

# Slovenia by bike, boat and foot with Intrepid



Rowboats and canoes on crystal-clear Lake Bohinj in Slovenia.

By Bill Fink

A rainbow of paragliders swirled in the thermal winds of the Julian Alps, their multicolored parachutes glittering in the sunlight. Two thousand feet below them, in the cobalt-blue waters of Lake Bohinj, a wandering flotilla of kayaks, paddleboards, canoes and rowboats ferried visitors to small beaches bordered by vibrantly green pine trees.

In the high Alpine meadows surrounding the peak of Mount Vogel, where I stood surveying this scene, I could hear the faint clinks and clanks of cowbells below me. Our hiking group then descended from our perch along rocky trails through jaw-dropping, panoramic views we shared with hardy cows and curious mountain goats.

I had joined Intrepid Travel's new Hike, Bike and Raft trip in Slovenia, a country that is fast becoming a go-to adventure spot in Europe. Long considered merely a stopping-off point for tourists en route to Croatia, Slovenia has developed into a des-

tinuation of its own, offering a true choose-your-own-adventure array of activities.

## From the city to the mountain

Our eight-day tour began in Slovenia's capital city of Ljubljana, where we walked old-town streets lined with a combination of blunt Yugoslavian socialist architecture, quaint Austrian-style churches, rough Bosnian meat pie shops and posh Western European cafes, all topped off with a medieval castle looming on a hilltop.

The city guide provided perspective on how the small puzzle piece of Slovenia fits into the cultural, culinary and historical crossroads of central and southeast Europe. What Slovenia's "combination of Austrian strictness and Balkan looseness" means in practice is that you can enjoy local wines and cheeses all day long, but the buses still run on time.

Thankfully, our public bus to the Alps did leave promptly from Ljubljana, escaping a torrential July downpour. The two-and-a-half-hour ride from Ljubljana to our base by Lake Bohinj revealed the incredible variety of settings in this small

country. Flat farming fields made way for towering granite peaks, as the apartment block-choked city dissolved into quaint mountain villages with small, white church spires.

Our headquarters for the trip was a small, family-run, two-star pension guesthouse a hundred yards from Lake Bohinj. Like our lodging in Ljubljana, the emphasis was on location and practicality rather than luxury and services. One look out of my window toward an incredible mountainscape confirmed I had come to the right place.

Our 10-person international group ranged from their early 20s to over 50. Some came solo, some with friends but all with an eager spirit for getting out and exploring. Intrepid built enough free time into the schedule for people to do their own thing but with enough structure to ensure delivery of the hiking, biking and rafting goals.

## Choose your adventure

A short walk from our lodging revealed the majesty of Lake Bohinj, an Alpine paradise with glassy waters disturbed only by the ripples of a few paddling ducks. With apologies to our avian friends, we dove into Bohinj, our group flocking together with a selection of kayaks and paddleboards. Well-stocked with snacks, we paddled our way to a small beach to relax under the sun, challenge each other to stupendous kayak feats and sip local beer.

Back on land, our group gathered into

a convoy of road bikes to explore surrounding traditional villages composed of picture-postcard wooden homes with bouquets of flowers lining nearly every window and balcony. Our half-day ride continued on paved paths through fields of wildflowers, a shaded riverside and some small, rolling hills. Our next day's trip by van led to a walking tour around equally scenic Lake Bled and a gondola ride to visit its famed island church.

The most vigorous of our adventures was a hike up and down Mount Vogel. Thankfully, this ski resort had a gondola taking us about three-quarters of the way to the 6,300-foot peak, but the steep, rocky climb to the summit still proved to be a challenging hike. We were rewarded with truly stunning views in every direction.

Following our arranged hikes, bikes and rafting excursions, we had free time to choose our own adventures. Some of us jogged the five-mile trail around Lake Bohinj. Others dove in for a swim. Farther afield, ziplines beckoned while vast underground caverns offered spelunking tours. The only limits to adventure in Slovenia are your own imagination and a reasonable level of fitness. Intrepid's Hike Bike and Raft trip proved to be an excellent way to get

the mind whirring, the eyes dazzled and those legs and arms pumping.

Next year, Intrepid will offer six departures of the Hike, Bike and Raft tour between May and September. Rates start at \$1,455, with \$470 single supplement. See [www.intrepidtravel.com](http://www.intrepidtravel.com)



Top, hikers on Mount Vogel. Bottom, cyclists crossing a small bridge.

PHOTOS BY BILL FINK

## Belize ecoluxury at the Copal Tree Lodge

By Kristy Alpert

"Time for lunch," my guide exclaimed as our boat entered the Gulf of Honduras just off the coast of Belize. I rose to fetch an ice-cold Belikin beer from the cooler, where I presumed I would find an assortment of foil-wrapped sandwiches.

Instead I found myself the only one left on the boat, as my guide, the chef and the captain were already in the water, outfitted with snorkels and homemade fishing spears and urging me to join them in foraging and catching our lunch.

I had booked the "Snorkel With the Chef" experience through the Copal Tree Lodge, a luxury ecoresort near Punta Gorda with an ethos of homegrown and ethi-

cally sourced products, and I was about to learn what the lodge meant by "locally sourced lunch with the chef."

We dove for conch, comparing each catch with the previous find and returning the smaller of the two to the seafloor to make sure we were only taking the most mature mollusk. After helping track down a lionfish, the chef and I returned aboard where he began firing up a grill and preparing a lavish spread of conch ceviche, grilled lionfish and a fresh



The pool at the Copal Tree Lodge, a rainforest ecoresort in Belize.

PHOTO BY KRISTY ALPERT

tomato and watermelon salad.

That wouldn't be the only time I would get to see the ingredients before they arrived on my plate while staying at the Copal Tree Lodge. The resort is home to a 3,000-acre, sustainable

farm in the rainforest of the Maya Mountains of southern Belize, and guests are encouraged to tour the premises and interact with the farm staff during working hours. It's there that they grow more than 70% of the food served at the resort.

Guests can participate in hands-on learning about the production of coffee, chocolate and more at the on-site Farm Center, but it's the farm-to-flask experience that has guests buzzing with excitement. The Copal Tree Distillery opened in early October 2018 with tours and rum tastings. Copalli Rum is the only rum in Belize made from pure cane sugar, and 100% of the sugar cane used in this organic rum is grown on the resort's property and processed in a zero-impact facility.

The distillery isn't the only sustainable structure at this regal rainforest respite: The 16 private suites and the single three-bedroom villa feature custom-made furniture and building materials made from the lodge's own sustainably harvested wood.

Copal Tree Lodge rates start at \$169 for a King Jungle Suite; visit [copaltreelodge.com](http://copaltreelodge.com). For more on Copalli Rum, visit [copallirum.com](http://copallirum.com).