



Europe's Most Beloved Hidden Gem

KRISTY ALPERT NAVIGATES HER WAY THROUGH ONE REMARKABLE, AND REMARKABLY TONGUE-TWISTING, DESTINATION

It's a rare thing these days to arrive in a city with no expectations. For most travelers, the act of choosing a travel destination is often rooted in gleaning recommendations from friends, colleagues, and even internet strangers. So, needless to say, it was a strange and wonderfully exhilarating feeling when I arrived in Ljubljana without any pre-conceived notions of the city.

No one I know had ever been to the Slovenian capital—most of my friends probably couldn't even point out Slovenia on a map—and from what I could tell, there appear to be only a small handful of travel stories out there offering tips on what to do and see in the area (most of the ones I found seem to be over 10 years old.) In fact, even just saying the name itself might be a stretch for most (it's pronounced “lyoob-lyAH-nah”)

But precisely because Ljubljana is not on the radar for most travelers, it's also one of Europe's best-kept secrets.



Dragon Bridge at Vodnik Square during Sunset

The Cozy Capital

Though it's one of the Continent's smallest capitals, weighing in with a population of about 283,000 people, Ljubljana somehow manages to offer a full European experience within its 63.2 square-mile borders.

The city is a *mélange* of unassumingly chic components, boasting an ambiance reminiscent of the lively streets of Paris, an architecture that emulates the Baroque buildings and bridges of Prague, a dizzying landscape with mountains as majestic as the Dolomites, and a trendy nightlife as hip as the one in Berlin. But even with these international influences coursing throughout every crevice, it would be a shame to liken Ljubljana to anything less than the distinct identity it has created for itself over the past 2,000 years.

Ljubljana's fascinating history spans five millennia, each one very much preserved and present throughout the streets of this diverse city. Visitors today can experience the medieval heritage by taking a torch lit tour through the Roman city of Emona, before venturing up the hills in the old town to where Ljubljana Castle keeps a careful watch over the city below. Wrap up the day by soaking in the current modernity at the Square of the Republic, where in 1991, locals listened with glee as Slovenia announced its independence from Yugoslavia.

Hotel History

The mix of old and new here carries over to the hotel scene, where visitors can choose from new structures with a modern edge to

“Ljubljana, one of the few places in the world where the feeling of discovery is possible”

historic buildings renovated into posh respites. There's also plenty of in-between options: case in point, the Hostel Celica, a former prison-turned-overnight lock-up for adventurous backpackers, set outside of town.

One of the most impressive addresses to book for the night is the Vander Urbani Resort, Ljubljana's first ever Design Hotel. Set off the banks of the Ljubljanica River, in the heart of the pedestrian-only section of old town, the 16-room hotel is comprised of four historic town houses that—after an impressive renovation by architect and designers Sadar + Vuga—flow together seamlessly, offering nods to the buildings' history while also showcasing contemporary finishes and amenities. The rooftop pool and terrace are ideal for a cooling dip, morning yoga session, or sunset sips from the hotel's impressive list of local and boutique wines.

The focus on design doesn't stop with the décor, as the hotel also offers guests an aesthetically pleasing gastronomic experience, with creative menus designed by Benjamin Launay, the restaurant's French chef de cuisine. Location is also a plus: the intimate feel of the Vander Urbani is the perfect balance for the dynamic scene that plays out outside on a lively slice of the riverfront. A five-minute walk will put visitors face-to-face with the Dragon Bridge, Neboticnik skyscraper, and a smorgasbord of charming cafes, bars, and galleries.

Foodie Pursuits

Slovenia has gained a bit of attention lately in the culinary world, with international critics heralding it as one of the next great food destinations. Traditionally, the cuisine here has featured influences from the Mediterranean, the Pannonian plain, the Alps, and the Balkans, and has long revolved around peasant-style, home-cooked dishes, like piping hot soups and plates of hot polenta speckled with freshly butchered meats. But while Slovenians are quick to boast that their wines are competitive in taste and quality to their Italian and Austrian neighbors (and with good reason, as Slovenian wine has been cleaning up at international wine competitions for the past decade), up until recently, there wasn't much regard for the local dishes of the region.

But all that is changing, and most of it is due to the recent culinary revolution in Ljubljana



Torch Light Tours in Emona



Dinner in the Sky



that's been led by chef Janez Bratovž, the force behind the namesake JB Restaurant. Chef Bratovž is ranked among the foodie elite, earning a coveted spot on the S.Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants list a few years back, and his eatery offers easily the best dining experience in town. The chef takes his time to present local flavors in a new way for

visitors and locals alike, pulling inspiration from his personal garden as well as what's fresh at the farmer's market that morning, then creating dishes like foie gras with black garlic butter, roasted pear with deer loin, and Adriatic tuna in a creamy soya and seaweed sauce.

Aside from the fine dining at JB Restaurant, Ljubljana is famous for its open-air cafes, and

for love for all things pizza and gelato. Although gelato and pizza may not sound like local dishes, the fine people here have managed to create their own versions of those Italian staples, transforming them into Ljubljana delicacies in the process. Unrivaled in the city, the pies at Pizzeria Foculus are cooked in a beech wood-fired oven and topped with local ingredients ranging from prosciutto and caviar to quail eggs and truffles. The restaurant itself is a sight to see, remodeled with a detailed, hand-painted ceiling arched high above historic pillars. Follow that up with a taste of classic Ljubljana gelato: head to the river to grab a scoop from Kavarna Cacao, or any of the gelato stands open nearly 24/7 around the riverfront area.

The scene around the riverfront is bustling with markets (hawking everything from clothes and books to flowers and food) during the day; in the warmer months, the area becomes a street party as soon as the sun goes down. Talented street performers (not the creepy kind with metallic face paint!) take to the corners to perform original songs, comedic routines, and even the occasional satirical performance, while rows of outdoor tables set up along the river give a platform for al fresco dining and open-air pop-up bars.

The Verdict

Ljubljana is one of the few places left in the world where the feeling of discovery is still possible. Between seeking out a buzzed-about new restaurant or stumbling upon the weekly book exchange held in Tivoli Park (it's name, Knjižnica pod krošnjami, translates to the lyrical "Library Under the Trees"), visitors to Ljubljana will find a gentle rhythm and cosmopolitan beat that is still unspoiled by mass tourism, giving this Slovenian capital a distinctly charming allure.

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Ljubljana Riverfront