



PRETTY AS A PICTURE: A view of Ljubljana from its castle.

Fall in love with Ljubljana – fairytale capital

This Central European city offers many enchanting reasons to linger longer, reports Isabel Verwey

DRAGONS, castles and legends of love may once have been the subject of fairytales but in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, they are a reality.

Spend a day in this enchanting city in Central Europe to experience them for yourself and muse on your own story of life and love.

7am to 8am: Enjoy breakfast at one of the many delightful restaurants or coffee shops on Prešeren Square, the heart of the old city, while observing people making their way to work. Be sure to ask for coffee with milk if you prefer cappuccino, otherwise you'll get a small cup of typically strong European coffee.

8am to noon: It's time to see the

sights of the old city. Explore on your own, using brochures from the tourism office on the square to direct you. Alternatively, opt for a guided two-hour walking tour conducted daily at 10am, ending with a visit to the impressive Ljubljana Castle that towers above the city.

By now you would have noticed that Prešeren Square is dominated by the statue of the Slovenian Romantic poet France Prešeren, with his muse watching over him.

The unveiling of the muse in 1905 caused quite a stir in Catholic circles, as she is naked.

Although Prešeren inspired many with his poetry, he was unable to sway

the emotions of Julija Primic, the daughter of a rich merchant who sadly never returned his love. Prešeren's statue now forever gazes on the bust of his beloved, which was erected across the square close to where she once lived.

The old city's unique atmosphere is created through the harmonious blend of baroque and art nouveau architecture, complemented by the artistic contributions of renowned Slovenian architect Jože Plečnik. The attractive salmon-pink Franciscan church to the left of the statue and the Triple Bridge to the right are some of Plečnik's celebrated works.

Cross over the Triple Bridge, which spans the Ljubljanica River, to get to one

of Europe's most beautiful open-air markets, also a Plečnik design. With its permanent stalls, you'll always find fresh fruit and vegetables, flowers and novelties for sale.

Glassware, ranging from dainty coloured votives to oil and vinegar containers, is pretty and well priced, and would make perfect gifts.

Close to the market is the imposing baroque-style Cathedral of St Nicholas. Built in 1701, the striking frescoes on the high ceiling remind one of the cathedrals of St Petersburg. Blessed by the pope, the cathedral's huge copper doors depict in relief the history of Christianity in Ljubljana.

Other interesting architectural fea-

tures on the river promenade are Butcher's Bridge and Dragon Bridge. The latter structure is guarded by four fierce green dragon statues, a symbol of the city.

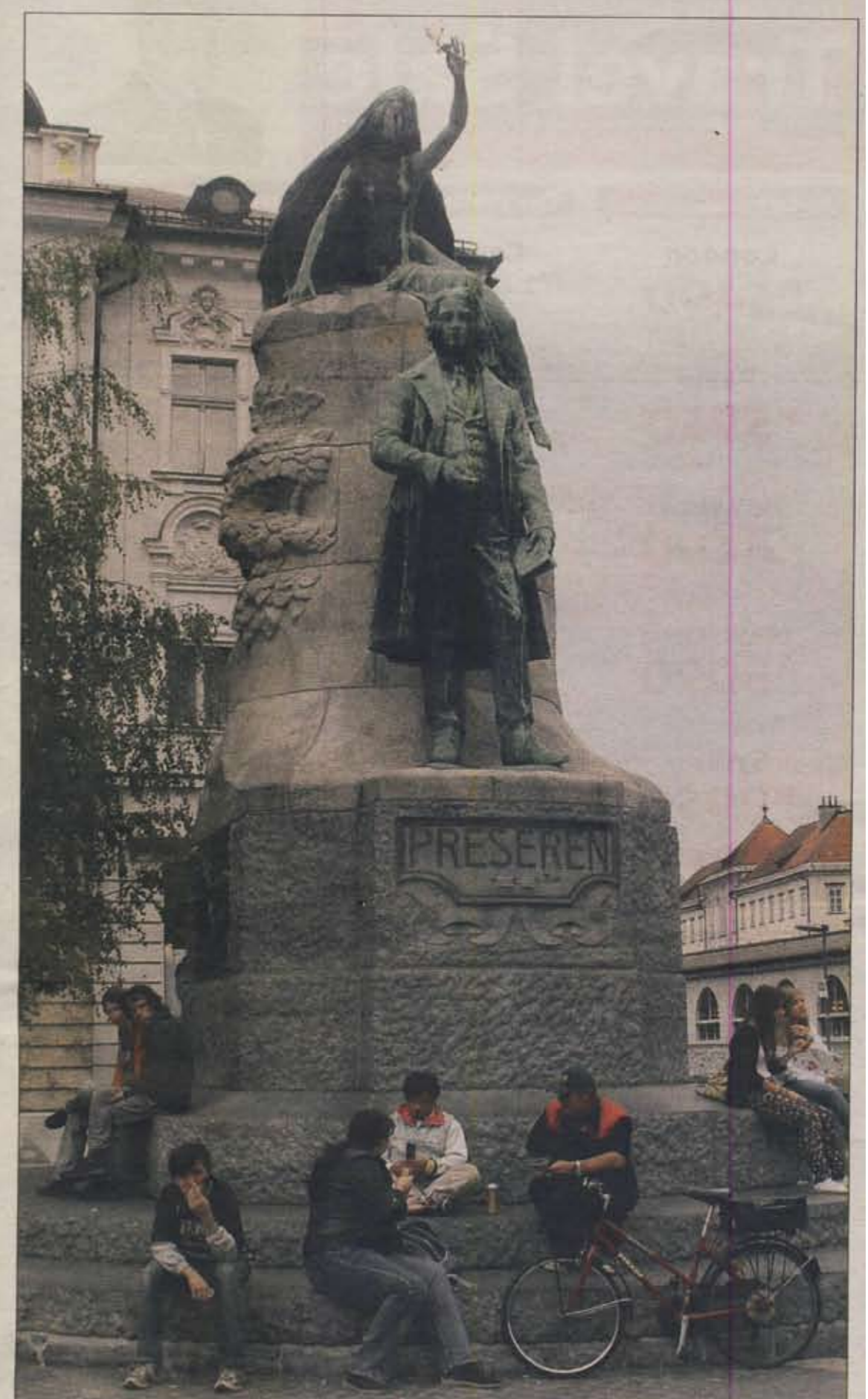
Now it's time to visit the medieval Ljubljana Castle. To get there, catch a special tourist train that runs from Prešeren Plein, or hop on the funicular from Krek Square.

Alternatively, enjoy a brisk walk up the hill. Built during the Middle Ages, the castle today is the venue for a variety of concerts and cultural events. A climb up the circular stairs to the top of the tower rewards visitors with a spectacular view of Ljubljana.

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PRETTY BAUBLES: Take home Ljubljana's functional glass art as a souvenir.



A PLACE IN HISTORY: The statue of Slovenian poet France Prešeren. As his verses were adopted for the country's national anthem, he will not be forgotten by the younger generation.

The beating heart of the Slovene nation

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Noon to 2pm: After all that exertion, a delicious Slovenian lunch would probably be welcome. Choosing from the numerous restaurants is difficult, but Gostilna AS with its good location, peaceful courtyard and scrumptious food would be my choice. End your meal with Slovenia's most famous patisserie, kremšnita, a decadent cream tart.

2pm to 4pm: Wander through Ljubljana's largest and most beautiful park, Tivoli Park. Situated in the centre of the city, it covers 5km and boasts several statues, fountains and the Ljubljana Zoo. Art lovers should visit the nearby Museum of Modern Art, which displays the works of Slovenian as well as international artists.

4pm to 6pm: For good reason, Ljubljana is known as the city that hosts the most cultural festivals in the world, so head back to Prešeren Square in time for a free afternoon concert. During the month-long festivals, two free concerts are presented daily in the open-air theatre on the square.

Musical performances ranging from ballet and jazz to choral music, as well as drama productions, are staged here. Several renowned artists have also entertained the locals, including Bob Dylan, Deep Purple, Vaya Con Dios and Billy Idol, who visited in June this year.

When things heat up, cool down with an ice cream

from one of the many stalls on the square. Next to Italian ice cream, Slovenian ice cream is the best in Europe.

6pm to 7pm: Glide up the Ljubljanica River by boat to catch a glimpse of the city from a different angle. The English-speaking guides provide interesting information on all the major attractions. As in South Africa, English is taught as a subject at school and is fairly well understood in Slovenia.

7pm to 11pm: Sip on sundowners at one of the many bars or restaurants along the river. For dinner, a Slovenian pizza is recommended, with its thin base and amazing variety of toppings.

End the day with another free performance on the square or attend an opera or symphony concert in the city's largest theatre complex, Cankarjev Dom.

Ljubljana boasts the world's oldest symphony orchestra, and the opera house has a rich history, with operas by composers such as Mozart having been performed here.

Having experienced the young and vibrant spirit of the Slovenian capital in a mere day, you'll have the urge to reflect on your feelings for the heart of the Slovene nation, in the only country that has "love" in its name.

For details about visiting Slovenia, call the Consulate of Slovenia 021 970 2447, email info@slovenianconsulate.co.za or visit www.slovenianconsulate.co.za

