

# Primorska



It may come as a surprise to many that the name of the long, slender province that forms Slovenia's western frontier means 'by the sea' or 'littoral'. Yes, there is a coastline, though it's only 47km long. And there's a whole lot more to Primorska than just that.

Like Gorenjska, its smaller and squatter neighbour to the east and northeast, Primorska offers travellers an endless list of activities and sights; it really can claim to be 'Europe in miniature'. There are mountains to climb and rivers to raft in the Soča Valley, wines to taste in the vineyards of the Vipava Valley and Brda Hills near Nova Gorica, expansive caverns at Škocjan and white stallions to ride at Lipica in the Karst and beaches on which to while away the hours on fine summer days at Piran and Portorož. And most of those activities can be enjoyed on the same day.

At the same time, Primorska can claim some of the most important and historic places in the country. Koper, Piran and Izola – three erstwhile Venetian ports full of Gothic architecture and art – will keep even the most indefatigable of sightseers busy, and there are hilltop churches, ancient monasteries and richly endowed museums sprinkled throughout the province.

Primorska enjoys some of the finest weather in Slovenia, with warm coastal winds affecting the valleys as far as Kobarid and Bovec and inland. As a result, the climate and the flora here are distinctly Mediterranean right up to the foothills of the Alps.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy a fresher-than-fresh seafood meal along the coast at **Izola** (p168) or **Piran** (p171)
- Raise the adrenaline by **canyoning**, **hydrospeeding** or **rafting** (p135) the Soča River from Bovec
- Be reminded of where you come from (and where you are going) at the **Church of the Holy Trinity** (p163) in Hrastovlje
- Enter into the world of Jules Verne's *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* by touring the **Škocjan Caves** (p151)
- Sample some of the world-class red wines (especially the Merlots) from the **Vipava** (p150) and **Brda** regions (p144)



## SOČA VALLEY

The region of the Soča Valley (Posočje) stretches from Triglav National Park to Nova Gorica. Its most dominant feature is the 136km Soča River, which can widen to 500m and narrow to less than a metre but



always stays a deep, almost unreal aquamarine colour. The valley has more than its share of historical sights, but most people come here for rafting, hiking and skiing.

The Soča Valley has been an important trade route between the Friulian Plain and the alpine valleys since the earliest times. It was the site of several Hallstatt settlements, evidenced by the rich archaeological finds unearthed at Most na Soči, Tolmin and Kobarid. Under the Romans the valley was on the important road between Noricum and the province of Histria.

The proximity of Venice and the Napoleonic wars of the late 18th and early 19th centuries restored the valley's strategic role. The railway to Bohinj brought modern transport between the Sava Valley and Gorica for the first time in 1906, and during WWI millions of troops were brought here to fight on the battle front stretching from the Karst to Mt Rombon. Between the wars, Primorska and the Soča Valley fell under Italian jurisdiction. Many Italians were expelled or left the province voluntarily after WWII.

### BOVEC

☎ 05 / pop 1635 / elev 451m

The effective capital of the Upper Soča Valley (Gornje Posočje), Bovec has a great deal to offer adventure-sports enthusiasts. With the Julian Alps above, the Soča River below and Triglav National Park at the back door, there's an abundance to choose from. If you have the time you could spend a week hiking, kayaking, mountain biking and, in winter, skiing at Mt Kanin, Slovenia's highest ski station.

### History

The area around Bovec is first mentioned in documents dating back to the 11th century. At that time it was under the direct rule of the Patriarchs of Aquileia but was later transferred to the Counts of Gorica and, in about 1500, to the Habsburgs. The Turks passed through the basin on their way to the Predel Pass in the 15th century, and on two occasions (in 1797 and again in 1809) Napoleon's army attacked Austria from here.

Bovec suffered terribly in the fighting around the Soča Valley during WWI. Much of the town was destroyed, but its reconstruction by the architect Maks Fabiani in the 1920s gave Bovec an interesting combination of

traditional and modern buildings. Further reconstruction took place after severe earthquakes in 1976 and again in 1998.

### Orientation

Bovec lies in a broad basin called the Bovška Kotlina at the meeting point of the Soča and Koritnica Valleys. Towering above are several peaks of well over 2000m, including Rombon (2208m) and Kanin (2587m). The Soča River flows past Bovec 2km to the south at Čezsoča. The Italian border is 16km to the southwest via the pass at Učēja and 17km north at Predel.

The centre of the town is Trg Golobarskih Žrtev, one of the few named streets here. Actually, it's a long square that forms the main east-west drag and runs northward to the neo-Romanesque church of St Urh. Buses stop on Trg Golobarskih Žrtev in front of the Letni Vrt restaurant.

### Information

**Abanka** (Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 18; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Opposite the tourist office.

**Bar Kavarna** (☎ 388 63 35; Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 25; 20 min €1.50; ☎ 7am-10pm) Internet access.

**Nova KBM Banka** (Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 47; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

**Post office** (Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 8; ☎ 8-9.30am, 10am-3.30pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

**Tourist Information Centre Bovec** (☎ 384 19 19; www.bovec.si; Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 8; ☎ 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 4-6pm Sat, 9am-noon Sun Sep-Jun) Next door to the post office.

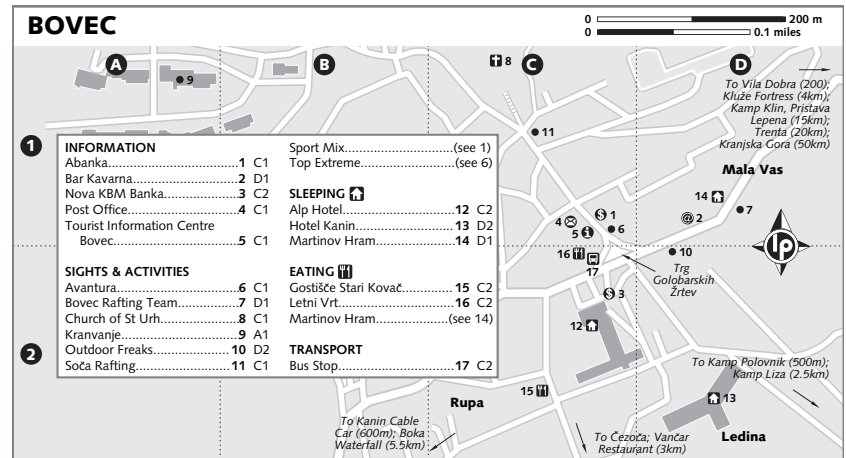
### Sights

The **Kluže Fortress** (Trdnjava Kluže; ☎ 384 19 00; www.kluze.net; adult/student & child €1.70/1.25; ☎ 9am-9pm Jul & Aug; 10am-5pm Sun-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat Jun & Sep), built by the Austrians in 1882 on the site of a 17th-century fortress and above a deep ravine on the Koritnica River, is 4km northeast of Bovec and worth the trip just to see its awesome location. There's a small exhibition devoted to the Soča Front and other local WWI battles. There's also a bar with hot and cold drinks. You can reach the fortress on the main road from Bovec towards Log pod Mangartom and the Predel Pass into Italy.

### Activities

#### ADVENTURE SPORTS

There are up to a dozen outfits organising all kinds of adventure sports. Among the better known half-dozen are **Avantura** (☎ 041-718 317; info@avantura.org; Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 19; ☎ 9am-9pm Jun-Aug); **Bovec Rafting Team** (☎ 388 61 28, 041-338 308; www.brt-ha.si; Mala Vas 106; ☎ 9am-7pm May-Sep), in a kiosk opposite the Martinov Hram restaurant; **Outdoor Freaks** (☎ 389 64 90, 041-553 675; www.freakoutdoor.com; Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 38; ☎ 9am-7pm May-Sep), in the Rombon building on the main square; **Soča Rafting** (☎ 389 62 00; www.socarafting.si; Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 48; ☎ 9am-7pm Jun-Sep, 9am-4pm Oct-May), about 100m uphill from the tourist office; **Sport Mix** (☎ 389 61 60, 031-871 991; www.dir.si; Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 18; ☎ 9am-7pm May-Jun & Sep, 8am-9pm Jul-Aug); and **Top Extreme** (☎ 330 00 90, 041-620 636; www.top.si; Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 19; ☎ 9am-9pm Jun-Aug).



## FISHING

Hotel Alp and Kamp Klin both sell fishing licences for hooking the famous Soča trout. There are two types: one for the area east of Čezsoča, as well as the Lepenjica River (€70.50), and another for the Soča below Bovec (€60), where there is a lot more kayaking and boating. The season lasts from April to October.

## HIKING & CYCLING

The 1:25,000-scale map called *Bovec z Okolico* (Bovec with Surroundings; €7.20) lists a number of walks and hikes ranging from a two-hour stroll south to **Čezsoča** and the protected gravel deposits in the Soča to an ascent of **Rombon** (2208m), which would take a good five hours one way. The smaller-scaled 1:40,000 Bovec (€7.20) also has walks in the area. Ask the tourist office for the pamphlet *Kolesarske Poti/Cycle Tracks*, which lists a half-dozen trips of various degrees of difficulty.

The **Kanin Mountain Bike Path** ([www.mtbpark.kanin.com](http://www.mtbpark.kanin.com), in Slovene) is just 2km from the cable car's station B. From the uppermost stop (station D) hikers could make the difficult three-hour climb of Kanin (2587m) or reach the **Prestrljenik Window** (2498m) in about an hour.

The tourist offices and some of the sports agencies listed above can organise **guided walks**, such as the one costing €140 to the **Mangart Saddle** (2072m) along the highest road in Slovenia, where you'll find accommodation at the Category I **Koča na Mangartskem Sedlu** (☎ 041-954 761; [erik\\_cuder@siol.net](mailto:erik_cuder@siol.net); ☎ daily mid-Jun-Sep, Sat & Sun Oct) with 53 beds at 1906m, and to the **Krn Lake** 1340m above the Lepena Valley, where you'll find the Category I **Planinski Dom pri Krnskih Jezerah** (☎ 302 30 30; [planinskod.novagorica@siol.net](mailto:planinskod.novagorica@siol.net); ☎ Jun-Sep) with 170 beds and berths at 1385m. A mountain-walking tour of medium difficulty follows the Soča Front lines (p139), passing trenches, old caverns, bunkers and observation posts. It takes between eight and 10 hours and costs about the same.

The most popular do-it-yourself walk in the area is to **Boka Waterfall**, 5.5km to the southwest of Bovec. The waterfall drops 106m from the Kanin Mountains into the valley and is almost 30m wide – it's an impressive sight, especially in late spring when the snow melts. To get there on foot, follow marked walkways B2 and S1 on the *Bovec z Okolico* (Bovec and

Surroundings) map; mountain-bike track No 1 on the map will also take you there. The trip up to the falls (850m) and back takes about 1½ hours, but the path is steep in places and can be very slippery.

Sport Mix, Soča Rafting, Bovec Rafting Team and Outdoor Freaks all rent **bicycles and mountain bikes** (hr/day/5 days €5/15/60).

## PARAGLIDING

In winter you can take a tandem paraglider flight (ie as a passenger accompanied by a qualified pilot) from the top of the Kanin cable car, 2000m above the valley floor. The cost of a flight ranges from €100; ask the Avantura agency for details. Paragliding is at its best from the Mangart Saddle (2072m) between June and September.

## SKIING

The **Kanin ski centre** (☎ 388 60 98; [www.bovec.si](http://www.bovec.si); day pass adult/child/senior & student €22/16/18) in the mountains northwest of Bovec has skiing up to 2200m – the only real altitude alpine skiing in Slovenia. As a result, the season can be long, with good spring skiing in April and even May. The ski area – 17km of pistes and 15km of cross-country runs served by four chairlifts and three T-bars – is reached by a cable car in three stages. The bottom station is 600m southwest of the centre of Bovec on the main road. You can rent a complete kit (skis, poles, boots) from an outfit called **Kravanje** (☎ 041-719 314; Kaninska Vas 7; ☎ 8-noon & 4-7pm Dec-May) at Kaninska Vas reception for about €16.50 a day.

The **cable car** (one-way/return €8.35/11.30) runs continuously during the skiing season; in July and August it runs hourly from 7am to 4pm and every hour from 8am to 3pm at the weekend in June and September. Several walks lead from the upper station.

## WATER SPORTS

Rafting, kayaking and canoeing on the beautiful Soča River (10% to 40% gradient; Grades I to VI) attract many people to Bovec. The season lasts from April to October, and organised excursions are available daily.

**Rafting** trips for two to eight people on the Soča over a distance of 10km cost €27 to €37 and for 21km €34.60 to €42, including neoprene long johns, windcheater, life jacket, helmet and paddle. You should bring along a swimsuit, T-shirt and towel. A canoe for two

is €50 for the day, and a single kayak is €27. A number of kayaking courses are also on offer (eg a one/two-day course for beginners costs €60/77, with equipment rental another €27). A guided 10km kayak/canoe trip costs from €30/28.50 per person

A 3km, two-hour **canyoning** trip near the Soča, in which you descend through gorges and jump over falls attached to a rope, costs from €34. **Hydrospeed**, which is like riding down a river on a boogie board, costs €30 to €35 for 8km to 10km.

## Sleeping

**Private rooms** (per person €12-25) are easy to come by in Bovec, and the tourist office and other agencies have hundreds on their lists.

**Kamp Polovnik** (☎ 389 60 07, 031-344 417; [www.kamp-polovnik.com](http://www.kamp-polovnik.com); per adult/child €6.70/4.80; ☎ Apr-Oct) About 500m southeast of the Hotel Kanin, this is the closest camping ground to Bovec. It is small but in an attractive setting.

**Kamp Liza** (☎ 389 63 70; per person €8; ☎ Apr-Oct) This little site is further afield in Vodena, 2.5km southeast of the town centre at the point where the Koritnica and Soča Rivers meet.

**Kamp Klin** (☎ 388 95 13; [kampklin@volja.net](http://kampklin@volja.net); Lepena 1; per person €7-9.10; ☎ Apr-Oct) This large and quite lovely camping ground is in Lepena on the idyllic Lepenjica River, about 15km southeast of Bovec.

**Martinov Hram** (☎ 388 62 14; [sara.berginc@volja.net](http://sara.berginc@volja.net); Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 27; per person €24-39) This lovely guesthouse just 100m east of the centre has 14 beautifully furnished rooms and an excellent restaurant with an emphasis on specialities from the Bovec region.

**Pristava Lepena** (☎ 388 99 00; [www.pristava-lepena.com](http://www.pristava-lepena.com); Lepena 2; per person €42-58; ☎ Apr-mid-Oct) This positively idyllic 'holiday village' is set in an alpine meadow 15km southeast of Bovec. There are 13 apartments in six traditional houses, a lovely restaurant, and fishing and riding opportunities.

**Alp Hotel** (☎ 388 60 40; [www.alp-chandler.si](http://www.alp-chandler.si); Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 48; s €37-48, d €56-78; ☎ ☎ ☎) This 103-room hotel, with a bit of landscaped garden around it, is fairly good value and as central as you are going to find in Bovec.

**Hotel Kanin** (☎ 388 60 21; [hoteli.bovec@siol.net](http://hoteli.bovec@siol.net); Ledina 9; s €42-57, d €64-93; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) About 150m southeast of the Alp Hotel, this 124-room property has much quieter surrounds, a large indoor swimming pool and a sauna.

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Dobra Vila** (☎ 389 64 00; [www.dobra-vila-bovec.com](http://www.dobra-vila-bovec.com); Mala Vas 112; s/d €17.50/110; ☎ ☎ ☎) This absolute stunner of a 12-room boutique hotel is housed in the former telephone-exchange building, which dates back to 1932. It has its own small cinema, a library and wine cellar and a fabulous restaurant. The place is peppered with interesting artefacts; we love the 1932 Bianchi Freccia d'Oro 175T motorcycle in one of the windows. One of the two quads is attractively laid out on two levels.

The rooms are not as nice as those at the Alp, though some have balconies.

## Eating

**Gostišče Stari Kovač** (☎ 388 66 99; Rupa 3; pizza €4.50-6.80; ☎ noon-11pm Tue-Sun) The 'Old Blacksmith', just west of the Alp Hotel, is a good choice for pizza cooked in a wood-burning stove.

**Letni Vrt** (☎ 389 63 83, 041-775 127; Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 12; meals from €10; ☎ 11am-10pm Wed-Mon) Opposite the Alp Hotel, the 'Summer Garden' has pizza, grilled dishes and trout at affordable prices. Its garden is lovely in summer – as it would be.

**Martinov Hram** (☎ 388 62 14; Trg Golobarskih Žrtev 28; mains €5.35-14.60; ☎ 10am-10pm Wed-Mon) This restaurant in an attractive inn specialises in seafood and grills and during the winter season serves pizzas as well. There is a lovely roadside terrace in front.

**Vančar** (☎ 389 60 76, 389 60 77; Čezsoča 43; meals from €15; ☎ 11am-10pm Jul & Aug, 11am-10pm Wed-Sun Sep-Jun) If you want to eat where local people do, head for this place about 3km south of Bovec. Expect huge portions.

**Dobra Vila** (☎ 389 64 00; [www.dobra-vila-bovec.com](http://www.dobra-vila-bovec.com); Mala Vas 112; starters €5-7.50, mains €9.20-15.85; ☎ noon-10pm) This spectacular restaurant at the Soča Valley's first boutique hotel specialises in game dishes and has a wonderful winter garden and outdoor terrace.

## Getting There & Away

Buses to Kobarid (€3, 30 minutes, 21km) and Tolmin (€4.50, one hour, 37km) are frequent, with up to six departures a day (a lot fewer at the weekend). There are also buses to Ljubljana (€12, 2½ hours, 142km, three a day) via Tolmin and Most na Soči and to

Nova Gorica (€7, two hours, 72km, three a day). In July and August there are up to four daily buses to Kranjska Gora (€4, 1½ hours, 33km) via Vrščič Pass, one of which carries on to Bled (€7, 2½ hours, 74km).

## KOBARID

☎ 05 / pop 1240 / elev 235m

The charming town of Kobarid is a lot quieter than Bovec, 21km to the northwest, and the woodland scenery somewhat tamer. Despite being surrounded by mountain peaks higher than 2200m, Kobarid feels more Mediterranean than alpine and the architecture retains its Italianate look. The Italian border at Robič is only 9km to the west.

Indeed, on the surface not a whole lot has changed in this sleepy hollow since the American writer Ernest Hemingway described Kobarid (then Caporetto) in his novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), depicting the horror and suffering of WWI. It was 'a little white town with a campanile in a valley,' he wrote, 'a clean little town and there was a fine fountain in the square'. The bell in the tower still rings on the hour, but the fountain has disappeared.

Kobarid did have a history before WWI and things have happened here since. It was a military settlement during Roman times, was hotly contested in the Middle Ages and was hit by a devastating earthquake in 1976, which destroyed some historical buildings and farmhouses with folk frescoes. But the world will always remember Kobarid as Caporetto, the site of the decisive battle of 1917 in which

the combined forces of the Central Powers defeated the Italian army.

## Orientation

Kobarid lies in a broad valley on the west bank of the Soča River. The centre of town is Trg Svobode, dominated by the Gothic Church of the Assumption and that famous bell tower. Buses stop in front of the Bar Kramar on the eastern side at Trg Svobode 9.

## Information

**Abanka** (Markova ulica 16; ☎ 8.30-noon & 2.30-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

**Nova KBM Banka** (Trg Svobode 2; ☎ 8-11.15am & 2-5.15pm Mon-Fri)

**Post office** (Trg Svobode 2; ☎ 8-9.30am, 10am-3.30pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

**Tourist Information Centre Kobarid** (☎ 380 04 90; www.lto-sotocje.si; Gregorčičeva ulica 8; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm & 3.30-8pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug; 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat Sep-Jun) Next door to the award-winning Kobarid Museum.

**X Point** (☎ 388 53 08, 041-692 290; www.xpoint.si; Trg Svobode 6; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Apr-Oct) An extreme-sports agency that organises rafting, canyoning, kayaking, canoeing, paragliding and trekking in and around Kobarid and Tolmin.

## Sights & Activities

### KOBARID MUSEUM

Located in 18th-century Mašera House, this museum (Kobariški Muzej; ☎ 389 00 00; Gregorčičeva ulica 10; adult/child/student & senior €4/2.50/3; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct; 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-

6pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar) is devoted almost entirely to the Soča Front (below) and deals with the tragedy of the 'war to end all wars'.

The museum is divided into about a dozen rooms on three floors. The rooms on the 1st and 2nd floors have themes: the **White Room** describes the particularly harsh conditions of waging war in the mountains in the snow and fog; the **Hinterland Room** explains what life was like for soldiers during pauses in the fighting and also for the civilian population that was uprooted by war and famine; the **Black Room** displays horrific photographs of the dead and dying.

On the 3rd floor the **Battle of Kobarid Room** deals with the events over three days – 24 to 27 October 1917 – when the combined Austrian and German forces met up near Kobarid and launched the offensive that defeated the Italian army.

Among the collection are photographs documenting the horrors of the front, military charts, diaries and maps, and two large relief displays showing the front lines and offensives through the Krn Mountains and the positions in the Upper Soča Valley the day before the decisive breakthrough. There's also a 20-minute presentation of slides with commentary.

### KOBARID HISTORICAL WALK

A free brochure from the tourist office describes the 5km Kobarid Historical Walk (Kobariška Zgodovinska Pot). From the Kobarid Museum walk to the north side of Trg Svobode, a winding road lined with the Stations of the Cross climbs up a hill called Gradič to the **Italian Charnel House** (Italijanska Kostnica), which contains the bones of more than 7000 Italian soldiers killed on the Soča

## THE SOČA/ISONZO FRONT

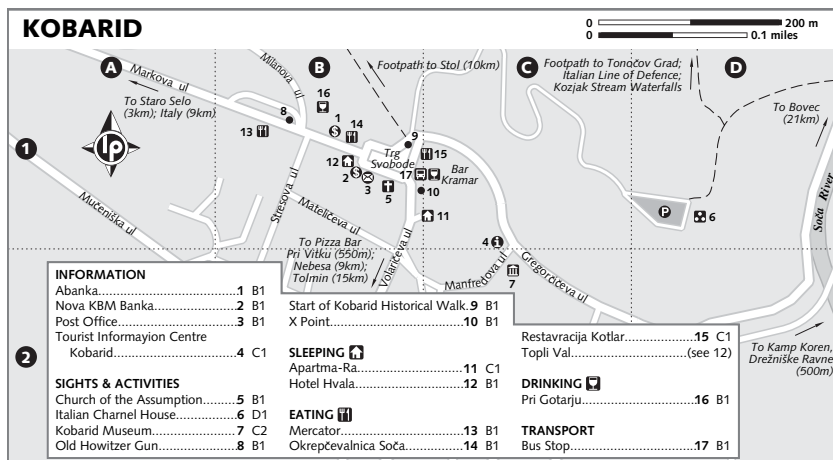
The breakthrough in the Soča Front (more commonly known as the Isonzo Front) by the combined Austro-Hungarian and German forces near Caporetto (Kobarid) in October 1917 was one of the greatest military campaigns fought on mountainous terrain and one of the costliest ever fought in terms of human life. By the time the fighting had stopped 17 days later, hundreds of thousands of soldiers lay dead or wounded, writhing and screaming in the blood-drenched earth, gassed and mutilated beyond recognition.

In May 1915, Italy declared war on the Central Powers and their allies and moved its army across the southwestern border of Austria to the strategically important Soča Valley. From there, they hoped to move eastward to the heart of Austria-Hungary. By then, however, the Austrians had fortified the lines with trenches and bunkers for 80km from the Adriatic and the Karst to the mountain peaks overlooking the Upper Soča Valley as far north as Mt Rombon. The First Offensive launched by the Italians was successful in the first month, and they occupied Kobarid and Mt Krn to the northeast, where they would remain for some 29 months.

The Italians launched another 11 offensives over the next 2½ years, but the difficult mountain terrain meant a war of attrition between two entrenched armies. Territorial gains were minimal, but the fighting in the mountains and the limestone plateau to the south was horrific.

On 24 October 1917 the stalemate was broken when the Austro-Hungarians and Germans formulated an unusual plan of attack based on surprise and moved hundreds of thousands of troops, arms and material (including seven German divisions) into the area between Bovec and Tolmin, with Kobarid as the first target. The 12th Offensive – the 'miracle of Kobarid' – routed the Italian army and pushed the fighting back to the Friulian Plain, where the war continued for another year. The sketches of the breakthrough by one Lieutenant Erwin Rommel, who would become known as the 'Desert Fox' while commanding Germany's North African offensive in WWII, are invaluable for understanding the battle. But no account is more vivid than the description of the Italian retreat in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. The novelist himself was wounded on the Gorica battlefield in the spring of 1917 while driving an Italian ambulance.

The 12th Offensive was the greatest breakthrough in WWI, and it employed some elements of what would later be called 'lightning war' (blitzkrieg). The Italians alone lost 500,000 soldiers, and another 300,000 were taken prisoner. Casualties on the Soča Front for the entire 1915–17 period, including soldiers on the battlefields and men, women and children behind the lines, number almost a million.



Front. Benito Mussolini attended the dedication in September 1938. The charnel house is topped with the 17th-century **Parish Church of St Anthony** (Župnijska Cerkev Sv Anton), which was moved here in 1935.

From the ossuary, a path leads north (take the left-hand fork after a minute's walk) for just over 1km to **Tonočev Grad**, an ancient fortified hill where an archaeological project has uncovered the remains of houses and churches dating from the 5th and 6th centuries.

The path then descends through the remains of the **Italian Defence Line** (Italijanska Obrambna Črta) built in 1915, past cleared trenches, gun emplacements and observation posts, before crossing the Soča over **Napoleon Bridge** (Napoleonov Most), a replica of a bridge built by the French in the early 19th century and destroyed in May 1915. On the far side of the river, the path leads up a side valley to a series of walkways that take you to the foot of the spectacular **Kozjak Stream Waterfalls** (Slapovi Potoka Kozjak). The route then returns to Kobarid along the east bank of the Soča. Allow three hours for a leisurely circuit.

## Sleeping

**Kamp Koren** (☎ 389 13 11; www.kamp-koren.si; Drežniške Ravne 33; per person €6.50-8.50; ☹ mid-Mar–Oct; ♿ ♿ ♿) The oldest camping ground in the Soča Valley, this small, 1-hectare site is about 500m north of Kobarid on the left bank of the Soča River and just before the turn to Drežniške Ravne, a lovely village with traditional farmhouses.

**Apartma-Ra** (☎ 389 10 07; apartma-ra@siol.net; Gregoričeva ulica 6c; per person €15-25; ♿ ♿ ♿) This welcoming little place with 25 beds between the Kobarid Museum and Trg Svobode (enter via the driveway from Volaričeva ulica) is entirely nonsmoking. Some rooms have terraces and bicycles are available for rent to guests for €6/9 per half-day/day.

**Hotel Hvala** (☎ 389 93 00; www.hotel-hvala.si; Trg Svobode 1; s €54-65, d €78-100; ♿ ♿ ♿) The only hotel in town is the delightful 'Hotel Thanks' (actually it's the family's name), which has 32 rooms, a bar, a superb restaurant and a Mediterranean-style café in the garden open in summer. It even sells **fishing permits** (per day €51-59, for 3 days €136-159) for the Soča River.

**Hiša Franko** (☎ 389 41 20; www.hisafranko.com; Staro Selo 1; s & d €90-119; ♿ ♿ ♿) This guesthouse in an old farmhouse 3km west of Kobarid in Staro Selo, halfway to the Italian border, has 13

themed rooms – we love the Moja Afrika (My Africa) one – some of which have terraces and Jacuzzis. Guests can hire mountain bikes for €7 a day. The restaurant here is legendary.

**Nebesa** (☎ 384 46 20, 041-769 484; www.nebesa.si, Livek 39; d €176-220; ♿) The 'Paradise' compound, with its four two-person modern 'cabins' and its scenic location 900m up in the mountains about 9km southeast of Kobarid on the road to Tolmin, is one of the few places to stay in Slovenia that is a 'destination' onto itself. Self-contained, with kitchen, fireplace and open terraces, the cabins measure more than 50 sq metres and are among the most dramatic (and romantic) places to stay in Slovenia.

## Eating & Drinking

**Okrepčevalnica Soča** (☎ 389 05 00; Markova ulica 10; pizza €3.20-6; ☹ 11am-10pm) The simple 'Soča Snack Bar' opposite the Hotel Hvala has drinks and snacks.

**Pizza Bar Pri Vitku** (☎ 389 13 34; Pri Malnih ulica 41; pizza & pasta €3.35-6.20; ☹ 11am-midnight Mon-Fri, noon-midnight Sat & Sun) This upbeat little pub-restaurant is about 500m south of the town centre and serves decent pizza and pasta dishes as well as more ambitious grilled dishes.

**Restavracija Kotlar** (☎ 389 11 10; Trg Svobode 11; starters €5.40-10.40, mains €6.25-16.70; ☹ noon-11pm Thu-Mon) This attractively decorated place is a good choice for a fast and affordable lunch when touring the nearby Kobarid Museum.

**Hiša Franko** (starters €6.70-11.40, mains €11.70-16; ☹ noon-3pm & 6-10pm Tue-Sun) Kobarid's 'other' slow-food phenomenon is this gourmet restaurant in a guesthouse of the same name in

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Topli Val** (starters €7.50-10, mains €6.75-25; ☹ noon-10pm) With a name like 'Warm Wave' and owners originally from Portorož, this excellent restaurant at the Hotel Hvala is bound to specialise in seafood. It's excellent – from the mixed shellfish starter (€14.60) and carpaccio of sea bass (€7.50) to the Soča trout and signature lobster with pasta (€26.70). Expect to pay about €40 per person with a decent bottle of wine, such as Četrtič Ferdinand Belo from Brda (€17), although the house wine is a snip at €7.50 a bottle. There's a lovely front terrace and back garden open in warmer months.

Staro Selo just west of town. Tasting menus, which change according to the season, cost €37.50/46 for five/seven courses.

**Mercator** (Markova ulica 1; ☹ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) This large branch of the popular supermarket chain is just west of Trg Svobode.

**Pri Gotarju** (☎ 388 57 43; Milanova ulica; ☹ 6am-11pm Sun-Thu, 6am-midnight Fri & Sat) This café-pub in a shady garden is a pleasant place for a drink – especially in the courtyard in summer. In the grassy area near the petrol station opposite is a rusting 150mm howitzer that weighs more than 5000kg and was built by Krupp in 1911.

## Getting There & Around

There are three to four buses a day to the northwest and Bovec (€3, 30 minutes, 21km) and to the southeast and Tolmin (€2, 30 minutes, 16km). Other destinations include Ljubljana (€10, 2½ hours, 115km, up to four a day) via Cerklje and Idrija (€6.20, two hours, 58km) and Nova Gorica (€5.80, two hours, 55km, five a day). Daily in July and August and at the weekend in June and September, a bus crosses over the spectacular Vrščič Pass to Kranjska Gora (€5.80, two hours, 52km).

## NOVA GORICA

☎ 05 / pop 12,600 / elev 93m

Nova Gorica is a green university town straddling the Italian border and an easy entry and exit point from the rest of the EU to the west.

When the town of Gorica, capital of the former Slovenian province of Goriška, was awarded to the Italians under the postwar Treaty of Paris in 1947 and became Gorizia, the new socialist government in Yugoslavia set about building a model town on the eastern side of the border. They called it 'New Gorica' and erected a chain-link barrier between the two towns.

This 'mini-Berlin Wall' was finally pulled down to great fanfare on 30 April 2004 after Slovenia joined the EU, leaving Piazza Transalpina (Trg z Mozaikom) straddling the border right behind Nova Gorica train station. With no barrier remaining there's really nothing to stop you wandering across to the Italian side, where the Italian bus 1 will whisk you to Gorizia train station. However, this is still not a legal border crossing and won't become one

until Slovenia joins the Schengen Convention (October 2007).

With Italy behind them and a couple of flashy casino-hotels dominating the place, most people arrive here to try their luck or move on. But Nova Gorica is worth a pause. Its immediate surrounds – the Franciscan monastery at Kostanjevica and Gorico to the south and the ancient settlement of Solkan in the north – offer some startling contrasts.

## Orientation

Nova Gorica sits on a broad plain south of the Soča River. Across the Italian region of Goriziano to the northwest are the vineyards of the Brda Hills (Goriška Brda). The Vipava Valley (Vipavska Dolina), an even more important wine-growing area, lies to the southeast. The Karst region is south and southeast of Nova Gorica.

Nova Gorica itself is an unusually long town, running about 5km from the border at Rožna Dolina (Casa Rossa) in the south to Solkan in the north. The bus station is in the centre of town at Kidričeva ulica 22, 400m southwest of the Hotel Perla. The train station is at Kolodvorska ulica 6, about 1.5km to the west.

## Information

**Bar Evropa** (www.go.net; Delpinova ulica 20; per hr €2; 5pm-2am Sun-Thu, 5am-3am Fri & Sat Jul & Aug; 7am-1am Mon-Thu, 7am-3am Fri, noon-3am Sat, noon-1am Sun Sep-Jun) Internet access south of Bevkov trg.

**Nova KBM Banka** (Kidričeva ulica 11; ☹ 7.30am-6pm, 7.30am-noon Sat) Near the Hotel Perla.

**Nova Ljubljanska Banka** (Bekov trg 3; ☹ 9am-1pm & 3-5pm Mon-Fri) In the central square.

**Post office** (Kidričeva ulica 19; ☹ 7am-7pm Mon-Fri, 7am-1pm Sat) Opposite the bus station.

**Tourist Information Centre Nova Gorica** (☎ 333 46 00; www.novagorica-turizem.com; Bekov trg 4;

☹ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug; 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun) In the lobby of the Kulturni Dom (Cultural House). Free internet access.

## Sights

In the train station, the rather esoteric **Goriška Border Museum** (Muzej Državna Meja na Gorškem; ☎ 333 44 00; Kolodvorska ulica 6; admission free; ☹ 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat, 10am-7pm Sun), which traces the story of divided Gorica/Gorizia from 1945 to that pivotal day in April 2004 when the walls came a-tumblin' down, is not going to hold



July and August) and Piran (€9, 2¼ hours, 97km, one daily at 7am). Daily in July and August and at the weekend in June and September, a bus crosses over the spectacular Vršič Pass to Kranjska Gora (€10.50, three hours, 118km).

There's a use shuttle bus (€1, 25 minutes, hourly) between the train stations in Nova Gorica and Gorizia in Italy.

#### TRAIN

About a half-dozen trains head northeast each day for Jesenice (€5.35, 2¼ hours, 89km) via Most na Soči, Bohinjska Bistrica (€4.50, 1¼ hours, 61km) and Bled Jezero (€5, 1¼ hours, 79km) on what is arguably the country's most beautiful train trip. In the other direction, an equal number of trains go to Sežana (€2.65, one hour, 40km), where you can change for Ljubljana or Trieste in Italy.

Nova Gorica is linked to Ajdovščina (€1.85, 40 minutes, 26km) to the southeast by two trains a day (at 5.36am and 2.25pm) on weekdays only from September to late June.

#### Getting Around

Local buses serve Solkan, Rožna Dolina, Šempeter and Vrtojba from the main station. You can order a taxi on ☎ 303 51 11 or 041-632 428.

#### AROUND NOVA GORICA

If you want to have a look at **Goriška Brda** (Brda Hills), the hilly wine region that stretches from Solkan west to the Italian border, start in **Dobrovo**, 13km to the northwest of Nova Gorica. The Renaissance-style **Dobrovo Castle** (Grad Dobrovo; ☎ 333 11 40, 335 98 11; Grajska cesta 10; adult/child €1.25/0.85; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), dating from about 1600, is filled with elegant period furnishings and exhibits on the wine industry. In the cellar there is a **vinoteka** (☎ 395 92 11, 031-342 369; ☎ 11.30am-9pm Tue-Sun) where you can sample the local vintages (white Rebula and Chardonnay or the Pinot and Merlot reds), which go nicely with the cheese, air-cured *pršut* and *salami* on offer. There's also an excellent **restaurant** (☎ 395 95 06; meals from €20; ☎ noon-11pm Tue-Sun) in the castle. In addition to its grapes and wine, Goriška Brda is celebrated for its fabulous cherries available in early June.

Southeast from Nova Gorica is **Vipava Valley**, famous for its wines, especially red Teran. For details see p150.

## CENTRAL PRIMORSKA

Central Primorska is a land of steep slopes, deep valleys and innumerable ravines with plenty of good hiking, the magical Idrijca River and a couple of interesting towns. The region is dominated by the Cerkno and Idrija Hills, foothills of the Julian Alps that eventually join the Škofja Loka Hills in Gorenjska to the east. It's an area often overlooked by travellers heading for the sexier Alps, Karst or beaches – and is all the more attractive for that reason.

Nowhere else in Slovenia are fields found on such steep slopes and houses in such remote locations as in the regions around Idrija and Cerkno. The ravines and valleys were very useful to the Partisans during WWII, and the region is dotted with monuments testifying to their presence: the Franja hospital near Cerkno, the Slovenija Partisan printing house at Vojsko, 14km northwest of Idrija, and the Pavl hospital, 20km southeast of Idrija.

#### IDRIJA

☎ 05 / pop 5765 / elev 340m

Idrija sits snugly in a deep basin surrounded by hills at the confluence of the Idrijca and Nikova Rivers. When most Slovenes think of Idrija, three things come to mind: *žlikrofi*, lace and mercury. The women of Idrija have been taking care of the first two for centuries, stuffing the crescent-shaped 'Slovenian ravioli' with a savoury mixture of bacon, potatoes and chives as fast as they spin their web-like lace (*čipka*). The men, on the other hand, went underground to extract the 'quicksilver' (*živo srebro*) that made this town one of the richest in medieval Europe.

The first mine opened at Idrija in 1500, making it the second oldest mercury mine in the world after the one in Almadén in central Spain. By the 18th century, Idrija was producing 13% of the world's mercury, thought to be the purest. All that meant money – for both Idrija and the imperial court in Vienna. And because of the toxic effects of mercury, doctors and lawyers flocked here to work. The Idrija miners faced many health hazards, but the relatively high wages attracted workers from all over the Habsburg Empire. In the 18th century, Idrija was second in size only to Ljubljana among the towns of Carniola.

The mercury market bottomed out in the 1970s, and the production of this once pre-

vious element has ceased altogether in Idrija. But the mine has left the town a difficult and expensive legacy. Idrija sits on something like 700km of shafts that go down 15 levels to 32m below sea level. The first four have now been filled with water and more have to be loaded with hard core and concrete to stabilise the place. Otherwise, they say, the town will sink.

#### Orientation

The centre of Idrija is Mestni trg, but everything of a practical nature is to the southeast over the Nikova River on or just off Lapajnetova ulica, where you'll find the bus station wedged between Vodnikova ulica and Prešernova ulica.

#### Information

**Abanka** (Lapajnetova ulica 47; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri)

**Nova KBM Banka** (Lapajnetova ulica 43; ☎ 7.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 7.30am-noon Sat)

**Post office** (Vodnikova ulica 1)

**Tourist Information Centre Idrija** (☎ 374 39 16; www.idrija-turizem.si; Vodnikova ulica 3; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct, 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat Nov-Mar) On the 1st floor behind the new purpose-built post office.

#### Sights

##### MUNICIPAL MUSEUM

This excellent **museum** (Mestni Muzej; ☎ 372 66 00; www.muzej-idrija-cerkno.si; Prelovcova ulica 9; adult/student & child €3/2.50; ☎ 9am-6pm) is housed in the enormous Gewerkenegg Castle on top of the hill to

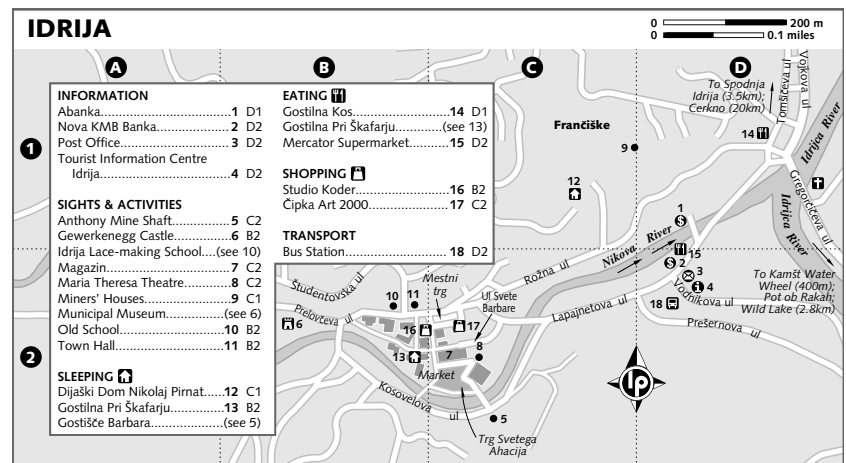
the west of Mestni trg. The collections, which deal with mercury, lace and local history, are exhibited in three wings centred on a courtyard. The **rococo frescoes** of plants, scrolls and columns framing the windows and arcades date from the 18th century.

Mercury (Hg) is the only metal that exists in a liquid state at room temperature. The silver metal is extracted from the mercury ore – a bright-red mineral called cinnabar – by smelting at a high temperature. Mercury is a very heavy metal, much denser than iron, and in the castle's north wing, amid a jungle of minerals and fossils, is a large cauldron of mercury with an iron ball floating on the top.

Part of the **ethnographical collection** in this wing shows rooms in a typical miner's house at various times in history. A miner's job carried status, and they earned more than double the average wage in this part of Slovenia. The miners were well organised, and socialism was popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the Rondel Tower of the east wing there's a mock-up of the 'call man', the unspeakable so-and-so who summoned miners to work every day at 3.30am by hitting a hollow log with a mallet in the town centre. At the bottom of the **Mercury Tower** at the start of the south wing is a Plexiglas cube filled with drops of mercury and 15 halogen lights on tracks, representing the number of levels in the mercury mine here.

One large room in the south wing is given over entirely to the **bobbin lace** (*klekljana čipka*)



woven here in broad rings with distinctive patterns. Some 40 different motifs run the gamut from the usual hearts and flowers to horseshoes, crescents and lizards. Check out the tablecloth that measures 3m by 1.80m. It was designed for Madame Tito and took 5000 hours to make.

An exhibition on the 2nd floor of the south wing traces Idrija history in the 20th century – from WWI and the Italian occupation to WWII and the birth of socialist Yugoslavia. Take a look at the enormous, bright-red hammer and sickle in the last room; it once adorned the entrance to the mercury mine.

#### ANTHONY MINE SHAFT

The **mine** (Antonijev Rov; ☎ 377 11 42, 031-810 194; www.rzs.idrija.si; Kosovelova ulica 3; adult/child €4.60/3.35; ☎ tour 10am & 3pm Mon-Fri, 10am, 3pm & 4pm Sat & Sun), a 'living museum' in the Selštev building south of Trg Svetega Ahacija, allows you to get a feeling for the working conditions of mercury miners in Idrija.

The tour, lasting about 1¼ hours, begins in the 'call room' of an 18th-century building where miners were selected each morning and assigned their duties by the *obergutman* (supervisor). There's an excellent 20-minute video in several languages (including English) describing the history of Idrija and the mine.

Before entering the shaft, which was sunk in 1500 and led to the first mine measur-

ing 1.5km long, 600m wide and 400m deep, you must don green overcoats and helmets with the miners' insignia and wish each other 'Srečno!' (Good luck!), the traditional miners' farewell.

As you follow the circular tour, you'll see samples of live mercury on the walls that the miners painstakingly scraped to a depth of about 5cm, as well as some cinnabar ore. The 18th-century **Chapel of the Holy Trinity** (Cerkev Sv Trojice) in the shaft contains statues of St Barbara, the patroness of miners, and St Ahacius, on whose feast day (22 June) rich deposits of cinnabar were discovered.

#### OTHER SIGHTS

There are several fine neoclassical buildings on Mestni trg, including the **town hall** (mestna hiša; Mestni trg 1), built in 1898. To the west of the square is the **Idrija Lace-Making School** (Čipkarska Šola Idrija; ☎ 373 45 72; Prelovčeva ulica 2; adult/child €2.50/2.10; ☎ by appointment) in the Stara Šola (Old School), built in 1876. Lace-making is still a popular elective course of study in elementary schools in Idrija.

In Trg Svetega Ahacija – the centre of town in the Middle Ages – the large 18th-century building on the north side is the **Magazin** (Trg Svetega Ahacija 4), a granary and warehouse where the miners, who were paid in food as well as in cash, kept their stores. To the east is the **Maria Theresa Theatre** (Gledališče Marije Terezije; Trg Svetega Ahacija 5), built in 1770 and the oldest in the country.

#### ON THE WINGS OF MERCURY

Alchemists in the Middle Ages were convinced that all metals originated from mercury and tried to use the metal, named after the fleet-footed messenger of the Roman gods, to obtain gold from other metals. The biggest boon came in the 16th century, when it was discovered that mercury, which bonds as an alloy to many metals, could separate gold or silver from rock or ore.

Mercury was used as an early antidote to syphilis. The Venetians needed it to make their famous mirrors, and later milliners used it to lay felt for making hats. Mercury is a highly toxic substance and can affect behaviour; occupational mercurialism from vapours and absorption by the skin is a serious disorder. As a result, many milliners went crazy, and this was the inspiration for the Mad Hatter in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865). In modern times, mercury has been used in the drug, paper and electrical industries, in dentistry and in some detonators and bombs.

Mercury mining in Idrija came to an end both because the use of heavy metals had been largely abandoned by many industries in favour of more environmentally friendly substances and for economic reasons. A 2.5L flask (about 34kg) of mercury that went for US\$800 in the 1970s was worth only \$100 a decade later. A European Union resolution approved in 2006 calls for a ban on EU mercury exports by 2008.

Laid out across the slopes encircling the valley are Idrija's distinctive **miners' houses**. Large wooden A-frames with cladding and dozens of windows, they usually had four storeys with living quarters for three or four families.

One of the most interesting examples of mining technology that still exists is the **Kamšt** (☎ 372 66 00; Vodnikova ulica; adult/child €1.70/1.25; ☎ 9am-4pm by appointment), a 13.6m water wheel made of wood that was used to pump the water out of flooded mines from 1790 until 1948. It is about 1.5km southeast of Mestni trg.

#### Activities

An excellent 3km trail called **Pot ob Rakah** follows the Idrija River Canal from the Kamšt to **Wild Lake** (Divje Jezero), a tiny, impossibly green lake fed by a karst spring more than 80m under the surface. After a heavy rainfall, water gushes up from the tunnel like a geyser and the lake appears to be boiling (although the surface temperature never exceeds 10°C).

The lake was declared a natural monument in 1967, and little signboards around the shore identify the plants and trees and point out the lake's unique features. The body of water flowing from Wild Lake into the Idrija just happens to be the shortest river in Slovenia. The **Ježernica River** is a mere 55m long.

If you were to follow the canal for 15km to the southwest, you'd come to the first of the **barriers** (*klauže*) of stacked wood and stones that dammed the Idrija and Belca Rivers to float timber in the 18th century. They were once called 'Slovenian pyramids' because of their appearance. Wood was an important resource here, both to support the 700km of mine shafts and because the heat needed to extract mercury from cinnabar required a lot of fuel. The dams continue for 12km down the Belca River.

#### Festivals & Events

The big event in Idrija is the annual **Lace-making Festival** (Festival Idrijske Čipke; www.idrija-turizem.si) in late June, which includes a contest with up to a hundred competitors.

#### Sleeping

The tourist office has a list of **private rooms** (per person €20-25) available.

**Dijaški Dom Nikolaj Pirnat** (☎ 373 40 70; info@ciu-np.si; Ulica IX Korpusa 6; per person €13; ☎ Jul & Aug;

☎) This student dormitory 300m north-east of Mestni trg has 56 beds available in multibed rooms in summer only.

**Gostilna Pri Škafarju** (☎ 377 32 40; gostilnaskafar@5.net; Ulica Svete Barbare 9; s/d €35/50; ☎) In addition to food, this popular gostilna also offers accommodation in three smallish mansard rooms for between one and three people. You can't beat the location.

**Gostišče Barbara** (☎ 377 11 62, 041-716 701; joze.medle@siol.net; Kosovelova ulica 3; s/d/tr €45/54.50/71; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) A seven-room inn above the Anthony Mine Shaft, Barbara also boasts an excellent restaurant with rather limited opening hours.

**Hotel Kendov Dvorec** (☎ 372 51 00; www.kendov-dvorec.com; s; €75-135, d €95-155, tr €177; ☎ ☎ ☎) If you're looking for somewhere romantic in the area, this 'castle hotel' in Spodnja Idrija, 4km north of Idrija, has 11 rooms in a converted mansion, the oldest part of which dates from the 14th century. It's fitted with 19th-century antique furniture and enjoys stunning views along the Idrija Valley. Its restaurant is worth the journey in itself.

#### Eating

**Gostilna Pri Škafarju** (☎ 377 32 40; gostilnaskafar@5.net; Ulica Svete Barbare 9; starters €3.35-5.50, mains €5.65-12; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon, Wed & Thu, 10am-11pm Fri & Sat, noon-8pm Sun) Pizza (€3.80 to €5.50) baked in a beautiful wood-burning tile stove is why most people come to this friendly gostilna, but there are plenty of other things on the menu such as *žlikrofi* (€5 to €8).

**Gostilna Kos** (☎ 372 20 30; Tomšičeva ulica 4; starters €2.50-5.80, mains €5.50-12.50; ☎ 7am-3pm Mon, 7am-10pm Tue-Sat) Pri Škafarju does acceptable *žlikrofi*, but the best place to have this most Idrijan of specialities (€4.20 to €7.50), especially the mushroom ones, is at the 'Blackbird'.

**Gostišče Barbara** (☎ 377 11 62, 041-716 701; joze.medle@siol.net; Kosovelova ulica 3; meals from €15; ☎ 4-9pm Mon-Fri) This restaurant in the inn of that name serves 'slow food' and many consider it to be the best restaurant in town.

**Hotel Kendov Dvorec** (☎ 372 51 00; www.kendov-dvorec.com; 4-7 course menus €30-42; ☎ noon-midnight) This excellent restaurant in the very stylish Hotel Kendov Dvorec in Spodnja Idrija has an excellent list of Slovenian wines and a lovely garden.

There's a large **Mercator** (Lapajnetova ulica 45; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Fri, 7am-1pm Sat) supermarket opposite the bus station.



## Shopping

Idrija lace is among the finest in the world, and a small piece makes a great gift or souvenir. There are two places almost side by side in the main square worth a look, including **Studio Koder** (☎ 377 13 59; Mestni trg 16; ☎ 10am-noon & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat), a very stylish shop diagonally across the lace-making school, and **Čipka Art 2000** (☎ 372 25 73; Mestni trg 14; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 7am-6pm Wed, 9am-noon Sat), a larger place but with a smaller selection of lace.

## Getting There & Away

There are hourly buses to Cerkno (€2.60, 30 minutes, 20km) and Ljubljana (€6.20, 1½ hours, 58km), between one and three to Tolmin (€5, one hour, 44km), one or two to Bovec (€7.30, two hours, 77km) and one at 5.45am to Nova Gorica Idrija (€6.20, 1½ hours, 60km) via Ajdovščina.

## CERKNO

☎ 05 / pop 1670 / elev 355m

Cerkno is a quiet town in the Cerknica River Valley with only a third as many people as its neighbour 20km to the south, Idrija. Still, it has an important museum as well as the remains of a secret Partisan hospital from WWII. Just before Lent Cerkno becomes an important destinations for ethnologists and party-goers alike when the Laufarija, the

ancient Shrovetide celebration (opposite), takes place.

## Orientation & Information

Glavni trg, where the buses stop, is the main square. There is no tourist office in Cerkno, but the helpful and knowledgeable staff at the Hotel Cerkno will provide information.

**Nova KMB Banka** (Glavni trg 5; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

**Post office** (Bevkova ulica 9) In the *občina hiša* (council house) diagonally opposite Cerkno Museum.

## Sights

### CERKNO MUSEUM

The **museum** (Cerkljanski Muzej; ☎ 372 31 80; www.muzej-idrija-cerkno.si; Bevkova ulica 12; adult/child €1.70/1.25; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun) is about 150m southwest of Glavni trg. The permanent exhibit called 'Cerkljanska through the Centuries' traces the development of the region from earliest times up to the end of the 20th century. Most people, however, come to see the museum's collection of **Laufarija masks**.

### FRANJA PARTISAN HOSPITAL

The **hospital** (Partizanska Bolnišnica Franja; ☎ 372 31 80; www.muzej-idrija-cerkno.si; adult/child €3/2.50; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Sep; 9am-4pm Mar, Oct & Nov; 9am-4pm Sat & Sun Dec-Feb), hidden in a canyon near Dolenji Novaki about 5km northeast of Cerkno, treated

## STONE AGE MUSIC

The image of our Neanderthal ancestors sitting around a campfire making beautiful music together is not an easy one to conjure up. But it's whole lot easier now following a major discovery made in a mountain cave near Cerkno.

Palaeontologists were messing around in the area in 1995 collecting Stone Age tools when a local pundit who happened to pass by told them he knew where they'd find lots more like that. He led them to Divje Babe, a cave some 200m above the main road linking Cerkno with the Tolmin-Idrija highway, and they began digging. Among the buried tools was a piece of cave bear femur measuring 10cm long and perforated with four aligned holes – two intact and two incomplete at either end. It looked exactly like a, well, flute.

Because objects of such antiquity cannot be dated by the usual radiocarbon techniques, the flute was sent to the City University of New York to undergo electron spin resonance, which measures the small amounts of radiation absorbed by objects from the time of their burial. And the verdict? According to researchers, the flute is anywhere between 45,000 and 82,000 years old, depending on how much moisture – which inhibits the absorption of radiation – the cave floor has been exposed to. One thing is certain, however: Slovenia can now claim the oldest known musical instrument on earth. And – just in case you were wondering – it still works.

wounded Partisan soldiers from Yugoslavia and other countries from late 1943 until the end of WWII. Franja Hospital has nothing to do with political or economic systems; it is a memorial to humanity, courage and self-sacrifice. It is a moving and very worthwhile place to visit.

The complex, named after its chief physician, Dr Franja Bojč-Bidovec, was built in December 1943 for the needs of IX Corps, which accounted for 10,000 soldiers. By May 1945 it had more than a dozen buildings, including treatment sheds, operating theatres, X-ray rooms and bunkers for convalescence. More than 500 wounded were treated here, and the mortality rate was only about 10%.

The complex, hidden in a ravine by the Pasica Stream with steep walls riddled with caves and recently shored up, had an abundance of fresh water, which was also used to power a hydroelectric generator. Local farmers and Partisan groups provided food, which was lowered down the steep cliffs by rope; medical supplies were diverted from hospitals in occupied areas or later air-dropped by the Allies. The hospital came under attack by the Germans twice – once in April 1944 and again in March 1945 – but it was never taken.

## Activities

The English-language *Cerkno Map of Local Walks*, available from the Hotel Cerkno, lists eight walks in the Cerkno Hills (Cerkljansko Hribovje), most of them pretty easy and lasting between 1½ and five hours return. Walk

No 7 goes to the **Franja Partisan Hospital** (3½ hours) and back. The highest peak in the area is **Porezen** (1632m) to the northeast, which has a mountain hut called **Dom Andreja Žvana-Borisa na Poreznu** (☎ 377 51 35, 051-615 245; ☎ daily Jul & Aug; Sat & Sun May, Jun, Sep & Oct) at 1590m with 44 beds and berths.

The **Cerkno Ski Centre** (☎ 374 34 00; www.hotel-cerkno.si; half-day pass adult/child/senior & student €19.70/13/17.60, day pass €22.50/15/18.80), 10km north-east of Cerkno, is atop Črni Vrh (1291m) and covers 18km of ski slopes and 5km of trails. There are six chairlifts and two tows and cannons for making artificial snow.

## Festivals & Events

The **Laufarija festival** (<http://laufarija.cerkno.net> in Slovene) in late February/early March takes place in Glavni trg and in Sedejev trg near the Hotel Cerkno. See opposite.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Gačnk v Logu** (☎ 372 40 05, 041-753 524; gacnk@cerkno.com; per person €21) This B&B and restaurant in Dolenji Novaki (house No 1), not far from the Franja Partisan Hospital, has nine rooms with between two and four beds. The renovated restaurant (meals from €12, open 9am to 11pm) is very popular with local people, particularly for lunch at the weekend.

**Želinc farmhouse** (☎ 372 40 20; www.zelinc.com; Želin 8; per person €22; ☎) This very green farmhouse with 13 singles and doubles and two apartments for three is near Straža, 5km southwest of Cerkno on route No 102 to Idrija.

## THE LAUFARIJA TRADITION

Ethnologists believe that the Laufarija tradition and the masks came from Austria's South Tyrol hundreds of years ago. *Lauferei* means 'running about' in German, and that's just what participants do as they nab their victim. The masks with the crazy, distorted faces on display here are originals bought from one of the Laufarija clubs.

Groups of boys and young men (and now a few girls and women) belonging to Laufarija societies (not unlike the Mardi Gras krewes in New Orleans) organise the event every year and about two dozen perform. Those aged 15 and over are allowed to enter, but they must prove themselves as worthy apprentices by sewing costumes. These outfits – though not ornate – must be made fresh every year because many of them are made out of leaves, pine branches, straw or moss stitched onto a burlap (hessian) backing and take quite a beating during the festivities.

The action takes place on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday and again on Shrove Tuesday (Pustni Torek). The main character is the Pust, whose mask is horned and who wears a moss costume weighing up to 100kg. He's the symbol of winter and the old year – he must die.

The Pust is charged by people with a long list of grievances – a bad harvest, inclement weather, lousy roads – and, of course, is found guilty. Some of the other two dozen Laufarija characters represent crafts and trades – the Baker, the Thatcher, the Woodsman – while the rest have certain character traits or afflictions such as the Drunk and his Wife, the Bad Boy, Sneezzy and the Sick Man, who always plays the accordion. The Old Man wearing Slovenian-style lederhosen and a wide-brimmed hat executes the Pust with a wooden mallet, and the body is rolled away on a caisson.

**Hotel Cerkno** (☎ 374 34 00; www.hotel-cerkno.si; Sedejev trg 8; s/d €51/76; P) This 75-room partially renovated hotel is in a modern building just south of Glavni trg. It's a comfortable enough place with a large indoor pool (nonresident adult/child €5.60/4.60), sauna, gym and three clay tennis courts (per hour €4.20).

There's a **Mercator** (Sedejev trg 8; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 7am-noon Sat, 8-11am Sun) supermarket next to the Hotel Cerkno.

### Getting There & Away

There are hourly bus departures to Idrija (€2.60, 30 minutes, 20km) on weekdays, with between four and six at the weekend, up to four a day to Ljubljana (€7.30, two hours, 77km) and one to Bovec (€6.50, 1¼ hours, 66km) via Most na Soči, Tolmin and Kobarid. Another four (two on Saturday, one on Sunday) go just to Tolmin (€4, one hour, 33km), where you can change for Nova Gorica and the coast.

## KARST REGION

The Karst region (www.kras-carso.com) is a limestone plateau stretching from Nova Gorica southeast to the Croatian border, west to the Gulf of Trieste and east to the Vipava Valley. Because it was the first such area to be researched and described in the 19th century, it is called the Classic, Real, True or Original Karst and always spelled with an upper-case 'K'. Other karst areas (from the Slovene word *kras*) around the world only get a lower-case 'k'.

The thick layers of limestone deposits were laid down millions of years ago. Earth movements then raised the limestone above sea level, where it could be attacked by mildly acidic rainwater. Over hundreds of thousands of years, this slow, chemical erosion has produced limestone pavements, dry valleys, sinkholes, springs and, of course, vast subterranean networks of caves and tunnels.

Rivers, ponds and lakes can disappear and then resurface in the porous limestone through sinkholes and funnels. Some rivers have created large underground caverns like the caves at Škocjan. Calcium carbonate dissolved in the water dripping from the roofs of caves creates stalactites and stalagmites. When these underground caverns collapse – and

they do periodically – they form a depression (*polje*) that collects soil (mostly red clay, the *terra rossa* of the Karst) and then vegetation. These fertile hollows are cultivated by local farmers, but because of the proximity of underground rivers, they tend to flood quickly after heavy rain.

The Karst, with its olives, ruby-red Teran wine, *pršut* (air-dried ham), old stone churches and red-tiled roofs, is some people's favourite region of Slovenia. But although the weather is very pleasant for most of the year, with lots of sun and low humidity, don't be fooled. The *burja*, a fiercely cold northeast wind, can do a lot of damage in winter, although it is said to give the *pršut* its distinctive taste.

### VIPAVA VALLEY

05 / elev up to 100m

This wide and fertile valley stretches southeast from Nova Gorica into the Karst. Some of the red wines produced here are world class, and Vipava Merlot is among the best wines of Central Europe. It's an excellent place to tour by car or bike; ask the tourist office in Nova Gorica for the brochure *Wine Road of the Lower Vipava Valley*.

The Vipava Valley is where the Romans first launched their drive into the Danube region, and it was overrun by the Goths, Huns and Langobards from the 4th to 6th centuries before the arrival of the early Slavs. Along the way though the valley, about 22km southeast of Nova Gorica, is **Vipavski križ** (Santa Croce), a walled medieval village with a ruined castle, a Gothic church and a 17th-century monastery with some wonderful illuminated medieval manuscripts.

Another 4km to the west is **Ajdovščina** (Aidussina). This was the site of Castra ad Fluvium Frigidum, a Roman fort on the River Frigidus (Vipava) and the first important station on the road from Aquileia to Emona (Ljubljana).

The town of **Vipava**, in the centre of the valley some 33km southeast of Nova Gorica, is full of stone churches below **Mt Nanos**, a karst plateau from which the Vipava River springs. Be sure to make a side trip 2km north to Dornbeck and **Zemona Manor** (Dvorec Zemono; ☎ 366 51 29; Prešernova ulica 6), a summer mansion built in 1680 by one of the Counts of Gorica as a hunting lodge. Today the mansion, built in the shape of a cross inside a square with arcaded hallways and a raised central area, houses the **Gostilna Pri Lojzetu** (☎ 368 70 07; meals

from €20; ☎ noon-10pm Wed-Sun), a luxurious restaurant in the manor's wine cellar. Have a peek at the baroque murals near the entrance. They portray a phoenix and a subterranean cave, symbols of fire and water.

Further afield, you can explore **Rihemberk Castle** (☎ 333 43 10, rihemberk@siol.com; Cesta IX Korpusa 46; ☎ 2.30-7pm Sat & Sun May-Sep), which dates back to the 13th century and has a dominant cylindrical tower in the centre at Branik. Alternatively, visit the walled village of Štanjel with its own castle and magnificent Ferrari Gardens to the north, but the areas with the most to see and do are to the south. About 10km southwest of Štanjel and 12.5km northwest of Sežana is the fabulous **Mladinski Hotel Pliskovica** (☎ 764 02 50; 041-947 327; www.hostelkras.com in Slovene; Pliskovica 11; per person from €18), a hostel with six rooms and 45 beds purpose-built into a 400-year-old Karst house. It has a kitchen and laundry room and is open year-round.

### Getting There & away

Buses departing from Nova Gorica for Postojna every two hours or so pass through Ajdovščina (€3, 45 minutes, 24km) and Vipava (€4, one hour, 31km). Trains between Nova Gorica and Sežana serve Štanjel (€2, 40 minutes, 24km) and Dutovlje (€2.65, 50 minutes, 31km), 4.5km east of Pliskovica, seven times a day on weekdays and twice at the weekend.

### ŠKOCJAN CAVES

☎ 05 / elev 425m

The immense karst caves at Škocjan, a Unesco World Heritage site since 1986, are far more captivating than the larger one at Postojna, 33km to the northeast in Notranjska, and for many travellers, a visit here will be one of the highlights of their trip to Slovenia.

The Škocjan Caves (Škocjanske Jame), 5.8km long and 250m deep, were carved out by the Reka River, which originates in the foothills of Snežnik, a 1796m mountain to the southeast. The Reka enters the caves in a gorge below the village of Škocjan and eventually flows into the Dead Lake, a sump at the end of the cave where it disappears. It surfaces again – this time as the Timavo River – at Duino in Italy, 40km to the northwest, before emptying into the Gulf of Trieste.

Unesco included the surrounding 413-hectare **Škocjan Caves Regional Park** (Regijski Park Škocjanske Jame; ☎ 763 28 40; www.park-skocjanske-jame

.si) in its World Heritage Sites list in 1996. Today, visitors can explore about 2km of these spectacular caves.

### Orientation

The caves lie about 1.5km east of the main Ljubljana–Koper highway. The closest town of any size is Divača (population 1300), about 5km to the northwest. Divača's train station, where buses stop as well, is at Trg 15 Aprila 7, about 500m west of this highway.

### Information

**Banka Koper** (Kolodvorska ulica 2; ☎ 8.30am-noon, 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat) In Divača west of the Penzion Risnik.

**Kraški Turist** (☎ 041-573 768; kraskitursturist@gmail.com; ☎ 8am-5pm Apr-Oct) Next to the small café at the train station.

**Post office** (Kraška cesta 77; ☎ 8-9.30am, 10am-3.30pm, 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) In Divača opposite the Penzion Risnik.

### Sights

#### ŠKOCJAN CAVES

Visiting the **caves** (☎ 763 28 40, 708 21 10; www.park-skocjanske-jame.si; Škocjan 2; adult/child/senior & student €10.85/4.20/7.50; 1½-hr tours hourly ☎ 10am-5pm Jun-Sep; 10am, 1pm & 3.30pm Apr, May & Oct; 10am & 1pm Mon-Sat, 10am, 1pm & 3pm Sun Nov-Mar) involves a shepherded two-hour walking tour that includes hundreds of steps and ends with a rickety funicular ride.

The **ticket office** (☎ 9am-last tour) sells all kinds of literature, including the 1:6000 *Regijski Park Škocjanske Jame* (Škocjan Caves Regional Park; €3) map and *The Škocjan Caves* (€4.30) guide. If you have time before your tour, follow the path leading north and down some steps from the reception area for 200m to the lookout (signposted 'Razgledišče/Belvedere'). Extending before you is a superb vista of the Velika Dolina (Big Valley) and the gorge where the Reka starts its subterranean journey.

Visitors to the caves assemble around the picnic tables in front of the souvenir shop or restaurant, and the guides will separate you into five groups according to language spoken. You then walk with your him or her for about 500m down a gravel path to the main entrance in the Gločak Valley. Through a tunnel built in 1933, you soon reach the head of **Silent Cave** (Tiha Jama), a dry branch of the underground canyon that stretches for

500m. The first section, called **Paradise**, is filled with beautiful stalactites, stalagmites and flow stones; the second part (called **Calvary**) was once the river bed. The Silent Cave ends at the **Great Hall** (Velika Dvorana), 120m wide and 30m high. It is a jungle of exotic dripstones and deposits; keep an eye out for the mighty stalagmites called the Giant and the Organ.

The sound of the Reka River, as it rushes through cascades and whirlpools below, heralds your entry into the astonishing **Müller Hall**, with walls 100m high. To get over the Reka and into long, narrow **Svetina Hall** you must cross **Hanke Canal Bridge**, 45m high, narrow and surely the highlight of the trip. Only experienced speleologists are allowed to explore the 5km of caves and halls that extend to the northwest of the bridge ending at Dead Lake (Mrtvo Jezero).

From Svetina Hall you climb up a path hewn into the stone to **Bowls Hall**, remarkable for its rare bowl-like potholes that were formed when water flooding the cave churned and swirled up to the ceiling. They look like troughs or even rice terraces.

**Schmidl Hall**, the final section, emerges into the Velika Dolina. From here you walk past **Tominč Cave**, where finds from a prehistoric settlement have been unearthed, and over a walkway near the **Natural Bridge** to the funicular, which carries you 90m up the rock face to near the reception area.

You might be surprised to learn that the Škocjan Caves are home to an incredible amount of flora and fauna: 250 varieties of plants and five different types of bats. The temperature in the caves is constant at 12°C so you should bring along a light jacket or sweater. Good walking shoes (the path can get pretty wet and slippery in the high humidity) and a torch (flashlight) are also recommended.

### VILENICA & DIVAČA CAVES

The 803m-long **Vilenica Cave** (Jama Vilenica; ☎ 734 42 59, 051-648 711; www.vilenica.com; adult/child €5/3.35; ☞ 10am, 3pm & 5pm Sun May-Sep; 3pm Sun Oct-Apr) is 2km northwest of Lokev, halfway between Divača and Lipica. It was the first karst cave to open to the public in the early 19th century and still welcomes guests every Sunday year-round.

**Divača Cave** (Divaška Jama; ☎ 031-522 785, 041-671 183; divaska.jama@divaca.net; adult/child €5/3.35; ☞ 3pm Sun May-Oct), about 3km northeast on the road to Divača, is only 672m long but has excellent dripstones and rock formations.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Avtokamp Kozina** (☎ 680 26 11; www.hotelitabor-kozina.com; Bazoviška cesta 23; per person €6.70; ☞ May-Sep) This camping ground, 7km south of Divača, is the closest there is to the caves. It has 25 sites for trailers and caravans and 60 for tents.

**Gostilna Malovec** (☎ 763 02 00; Kraška cesta 30a; s/d/tr €20/40/60) The Malovec, in Divača, has a half-dozen basic but comfortable renovated rooms in a building beside its popular restaurant (starters €3.35 to €5.85, mains €5 to €9.10, open 8am to 10pm), which serves Slovenian favourites (including first-rate *gibanica*) to an appreciative crowd.

**Pr' Vncki** (☎ 763 30 73; pr.vncki@gmail.com; Matavun 10; per person €20-22) This place in Matavun is just steps south of the caves and as close as you are going to get. It has four traditionally styled rooms with a total of 10 beds in a charming old farmhouse.

**Gostilna Pri Jami** (☎ 763 29 61, 051-360 604; starters €3.35-4.60, mains €5-9.20; ☞ 9am-10pm Apr-Sep, 9am-8pm Oct-Mar) 'By the Caves' is just that – a restaurant next to the ticket office to the caves.

**Gostilna Malovec Orient Express** (☎ 763 30 10; Kraška cesta 67; pizza €5-10.85; ☞ 11am-11pm Sun-Fri, 11am-2am Sat) For something a bit more, well, 21st century, cross the road from the Malovec for this lively pizzeria and pub with great salads (€1.70 to €3.35) and a large back terrace.

There's a **Mercator** (Kraška cesta 32; ☞ 7am-7pm Mon-Sat, 8-11am Sun) supermarket near Gostilna Malovec in Divača.

### Getting There & Away

The Škocjan Caves are about 5km by road southeast of the Divača train station. Staff at both the train station and at helpful Kraški Turist (p151) at the station can provide you with a photocopied route map for walking to the caves. In any case the way is clearly signposted from the station through the village of Dolnje Ležeče to Matavun. Alternatively, the Kraški Turist in Divača rents bicycles (per hour/day/weekend €1.25/8.35/12.50) and can arrange transport for around €5 per person. Ask them for the pamphlet *Discover the Treasures of the Karst and Brkini*, which includes a map with cycling and hiking routes in the area.

Buses from Ljubljana to Koper and the coast stop at Divača (€7.60, 1½ hours, 82km, half-hourly). For Croatia, there are also daily

(Continued on page 161)

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buses to Zagreb (€19.20, 4¼ hours, 213km) at 5.40am and 7.06am and to Poreč and Rovinj (€9.30, three hours, 103km) at 3.07pm from June to September in Croatia.

Divača is on the rail line linking Ljubljana (€5.90, 1½ hours, 104km, hourly) with Sežana (€1, 10 minutes, 9km). Around 20 trains a day run in each direction. Divača is also the railhead for up to five trains a day to Koper (€3.30, 50 minutes, 49km) via Hrpelje-Kozina, and there are two or three daily connections to Buzet and Pula, 122km to the south in Croatia.

### LIPICA

☎ 05 / pop 95 / elev 403m

Lipica, a tiny village 9km southwest of Divača and just 2km northeast of the Italian border, lives for and on and through one commodity only: horseflesh. In this case, it's the snow-white beauties called Lipizzaners, which were first bred here for the Spanish Riding School in Vienna in the late 16th century.

Although very much part of the region, Lipica feels like Eden after all that limestone. Indeed, the word '*lipica*' in Slovene means 'little linden', after the trees that grow in such profusion here.

### History

In 1580 Austrian Archduke Charles, son of Ferdinand I, founded a stud farm here

to breed and train horses for the imperial court in Vienna. He was looking for a lighter, more elegant breed for parades and military purposes, and when he coupled Andalusian horses from Spain with the local Karst breed, the Lipizzaner was born. But they weren't quite the sparkling white beauties we know today. Those didn't come about for another 200 years when white Arabian horses got into the act.

The stud farm remained the property of the court in Vienna until the end of WWI when the Italians took control of Primorska and the horses were moved to Hungary and then Austria. In 1943, with WWII still raging, the Germans moved more than 200 horses to the Sudetenland in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic). When the area was liberated by American forces in 1945, most of the horses and the stud farm's archives were shipped off to Italy. Sadly, only 11 horses returned when operations resumed at Lipica in 1947; the all-important studbooks and 80 other horses, including five stallions, that had been confiscated by the Germans during the war, were assigned to Italy.

Today about 400 Lipizzaners remain at the original stud farm while Lipizzaners are also bred in various locations around the world, including Piber, northeast of Graz in Austria, which breeds the horses for the Spanish Riding School. And of course everyone claims theirs is the genuine article. Indeed, in a bid to get its

### DANCING HORSES OF LIPICA

Lipizzaners are the finest riding horses in the world, much sought after for *haute école* dressage. And with all the trouble that's put into producing them, it's not surprising. They are very intelligent, sociable horses, quite robust and graceful.

Breeding is paramount – as they say. Just four equine families with 16 ancestors can be traced back to the early 18th century, and their pedigrees read like those of medieval royalty. When you walk around the stables at Lipica you'll see charts on each horse stall with complicated figures, dates and names like 'Conversano' and 'Neapolitano'. It's all to do with the horse's lineage.

Lipizzaners foal between January and May, and the colts and fillies suckle for six or seven months. They remain in the herd for about three years. They are then separated for training, which takes another four years.

Lipizzaners are not white when they are born but grey, bay or even chestnut. The celebrated 'imperial white' does not come about until they are between five and 10 years old, when their hair loses its pigment. Their skin remains grey, however, so when they are ridden hard enough to sweat, they become mottled.

A fully mature Lipizzaner measures about 15 hands (about 153cm) and weighs between 500kg and 600kg. They have long backs, short, thick necks, silky manes and expressive eyes. They live for 25 to 30 years and are particularly resistant to disease. They will nuzzle you out of curiosity if you approach them while they graze.

case across, Slovenia has put a pair of Lipizzaners on the reverse side of its new €0.20 coin.

### Orientation & Information

The centre of everything in Lipica is the stud farm in the southwest corner of the village and the two hotels nearby. The **tourist office** (☎ 739 15 80; lipica@siol.net; 🕒 8.15am–6pm Apr–Oct, 9am–4pm Nov–Mar) is at the main ticket office facing the stud.

### Sights

#### LIPICA STUD FARM

The 311-hectare **stud farm** (Kobilarna Lipica; ☎ 739 15 80; www.lipica.org; Lipica 5; 🕒 8am–6pm) can be visited on a **guided tour** (adult/student €7/3.50; 🕒 hourly 9–11am & 1–6pm daily Jul–Aug; 10–11am & 1–5pm Mon–Fri, 9–11am & 1–6pm Sat & Sun Apr–Jun, Sep & Oct; 11am & hourly 1–3pm Mon–Fri, hourly 10–11am & hourly 1–4pm Sat & Sun Mar, 11am & hourly 1–3pm daily Nov–Feb). The tours begin opposite the information and ticket office; wait by the sign bearing the name of the language you want to hear the commentary in (including English). A visit covers the stables (the one called Velbanca dates from the early 18th century) and the riding halls to give you an idea of what it's like to learn dressage and control a very large animal.

The highlight of a visit (if you time it right) is the **exhibition performance** (adult/child incl stud farm tour €14/7; 🕒 3pm Tue, Wed, Fri & Sun Apr–Oct) of these elegant horses as they go through their complicated paces with riders *en costume*. It's not as complete a show as the one at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna or in such ornate surroundings, but watching great white horses pirouetting and dancing to Viennese waltzes sort of makes up for it. You can also attend a once-a-week **training performance** (adult/child incl stud farm tour €9/4.50; 🕒 noon Thu Apr–Oct).

If you miss the performances, try to be around when the horses are moved from the stables to pasture (usually between 9am and 10am) and again in the afternoon (around 5.30pm to 6pm).

### Activities

Sixty horses are available for **riding** (per hr from €16; 🕒 9am, 10am, 4pm & 5pm Sun–Fri Apr–Oct; 9am, 10am, 2pm & 3pm Nov–Mar) both in the ring and in the open countryside at two levels. There is also a large choice of one-hour lessons, including individual (€20 to €34) and group classes (€22) for beginners and intermediate riders and individual dressage classes (€42). There are week-long courses (€240) of six two-hour

lessons for beginners and advanced riders and dressage instruction (6 hours €230). You can also have a jaunt in a horse-drawn, four-person **carriage** (30/60 min €19/38; 🕒 3.30pm & 4.30pm Mon–Fri, 11am–2pm & 3.30–6pm Sat & Sun Apr–Oct).

The **Lipica Golf Course** (☎ 734 63 73; www.lipica.org; 9/18-hole Mon–Fri from €20/27.50, Sat & Sun €24.50/35.50, half-set clubs €9.50) behind the Maestoso has nine holes for a par 37, a driving range (€3) and a couple of putting greens.

Near the Hotel Maestoso are five **tennis courts** (per hr from €5, racquet €3.50) available for hire.

### Sleeping & Eating

There are just two hotels in Lipica, both managed by the **Lipica Stud Farm** (☎ 739 15 80; www.lipica.org). Rates depend on the season and are heavily discounted for stays of a week or more if you are taking a riding course.

**Hotel Klub** (☎ 739 15 70; s €43–53.50, d €62–79, ste for 2 €68–87; 📺) The 80-roomer is generally for those staying for longer periods. It has a sauna and fitness centre and is slightly closer to the stud farm.

**Hotel Maestoso** (☎ 739 17 90; s €53–68, d €82–106, ste for 2 €126–152; 📺 📺 📺) This 68-room hotel has most of the amenities, including an indoor swimming pool, a sauna and nearby tennis courts.

**Letni Vrt** (dishes €5.85–8; 🕒 11am–8pm Apr–Sep) The 'Summer Garden' is a self-service place with terrace east of the Maestoso serving simple meals and Balkan grills. It is open in the warmer months only.

**Maestoso** (€3.75–7, mains €6.25–15.80; 🕒 7am–11pm) This café-restaurant with a terrace is the better of the two places to eat in Lipica and is open year-round.

### Getting There & Around

Most people visit Lipica as a day trip from Sežana, 4km to the north, or Divača, 13km to the northeast, both of which are on the Ljubljana–Koper rail line. There is no public transport from the train stations in Sežana and Divača to Lipica, though you can rent bicycles in Divača (p152). In Lipica itself bicycles are available for hire from the fitness centre at the Hotel Klub for €5/14 per hour/day.

### HRASTOVLJE

☎ 05 / pop 140 / elev 164m

The Romanesque church in this tiny Karst village is the Istrian equivalent of St John the Baptist's Church in Bohinj. OK, so it's not on

a lake. But it is small, surrounded by medieval walls with corner towers and covered inside with extraordinary 15th-century frescoes. This is the reason to make the trip here – as difficult as it can be.

Hrastovlje lies near the source of the Rižana River, whose valley effectively forms the boundary between the Karst and the coast. From here northward to the village of Črni Kal and on to Osp, a row of fortresses were built below the limestone plains during the Bronze Age, which the Illyrian tribe of Histrians later adapted to their needs. The valley and surrounding areas would prove to be safe havens for later inhabitants during the Great Migrations and the Turkish invasions.

### Sights

The **Church of the Holy Trinity** (Cerkev Sv Trojica; ☎ 031-432 231; adult/student & child €1.70/0.85; 🕒 8am–noon & 1–5pm), which has a nave and two aisles, was built between the 12th and 14th centuries in the southern Romanesque style. The fortifications were added in 1581 in advance of the Ottomans.

The sombre exterior does not prepare you for what's inside. The complete interior of the church is festooned with **narrative frescoes** painted by Johannes de Castuo (John of Kastav near Rijeka) in around 1490. The paintings are a *Biblia pauperum* – a 'Bible of the poor' – to help the illiterate understand the Old Testament stories, the Passion of Christ and the lives of the saints. Spare the 20 minutes it takes to listen to the taped commentary (in four languages, including English) that will guide you around the little church.

Facing you as you enter the church is the main altar, carved in the 17th century, and the central apse with scenes from the Crucifixion on the ceiling and portraits of the Trinity and the Apostles. On the arch, Mary is being crowned Queen of Heaven. To the right of the central aisle are episodes from the seven days of Creation, and to the left is the story of Adam and Eve, as well as the murder of Abel by Cain and the latter's banishment.

On the ceilings of the north (left) and south (right) aisles are scenes from daily life (sowing, hunting, fishing, making wine etc) as well as the liturgical year and its seasonal duties. Christ's Passion is depicted at the top of the southernmost wall, including his descent into hell, where devils are attacking him with blazing cannons.

Below the scenes of the Passion is what attracts most people to this little church: the famous **Dance of Death** (Mrtvaški Ples), or Danse Macabre, fresco showing 11 skeletons leading the same number of people forward to a freshly dug grave, a pick and shovel at the ready. A twelfth skeleton holds open the lid of a coffin. The line-up includes a child, a cripple, a young man, a moneylender (who is trying to bribe his skeletal escort with a purse), a merchant, a monk, a bishop, a cardinal, a queen, a king and a pope. On the cardinal's cassock you can still see graffiti left by a visitor in 1640. The message is as subtle as a sledge hammer: we are all equal in the eyes of God no matter how important we (or others) think we are in this mortal life.

### Getting There & Away

Hrastovlje is 24km southwest of Divača off the main highway to the coast; Koper is 18km to the northwest. Any bus travelling this road in either direction will drop you off just west of Črni Kal, where a massive flyover has cut travel time to the coast substantially, but it's still another 8km south to Hrastovlje. Without a car or bicycle the only sure way of making it to Hrastovlje is by a single daily train.

A train leaves Divača (€2.65) at 4.47am daily, arriving at Hrastovlje station at 8.20am; the church is about 1km to the northwest. The next train of any kind through this backwater is the 7.12pm from Koper (€1.45), which gets into Hrastovlje 15 minutes later. The train carries on to Divača, Postojna and Ljubljana, arriving there at 9.43pm.

If you're driving south to the coast on route No A1, take the first exit after Črni Kal, which is for route No 208 heading south for Buzet and Pula in Croatia. The road to Hrastovlje runs just off it.

## THE COAST

Slovenia's short coast (47km) on the Adriatic Sea (Jadransko Morje) is an area of both history and recreation. Three seaside towns – Koper, Piran and Izola – are full of important Venetian Gothic architecture and art, and there are clean beaches, boats for rent and rollicking clubs.

But the Slovenian coast is not everybody's cup of tea. It is fairly overbuilt, jammed from May to September and the water is not especially

inviting, though there are some decent beaches at Portorož. Also, bear in mind that many of the hotels, camping grounds, tourist offices and restaurants here close or severely curtail their opening times during the off-season, which is from November to March or April.

The Koper wine-producing area is known for its white Malvazija and Chardonnay and red Refošk. Concerts, theatre and dance events take place during the **Primorska Summer Festival** (www.portoroz.si) in Koper, Izola, Piran and Portorož in July and the first half of August.

## KOPER

☎ 05 / pop 23,270 / elev 4m

By far the largest town on the coast, Koper at first glance appears to be a workaday port city that scarcely gives tourism a second thought. It is much less crowded and more down to earth than its ritzy cousin Piran, 17km down the coast, but despite the industry, container ports and high-rise buildings, Koper has managed to preserve its compact medieval centre. Its recreational area, the seaside resort of Ankaran, is to the north across Koper Bay.

## History

Koper has been known by many names during its long and turbulent history. As an island separated from the mainland by a canal, it was called Aegida by ancient Greek sailors, Capris by the Romans (who found it being used to raise goats) and Justinopolis by the Byzantines. The Patriarchs of Aquileia (p22), who took over the town in the 13th century and made it the base for their estates on the Istrian peninsula, renamed it Caput Histriae – Capital of Istria – from which its Italian name Capodistria is derived. They fortified the town and erected some of Koper's most beautiful buildings, including its cathedral and palaces.

Koper's golden age came during the 15th and 16th centuries under the Venetian Republic. Trade increased and Koper became the administrative and judicial centre for much of Istria. It also had a monopoly on salt, which Austria so desperately needed. But when Trieste, 20km to the northeast, was proclaimed a free port in the early 18th century, Koper lost its importance.

Between the world wars Koper was controlled by the Italians, who launched a programme of Italianisation. After the defeat of Italy and Germany in WWII the disputed Adriatic coast area – the so-called Free Territory of Trieste – was divided into two zones. Under the 1954

London Agreement, Zone B and its capital, Koper, went to Yugoslavia while Zone A, including Trieste, fell under Italian jurisdiction.

Up to 25,000 Italian-speaking Istrians fled to Trieste, but 3000 stayed on in Koper and other coastal settlements. Today Koper is the centre of the Italian ethnic community of Slovenia, and Italian is widely spoken here.

## Orientation

The centre of Koper's semicircular Old Town is Titov trg, a marvellous Gothic-Renaissance square with Venetian influences. The marina and tiny city beach are to the northwest. The joint bus and train station is 1.4km to the southeast at Kolodvorska cesta 11.

## Information

### BOOKSHOP

**Mladinska Knjiga** (☎ 663 38 80; Pristaniška ulica 5a; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat)

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Pina** (☎ 627 80 72; Kidričeva ulica 43; adult/student per hr €3.75/1.25; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Fri) Internet café with 10 terminals.

## MONEY

**Banka Koper** (Kidričeva ulica 14; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat)

**Maki Exchange Bureau** (☎ 627 25 44; Pristaniška ulica 13; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 7.30am-1pm Sat)

**Nova Ljubljanska Banka** (Pristaniška ulica 45; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 3.30-5pm Mon-Fri)

## POST

**Post office** (Muzejski trg 3)

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist Information Centre Koper** (☎ 664 64 03; www.koper-tourism.si; Titov trg 3; ☎ 8am-9pm Jul & Aug; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 1-5pm Sun Sep-Jun); summer branch (☎ 663 20 10; Ukmarjev trg 7; ☎ 8am-9pm Jul & Aug) The main centre is in the Praetorian Palace.

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Kompas** (☎ 663 05 82; Pristaniška ulica 17; ☎ 8am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat)

**Palma Travel Agency** (☎ 663 36 60; Pristaniška ulica 21; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

## Sights

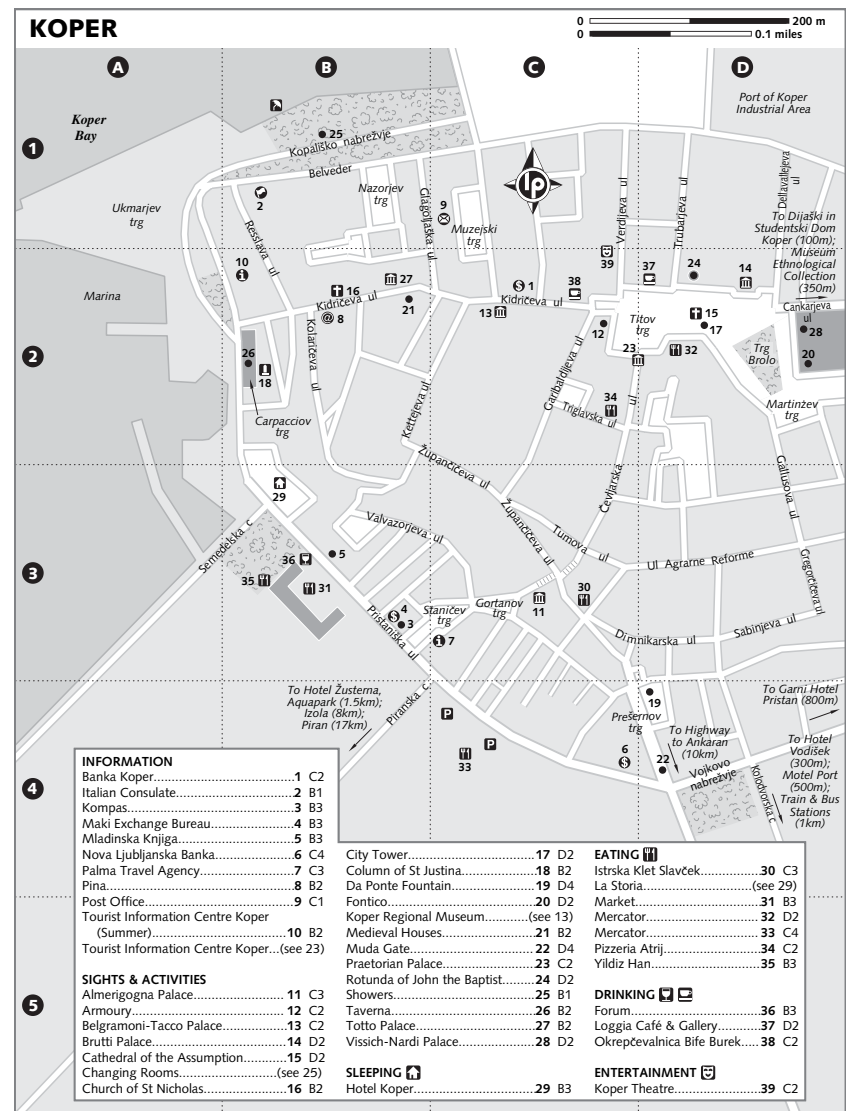
The easiest way to see most everything of interest in Koper's Old Town is simply to walk from the marina on Ukmarjev trg east

along Kidričeva ulica to Titov trg and then south down Čevljarska ulica, taking various detours along the way.

## KIDRIČEVA ULICA

One of the most colourful streets in Koper, Kidričeva ulica starts at Carpacciov trg, where the **Column of St Justina** (Steber Sv Justine) com-

memorates Koper's contribution – a galley – to the Battle of Lepanto in which Turkey was defeated by the European powers in 1571. Nearby is a large Roman covered basin that now serves as a fountain. At the southern end of the square is the arched **Taverna**, a one-time salt warehouse dating from the 15th century.



On the north side of Kidričeva ulica there are several disused churches from the 16th century, including the **Church of St Nicholas** (Cerkev Sv Nikolaja; Kidričeva ulica 30), and the 18th-century baroque **Totto Palace** (Palača Totto; Kidričeva ulica 22a), with a relief of the winged lion of St Mark taken from Koper's medieval fortress. Opposite the palace are some wonderful old **medieval town houses** (Kidričeva ulica 33), with protruding upper storeys painted in a checked red, gold and green pattern.

The **Belgramoni-Tacco Palace** (Palača Belgramoni-Tacco; Kidričeva ulica 19), dating from the early 17th century, houses the **Koper Regional Museum** (Pokrajinski Muzej Koper; ☎ 663 35 70; adult/child €1.70/1.25; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat & Sun), with displays of old maps and photos of the port and coast, Italianate sculptures and paintings dating from the 16th to 18th centuries, and copies of medieval frescoes. Note the wonderful bronze knocker on the front door of Venus arising from a seashell. The museum's **ethnological collection** (etnološka zbirka; ☎ 627 20 28; Gramšijev trg 4; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) is in a 17th-century building in the eastern section of the Old Town.

## TITOV TRG

In almost the exact centre of old Koper, Titov trg is a beautiful square full of interesting buildings; mercifully, like much of the Old Town's core, it is closed to traffic. On the north side is the arcaded Venetian Gothic **Loggia** (Loža; Titov trg 1) built in 1463. It now contains an elegant yet affordable café and the **Loggia Gallery** (Loža Galerija; ☎ 627 41 71; adult/child €1.70/0.85; 🕒 11am-5pm Tue-Sat, 11am-1pm Sun).

To the south, directly opposite, is the gleaming white and recently renovated **Praetorian Palace** (Pretorska Palača; Titov trg 3; admission free; 🕒 8am-9pm Jul & Aug; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 1-5pm Sun Sep-Jun), a mixture of Venetian Gothic and Renaissance styles dating from the 15th century and the very symbol of Koper. It now contains the town hall, with a reconstructed old pharmacy and the main branch of the tourist office on the ground floor and exhibits on the history of Koper and a ceremonial hall for weddings on the 1st floor. The facade of the palace, once the residence of Koper's mayor who was appointed by the doge in Venice, is chock-a-block with medallions, reliefs and coats of arms.

On the square's western side, the **Armoury** (Armeria; Titov trg 4) was a munitions dump four

centuries ago. Opposite is the **Cathedral of the Assumption** (Stolnica Marijinega Vnebovzetja; 🕒 7am-9pm) and its 36m-tall belfry, now called the **City Tower** (Mestni Stolp; adult/child €1.70/1.25; 🕒 10am-1pm & 3-5pm). The cathedral, partly Romanesque and Gothic but mostly dating from the 18th century, has a white classical interior with a feeling of space and light that belies the sombre exterior.

Behind the cathedral to the north is a circular Romanesque **Rotunda of John the Baptist** (Rotunda Janeza Krstnika), a baptistery dating from the second half of the 12th century with a ceiling fresco.

## TRG BROLO

Linked to Titov trg to the east, **Trg Brolo** is a wide and peaceful square of fine old buildings, including the late-18th-century baroque **Brutti Palace** (Palača Brutti; Trg Brolo 1), now the central library, to the north. On the eastern side is the **Fontico** (Fontiko; Trg Brolo 4), a granary where the town's wheat was stored in the late 14th century, and the **Vissich-Nardi Palace** (Palača Vissich-Nardi; Trg Brolo 3), containing government offices.

## ČEVLJARSKA ULICA

Historical **Čevljarska ulica** (Cobbler Street), a narrow pedestrian street, runs south from Titov trg. As you walk under the arch of the Praetorian Palace, have a look to the right. The little hole in the wall with the Italian inscription '*Denontie*' was where anonymous denunciations of officials and others could be made.

At the end of Čevljarska ulica and down the stone steps is the **Almerigogna Palace** (Palača Almerigogna; Gortanov trg 13), a painted Venetian Gothic palace and arguably the most beautiful building in Koper.

The 17th-century Italian family who erected the **fountain** in Prešernov trg, 200m to the southeast, was named Da Ponte; thus it is shaped like a bridge (*ponte* in Italian). At the southern end is the **Muda Gate** (Vrata Muda). Erected in 1516, it's the last of a dozen such entrances to remain standing. On the south side of the archway you'll see the city seal: the face of a youth in a sunburst.

## Activities

Koper's tiny **beach** (☎ 627 18 41; Kopališko nabrežje 1; adult/child €2.30/1.50, after 2pm €1.70/1.25; 🕒 8am-7pm May-Sep), on the northwest edge of the Old

Town, has a small bathhouse with showers and changing rooms, toilet, grassy area for lying in the sun and café-bar. Frankly you'd do better to visit the **Aquapark** (☎ 663 80 00; adult/child all day Mon-Fri €10.50/6.70, Sat & Sun €14.20/8.80; 🕒 9am-9pm), which has 3700 sq metres of open and covered swimming pools, at the Hotel Žusterna. Alternatively, you could travel to Ankaran, about 10km to the north by road, and swim at the sand-and-pebble beach there or in one of the two seawater **swimming pools** (adult all day €9.40, child €6.60, senior & student €8.60; 🕒 8am-9pm May-Sep) at the Adria Ankaran holiday resort (below).

## Sleeping

**Camp Adria Ankaran** (☎ 663 73 50; www.teni.si/adria; Jadranska cesta 25; adult €8.80-11, child €3.50-4.40; 🕒 late Apr-Sep; 📍 📶 🚰) This enormous camping ground (the closest one to Koper) with 500 sites for 1200 guests in Ankaran extends over 7 hectares on the eastern side of the Adria Ankaran holiday resort and down to the sea. There is any number of sporting facilities, and the camping charge includes use of the two swimming pools.

**Motel Port** (☎ 639 32 60; motel.port@siol.net; Ankaranska cesta 7; dm €14, rm for up to 3/4 €46/65; 📍 📶 🚰) Hidden on the top floor of a Mondrianesque shopping centre south of the Old Town, this place has excellent en suite rooms as well as HI-affiliated dormitory rooms, but its location beside a truck terminal results in a constant traffic rumble.

**Dijaški in Študentski Dom Koper** (☎ 662 62 50; www.d-dom.kp.edu.si in Slovene; Cankarjeva ulica 5; dm €15; 🕒 late Jun-Aug) This modern 350-bed five-storey dormitory about 150m east of Trg Brolo rents beds in triple rooms primarily in summer. However, there are about three rooms available year-round.

Kompas (p164) and the Palma Travel Agency (p164) can arrange **private rooms** (s €12.50-14.60, d €20.85-25) and **apartments** (apt for 2 €29.20-35.40, apt for 4 €43.80-54.20). Most rooms and apartments are in the new town beyond the train station, however.

## MIDRANGE

**Hotel Vodišek** (☎ 639 24 68; www.hotel-vodisek.com; Kolodvorska cesta 2; s/d/tr/q €40/60/75/88; 📍 📶 🚰) This tiny hotel with 32 reasonably priced rooms is in a shopping centre halfway between the Old Town and the train and bus stations. Use of bicycles is free for guests.

**Garni Hotel Pristan** (☎ 614 40 00; www.pristan-koper.si; Ferrarska ulica 30; s €55-61, d €82-91, ste €74-108; 📍 📶 🚰) This 16-room property in a modern boat-shaped building above a shopping mall about 700m east of Titov trg is close to many of the large Slovenian and international shipping companies based in Koper and is most suited for business travellers.

## TOP END

**Hotel Žusterna** (☎ 663 80 00; www.terme-catez.si; Istrska cesta 67; s €60-68.50, d €99-116; 📍 📶) This 117-room sister-hotel of the Koper, about 1.5km to the west on the main coastal road, is not convenient for touring the Old Town, but its Aquapark (left) is a major draw for those seeking recreation.

**Hotel Koper** (☎ 610 05 00; www.terme-catez.si; Pristaniška ulica 3; s €60, d €100-110; 📍 📶 🚰) This pleasant, 65-room property on the edge of the historic Old Town is the only really central hotel in town. Rates include entry to the Aquapark at the Hotel Žusterna.

## Eating

**Okrepčevalnica Bife Burek** (☎ 271 347; Kidričeva ulica 8; snacks & light bites €1.50-3.50; 🕒 7am-10pm) This place serves good-value *burek* and pizza slices, which you can carry to Titov trg and eat there.

**Istrska Klet Slavček** (☎ 627 67 29; Župančičeva ulica 39; dishes €3.35-10.85; 🕒 7am-10pm Mon-Fri) The 'Istrian Cellar', situated in the 18th-century Carli Palace, is one of the most colourful places for a meal in the Old Town. Filling set lunches go for less than €10, and there's Malvazija and Teran wine available straight from the barrel.

**Pizzerija Atrij** (☎ 626 28 03; Triglavska ulica 2; pizzas €4.20-6.05; 🕒 9am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat) This old favourite down an alleyway no wider than your average fullback's shoulder spread serves decent pizzas and has a small back garden.

**La Storia** (☎ 031-769 079; Pristaniška ulica 3; starters €4.80-6.70, mains €5-10; 🕒 11am-9pm Mon-Fri, noon-5pm Sat & Sun) This Italian-style trattoria in the same building as the Hotel Koper focuses on pasta and salads and has outside seating in the warmer months. The salad bar (small/large €2.30/3.35) is good value.

**Yildiz Han** (☎ 626 14 60; Pristaniška ulica 2; starters €2.70-5, mains €6.00-10.20; 🕒 noon-midnight) 'Star House', a branch of a similarly named establishment in Ljubljana, has all our Turkish favourites, including *sigara böreği* (filo parcels

filled with cheese), *yaprak dolmasi* (stuffed vine leaves) and kebabs.

There's an outdoor **market** (Pristaniška ulica; ☞ 7am-2pm Mon-Sat) in the open courtyard of the shopping centre. A short distance to the southeast is a huge **Mercator** (Pristaniška ulica 8; ☞ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 7am-1pm Sat) supermarket with a smaller **Mercator** (Titov trg 2; ☞ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 7am-1pm Sat, 8am-noon Sun) in the Old Town open on Sunday.

## Drinking

**Loggia Café** (☎ 621 32 13; Titov trg 1; ☞ 7.30am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun) This lovely café in the exquisite 15th-century Loggia is the best vantage point for watching the crowds on Titov trg.

**Forum** (☎ 627 20 94; Pristaniška ulica 2; ☞ 7am-10pm) This café-bar at the northern side of the market, next to the Yildiz Han Turkish restaurant and facing a little park and the sea, is a popular local hangout.

## Entertainment

**Koper Theatre** (Gledališče Koper; ☎ 663 13 81; Verdijeva ulica 3) Just north of Titov trg, the city's theatre stages plays as well as concerts and dance performances.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Although train departures are limited, the bus service to and from Koper is good. Buses go to Izola, Strunjan, Piran (€2.60, ½ hour, 18km) and Portorož every half-hour on weekdays and every 40 minutes at the weekend. The buses start at the train and bus station and stop at the market on Pristaniška ulica before continuing on to Izola. Up to 15 buses daily make the run to Ljubljana (€10.35, 1¼ to 2½ hours, 120km).

Buses to Trieste (€3, one hour, 23km, up to 13 a day) run along the coast via Ankaran and Muggia weekdays only. Destinations in Croatia include Rijeka (€7.60, two hours, 84km, 10.10am Monday to Friday), Rovinj (€11.10, 129km, three hours, 3.55pm daily July and August) via Poreč (€8, two hours, 88km), plus two or three to Poreč only, notably at 8.30am Monday to Friday.

### TRAIN

Koper is on a minor rail line linking it with Ljubljana (2¼ hours, 153km) via Postojna and Divača. There are local services (€7.30, 2½ hours) at 10.03am and 7.12pm and faster

IC services (€8.70, 2¼ hours) at 5.55am and 2.45pm. To get to Buzet and Pula in Croatia from Koper, you must change at Hrpelje-Kozina (€4, 30 minutes, 37km, five daily) for any of three trains a day.

## Getting Around

Local buses 1, 2 and 3 go from the main bus and train stations to the eastern edge of Cankarjeva ulica in the Old Town, with a stop near Muda Gate.

Parking in much of the Old Town is restricted – or banned altogether – between 6am and 8pm. Generally, you must leave your vehicle in the pay car parks along Pristaniška ulica.

To order a taxi in Koper ring ☎ 041-554 770 or ☎ 031 386 000.

## IZOLA

☎ 05 / pop 10,425 / elev 2m

Izola, a somewhat scruffy fishing port 7km southwest of Koper, is the poor relation among the historical towns on the Slovenian coast. As a result, it is often bypassed by foreign visitors. But Izola does have a certain Venetian charm, a few narrow old streets, and some nice waterfront bars and restaurants where you might tarry for a while.

## History

The Romans built a port called Haliaetum at Simon's Bay (Simonov Zaliv) southwest of the Old Town, and under the control of Venice in the Middle Ages, Izola – at that time an island (*isola* is Italian for 'island') – flourished, particularly in the trading of olives, fish and its celebrated wine. But a devastating plague in the 16th century and the ascendancy of Trieste as the premier port in the northern Adriatic destroyed the town's economic base. During the period of the Illyrian Provinces in the early 19th century, the French pulled down the town walls and used them to fill the channel separating the island from the mainland. Many of the medieval churches and buildings were also razed at that time.

After several fish canneries were opened at Izola in the 20th century, the town began to industrialise. It remains the country's foremost fishing port, but Izola's glory days seem a million years ago as you walk through the narrow streets whose houses look like they could topple over in the slightest of winds.

## Orientation

Almost everything of a practical nature is located around Trg Republike. Buses stop in front of the Bela Skale travel agency at Cankarjev drevored 2 on the square's south-eastern edge. To reach the Old Town and its main square, Veliki trg, walk north along the waterfront promenade called Sončno nabrežje.

## Information

**Abanka** (Pittonijeva ulica 1; ☞ 9am-1pm & 3.30-7pm Mon-Fri) In a side street next to the bus stops.

**Banka Koper** (Drevored 1 Maja 5; ☞ 8.30am-noon, 3-5pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-noon Sat)

**Post office** (Cankarjev drevored 1)

**Tourist Information Centre Izola** (TIC; ☎ 640 10 50; tic.izola@izola.si; Sončno nabrežje 4; ☞ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun Jun-Sep; 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat Oct-May)

## Sights & Activities

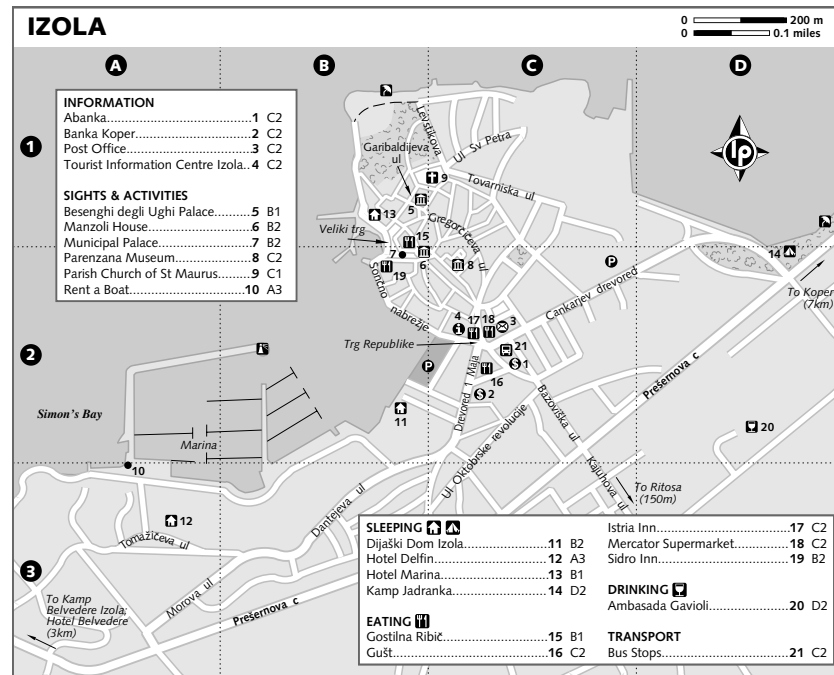
Izola isn't overly endowed with important historical sights; Napoleon and his boys took care of that. Those that survive include the striking, orange-striped 16th-century **Parish**

**Church of St Maurus** (Župnijska Cerkev Sv Mavra; Garibaldijeva ulica) and its detached bell tower on the hill above the town, the **Municipal Palace** (Mestna Palača; Veliki trg), which now houses offices of the local council, and the renovated Venetian Gothic **Manzioli House** (Manziolijev trg) behind the Municipal Palace, which was built in 1470 and was the residence of an Istrian chronicler in the 16th century.

Izola's most beautiful building, however, is the rococo **Besenghi degli Ughi Palace** (mr Gregorčičeva ulica & Ulica Giordano Bruno) below the church, which is sadly no longer open to the public. Built between 1775 and 1781, the mansion has windows and balconies adorned with stuccos and wonderful wrought-iron grilles painted light blue.

Izola can now make its superlative claim to fame with the **Parenzana Museum** (☎ 640 10 50, 041-613 299; 1st fl, Ulica Alme Vivode 3; admission free; ☞ 9am-noon & 6-9pm Tue-Sun), a branch of the Pomorski Museum Sergej Mašera in Piran. It has both train and ship models and is the largest such collection in the world.

There are pebble **beaches** to the north and southeast of the Old Town, but the best one



is at **Simon's Bay** about 1.5km to the southwest. It has a grassy area for sunbathing.

The *Prince of Venice* is a 39m high-speed catamaran that makes day trips between Izola and Venice and can be used recreationally or as a way to get to or from Italy. See p291 for details.

You can rent speedboats from **Rent a Boat** (041-618 099, 041-348 077; 8-10am & 6-8pm) at the marina. Bookings by telephone can be made between 8am and 2pm Monday to Friday.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

**Kamp Jadranka** (☎ 640 23 00; Polje cesta 8; per person €6.30-8.40; ☎ Apr-Oct; 📍) This small site on the waterfront 1km east of the Old Town is just off the busy coastal road and fills up quickly in summer.

**Kamp Belvedere Izola** (☎ 660 51 00, 660 41 00; www.belvedere.si; Dobrava ulica 1a; adult €6.50-8.50, child €3.80-5; ☎ Apr-Sep; 📍) This 3-hectare camping ground on a bluff 3km west of Izola has wonderful views of the town and the Adriatic and a large swimming pool.

**Dikaški Dom Izola** (☎ 662 17 40; www.s-sgtsi.kp.edus.si in Slovene; Prekomorskih Brigad ulica 7; dm €20; ☎ Jul & Aug) This 174-bed hostel in the Srednja Gostinjska in Turistična Sola (Middle School of Catering and Tourism) overlooks the marina and welcomes foreign guests in summer only.

### MIDRANGE

**Hotel Belvedere** (☎ 660 51 00; www.belvedere.si; Dobrava ulica 1a; s €39-64, d €52-85, apt for 2 €46-79, apt for 4 €68-100; 📍) As well as its singles and doubles, this large hotel beside the Belvedere camping ground 3km west of town has apartments for between two and four people, although some have to be booked for at least three nights.

**Hotel Delfin** (☎ 660 70 00; www.hotel-delfin.si; Tomažičeva ulica 10; s €39-50.50, d €65-88; 📍) Hard by Izola's marina complex, the Delfin is a bit out of the centre but still near the water. It's a pleasant enough place on a hill about 1km southwest of Trg Republike and has its own swimming pool. But it's a big place, with 225 rooms, and caters largely to tour groups.

**Hotel Marina** (☎ 660 41 00; www.belvedere.si; Veliki trg 11; s €42-81, d €56-108, ste €102-148; 📍) The 52-room Hotel Marina couldn't be any more central: it's right on the main square and fronting the harbour. Rates depend on

the season and whether your room faces the water and has a balcony. There's a new and very attractive spa and wellness centre here.

## Eating

Izola is the best place on the coast to enjoy a seafood meal. Be careful when you order, however, and ask the exact price of the fish. As seafood is sold by decagram (usually abbreviated as *dag* on menus), you might end up eating (and paying) a lot more than you expected. And be sure to have a glass of Malvazija, the pale-yellow local white that is light and reasonably dry.

**Istri Inn** (☎ 641 80 50, 031-384 243; Trg Republike 1; dishes €3-5.50; ☎ 6am-midnight) This place on the main road into the Old Town has good-value set lunches (€5.50) and stays open most of the day. Try the gnocchi with *pršut* in a red Refošk wine sauce.

**Gušt** (☎ 041-650 333; Drevored 1 Maja 3; pizza & pasta €4.40-6; ☎ 8am-1am) This *picerija* and *špageterija* opposite the Banka Koper has decent pizza, pasta and salads (from €3).

**Sidro Inn** (☎ 641 47 11; Sončno nabrežje 24; starters €5.85-10, mains €6.30-20; ☎ 8am-midnight) One of Izola's best restaurants, Sidro is an old standby on the waterfront just up from the tourist office.

**Gostilna Ribič** (☎ 641 83 13; Veliki trg 3; starters €4.20-8.75, mains €8-17.50; ☎ 8am-1am) Another of the town's top restaurants, this is an eatery on the inner harbour that's much loved by locals and specialises in turbot.

There's a **Mercator** (Trg Republike 4; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 7am-1pm Sat) supermarket opposite the bus stops.

## Entertainment

**Ambasada Gavioli** (☎ 641 82 12; www.ambasada-gavioli.com; Industrijska cesta; ☎ midnight-6am Sat) In the industrial area southeast of the port, the Ambasada Gavioli still holds the crown as queen of Slovenia's rave clubs.

## Getting There & Away

Frequent buses between Koper (€1.70, 15 minutes, 6km) and Piran (€1.70, 20 minutes, 9.5km) and Portorož go via Izola. Other destinations from Izola (via Koper) include Ljubljana (€9.60, 2½ hours, 105km, five a day, with up to nine in July and August) and Nova Gorica (€7.60, 1¼ hours, 84km, one or two a day).

International routes include six buses a day (five on Saturday) to Trieste (€2.10, 40 minutes, 23km) in Italy and two departures to Umag (€3.70, one hour, 41km) and Pula (€8.50, 2½ hours, 94km) at 2.12pm daily and at 7.42am Monday to Saturday. There's also a daily bus to Zagreb (€22, 6½ hours, 243km) at 4.44am in Croatia.

For getting to/from Italy by boat see p291.

## Getting Around

From June to August a minibus does a continuous loop from the Belvedere Izola holiday village west of the Old Town to Simon's Bay, Izola Marina, Trg Republike and the Jadranka camping ground and back.

Order a taxi in Izola on ☎ 040-602 602.

You can rent bicycles at **Ritosa** (☎ 640 12 40; Kajuhova ulica 28; per day €10; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat).

## STRUNJAN

☎ 05 / pop 560 / elev up to 116m

For centuries past the people who lived at Strunjan, a peninsula halfway between Izola and Piran, were engaged in making salt; you'll see the disused pans spread out before you on the descent along the main road (route No 111) from the Belvedere tourist complex. Today the area is protected, and this is because of the expanded 429-hectare **Strunjan Country Park** (Krajinski Park Strunjan), which contains the saltpans and the contiguous **Stjuža Lagoon**, both classified as natural monuments.

Although there has been much development around Strunjan Bay to the southwest, much of the peninsula is remarkably unspoiled. It is bounded by a high cliff, **Cape Ronek** (Rtič Ronek; 116m), at its northernmost point; below it is Moon Bay (Mesečec Zaliv), the prettiest inlet on the coast, which can be seen from the footpath along the cape.

The **Strunjan Health Resort** (Zdravilišče Strunjan; ☎ 676 41 00; www.krka-zdravilica.si; Strunjan 148; s €50-55, d €72-85, ste €100-110) has all types of accommodation on offer, but the **Salinera** (☎ 676 31 00; www.hotelji-piran.si; Strunjan 14; 📍) is a new resort on the opposite side of the bay, with a 101-room hotel as well as villas and apartments is a lot nicer. Along with a beach, the resort has an indoor pool filled with heated sea water as well as tennis courts and

other sport facilities, including the curiously named Bioenergy Park (Bioenergijski Park) with 12 'energy points' or *chakras* meant to stimulate and improve the metabolism. At the resort's wellness centre much use is made of *fango* – the salty mud found nearby for beauty and therapeutic purposes. **Avtokamp Strunjan** (☎ 678 20 76; amd-piran@siol.net; per person €6.70-9.20) has an area of 1.5 hectares and space for 500 campers.

Frequent bus services link Strunjan with Izola (€1.70, 15 minutes, 6km), Koper, Piran (€1.30, 10 minutes, 3.5km) and Portorož.

## PIRAN

☎ 05 / pop 4050 / elev 23m

Picturesque Piran (Pirano in Italian), sitting at the tip of a narrow peninsula, is everyone's favourite town on the Slovenian coast. Its Old Town is a gem of Venetian Gothic architecture and full of narrow atmospheric streets, but it can be a mob scene at the height of summer.

## History

Piran has been settled since ancient times, and it is thought that the town's name comes from the Greek word for fire (*pyr*). In those days, fires were lit at Punta, the very tip of the peninsula, to guide ships to the port at Aegida (now Koper). The Romans established a settlement here called Piranum after their victory over the Illyrians and Celts. They in turn were followed by the early Slavs, the Byzantines, the Franks and the Patriarchs of Aquileia.

Venetian rule began in the late 13th century and lasted in one form or another for more than 500 years. Unlike Koper and Izola, whose citizens rose up against the Venetians time and time again, Piran threw its full support behind Venice in its struggles with Aquileia and Genoa. (The fact that Venice was Piran's biggest customer for the salt it produced was certainly an incentive.) The Venetian period was the town's most fruitful, and many of its beautiful buildings and its fortifications were erected then.

Economic stagnation under Austrian and then Italian rule from the early 19th century until after WWII meant that Piran was able to preserve – at a price to the affluence of its citizens – its medieval character. Today it is one of the best preserved historical towns anywhere on the Adriatic and is protected in its entirety as a cultural monument.



## Orientation

Piran's Old Town rests on the westernmost point of Slovenian Istria. Strunjan Bay lies to the north; Piran Bay and Portorož, Slovenia's largest beach resort, are located to the south.

Tartinijev trg, north of Piran Harbour and the small marina, is the centre of the Old Town today, but in the Middle Ages the focal point was Trg 1 Maja (also written Prvomajski trg) to the northwest. The bus station is along the waterfront, about 350m south of Tartinijev trg, at Dantejeva ulica 6.

## Information

**Banka Koper** (Tartinijev trg 12; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat)

**Cyber Point Piran** (☎ 671 00 22; <http://cyberpoint.kosp-cscp.si> in Slovene; 4th fl, Studentek Bldg, Zupančičeva ulica 14; per hr €4.20; ☎ 1-9pm Mon-Fri) Internet access on five terminals.

**Maona Tourist Agency** (☎ 673 45 20; [www.maona.si](http://www.maona.si); Cankarjevo nabrežje 7; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 5-7pm Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) Unstintingly helpful travel agency organising everything from private rooms to activities and cruises.

**Post office** (Cankarjevo nabrežje 5)

**Tourist Information Center Piran** (☎ 673 02 20; [www.piran.si](http://www.piran.si); Tartinijev trg; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 3-9pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 10am-5pm mid-Sep-mid-Jun) In the impressive Municipal Hall.

**Trafika** (Tartinijev trg 15; ☎ 6.30am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) Sells English-language newspapers beside the Hotel Tartini.

**Turist Biro** (☎ 673 25 09; [www.turistbiro-ag.si](http://www.turistbiro-ag.si); Tomažičeva ulica 3; ☎ 10am-1pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat & Sun) Opposite the Hotel Piran.

## Sights

### SERGEJ MAŠERA MARITIME MUSEUM

Located in the **Gabrieli Palace** (Palača Gabrielle; Cankarjevo nabrežje 3) on the waterfront, this **museum** (Pomorski Muzej Sergej Mašera; ☎ 671 00 40; [www.pommuz-pi.si](http://www.pommuz-pi.si); adult/child €2.50/2, with guide €3.35/3; ☎ 9am-noon & 6-9pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 3-6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun) is named in honour of a Slovenian naval commander whose ship was blown up off the Croatian coast in WWI. The mid-19th-century palace, with its lovely moulded ceilings, parquet floors and marble staircase, is worth a visit in itself.

The museum's excellent exhibits focus on sea, sailing and salt-making – three things that have been crucial to Piran's development over the centuries. The salt pans at Sečovlje, southeast of Portorož, get most of the attention on the ground floor. There are some old photographs showing salt workers going about their duties in coolie-like straw hats, as well as a wind-powered salt pump and little wooden weights in the form of circles and diamonds that were used to weigh salt during the Venetian Republic.

The antique model ships upstairs are very fine (especially the 17th-century galleon and 18th-century corvette); other rooms are filled with old figureheads and weapons, including some very lethal-looking blunderbusses. The folk paintings are ex-voto offerings that were placed by sailors on the altar of the pilgrimage church at Strunjan for protection against shipwreck.

### TARTINIJEV TRG

The **statue** of the nattily dressed gentleman in Tartinijev trg, an oval-shaped, marble-paved square that was the inner harbour until it was filled in 1864, is that of local boy composer and violinist Giuseppe Tartini (1692–1770). To the east is the **Church of St Peter** (Cerkev Sv Petra; 1818), which contains the restored 14th-century **Piran Crucifix**. Across from the church is **Tartini House** (Tartinijeva Hiša; ☎ 663 35 70; Kajuhova ulica 12; adult/child €1/0.65; ☎ 9am-noon & 6-9pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, 11am-noon & 5-6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun), the composer's birthplace and popular concert venue.

One of Piran's most eye-catching structures is the red 15th-century Gothic **Venetian House**

(Benečanka; Tartinijev trg 4), with its tracery windows and balcony in the northeast of the square. There is a story attached to the stone relief between the two windows of a lion with a banner in its mouth and the Latin inscription *Lassa pur dir* above it. A wealthy merchant from Venice fell in love with a beautiful local girl, but she soon became the butt of local gossips. To shut them up (and keep his lover happy), the merchant built her this little palace complete with a reminder for his loose-lipped neighbours: 'Let them talk'.

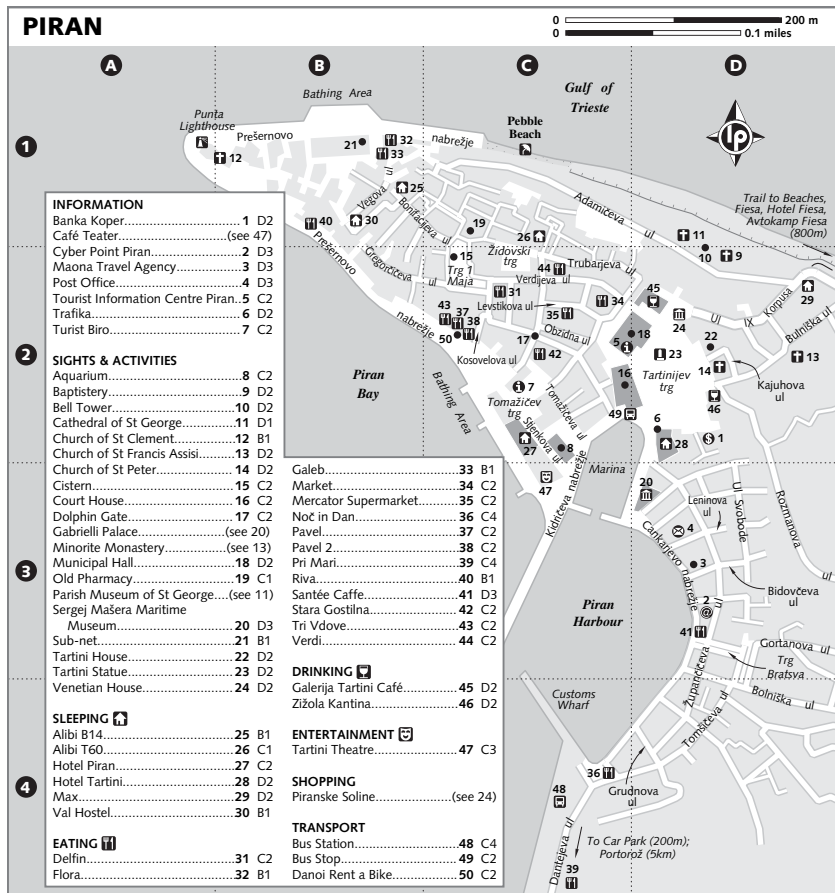
The **Court House** (Sodnijska Palača; Tartinijev trg 1), which has two 17th-century doors, and the porticoed 19th-century **Municipal Hall** (Občinska Palača; Tartinijev trg 2) are to the south. The **Aquarium** (Akvarij; ☎ 673 25 72; Kidričevo nabrežje 4; adult/child €2.50/1.70; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-7pm late Mar-mid-Jun, Sep-mid-Oct, 9am-10pm mid-Jun-Aug), about 100m south of the square along the harbour, might be small, but there's a tremendous variety of sea life packed into its two-dozen tanks

### CATHEDRAL OF ST GEORGE & SURROUNDS

The Renaissance and baroque **Cathedral of St George** (Stolna Cerkev Sv Jurija; Adamičeva ulica 2) stands on a ridge north of Tartinijev trg above the sea. To the east runs a 200m stretch of the 15th-century **town walls** complete with loopholes. They once ran from the sea all the way to the harbour, and seven crenellated towers are still intact.

The church was founded in 1344 and was rebuilt in baroque style in 1637. It is currently undergoing a massive rebuilding, and visitors are allowed only into the choir to view the magnificent marble altar and star-vaulted ceiling. Church plate, paintings and an unusual statue of St George slaying the dragon, with a woman curiously holding the monster by a lead, can be seen in the attached **Parish Museum of St George** (Župnijski Muzej Sv Jurija; ☎ 673 34 40; admission €1; ☎ 11am-5pm), which contains church plate, paintings and a **lapidary** in the crypt.

The cathedral's freestanding **bell tower** (zvonik; adult/child €1.25/0.85; ☎ 11am-5pm), built in 1608, was clearly modelled on the campanile of San Marco in Venice and can be climbed daily for excellent views of the town and harbour. Next to it, the octagonal 17th-century **baptistry** (*krstilnica*) contains altars, paintings and a Roman sarcophagus from the 2nd century later used as a baptismal font.



On your way up to Tartinijev trg are the **Minorite Monastery** (Minoritski Samostan; ☎ 673 44 17; Bolniška ulica 20) with a wonderful cloister and the **Church of St Francis Assisi** (Cerkve Sv Frančiška Asiškega) built originally in the early 14th century but enlarged and renovated over the centuries. Inside are ceiling frescoes, a giant clam shell for donations and the Tartini family's burial plot.

### TRG 1 MAJA & PUNTA

Beyond the market north of Tartinijev trg, medieval homes have been built into an ancient defensive wall along Obzidna ulica, which passes under the 15th-century **Dolphin Gate** (Dolfinova Vrata). **Židovski trg**, the centre of Jewish life in Piran in the Middle Ages, is about 100m to the northwest of here.

**Trg 1 Maja** (1st May Square) may sound like a socialist parade ground, but it was the centre of Piran until the Middle Ages, when it was called Stari trg (Old Square). The surrounding streets are a maze of pastel-coloured overhanging houses, vaulted passages and arcaded courtyards. The square is surrounded by interesting baroque buildings, including the former town **pharmacy** (lekarna; Trg 1 Maja 2) on the north side (now the Fontana restaurant). In the centre of the square is a large baroque **cistern** (*vodnjak*) that was built in the late 18th century to store fresh water; rainwater from the surrounding roofs flowed into it through the fish borne by the stone *putti* cherubs in two corners.

**Punta**, the historical 'point' of Piran, still has a **lighthouse**, but today's is small and modern. Just behind it, however, the round, serrated tower of the **Church of St Clement**, originally built in the 13th century but altered 500 years later, evokes the ancient beacon from which Piran got its name.

### Activities

#### DIVING

**Sub-net** (☎ 673 22 18; www.sub-net.si; Prešernovo nabrežje 24; shore/boat dive €25/40; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sun-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-7pm Sat) organises shore and boat-guided dives, gives PADI open-water courses (around €150) and rents equipment. Don't expect Red Sea-style corals in these parts, though; the most unusual underwater sight hereabouts is the wreck of a WWII seaplane in Portorož Bay.

#### SWIMMING

Piran has several 'beaches' – rocky areas along Prešernovo nabrežje – where you might get

your feet wet. They are a little better on the north side near Punta, but as long as you've come this far keep walking eastward on the paved path for just under 1km to **Fiesa**, which has a very small but clean beach.

### Tours

Maona Tourist Agency (p172) and several other travel agencies in Piran and Portorož can book you on any number of cruises – from a loop that takes in the towns along the coast to day-long excursions to Brioni National Park and Rovinj in Croatia, or Venice and Trieste in Italy.

The large, sleek **Marconi** (☎ 673 45 20; www.maona.si; ☎ 10.30am Tue, 10am Fri & Sun late May-Sep), which can carry up to 400 passengers, cruises down the Istrian coast of Croatia as far as the Brioni Islands (adult/child return €59/29.50) and the national park there on Friday, with a stop at Rovinj (return €28/14). The boat leaves at 10am and returns to Piran at 6.35pm. On Tuesday it does only as far as Rovinj and back and on Sunday to Poreč (€28/14), also with a stop at Rovinj.

For day trips to Venice from Piran with Venezia Lines see p291.

### Festivals & Events

The **Tartini Festival** (www.tartinifestival.org) of classical music takes place in venues throughout Piran, including the vaulted cloister of the Minorite monastery, in mid-August.

### Sleeping

#### BUDGET

**Avtokamp Fiesa** (☎ 674 62 30, 031-487 255; autocamp.fiesa@siol.net; adult €8.35-10, child €2.50; ☎ May-Sep; 📍) The closest camping ground to Piran is at Fiesa, 4km by road but less than 1km if you follow the coastal trail east of the Church of St George. It's in a quiet valley by two small, protected ponds and close to the beach, but it becomes very crowded in summer. There are snack bars, a café and a small supermarket (open 8am to 2pm) here.

**Val Hostel** (☎ 673 25 55; www.hostel-val.com; Gregorčičeva ulica 38a; with/without HI card €20/24 Jun-Aug, €18/23 Sep-May; ☎ 📍) This central partially renovated hostel on the corner of Vegova ulica has 22 rooms (56 beds) with shared shower, free internet access, kitchen and washing machine. It's a great favourite with backpackers, but there's a surcharge of €2 for one night's stay in the high season.

### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Alibi B14** (☎ 031-363 666; www.alibi.si; Bonifacijeva ulica 14; per person €20-25; ☎ 📍) The most welcome arrival on the budget/mid-range accommodation scene in Piran in years is this upbeat and colourful four-floor party hostel with six rooms, each with four to six beds, kitchenette and bath. It's in an ancient townhouse on a narrow street, and there's a washing machine and free internet access. Even better is its sister-hostel, the more subdued **Alibi T60** (Trubarjeva ulica 60; per person €30; ☎ 📍 📍) to the east with a fully equipped double (TV, fridge and bathroom) on each of five floors served by a vintage wooden staircase. The view of the terrace from the top room is priceless. Reception is at Alibi B14.

**Private rooms** (s €15.85-25, d €23-35) and **apartments** (apt for 2 €36.30-44.20, for 4 €56-72) are available through Maona Tourist Agency (p172) and Tourist Biro (p173) throughout the year, but the biggest choice is available during summer.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Max** (☎ 673 34 36, 041-692 928; www.maxpiran.com; Ulica IX Korpusa 26; s/d €50/60; ☎ 📍) Piran's most romantic accommodation has just six rooms, each named rather than numbered, in a delightful, very pink townhouse just down from the cathedral.

**Hotel Fiesa** (☎ 671 22 00, 031-619286; www.hotel-fiesa.com; Fiesa 57; s €53-70, d €75-98; 📍) Although not in Piran itself, this 22-room very pink hotel overlooking the sea near the Avtokamp Fiesa camping ground is unquestionably one of the most atmospheric places to stay in the area. Among the best sea-facing rooms are Nos 1, 2, 7, 8 and 9, all of which have balconies.

**Hotel Tartini** (☎ 671 10 00; www.hotel-tartini-piran.com; Tartinijev trg 15; s €48-76, d €70-104, ste €122-185; 📍 📍 📍) This attractive, 45-room property faces Tartinijev trg and manages to catch a few sea views itself. The staff are especially friendly and helpful.

**Hotel Piran** (☎ 676 21 00; www.hoteli-piran.si; Stjenkova ulica 1; s €57-84, d €70-123, ste €131-181; 📍 ☎ 📍 📍) One of Piran's only two central hotels, the Hotel Piran, with 80 rooms and 10 apartments, is right on the water.

### Eating

**Santeè Caffè** (☎ 051-309 980; Cankarjevo nabrežje 11; ☎ 7am-midnight) This hyper-friendly place has sandwiches (€1.25 to €3.10) and salads (€4.20) and walls painted in colours as vivid as its excellent ice creams.

**Flora** (☎ 673 12 58; Prešernovo nabrežje 26; pizza €3.35-5.85; ☎ 8am-1am Jul & Aug, 10am-10pm Sep-Jun) The terrace of this simple pizzeria east of the Punta lighthouse has uninterrupted views of the Adriatic.

**Stara Gostilna** (☎ 673 31 65, 040-640 240; Savudrijska ulica 2; starters €4.20-7, mains €5.85-14.60; ☎ 9am-11pm) This delightful bistro in the Old Town serves both meat and fish dishes and has some of the best and most welcoming service in town.

**Pri Mari** (☎ 673 47 35, 041-616 488; Dantjeva ulica 17; starters €3.75-8.35, mains €6.25-14.60; ☎ noon-10pm Tue-Sat, noon-6pm Sun) This very stylish restaurant south of the bus station makes an ambitious (and successful) attempt at combining Mediterranean and Slovenian food.

There's an outdoor **market** (Zelenjavni trg; ☎ 7am-2pm Mon-Sat) in the small square behind the Municipal Hall. There's a small **Mercator** (Levstikova ulica 3; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 7am-1pm Sat, 8-11am Sun) supermarket in the Old Town and a **Noč in Dan** (☎ 671 57 52; Tomšičeva ulica 41; ☎ 7am-midnight daily) branch opposite the bus station.

One of Piran's attractions is its plethora of fish restaurants, especially along Prešernovo nabrežje, though don't expect any bargains. Most of them – including **Pavel** (☎ 674 71 01; Gregorčičeva ulica 3; ☎ 11am-11pm), **Pavel 2** (☎ 674 71 02; Kosovelova ulica 1; ☎ 11am-11pm) and **Tri Vdove** (Three Widows; ☎ 673 02 90; Prešernovo nabrežje 4; ☎ 11am-10pm) – cater to the tourist trade and are over-priced; expect to pay about €25 per person with house wine. Instead, try any of the following fish restaurants, which are very popular with Piranites:

**Verdi** (☎ 673 27 37; Verdijeve ulica 20; starters €6.30-12.50, mains €4-16.70) The tables at this place in the back streets of the Old Town spill out onto the nearby square on warm summer days. The seafood pasta is excellent.

**Delfin** (☎ 673 24 48; Kosovelova ulica 4; mains €6.30-16.70; ☎ 11am-11pm Mon-Fri, 11am-midnight Sat & Sun) This restaurant is housed in a 15th-century house facing Trg 1 Maja.

**Riva** (☎ 673 22 25; Gregorčičeva ulica 46; starters €5-8.35, mains €8.35-16.70; ☎ 9am-midnight) Our new favourite (and very classy) seafood restaurant on Prešernovo nabrežje has the best sea views and décor. There's a pizzeria (pizzas €4.20 to €5.40) next door for ichthyophobes.

**Galeb** (☎ 673 32 25; Pusterla ulica 5; meals from €14.60; ☎ 11am-4pm & 6pm-midnight Wed-Mon) An excellent family-run restaurant, Galeb is east of the Punta lighthouse and nonsmoking throughout.

## Drinking & Entertainment

**Galerija Tartini Café** (☎ 673 33 81; Tartinijev trg 3; ☎ 7am-midnight) This café in a classical building next to the Venetian House is a wonderful place for a cup of something hot and a slice of something sweet.

**Café Teater** (☎ 051-310 102, 041-638 933; Stjenkova ulica 1; ☎ 7am-3am Mon-Fri, 9am-3am Sat & Sun), With a waterfront terrace and antique furnishings, this is where anyone who's anyone in Piran can be found.

**Žizola Kantina** (Tartinijev trg 10; ☎ 9am-2am) This simple, nautically themed bar has tables right on the main and is popular with Piranites.

**Tartini Theatre** (Gledališče Tartini; ☎ 676 67 00; Kidričevo nabrežje) Built in 1910 and seating 300 spectators, this theatre hosts a program of classical concerts throughout the year.

## Shopping

**Piranske Soline** (☎ 673 31 10; Tartinijev trg 4; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun) In the Venetian House, this place sells bath sea salts and other products from Sečovlje (p180).

## Getting There & Away

From the bus station buses head for Koper (€2.60, 30 minutes, 18km) via Izola every 20 to 40 minutes. Other destinations that can be reached from here include Ljubljana (€11.70, 2½ to three hours, 140km, eight daily) via Divača and Postojna, and Nova Gorica (€9, 2¼ hours, 97km, one at 2.20pm Monday to Friday year-round and another at 4.50pm daily in July and August) and Sečovlje (€1.70, 15 minutes, 9.5km, eight a day).

Some five buses go to Trieste (€4.60, 1¼ hours, 36km) in Italy on weekdays only, and there is a daily departure for the Croatian capital Zagreb (€23, six hours, 259km) at 4.25am. One bus a day heads south for Croatian Istria from June to September, leaving at 4.25pm and stopping at the coastal towns of Umag, Poreč and Rovinj (€7, two hours, 74km).

From Tartinijev trg, I&I minibuses (€1) shuttle to Portorož and the camping grounds at Lucija (minibus 1) every half-hour from 5.30am to 10.45pm (11.45pm on Friday and Saturday) continuously year-round.

Piran and Izola despatch catamarans to Venice (p291) at least once a week.

## Getting Around

### CAR

Traffic is severely restricted here, and parking spaces are at an absolute premium. All vehicles are stopped at a tollgate 200m south of the bus station where the sensible choice is to use the huge municipal car park (€0.80 per hour, €7.75 per day) and walk or take a shuttle bus into the centre. You could take a ticket and drive into the centre (first hour free, then €2.70 per hour), but old Piran is so small, parking is so limited and its alleyways so narrow (mostly footpaths) that you're likely to regret it.

### TAXI

For a taxi in Piran call ☎ 051-607 333 or ☎ 031-252 126.

### BICYCLE

Bikes are available from **Danoi Rent a Bike** (Prešernovo nabrežje; per hr/6 hr/day €2.50/10.50/18; ☎ 8am-1am May-Sep), a small kiosk wedged between the two Pavel restaurants along the waterfront.

## PORTOROŽ

☎ 05 / pop 2760 / elev to 90m

Every country with a sea coast has got to have a honky-tonk beach resort – a Blackpool, a Bondi or an Atlantic City – and Portorož is Slovenia's very own. The 'Port of Roses' skirts a sandy bay about 5km southeast of Piran. Obala (Beach Rd), the main drag, is essentially a strip of high-rise hotels, restaurants, bars, travel agencies, shops, parked cars and small beaches, and it is not to everyone's liking.

But Portorož isn't all bad. Its sandy beaches are the largest on the coast and are relatively clean, there are pleasant spas and wellness centres where you can take the waters or cover yourself in curative mud, and the list of other activities is endless. At the same time, the vast array of accommodation makes Portorož a useful fall back if everything's full in nearby Piran.

## History

Portorož may look as if it was born yesterday, but that's not the case. Though most of the development along Obala dates from the late 1960s and 1970s, the settlement was first mentioned in the 13th century, and its

sheltered bay was fiercely contested over the next 200 years.

Portorož achieved real fame in the 19th century when Austro-Hungarian officers came here to be treated with *fango*, the mud collected from the salt pans at Sečovlje (p180). Word spread quickly and in 1912 the luxurious Palace hotel (under protracted renovation) was established.

## Orientation

Portorož's main development looks on to the bay from Obala, but there are satellite resorts and hotel complexes to the northwest at Bernardin and south near the Portorož Marina at Lucija. Buses stop opposite the main beach on Postajališka pot.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Kapelca Bar** (☎ 674 42 36; Obala 16a; 20 min €1.70; ☎ 7am-1am Mon-Sat, 11am-1am Sun) Pub with internet access.

### MONEY

**Banka Koper** (Obala 33; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat)

### POST

**Post office** (K Stari cesti 1)

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist Information Centre Portorož** (☎ 674 02 31; www.portoroz.si; Obala 16; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 3-9pm mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 10am-5pm mid-Sep–mid-Jun)

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Atlas Express** (☎ 674 67 72; atlas.portoroz@siol.net; Obala 55; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Local rep for American Express.

**Istria Tourist Service** (☎ 674 03 60; www.istria.si; Postajališka pot 2; ☎ 8am-10pm Jul & Aug, 9am-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) At the main bus stop.

**Kompas** (☎ 617 80 00; Obala 41; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug; 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun)

**Maona Tourist Agency** (☎ 674 03 63; Obala 14b; ☎ 9am-8pm daily Jul & Aug; 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Sep-Jun) Branch of the excellent agency in Piran.

## Sights

**Forma Viva** atop the Seča Peninsula near the Lucija camping ground is an outdoor sculpture garden with more than a hundred works of

art carved in stone. This is just one of several such parks in Slovenia. They were international exhibitions where sculptors worked with local materials: stone at Portorož, wood at Kostanjevica na Krki in Dolenjska, iron at Ravne na Koroškem in Koroška and – God help us – concrete in Maribor. The real reason for coming is the fantastic view of Portorož and Piran Bays. The salt pans at Sečovlje are a short walk to the south.

## Activities

### BOATING & CRUISES

Maona Tourist Agency rents out boats, and you can also hire them on the grassy beach area directly west of the Metropol Hotel.

**Spinaker** (☎ 674 54 20, 041-281 133; www.spinaker.si; Sončna pot 8; 1/2/4hr €38/67/112; ☎ 10am-6pm May-Sep) can take five of you sailing along the coast to Piran and beyond from the main pier in Portorož. There are also cruises on the **Solinarka** (☎ 031-653 682, 040-648 376; poropat@siol.net; adult/child €6.70/4.20; ☎ varies) tour boat from Portorož to Piran and Strunjan and back and a circular one on the **Svetko** (☎ 041-623 191; €13; ☎ 9.40am) from Bernadin to Izola.

**Jonathan Yachting** (☎ 677 89 30, 041-644 533; www.jonathan-yachting.si; Cesta Solinarjev 4) in Portorož has a range of boats for hire: a 10m Elan 333 sailing yacht with four to six berths costs from €990 a week from mid-October to mid-April and as much as €1750 a week in July and August. An 11m, six-berth Dufour 34 is €1200 and €2200 respectively.

Atlas Express (left) and others can book day trips to Venice aboard the *Prince of Venice* and with Venezia Lines (p291).

### PANORAMIC FLIGHTS

Sightseeing by ultra-light plane is available at the **Portorož airport** (☎ 672 25 25; info@solinair.si; Sečovlje 19; ☎ 8am-8pm Apr-Sep, 3-5pm Oct-Mar). Flights over Portorož and Piran or the whole coast (15 minutes) cost about €35.

### SPAS

**Terme & Wellness Centre Palace** (☎ 696 50 11; www.lifeclass.net; Obala 43; ☎ 7am-7pm), a large spa connected with the Grand Hotel Palace that you can also enter from K Stari cesti, is famous for thalassotherapy (treatment using sea water and by-products like mud from the salt flats). The spa offers various types of warm sea-water and brine baths (€35.50 to €44), Sečovlje mud baths (€23), massage (€35 for 40



<b>INFORMATION</b>	1 E2 Atlas Express..... Banka Koper..... Istriana Tourist Service..... Kapelica Bar..... Kompas..... Maona Travel Agency..... Post Office..... Tourist Information Centre Portorož.....	18 E2 Mercator..... Noč in Dan..... Papa Chico..... Pizzeria Figarola..... San Lorenzo..... Stara Oljka..... Taverna.....	8 F4 Jonathan Yachting..... Spinalker..... Swimming Pool..... Tennis & Wellness Centre Palace..... Wai Thai.....	25 E2 Cicco..... News Café.....	27 F1 Portorož Auditorium.....	12 E4 Avtokamp Lucija..... Grand Hotel Metropal..... Hotel Marco..... Hotel Riviera..... Hotel Slovenija..... Prenosišča Korotan.....
<b>EATING</b>	19 E3 20 E3 21 E2 (see 13)	22 E2 23 E2 24 E3	26 B1 (see 15)		28 E1 29 D2 30 E2	
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>						
<b>DRINKING</b>						
<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b>						
<b>SLEEPING</b>						
<b>TRANSPORT</b>						

minutes) and a host of other therapies and beauty treatments. The palatial indoor **swimming pool** (nonguests 4hr pass €9.60/12.20 Mon-Fri/Sat & Sun; ☎ 1-9pm Mon-Fri, 11am-9pm Sat & Sun).

**Wai Thai** (☎ 692 70 70; Obala 33; 50-min massage €46-52; ☎ 9am-10pm Thu-Tue, 2-10pm Wed) begs the question, why Thai? The answer: it's Slovenia's most sumptuous wellness centre. Located in the Hotel Riviera, the spa's decor suggests a provincial *wat*, and there are Thai masseuses to help you relax and lots of other treatments, too.

## SWIMMING

The lifeguard-patrolled **beaches** (☎ 8am-8pm Apr-Sep) at Portorož, including the main one, which accommodates 6000 fried and bronzed bodies, have water slides and outside showers, and beach chairs (€3.80) and umbrellas (€3) are available for rent. Beaches are off-limits between 11pm and 6am and camping is strictly forbidden.

The large outdoor **swimming pool** (adult/child €3.80/2.50; ☎ 10am-6pm May-Sep), south of the Grand Hotel Metropal and owned by the same people, is open in summer.

## Festivals & Events

An unusual local event involving a lot of pagantry is the **Baptism by Neptune** (Neptunov Krst) of new recruits to the naval school held in early September.

## Sleeping BUDGET

**Avtokamp Lucija** (☎ 690 60 00; www.metropolgroup.si; Seča 204; adult €7.20-11.70, child €3; ☎ early Apr-Sep; ☎) This 6-hectare camping ground is below the Seča Peninsula and south of the marina about 2km from the bus station. It offers all sorts of sporting facilities and can (and often does) accommodate 1000 guests.

**Prenosišča Korotan** (☎ 674 5400; www.sd.upr.si/sdp/prenosisca; Obala 11; s/d/tr €29/41/55; ☎ Jul & Aug; ☎) Just off the main road between Piran and the centre of Portorož (take I&I minibus 1), this unusually upmarket summer-only hostel in Korotan has en suite rooms and computers for internet access.

The Maona (p177) and Istriana (p177) travel agencies have **private rooms** (s €13-27, d €22-35) and **apartments** (apt for 2 €27-47, apt for 4 €50-87), with prices varying widely and depending on both the category and the season. Some of the cheapest rooms are up on the hillside, quite a walk from the beach. Getting a room

for fewer than three nights (for which you must pay a supplement) or a single any time can be difficult, and in winter many owners don't rent at all.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

Portorož counts upwards of 20 hotels, not including the Palace, the Art Nouveau hotel that put Portorož on the map (currently undergoing a long-overdue renovation and set to reopen in 2008), and very little budget accommodation. Hotel rates in Portorož can be very high during the summer months. Many hotels close for the winter in October or November and do not reopen until April or even May.

**Hotel Marko** (☎ 617 40 00; www.hotel-marko.com; Obala 28; s €54-83, d €7-104; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Much of Portorož is high-rise city. For something on a more human scale, check out this lovely 48-room hotel with scenic gardens just opposite the main beach.

**Grand Hotel Metropal** (☎ 690 10 00; www.metropolgroup.si; Obala 77; s €110-165, d €160-240; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Currently the only five-star hotel in town, the 104-room Metropal is up on a hill overlooking the beach. It boasts a casino, huge indoor and outdoor swimming pools and the excellent San Lorenzo restaurant on the ground floor.

**Hotel Riviera & Hotel Slovenija** (☎ 692 00 00; www.lifeclass.net; Obala 33; s €125-164, d €166-224; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The sister properties are joined at the hip and are good choices if you want to stay someplace central. The Riviera has 160 rooms, three fabulous swimming pools and the Wai Thai spa. The Slovenija is somewhat bigger with 183 rooms. Both have four stars.

## Eating

**Taverna** (☎ 690 50 00; Obala 22; starters €6.25-7.50, mains €7.30-14.60; ☎ noon-11pm) Part of the group that owns the Grand Hotel Metropal, Taverna serves so-so meat and better fish dishes, but the location – at the end of a slip road overlooking the marina and the bay – is superb.

**Stara Oljka** (☎ 674 85 55; Obala 20; starters €6.20-7.50, mains €7-16; ☎ 10am-midnight) The 'Old Olive Tree' specialises in grills (Balkan, steaks etc) and you'll often see something large being roasted on a spit here. There's a large and very enticing sea-facing terrace.

**Pizzeria Figarola** (☎ 674 22 00; Obala 14a; pizza €5.65-7.50; ☎ 10am-10pm) There are dozens of decent

pizzerias all along Obala but Figarola, with a huge terrace just up from the main pier, is the place of choice.

**Staro Sidro** (☎ 674 50 74; Obala 55; starters €4.20-10, mains €7.10-16; 🕒 11am-11pm) A tried-and-true favourite in Portorož, the 'Old Anchor' is next to the lovely Vila San Marco. Its garden has seafood and a lovely terrace overlooking Obala and Portorož Bay. Try the crayfish soup and the blackened rice with prawns.

**Papa Chico** (☎ 677 93 10; Obala 26; starters €3.75-5.45, mains €4.60-8.75; 🕒 9am-2am Mon-Sat, 10am-2am Sun) This pleasant cantina serves 'Mexican fun food' (go figure), including hysterical fajitas (€7.50 to €9.20).

**San Lorenzo** (☎ 690 10 00; Obala 77; starters €5.40-9, mains €7.90-20.50; 🕒 noon-11pm) Located on the ground floor of the Grand Hotel Metropol, this Italian/Mediterranean restaurant is among the finest in Portorož. The wine selection is superb.

You'll find a branch of the **Mercator** (Obala 53; 🕒 7am-8pm Mon-Sat) supermarket chain next to where the buses stop and a **Noč in Dan** (☎ 671 57 63; Obala 26; 🕒 24hr) branch open round the clock near the open-air swimming pool.

## Drinking & Entertainment

**Cacao** (☎ 674 10 35; Obala 14; 🕒 8am-3am) This über-designer café wins the award as the most stylish on the coast. It has a fabulous terrace.

**News Café** (☎ 674 10 04; Obala 4f; 🕒 8am-2am) The News is not exactly central (it's in the Bernadin tourist complex), but it's a comfortable café and an 'American bar' with food and is handy to the Korotan hostel.

**Portorož Auditorium** (Portorož Avditorij; ☎ 676 67 00; www.avditorij.si; Senčna pot 12; box office 🕒 8-10am & 10.30am-2pm Mon-Fri) The main cultural venue in Portorož, with two main indoor theatres and a huge open-air amphitheatre, the auditorium is 200m behind where the buses stop. Some of the events of the Primorska Summer Festival (www.portoroz.si) in July and part of August take place here.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Buses leave Portorož for Piran, Strunjan and Izola (€2.20, 20 minutes, 12km) about every 20 to 40 minutes throughout the year. Other destinations from Portorož and their daily frequencies are the same as those for Piran (p176). The bus for Zagreb (€23, six hours, 255km) leaves at 4.31am.

I&I minibuses (p176) make the loop from the Lucija camping grounds through central Portorož to Piran throughout the year.

## CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The main car-rental companies, including **Avis** (☎ 674 05 55) at Atlas Express (p177), are all represented in Portorož. Atlas Express rents motor scooters for six hours/day for €35/40.

## Getting Around

### CAR

Parking space is tight in Portorož, and you must 'pay and display' to park in Portorož. One hour costs €0.85, a full day €8.35.

### TAXI

For a local taxi in Portorož ring ☎ 674 55 55 or ☎ 673 07 00.

### BICYCLE

Atlas Express (p177) rents bicycles per six hours/day for €12/18.

## SEČOVLJE

☎ 05 / pop 580

The disused salt pans at Sečovlje, covering an area of 724 hectares from Seča to the Drag-onja River on the Croatian border, have been turned into **Sečovlje Saltworks Country Park** (Krajiški Park Sečoveljske Soline; www.kpss.soline.si) and a **nature reserve**, which attracts some 270 bird species. The area, crisscrossed with dikes, channels, pools and canals, was once a hive of activity and one of the biggest money-spinners on the coast in the Middle Ages. Today, it looks like a ghost town with its empty grey-stone houses and pans slowly being taken over by hardy vegetation.

In the centre of the reserve is the wonderful **Saltworks Museum** (Muzej Solinarstva; ☎ 672 13 30, 671 00 40; www.pommuz-pi.si; adult/child/student €3.35/2/2.50; 🕒 9am-8pm Jun-Aug, 9am-6pm Apr, May, Sep & Oct) housed in two buildings. The exhibits relate to all aspects of salt-making and the lives of salt workers and their families: tools, weights, water jugs, straw hats, baking utensils and the seals used to mark loaves of bread baked communally. Out among the pans south of the museum is a **wind-powered pump** (just follow the earthen dikes to reach it) that still twirls in the breeze. The museum staff make use of it and other tools to produce a quantity of salt every year in the traditional way. In all about 2000 tonnes of salt are produced at Sečovlje annually.

## SALT OF THE SEA

Although salt-making went on for centuries along the Slovenian coast at places like Sečovlje and Strunjan, the technique changed very little right up to 40 years ago when harvesting on a large scale all but ended.

Sea water was channelled via in-flow canals – the 'salt roads' – into shallow ponds separated by dikes, which were then dammed with small wooden paddles. Wind-powered pumps removed some of the water, and the rest evaporated in the sun and the wind as the salt crystallised from the remaining brine. The salt was collected, drained, washed and, if necessary, ground and iodised. It was then loaded onto a heavy wooden barge called a *maona* and pulled to salt warehouses (*skladišča soli*).

Salt harvesting was seasonal work, lasting from 24 April (St George's Day) to 24 August (St Bartholomew's Day), when the autumn rains came. During that time most of the workers lived with their families in rented houses lining the canals at Sečovlje. They paid the landlord with their 'salt funds' – the pans around each house.

The set-up of each house was pretty much the same. The large room downstairs served as a storehouse while upstairs there were two bedrooms and a combination living room and kitchen. All the windows and doors opened on both sides so that workers could observe changes in the weather. Rain and wind could wipe out the entire harvest if the salt was not collected in time.

In September the workers returned to their villages to tend their crops and vines. Because they lived both on the land and 'at sea', Slovenian salt workers were said to 'sit on two chairs'.

Sečovlje is right on the border with Croatia, and to reach it you must pass through Slovenian immigration and customs first, so don't forget your passport. Before you cross the Croatian checkpoint, however, you make a sharp turn to the right (east) and continue along an unsealed road for just under 3km. The two museum buildings stand out along one of the canals.

Buses from Portorož stop at the town of Sečovlje, about 1.5km north of the border, so it's best to catch a bus heading into Istria

if you can time it right and get off just before the Croatian frontier.

The best way to visit the salt pans in summer is on the **Solinarka** (☎ 031-653 682, 040-648 376; poropat@iol.net; adult/child 10.85/6.30; 🕒 twice daily Jul & Aug) tour boat, which departs the Bernadin complex at about 9.30am and 4pm, Piran at 9.45am and 4.15pm and Portorož at 10.15am and 4.45pm. (To avoid disappointment, double-check these times.) The trip lasts two hours, and the price includes entry to the Saltworks Museum.

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