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NEWSDAY PHOTO / BRYN NELSON



# Exploring castles, caves and a cool capital in Slovenia



Above and below: discovering Ljubljana; right, Lake Bled in northern Slovenia



### Once part of Yugoslavia, this lovely 15-year-old nation has its own Alps, its own hipsters — and plenty of history

BY BRYN NELSON  
STAFF WRITER

**M**y first night in a Slovenian military prison went far better than expected. The cell was rather small and Spartan, but the lofted sleeping space, functional furniture and sliding wood panel covered with eclectic paintings seemed like nice touches. OK, it was a former military prison. Alright, a prison turned hip youth hostel in the midst of an alternative arts complex within an enchanting city dubbed "The New Prague." Not a bad introduction to Ljubljana (pronounced Lube-lee-ana), a compact capital city of less than 300,000 in a country that's smaller than New Jersey but chock-full of castles, caves, quirky charm and stunning beauty. Skiing started here. So did the

famous Lipizzaner horses. In 1991, the Republic of Slovenia officially declared independence from Yugoslavia. Mercifully, the breakaway republic endured only a short armed conflict before spreading its wings as a new nation, now with nearly 2 million residents.

**Hinting at the past**  
Some of Ljubljana's abundant graffiti speaks to the country's uneasy past, but other historical artifacts are more whimsical. At the city's bustling Sunday flea market, old Yugoslavian National Army medals share prime riverside real estate with musical instruments, dolls and religious art carefully arranged under weeping willows. And at the Yugoslav army's former compound, a military prison cleverly transformed into the bright and modern Celica Hostel presides over a brash scene of artists, musicians and hipsters. Beyond the confines of our artsy commune, my traveling partner, Geoff, and I saw centuries worth of cultural icons. On our leisurely two-hour drive from the Venice airport in early April,



we marveled at the small Slovenian villages huddled around hilltop churches with their ornamental spires. In the fields, traditional open-sided hayracks, called kozolects, sat waiting to dry hay. In Ljubljana, watermelon-red and lemon-yellow 17th century

churches join rows of handsome Baroque and Secessionist (or Art Nouveau) building facades and a medieval castle affording spectacular views. By the Ljubljanica River, market stalls sell fresh fish, produce and reproductions of 18th and 19th century beehive

covers painted by farmers to depict biblical stories or social satire. And the wonderful Dragon Bridge, with its intricate dragon statues, recalls the much earlier Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts. Jason, as the story goes, killed a fierce dragon-like monster in a lake near where the city now stands, providing Ljubljana with its very own monster mascot. On our first morning in the city, we sipped espresso at an outdoor cafe in picturesque Prešernov trg, a popular square dominated by the bright red Church of the Annunciation on one side and the city's famous Triple Bridge on the other. Sunday mass at St. Nicholas' Cathedral, although inscrutable in Slovenian, gave us an excuse to enjoy the 18th century Baroque cathedral's beautiful interior. After wandering through the riverside market and pedestrian-only streets making up the captivating Old Town, we headed to Ljubljana Castle, following a lane that zigzagged up a hillside covered in wildflowers. We were too early for a detour to the amazing

Ljubljana, the capital city of Slovenia, boasts a thriving Sunday flea market as well as scenes of breathtaking urban beauty.

**ON THE COVER**  
Predjama Castle, not far from Postojna and dating back to 1202, is built within the mouth of a cave — the perfect place for an impregnable fortress.

bar beneath the castle that incorporates the exposed bedrock into its decor. But the fortress offered panoramic views of the city from its clock tower. An odd but excellent 3-D video "tour" (called the Virtualni Muzej, or Virtual Museum) within the tower completed our orientation. In Slovenia, nearly everyone speaks some English, which is helpful when confronted by a daunting mix of Slovenian consonants. Even so, we received appreciative smiles for attempting basic phrases like "dober dan," which means "good day." We practiced our awkward pronunciation with our friends, Mateja and Jadran, who had welcomed us to their city by cooking an incredible seafood dinner while introducing us to some of the country's excellent wines. After our castle tour the next day, they met us for lunch and an afternoon of lounging in the sun at a fantastic riverside restaurant named Zlata Ribica.

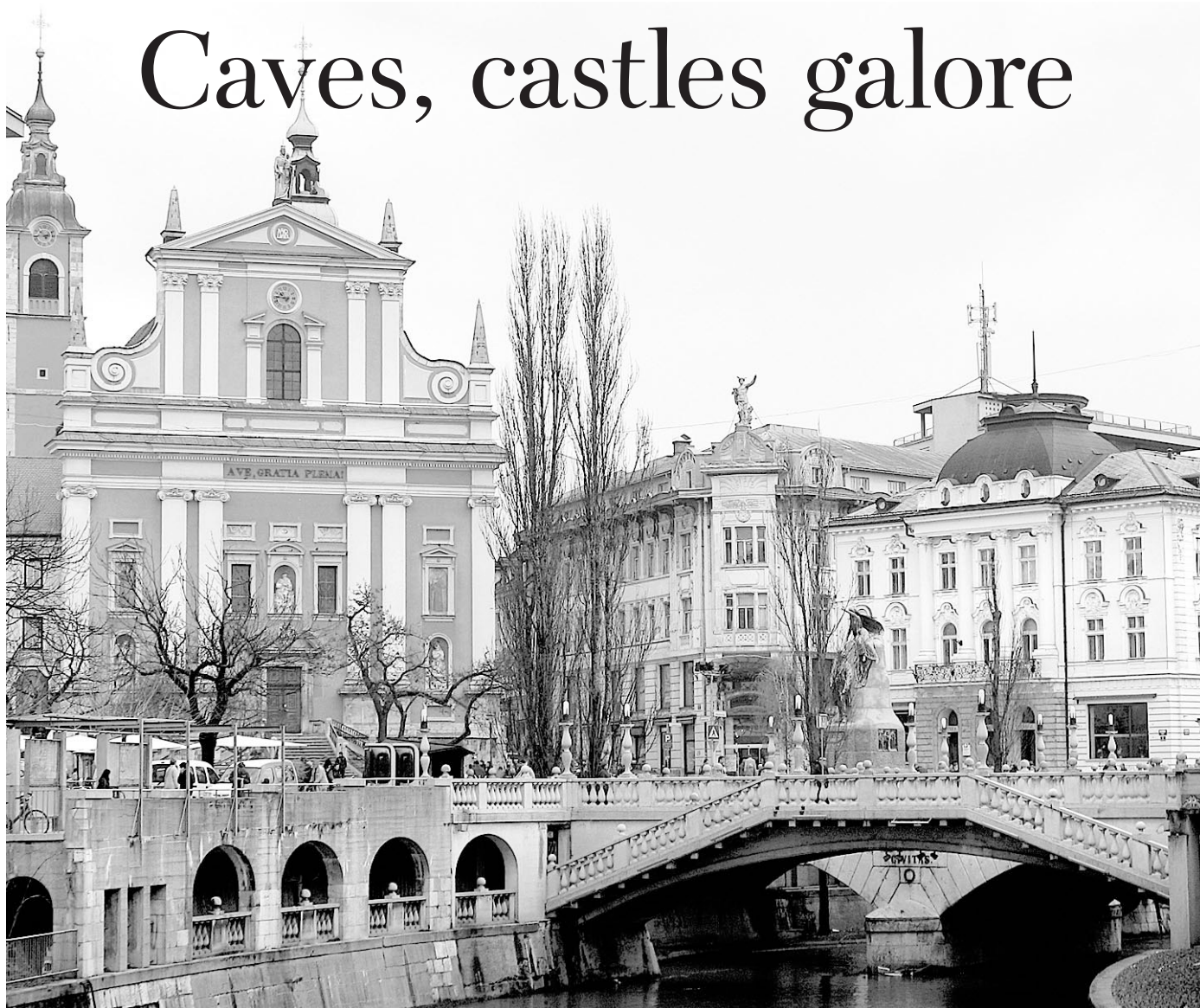
**The pleasures of Old Town**  
We could have made plans to visit some of Ljubljana's well-regarded cultural institutions later in the day. Instead, we all ordered Italian gelati from a sweet shop and ambled down the cobbled streets of Old Town, admiring the tapestry of architectural styles around us. With several hours of daylight left, Geoff and I decided to visit another site high on our list: Lake Bled. The small lake an hour's drive north of Ljubljana may be overrun in the summer. But on a Sunday evening in April, we had nearly the whole place to ourselves. With the Julian Alps as a backdrop, the lake's iconic island and its 17th century Church of the Assumption were spectacular. We had missed our opportunity to take gondolas or rowboats to the island, but discovered more extraordinary views from Bled Castle, perched high atop a lakeside cliff. The castle was nearly deserted and its restaurant had already closed, though a waiter let us order wine and sit on the expansive terrace, drinking in the view.

See SLOVENIA on D12





# Caves, castles galore



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / BRYN NELSON

Architecture is a star in Ljubljana, with watermelon-red buildings and styles ranging from Baroque to Art Nouveau.

## SLOVENIA from D11

The moment was shattered only by the sound of Celine Dion belting out “Memories” from “Cats,” the song carrying effortlessly across the terrace from a set of speakers.

There are some things you simply can’t escape.

On our second full day in the country, we toured two giant cave complexes, explored a resort town on the Adriatic and spent much of the afternoon visiting with the truffle king of Slovenia. Amazingly, we fit it all into a leisurely day and less than 200 miles of driving.

### Underground experience

Slovenia boasts more than 7,000 caves in its Karst region, though the Postojna Caves are by far the most popular of the lot, evidenced by the huge parking lot and mini-city of shops and restaurants by the entrance. The caves are full of interesting formations and well worth a visit, though their most amazing feature is the endangered snakelike creature swimming within them: the “human fish.” Technically a foot-long salamander adapted to water, the bizarre creature is light-sensitive, can go for years without eating and can live to be 100. I’ve never seen anything like it.

The Škocjan Caves com-

plex 20 minutes to the south is far less visited. But the caves, declared a World Heritage Site by the United Nations’ UNESCO agency in 1986, proved much more awe-inspiring. With the Reka River thundering through the freakishly large Murmuring Cave, we walked single file across bridges bisecting the 330-foot expanse from river to cavern ceiling, and I felt like an extra in a scene from “The Lord of the Rings.”

Which brings us to the truffle king. A friend had recommended a restaurant named Gostilna Ratoša in a tiny vil-

lage near Postojna, although she also stressed that we should call ahead for reservations.

Which we didn’t.

The restaurant was closed when we finally found it, but its gracious owners, Ivan and Darja — along with their wine supplier — spent the afternoon talking with us anyway.

And plying us with homemade dry-cured ham called Karst pršut, thick slices of chocolate-covered poppyseed cake and a seemingly never-ending supply of local wine, some of it produced by

the Graben vineyard that Ivan co-owns. Some of that wine is sent on to pricey New York restaurants such as Masa.

Ivan also has a kennel of dogs trained to sniff out white and black truffles in the countryside, which he exports around the world.

### The coast, and a castle

Our last stop of the day was in the seaside resort of Piran, with a Venetian feel, a lovely town square and a maze of streets leading to a point extending out into the Adriatic. With the wind howling and sun appearing only momentarily to bid its evening farewell, we retreated to the car and imagined how inviting the town would be on a warmer day.

On our way back to the Venice airport the next morning, we stopped by one last site to be filed under the “Are you kidding me?” category. Predjama Castle, not far from Postojna and dating back to 1202, greets its visitors as a sand-colored improbability that invites the question: “That can’t really be an entire castle built within the mouth of a cave, can it?” But of course it is — the perfect place for an impregnable fortress — and I couldn’t help but smile as we rushed to explore its unlikely rooms and hidden passages.



This former military prison is now a colorful youth hostel, complete with stylized graffiti and a hip, artsy scene.

## IF YOU GO

**GENERAL INFO:** The “Rough Guide to Slovenia” is a great resource, with maps and descriptions. The Slovenian Tourist Board ([www.slovenia-tourism.si](http://www.slovenia-tourism.si)) is also a good place to start. A new member of the European Union, Slovenia switches to the euro next year. Until then, the tolar (SIT) is its currency, with an exchange rate of about 186 SIT to \$1.

**GETTING THERE:** Delta Airlines offers nonstop flights from JFK Airport to Venice’s Marco Polo Airport. From there, it’s two hours by rental car to Ljubljana. Zagreb, Croatia, and Vienna, Austria, also are within an easy drive. Make sure the rental company allows you to take a car into Slovenia. Rentals and gas are expensive, but the roads are good and the distances short. The country is also well served by trains; [www.slo-zeleznice.si](http://www.slo-zeleznice.si) has timetables, with an English translation button in the upper corner.

**WHERE TO STAY:** The Celica Hostel ([www.souhostel.com](http://www.souhostel.com)) is well worth a visit (and tours are available), although the clientele is definitely young. Private rooms with a shared bathroom begin at \$62 a night for two, with a forgettable continental breakfast. At the other end of the spectrum, the four-star Grand Hotel Union ([www.gh-union.si](http://www.gh-union.si)) offers rooms in a gorgeous, centrally located Art Nouveau building, beginning at \$220 a night for two, with a continental breakfast included.

**WHERE TO EAT:** In Ljubljana, Cajna Hiša at Stari Trg 3 offers a great selection of teas, good coffee and a solid breakfast (\$25 for two). Try the traditional apple, cheese and nut gibanica dessert. Seafood is the appealing specialty of Gostilna As at Copova 5 (enter the alleyway via Slovenska; \$130 for two).

Zvezda, at Wolfova 14, serves up great gelati (Italian ice creams). We had the best meal of all at Zlata Ribica, Cankarjevo Nabrezje 5, (\$75 for two), with its riverside setting and delicious meat dishes. In the tiny village of Gorice, Gostilna Ratoša has limited hours but features truffles (in season, which varies) and great wine. A hotel concierge can help with reservations and directions, available by calling 05 7536110 within Slovenia.

— BRYN NELSON