



MAGICAL: A view of Bled with its lake, island and church, set against the Julian Alps.

PICTURE: WWW.SLOVENIA.INFO

A taste of cream cake and Alpine adventure

Slovenia offers visitors a wide range of activities in a charming environment, writes **Belinda Virét**

DO you fancy an enchanting day and memorable afternoon tea? Then the picture-perfect Alpine town of Bled in Slovenia, also known for its delectable cream cake, is the place to visit.

About 50km from the capital city, Ljubljana, this gem to the northwest of the Julian Alps offers magnificent scenery. Established around a glacial lake with Slovenia's only natural island, the beauties of Bled – and its famed confectionery, *kremšnita* – have been enjoyed by many prominent people from across the world.

A little like the Slovenes, this cake is carefully layered, sweet, yet not overpowering. Creamy custard and vanilla flavours are supported by leaves of flaky pastry, and the top is dusted with a generous layer of icing sugar. It is available in nearly every patisserie, coffee house and restaurant in Bled.

The coffee in Bled is also particularly good, so start the day with the locals at one of the welcoming coffee houses that offer a view of the lake. One can't help but admire a prominent centuries-old church near the lake shore, half hidden in the greenery of the abundant natural forests, and the steep-roofed

wooden homes with geraniums brilliantly cascading from their balconies.

Head out over the sapphire-blue waters to Bled Island on a ferry, a wooden *pletna*, to visit the beautiful Baroque-style Pilgrimage Church of the Assumption of Mary. Once a destination for pagan worshipers, the island has become a popular attraction and is a favoured venue for couples wishing to tie the knot in a romantic fashion. According to legend, those who ring the 476-year-old wishing bell, set above the church nave, are blessed with good luck.

On returning to shore, a 20-minute hike – or a five-minute drive – will take you to a once-mighty castle, dramatically perched on the 130m rocky cliffs that tower over the lake. The oldest fortress in Slovenia and once the residence of the Bishops of Bixen, Bled Castle offers spectacular 360-degree views of the area.

Be sure to visit the museum section, as well as the printing works, which are set up in an old prison cell flanked by intimidating medieval weapons of war. See a master printer – a profession that once required seven years of training –

demonstrate the original printing process using a replica of Gutenberg's wooden printing press, blocks and lead letters. Also sample top-quality wines in the castle cellar and see how Franciscan monks used to bottle wine from oak barrels. Fill your own wine bottle, and cork and wax it for a great souvenir.

To dip into more recent history, make your next stop the impressive Hotel Vila Bled, once the summer residence of former Yugoslavian leader Marshall Josip Broz Tito. Cuban cigars intimating the late controversial dictator's flashy lifestyle remain on display in glass cabinets. Ask the hotel staff's permission to peek into Tito's most frequented quarters for a further glimpse into his life.

Nowadays, you're also likely to find heads of state and other dignitaries at the Grand Hotel Toplice. Set on the edge of Lake Bled, this five-star establishment has one of the town's three thermal swimming pools, its own private beach and offers a host of wellness services. Here, a night for two in a double room with a lake view can set one back €215 out of season or €240 in season.

With the influence of neighbouring Italy evident in local menus, opt for pasta and enjoy lunch on the hotel patio overlooking the lake. Alternatively, order



TRANQUIL: Vintgar gorge.

from a local restaurant a thin-based pizza, topped with freshly gathered forest mushrooms, and picnic on the grassy banks of the lake. Children, especially, will delight in feeding the swans and taking a dip in the clean, clear water.

Feeling refreshed, head off for about 3.5km in the direction of Podhom village to experience one of the most amazing natural features in Slovenia – Vintgar gorge. A secure wooden boardwalk hugging the forest-clad sides of the gorge offers a soul-stirring, easy 1.6km walk alongside the gushing Radovna River, ending at the delightful 26m Šum

waterfall.

Turn back at the waterfall and return on the same trail or carry on, proceeding to the chapel of St Catherine above Zasip. This walk offers excellent views of the Karavanke mountains, Dolina, Bled and the country's highest peak, Mount Triglav, as it leads back to Bled via Zasip.

Having seen some of the countryside and experienced the friendliness of the locals, visitors may be easily persuaded to stay longer in Bled and explore other areas, such as the nearby valley of Bohinj. This area, dominated by Slovenia's largest glacial lake, is considered one of the most beautiful areas in the heart of the Julian Alps and in Triglav National Park.

Otherwise proceed to Ljubljana, the quaint capital of Slovenia, the perfect base from which to set out on day trips to other parts of this spectacular, clean, green and safe land in south central Europe.

Slovenia is well positioned to become a top tourist destination, especially since joining the Schengen visa area, making it relatively easy for South Africans to visit.

To find out more about visiting Slovenia, call South Africa's Honorary Consul of Slovenia on 021 970 2447 or email info@slovenianconsulate.co.za. See www.sloveniansconsulate.com



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HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT: Bled is known for its cream cake, *kremšnita*. The layer of icing sugar is reminiscent of the snow that transforms the area into a winter wonderland.



PICTURESQUE: The Pilgrimage Church of the Assumption of Mary on Bled Island across Bled Lake. It had to be restored twice following two major earthquakes.