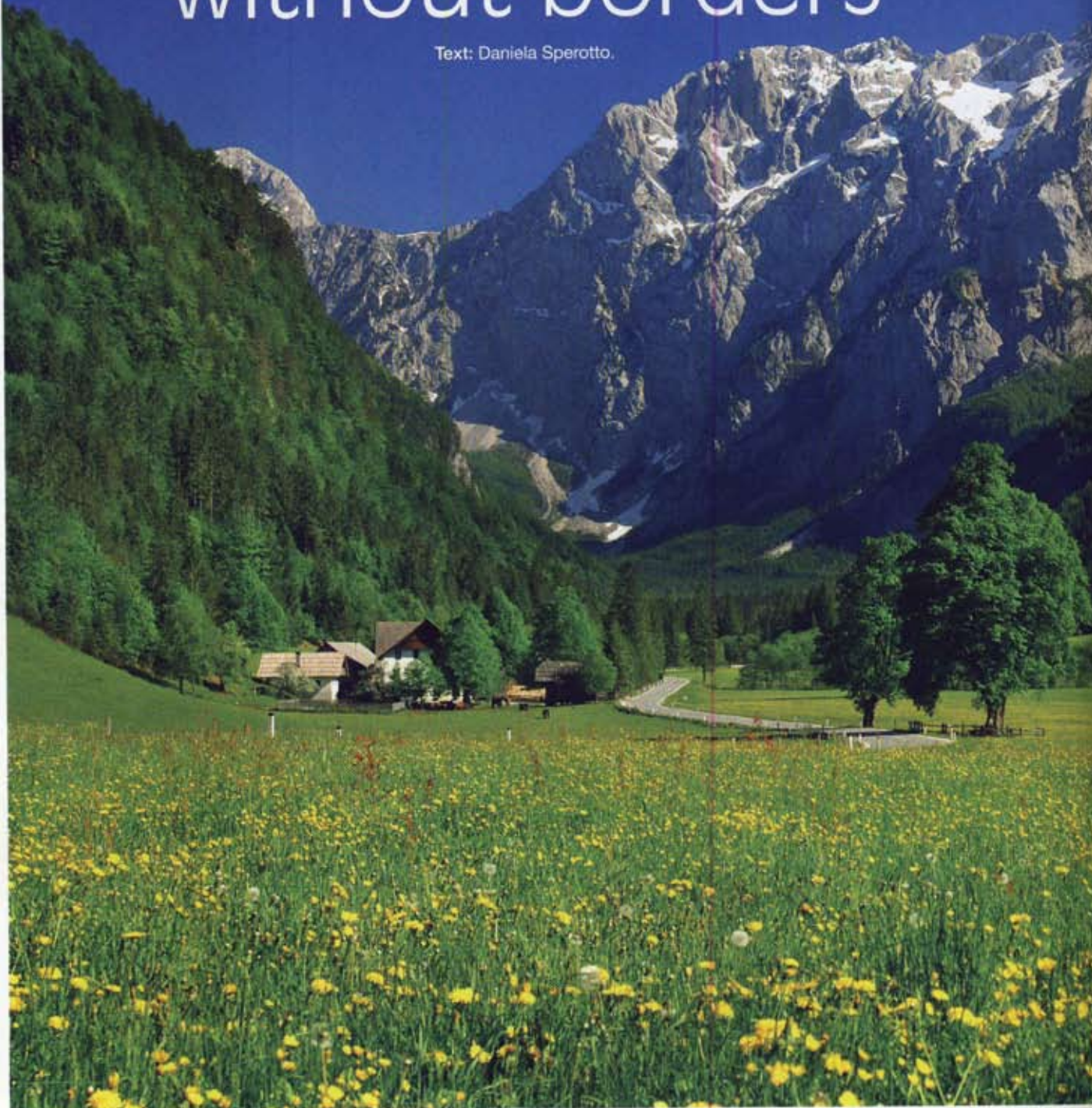


A country without borders

Text: Daniela Sperotto.



78 avocado march/april 2011





A tiny little country, said to be half the size of Switzerland, Slovenia's sheer awesomeness has got to be seen to be believed.



If it is a country with a topography that will get your adventurous streak bursting, or a country with an incredible past that can make any history buff excited, or just a country filled to the brim with a variety of dishes and hearty food to satisfy any belly, there is no need to venture further than the enigmatic country of Slovenia.

Although not the top choice on many peoples' "must visit" travel destinations, you would be utterly wrong to disregard this awesome country.

Nestled neatly in-between Austria, Hungary, Italy, Croatia and the Adriatic Sea, Slovenia lies in the heart of Europe, where the Alps meet the Mediterranean and the Pannonian Plain meets the Karst – epitomises why this diverse country has been dubbed: "Europe in miniature".

Measuring only 20, 273 km², with a population of just over two million, Slovenia is home to some of the most hospitable, friendly, generous and multilingual people you may ever come across on your travels.

An asset to any country, the Slovenes themselves live life everyday with a love for their country, and are keen to share this love with everyone who visits.

Slovenia's location should be a calling card on its own, and is indicative of its diverse culture.

History, hills, valleys and countryside

As one of the youngest democracies in Europe, Slovenia is marked with a jaded past, yet became the first former communist country to become part of the EU on 1st January 2008.

Tucked between the seaside and the adventurous Alpine peaks, Slovenia's greatness is in its details.

As with its history and past, its landscape is filled with a broad mix of juxtaposed elements, making it even more enchanting. In a relatively small area, you can find the best of a whole continent: mountains, lakes, the Mediterranean Sea, vast forests, ancient castles, and charming urban cities, all set against a backdrop of pristine natural splendor.





Developing over the centuries, under influences from all directions and cultures, each ruling empire left visible traces on the country which has resulted in a variety of lifestyles, cuisines, cultures and traditions.

Dumplings, sausages, pizza and potica

No matter where you roam, food typifies any nation and nothing seems to pin-point a culture more than its festivals and cuisine. Slovenia is packed to the rafters with different dishes and traditions influenced by its past and present, its landscape, people and its neighbours, making your gastronomic journey well worthwhile.

A melting pot for all tastes, Slovenia's food is to be "enjoyed with reckless abandon".

With parts of the country having been part of Italy, pizzas and pastas are a definite favourite, while opposite to this, Slovenia was also part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, so sausages and meat feature heavily on most menus.

So even if you are not an adventurous person when it comes to food, you still will be well catered for.

The Balkan proximity has brought about influences in the form of kebabs and different kinds of grilled meats, while fish and seafood is generously available throughout the country.

Slovenian food is very plain, without many spices or garnishing, but it is scrumptiously hearty and very filling.

Consisting mainly of different meat varieties depending on the dish, vegetarian dishes are in the minority.

A typical three-course meal consists of a soup (*juha*), usually made of chicken broth, egg noodles and beef, accompanied by fresh salad in vinegar (*solata*), fresh bread (*kruh*) and potatoes (*krompir*).

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This is followed by a main dish of meat or seafood like squid, sausage (*klobasa*), or goulash (*golaz*), to name but a few.

Although not mentioned on most menus, traditional Slovenian dishes are served if you order them.

Trying the *Kraški pršut* (air-dried ham similar to prosciutto), and traditionally prepared goose and duck are a must.

Ultimately, when it comes to specialties, you cannot leave without indulging in one, or many of Slovenia's shining star: the *štruklji*.

Said to have over 70 different varieties, they are stuffed dumplings prepared with sweet or savoury fillings, depending on the region or time of year but are available anywhere and everywhere.

Local Slovenian wine should be your top pick to accompany your meals. Very protective of their wine, Slovenes like to drink their wine themselves with only 5% being exported and 75% being consumed by the Slovenes themselves.

The wine is very good in both quality and taste, and comes in a number of varieties depending on the region.

Specialty wines such as *Teran*, which is a dry red wine from the *Kras* region, and *Cvicek* wine, which is a very dry and light red coloured wine should be tried at least once on your visit.

Served mostly with coffee (*kava*), when it comes to desserts, the *potica* is among the most famous and popular – this is a type of nut



rolled cake that is stuffed with an assortment of fillings during holidays, while the cream cake of Bled and *gibanica* (a very heavy cake like pastry consisting of poppy seeds, apples, walnuts, cheese and raisins, topped with cream) are definite local favourites.

Wining and dining

The heart and soul of Slovenian cuisine is the *gostilna*. These are normally rustic family-run inns, and are a must-stay-and-eat at experience.

Experiencing their warm generous hospitality, these inns are where family recipes are passed down through generations and prepared fresh for visitors.

Another great option for experiencing traditional regional specialties and superb wines are by visiting some of the tourist farms.



Fact file

Currency: EURO

Capital: Ljubljana

Weather: Although Slovenia has four distinct seasons, depending on where you go, and what you want to see and do in the country, the climates can differ quite drastically. In the Alpine regions temperatures are moderate in summer but cold in winter. From the coast up to the Soa Valley, there is a great Mediterranean climate with mild winters and warm sunny weather most of the year round. Eastern Slovenia boasts more of a continental climate, with hot summers and cold winters.



Travel around, ask for regional specialties, stop into shops, farms and markets to enjoy the true Slovenian spirit, but most of all enjoy it.

No matter what you go to Slovenia for, be it skiing, hiking, city hopping or leisurely country driving, you will not leave without being in awe of its splendor and charm.

Eating out

Gostilna Pod Lipo

Where: Borštnikov trg 3, 1000, Ljubljana

Contact: 01 4224 110

Located right in the centre of Ljubljana, this more traditional gostilna is one of the best places to eat when in the city, and it is really easy to find. Offering a wide selection of dishes, you can select anything from an array of dishes, including fish, meat and vegetarian.

Ask for the inn's more traditional meals like the roast veal with mash potato and onion, or try one of its delicious pizzas.

Gostilna Jurman

Where: Zaloska Cesta 151, 1000 Ljubljana.

Contact: 051 358 358

A genuine great find. Popular among locals and tourists alike, Gostilna Jurman, is a busy bar/ restaurant where food is excellent, and the atmosphere very hospitable and friendly.

There is a great selection of dishes, and prices are fairly reasonable, but be warned that it is a popular eatery but well worth the wait.

Pikol

Where: Vipavska 94, 5000, Rožna Dolina

Contact: 053 334 523

Housed in a quaint wooden cottage on the margin of Rožna dolina, next to a romantic and mysterious fishpond, Pikol has achieved the reputation of a top-level fish restaurant.

Offering fish specialties of sea bass Carpaccio with chestnut honey, as well as marinated scampi with caviar, this restaurant is a true gem. It also offers traditional regional cuisine and venison dishes for those not wanting fish, ensuring that there is something for all tastes.

Restaurant Sophia

Where: Obala 45, 6320, Portorož

Contact: 056 927 000

A top-end fine dining experience, Restaurant Sophia is for those looking for something more sophisticated, and out of the hustle and bustle of the more traditional inns and pubs.

Housed in the historic and beautiful Kempinski Palace Portorož hotel, you cannot expect anything else but exquisite cuisine, with a menu comprising only the finest of dishes cooked to perfection and a wine selection to complement every dish.

With thanks to Consulate of Slovenia and Slovenian Tourism Board. Pictures courtesy of ThinkStock.

