

In Bled, fairy tales can come to life

By Kristy Alpert

Move aside, Paris, and wait your turn, Tuscany: Another European destination is emerging on the scene for dream weddings abroad, and it's one laden in romantic lore.

Putting the "love" in Slovenia is the postcard-primed town of Bled. The tiny settlement in the middle of the country looks like it was ripped right out of the pages of a storybook, with a majestic, cliff-encased castle towering above a charming chapel that's perched high on the slope of an island in the middle of a pristine alpine lake.

The town's 1,000-year history has been cloaked in a blanket of enchanting stories, where tales of royal woes blend seamlessly into fables of wishing bells and magical waters.

Legend has it that a grieving widow once sat gazing out from the castle overlooking

Lake Bled after her husband's untimely death at the hands of robbers. She was so overcome by grief that she gathered all her gold and silver to cast a bell that would ring out in memory of her fallen beloved.

On the day of the bell's transportation to the island, a powerful swell overtook the boat and sank the bell to the bottom of the lake, where it still rests today.

Defeated, the widow sold her belongings and spent the rest of her life as a nun. After her death, the pope caught wind of her heartbreaking story and blessed a new bell for the tiny island church. Now, anyone who makes a trip to the island and rings the bell three times will have their greatest wish granted.

The bell has become somewhat of a magnet for marrying couples, who trek out to the island in a traditional *pletna* boat after their ceremony to ring the bell. Not only has crossing the sacred waters become a symbol of good luck — that water is believed to have healing properties from the lake's unique creation from thermal springs and glacial formations — but the church's position at

It is tradition for grooms to carry their brides up the 99-step staircase of this church on the island of Bled.



Pletna boats provide romantic transport to the island on Lake Bled, Slovenia.

the top of a grand flight of stairs has led to an entirely new wedding ritual.

"According to tradition, the groom has to carry the bride up the 99 stone steps to the church on the island to ensure a happy marriage," said Mateja Legat, event sales manager at the Grand Hotel Toplice and a Bled wedding planner for more than 12 years.

The Grand Hotel Toplice is a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World and has been every bit as involved in Bled's romantic appeal as the setting and stories since the hotel's inception. The hotel dates to the early 1850s, just years after the thermal springs were found on Lake Bled as the town was just being discovered. Over the years, the Grand Hotel Toplice has been lovingly restored to offer a romantic respite for couples and guests with distinguishing taste, including a guest list that ranges from Arthur Miller and Pablo Neruda to Madeleine Albright and Prince Charles.

The hotel now offers 87 rooms and suites along the shores of Lake Bled (double rooms starting around \$86 depending on

the season, breakfast included), and features a spa (including thermal baths, massage services, saunas and a private treatment room for couples), a private beach and boathouse, two bars and three decadent restaurants perfect for wedding receptions or rehearsal dinners.

The hotel also offers four remarkable venues for weddings with customized wedding packages presented by Legat and her team upon request. Any couple who books a wedding dinner for more than 30 guests will receive a complimentary night stay in one of the hotel's best suites.

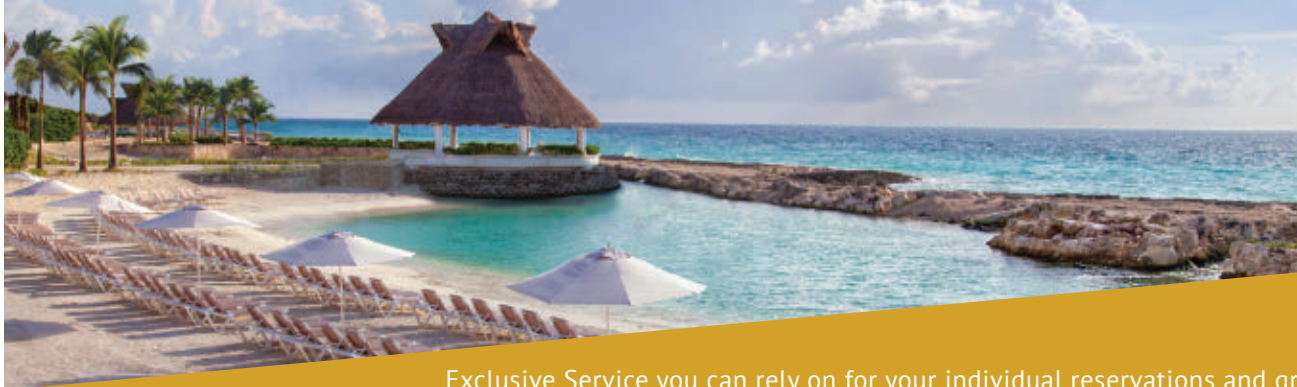
"Couples can exchange their vows in the shade of majestic chestnut trees on a terrace overlooking Lake Bled or in one of the hotel's elegant lounges," Legat suggested. "Then after the wedding they can go to the island and ring the wishing bell before heading back to the Grand Hotel Toplice for the dinner and party in the Grand Hall."

For more on the Grand Hotel Toplice, visit www.sava-hotels-resorts.com. For more on Bled tourism, see www.bled.si/en.

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