

# ROAD TRIPPING

SAM BALDWIN SETS OUT TO SNOWBOARD SLOVENIA AND FINDS ENOUGH SNOW, SECRETS AND STORIES TO RIVAL THE SLOPES OF ANY MAINSTREAM RESORT



# THE REPUBLIC



Slovenia – it may be beautiful but is that any compensation for square cars and horse meat?

Stepping from the small twin-prop Air Adria plane, it's as if I've landed in the enchanted land of Narnia. Ljubljana airport is surrounded by pine forest and farmland, and the fairy tale landscape is dusted with an icing of snow.

Largely unknown to Brits, Slovenia suffers from an identity crisis. It's less than a three-hour flight from the UK, yet few can find it on the map. Most believe it's a poor Eastern European communist-Balkan-state, still struggling to scrape off the rust of the Iron Curtain, but in fact, this small, prosperous, central European country is a hidden snow gem.

My friends and I's plan is to spend a week road tripping the Republic, trying to cross paths with as many of the slopes, natural beauty spots and locals as we can. With about 12 resorts (of worthy visiting size) but only a week to spare, we plan to visit three of the most well-known – Vogel in the

west, Rogla in the middle and Mariborsko-Pohorje in the east.

Our first stop is Slovenia's compact capital Ljubljana, where we spend an evening strolling along the green Ljubljanica river, dropping into cosy café-bars, sampling the local *pivo* (beer) and trying a horse burger, one of the Republic's more unusual dishes. Crowned by a castle, the city's medieval architecture is easy on the eye, but is strangely plastered in high-quality graffiti, which seems to be encouraged. We spot a building displaying flyers inviting graffiti artists to paint. By morning their wish has been granted; a crisp piece of Slovenian graffiti has been added to Ljubljana's street art gallery.

Next morning it's an early start as we head west to Vogel in the Bohinj valley. We stop off en route at Lake Bled – probably the most picturesque body of water in the world. The crystal clear H<sub>2</sub>O reflects the lone island's medieval church – it's a rare example

"I reckon I could sled to the Med from here..."



From left: Local brew Pivo; Street art in Ljubljana is actively encouraged; Guess what Vogel's main attraction is; Crossing the country in the right direction

of where man's additions have enhanced nature's innate beauty. A large cable car goes from the very bottom of the resort and shoots us straight up to the slopes, which overlook another incredibly pretty lake – Bohinj. The resort has a vintage feel to it, many of the lifts are of the old school one-man chair variety, but it's fairly quiet and there's enough fun, rolling terrain with amazing views of the lake to keep us occupied for the two days we spend exploring the area.

Next day, back on the road, we decide to play a wild card and investigate a ski area we've seen marked on our map, in the small village of Mezica. We book into a traditional farmstead for the night, though getting there turns out to be a nerve-wracking experience. The roads are icy and the car is silent with tension as we wind our way up switchback after switchback on the steep, snow-covered track. To one side, there's a steep drop-off into the dark abyss. With no barriers on the road, it's almost certainly game over if the car slides. No one speaks. I grip the wheel tightly, willing the car to stay on track. After a long and scary ascent we make it to the rustic cottage safely, hugely relieved, to be met by the farmers Anna and Yakka who welcome us into their stone and wood home.

IT'S FAIRLY QUIET AND THERE'S ENOUGH FUN, ROLLING TERRAIN WITH AMAZING VIEWS OF THE LAKE TO OCCUPY US

The conversation is limited – our hosts don't speak a word of English, but with sign language and a phrase book we get the basics across. Everything I ask Yakka is answered with an enthusiastic “Ya! Ya! Ya!”, and his home-made cider, which tastes like apple juice but is actually 13 per cent alcohol, helps the evening flow along nicely as we learn a little of their lives and that of the land.

These two lovely locals are a dying breed of Slovenian smallholders; they have three cows, a clutch of chickens, a small orchard and a few acres of alpine meadow – but they're surviving, and it seems that nowadays, young Slovenians just aren't interested in taking on the hardships of working the land for a living. But can you blame them? With a good education system and developed economy, there are more opportunities than ever for young Slovenians, and after the limitations of Yugoslavia, they're keen to take advantage of their newly formed, independent and prosperous country, which is a member of Nato, the EU and the Eurozone.

We head into Mezica the following

morning to investigate the village's mystery ski area but we're in for a disappointing surprise – the lifts and slopes have long since disappeared. It is here I meet Aleš and Primosh, two brothers who enlighten me about the fate of their local slopes. Both are large, muscular men with shaven heads and goatee beards, giving them a manner of menace and at first, when Aleš rolls up in his black Mercedes, I think I'm meeting with the Yugoslav mafia. The pair are real men about town, they know everyone and everyone seems to know them,

but both are extremely friendly, helpful and speak excellent English. We sit in Primosh's XO bar, where he refuses any form of payment, and drink a succession of cappuccinos as their story unfolds.

They are the sons of a national ski champion. Both took after their father, though serious injury halted Aleš' racing career and he now runs the Prokon Slovenian Property company. Primosh, the younger of the two, proudly shows me cuttings from Korean and Japanese ski magazines from his days of glory while he toured the world, competing as part of the Yugoslavian team. There's a note of sadness when they speak of their little home town Mezica, a place which gave birth to many of the



**Pretty perfect conditions From top: Not your typical Alpine church; Picturesque lakes dot the country; No sledging, we guess; In sight of safety**

**I spy a clearing up  
there in the trees...**




country's greatest skiers. "It's hard to believe it now, but 20 years ago, Mezica was one of the most famous ski centres in Slovenia, and was known for producing many Olympic champions," says Aleš.

But a combination of warming weather and the local Zinc mine closing in 1994 left the resort struggling, eventually closing for good a few years ago (a fact that seemed to have been overlooked by the makers of our map!). They tell me that neighbouring towns have held on to their limited slopes, but recommend I hop over the border to Austria, just 10 minutes away, to visit Petzen, Austria's most southerly ski resort. We do, and we enjoy a good day shredding the somewhat hard-packed slopes, taking in the wooded terrain in a picture-perfect setting, as locals skate around the frozen lake and cross-country trails at the base of the mountain.

Our next stop is Mariborsko-Pohorje, one of the larger areas in Slovenia with 21 lifts and 40km of runs. The snow cover is good and there are plenty of trees to dip into on the rounded mountain terrain. Pulling up for lunch in one of the charming wooden lodges, we tuck in into a hearty dish of dumplings and game stew – washed down with mulled white wine. We spend another good day here, by the end of which we've covered most of the terrain, and the following day move on to our final destination, Rogla. This is the only resort I've been to where you have to start at the top and ski or board down to the bottom. Despite the odd set-up, it's a very pretty area with lots of forested runs and as a bonus, when we head to the back of the area, we find it's almost deserted so we have the whole place to ourselves.

Due to the relatively small size of Slovenia's resorts, they're unlikely to

compete with traditional favourites in the rest of the Alps. But what the country does offer is incredibly picturesque landscapes, good value, friendly locals and enough terrain to keep even advanced riders happy, as long as they visit a few different resorts.

It's not going to keep party animals entertained for long – though capital Ljubljana has plenty going on – and if you prefer piss ups to powder then Slovenia is probably not for you. However, if you'd like to lose the Brit crowd, visit an Alpine land where strong traditions meet a clean, cultured and compact country still untouched by overdevelopment, then a snow-road trip in Slovenia is one excellent adventure. 

**Sam Baldwin is the editor of SnowSphere.com, the travel magazine for skiers and snowboarders.**

