



JONATHAN STRUGS PHOTOS

The view from the castle tower, the many pedestrian streets lined with cafés and colourful art-nouveau architecture are just three of the many good reasons to visit.

# Eastern Europe's overlooked GEM

## Fall in love with Ljubljana's wine bars, fanciful architecture and café culture

BY SANDRA MACGREGOR

I should have known never to judge a city by its train station. I'd learnt that at Piazza Garibaldi in Naples. But, nonetheless, pulling into the station in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, having come directly from Dubrovnik, Croatia's rising star, my heart sinks a little. No exuberant art nouveau buildings, no elegant, à la Parisienne coffee shops and not a single gothic church in sight. Just a disinterested ticket attendant and a man urinating in the sink in the women's washroom.

But I needn't have worried. As I leave the station and head south down Mikloši street toward Prešeren Square, the city's main hub, I start to feel that a love story may be about to unfold.

"Some say she's gaudy but I think she's gorgeous," says a local, in near perfect English as he notices me staring at the Cooperative Business Bank, a bright, pinkish-orange, flamboyant masterpiece adorned with colourful geometric patterns. Mikloši street has the largest concentration of art nouveau buildings in the city. Cheeky facades, organic forms, patterns and decorative motifs abound, each as dizzying as it is delightful.

I arrive in Prešeren Square where I had planned to grab a coffee and give my eyes a rest only to find that the visual feast is

far from over. Vying equally for attention in the square are a bold, rose-coloured, 17th-century Franciscan Church and a commanding statue of beloved national poet France Prešeren (complete with naked muse). Having heard of the church's beautiful 18th-century altar, I try for a tour, but, finding it closed, I join the others seated on the church's front steps — a perfect place to pause and see and be seen.

There is little time for rest, however. This little city of 270,000 people isn't quite what I had expected. Its charisma is undeniable and invites investigation. Bridges and streets fan out from Prešeren Square, each with a fairy-tale-like quaintness thanks to pedestrian-friendly, cobblestoned streets and age-worn but elegant buildings. The image is made complete by an imperious hilltop castle that claims the city's skyline and beckons visitors forward.

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This is one of a quartet of fierce dragons that guard Ljubljana's Dragon Bridge and test a woman's virtue.





## TRAVEL

## Ljubljana: Human Fish beer and underappreciated wines

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I resist the urge to cross the triple bridge, one of the city's most famous landmarks, and walk instead toward the endless cafés and outdoor patios lining the Ljubljanica river. Always busy, their inexpensive menus make them as attractive to locals as to visitors. One could spend hours sitting by the river and people watching. It is much more difficult, however, to eavesdrop; I don't hear much English spoken. Though European tourists have begun to catch on to what an attractive and inexpensive destination Ljubljana is, North Americans are not common, continuing to favour Prague and Dubrovnik as their primary Eastern European destinations.

Underappreciated by both Europeans and North Americans are Slovenian wines. Wine has become a booming business and vineyards are popping up throughout the country. I won't have the chance to explore the wineries but, lucky for me, the country's increase in vineyards is matched by a corresponding increase in the number of wine bars, many of which also stake a claim by the riverbank. Lured by a list of more than 100 Slovenian vintages, I decide to step into the chic Dvorni Vinoteka where my helpful waiter informs me that almost none of the country's wines are exported, therefore making it necessary for me to try as many of the local vintages as possible.

As popular as the cafés and wine bars along the riverbank are gelato stands — not surprising given Slovenia's proximity to Italy. Though I know a diet of wine and gelato is hardly conducive to sightseeing, it's hard to resist the lure of a treat that's every bit as delicious as its Italian counterpart, yet only a fraction of the price.

I decide the only way to resist further gastronomic indulgence is to leave the riverside and its cafés behind and head to what I am told is one of the most overlooked yet beautiful experiences Ljubljana has to offer: Tivoli park.

Always a fan of parks when travelling (there is something about an urban centre that, no matter how beautiful, can make you crave some greenery), the five-square-kilometre park has little of that staid, sanitized look city parks can sometimes have. Its entranceway is welcoming, with a wide promenade flanked by chestnut trees and a permanent, open-air photograph collection. The walk-



PHOTOS BY JONATHAN STRUG

Restaurants, cafés and wine bars line the banks of the Ljubljanica river as it wends through the city.

You'll find vibrant baroque and art-nouveau buildings on Stari Trg, one of the streets that leads to Ljubljana's castle.

wag when a virgin walks by.

"My mother-in-law took me here before I married her son," the local woman explains, adding with a wry smile, "she let me marry him anyway."

Finally, I decide to heed the call of the castle, but not before stepping into the nearby Premier Pub where I notice a sign for what has to be the most curiously named craft beer company I have ever come across: Human Fish Brewery. Named after an indigenous and blind cave-dwelling salamander, it is Slovenia's first craft brewery and a pint of its pale ale is worth the stop.

Sated, I head for the castle. Its present incarnation was built mainly in the 16th century, after an earthquake destroyed its original structure.



way leads to the Tivoli Mansion (a baroque beauty) and a quaint café. Tivoli's rambunctious flower gardens, bike trails (bikes are available for rent), zoo and picnic areas are all lovely but my favourite is the Ticistan (Birds' Home) area, where well-fed and friendly woodpeckers, robins and squirrels are more than happy to make my acquaintance for a handful of nuts.

Having tamed the wildlife of Tivoli, my thoughts turn to less docile creatures and I decide to go dragon hunting. As the symbol of Ljubljana, dragons can be found sprinkled throughout the city: on the

castle tower, on lampposts, carved into buildings, and in pretty much every gift shop. But the most famous of the mythical beasts are the four iconic green dragons guarding the corners of the Zmajski bridge (more popularly known as Dragon Bridge).

Impressive and beautifully made, I fail to understand why these fierce creatures should elicit laughter from a group of young boys who seem to be watching an equally hysterical number of girls run across the bridge. Noticing my confused look, a local explains that legend has it that the dragons' tails will

## If you go

**Where:** Ljubljana, Slovenia

**How to say it:**  
Lyoo-BLYAH-nah

**How to get there:** You can fly Air Canada from Ottawa, connecting in Montreal and transferring to Adria Airways in Frankfurt. Or you can fly Air Canada, connecting in Toronto, and transfer to Air Adria in Zurich.

**When to go:** Anytime of the year is good but if you want to avoid the cold, May to October is best.

## Where to stay:

■ The Grand Hotel Union, centrally located near Prešeren Square in a historic art nouveau building has doubles from \$275. 011-386-1-308-1270 or <http://gh-union.si>.

■ Kavarna Macek Rooms, located along the river above a picturesque café, has doubles from \$130. 011-386-1-470-1100 or <http://sobe-macek.si>.

## Where to eat:

■ Sokol offers traditional Slovenian food. 011-386-1-439-6855 or [www.gostilina-sokol.com](http://www.gostilina-sokol.com).

■ Pizza Foculus is consistently ranked as one of the best pizza places in town and is popular with students for its affordable prices. 011-386-1-421-9295 or [www.foculus.com](http://www.foculus.com).

**More:** [www.visitljubljana.si](http://www.visitljubljana.si)



DENNIS LEUNG, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

