyplanet.com.

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