



SLOVENIAN SOLITUDE

This lesser-known European country offers a wide variety of alpine walks away from the more popular hiking trails of the continent.

WORDS AND PHOTOS_ [DAVE REYNOLDS](#)



Approaching the heart of the park on the Triglav Summit trail.

IN a time when over-tourism in Europe is leading to increasingly busy national parks and trails it is a delight to discover a place that harks back to a less crowded past. Imagine a country abounding with stunning alpine hikes, idyllic valleys, glacial lakes and rivers of eye-popping beauty, abounding with wildlife and flora. Where traditional mountain culture survives, with hospitable people who not only love to be outdoors but truly practice and value sustainability. Welcome to Slovenia!

Slovenia's relatively compact size is a blessing for hikers as it allows you to explore a wide range of landscapes within a relatively short distance. You can easily find a level of walking to match your desires and ability: from challenging high Alpine hut-to-hut trips to more sedate river valley and vineyards walks through the lowland Karst region. The Slovenian section of the long-distance Alpe-Adria Trail offers a combination of these varied landscapes.

A capital start

My journey started in the capital Ljubljana, truly one of Europe's gems. Ljubljana's blend of historic charm, artistic expression, and environmental consciousness creates a unique atmosphere that makes exploring on foot a delight. One of the first things you notice wandering the winding cobblestone streets of the old town is how many bikes there are, and the corresponding lack of vehicle traffic, pollution and noise makes for an enchanting introduction.

The historic centre with its colourful Baroque buildings straddles the Ljubljanica River which adds a unique charm to the city, along with a 12th Century castle towering, like a fairytale, on the hill above. The riverbanks are lined with lively restaurants, cafes and bars and in the evenings, the river is beautifully illuminated. I arrived on a Monday night and was astonished by how many people were out enjoying a traditionally quiet weeknight. Slovenes, whether in the city or the mountains,

seem to enjoy eating well and have a strong emphasis and pride in locally grown produce.

Ljubljana is also superbly situated as a gateway to the country's mountains, some 50km away. Slovenia's famed Julian Alps are a stunning range of rugged limestone and granite peaks tucked into the northwestern part of the country. These impossibly beautiful limestone peaks are home to some of the most challenging and rewarding hiking trails in Slovenia. Here you find Triglav National Park, the crown jewel in Slovenia's alpine treasures, encompassing over 800 square miles of pristine wilderness.

Beauty and variety

At first glance, the heights of the mountains in this corner of the European Alps seem quite modest compared to the more westerly neighbours. The highest peak is the iconic Mount Triglav at 2864m, but those statistics

belie the beauty, variety and challenge offered by hiking in the Julian Alps. There are several options to explore the park on foot: you can opt for an extended hut-to-hut hike through the Alpine heights, make a dash for the top on the Triglav summit trail or opt for the Alpe Adria trail that skirts along the western section of the

park from the ski town of Kranjska Gora down the Soča river valley. The latter incorporates the Soča River Trail which follows the crystal-clear waters of the Soča River, offering opportunities for easy walking while enjoying the river's beautiful carved limestone gorges leading to the outdoor mecca of Bovec.

Above: Lake Bled with the island of the Church of the Assumption dating back to 1698.

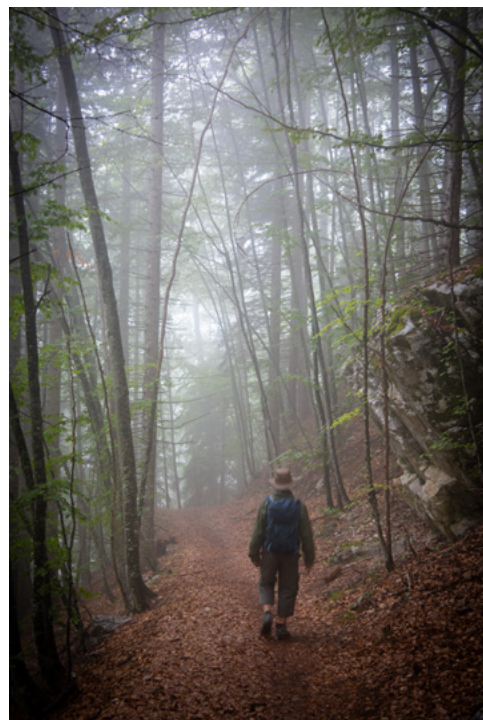
Below: Descending down from the Torc summit with expansive views of the surrounding limestone ranges.





Left: The incredible main chamber of the Skocjan Caves is reminiscent of a scene from Lord of the Rings

Below: An atmospheric forest walk on a wet day's descent from the Vrsic pass.



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Like any famous peak, Mount Triglav acts as a magnet for peak baggers intent on conquering its iconic pyramidal summit, so Slovenian authorities came up with a plan to disperse hikers on another trail through the park: the Seven Lakes trail which follows a loop from scenic and very chilled Lake Bohinj into the Alpine region below Triglav through a series of glacial lakes and back again. So whilst Triglav's summit still attracts a decent number of hikers you can find solitude on the many other trails through the park. For our exploration, I chose a mixture of all the above to get a good overview of what the region offered.

After leaving Ljubljana it seemed obligatory to stop for a quick exploration of Lake Bled and its famous island church on the way to the mountains, however, the real highlight of our day was not the familiar sight of the island church but a lunch in a rustic local barn. Our host Matej grew everything used for our lunch in her gardens and gave us a good insight into the organic farming and ethos that underpins Slovenian cuisine. Traditional farming methods that prioritise biodiversity and soil health are encouraged, along with cultivation of heirloom crops and native breeds of livestock. We cautiously inspected her beehive, and learned beekeeping is deeply ingrained in Slovenian

culture. Along hiking trails, you come across hives creatively painted with vibrant motifs that are also a form of art and cultural expression.

Seven Lakes Trail

After breakfast the next day we started into the mountains, on well-maintained trails that climbed through alpine meadows and forest to the heart of the Triglav National Park. We passed surprisingly few other walkers and the trail opened up to incredible panoramic views across the ranges of mountains that make up Triglav National Park. Our destination was the Vodnikov Dom Hut, named after a famous Slovenian Poet and perched overlooking an amphitheatre backed by the looming summit of Mount Triglav itself.

I'm a big fan of European mountain huts and the Slovenian variety is excellent. This was a sizable building with private and dormitory rooms and a convivial dining room and terrace where you can purchase all your meals and drinks. Slovenians take great pride in their food, and the traditional meals offered are a delightful part of the hiking experience. Slovenian cuisine is hearty and nourishing, perfectly suited for hikers seeking to refuel after a day on the trails. Don't miss



Top: The Vodnikov Dom Hut, with superb views across the valley below Mount Triglav.

Above: A Juta stew washed down the local brew and spectacular backdrop of the Prisojnik Mountain.

the opportunity to try traditional dishes like "štruklji" (dumplings), "jota" (a bean and sauerkraut stew), and "kranjska klobasa" (delicious local sausages). In the long summer evening we sat outside and enjoyed watching the sun drop behind the mountains with a local beer in hand. Followed by one of the excellent local brandies, made with mountain berries and medicinal herbs.

The next morning, most of our fellow hut hikers headed off for the summit of Triglav and other high routes that also offer Via Ferrata. We chose a nearby peak that offered incredible 360° views with some very friendly sheep as company. Over the next two days, we traversed the Seven Lakes Trail through Alpine meadows, forested valleys and over passes watching chamois and ibex on the hillsides and alpen cows in the valleys below.

During the spring and summer months, the park's meadows burst to life with a riot of colourful wildflowers. Edelweiss, alpine aster, avens and gentian are just a few of the species that paint the landscape with vibrant hues. The park's forests are predominantly composed of spruce and fir trees, but you'll also find extensive beech and pine forests.

Triglav National Park is not just a sanctuary of natural beauty, it's also steeped in culture and tradition and one of the most captivating

aspects of the park is the presence of small mountain villages that seem to have been frozen in time. These villages, perched on the hillsides or nestled in valleys, exude an aura of tranquillity and simplicity that is difficult to find in the modern world. The mountain villages and pastures are windows into a way of life that celebrates simplicity, connection to the land, and a profound sense of community. Throughout the park, you encounter both mountain huts and shepherd's huts, known as "koča" in Slovenian. These rustic structures serve as resting places for hikers and offer local cheese and yoghurt to passersby, as well as a glimpse into Slovenia's mountain culture.

Alpe-Adria Trail

Our next destination was the Alpe-Adria Trail, first up through the mountains near Kranska Gora and then dropping down through the Soca River valley and Karst Vineyards region to finish at the Adriatic Port of Piran. The scenery as you walk up the Pisnica River valley is jaw-dropping, flanked by impossibly jagged mountain spires on either side, passing by beautiful lakes, popular with locals for swimming and relaxing. We spent a memorable night in a mountain hut where we thought we had a whole dormitory to ourselves before a late-



Top: Bridge over the serene Lake Bohinj, a centre for watersports and lakeside swimming in its clear glacial waters.

Left: Velika Plaz, with a sizable summer population of herdsmen who bring their flocks to the highland pastures.



night arrival of a large party of German hikers led to one of the worst nights' sleep I've had since being a backpacker! The good-humoured staff and excellent coffee in the morning soon revived our spirits along with the prospect of my first sight of the legendary Soca River.

The Soca is known for its startling emerald green colour, a feature celebrated in local folklore. It's often referred to as the "Emerald Beauty" and its mesmerising colour is due to limestone particles carried in the water interacting with light. Descending into the Soca River valley we spent the night at a beautiful, converted farmhouse and climbed to reach the cave that's the source of the fabled Emerald River. The Soca River trail is a gateway to some of the best natural beauty in Slovenia. Hiking along the riverbanks, you'll be treated to magnificent views of the sculpted limestone

“THE KARST REGION IS A GEOLOGICAL WONDER,”


gorges and azure waters, with a backdrop of the towering peaks of the Julian Alps.

It's hard to believe it was once the scene of intense fighting during WWI. The so-called Isonzo Front was a series of battles fought between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Italy, which occurred along the Soča River and took half a million lives. It was here that a young Ernest Hemingway served as an ambulance driver and was wounded, his experience providing the location for the action in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*.

Very friendly locals

Slovenia's rich culture and traditions are interwoven into the Alpe-Adria Trail experience, as you hike amongst the lowland Karst region you'll encounter sleepy villages and vineyards where time seems to stand still. Houses with stone facades and terracotta roofs are surrounded by vineyards and orchards, some of these unassuming vineyards producing some of the finest Slovenian wines. One of our most memorable experiences was a leisurely lunch with a local family, who produced bio-dynamic wines and took great pride in plying us with their excellent range of wines and spirits. It's that genuine hospitality and connection that are always a highlight of travel and are long remembered.

The Karst region is a geological wonder characterised by rugged limestone terrain, dramatic sinkholes, underground caves, and surface features known as karst phenomena. Hiking through the Karst region also offers a journey into a subterranean world, as this area is famous for its extensive cave systems, including the world-renowned Postojna Cave and Skocjan Caves. The latter was included on UNESCO's list of natural and cultural World Heritage Sites in 1986 and is on an epic scale with one of the biggest subterranean chambers on the planet.

The charming coastal town of Piran beckons at the end of the Alpe-Adria Trail, with its rich history, Venetian architecture, and a relaxed Mediterranean atmosphere. A walk along the city walls overlooking the terracotta rooftops of Piran is a fitting way to end your hike in Slovenia, followed by a meal at one of the excellent seafood restaurants to celebrate. 

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