



VIBRANT IDYLIC LJUBLJANA

Text: Chow Ee-Tan Images Courtesy of Chow Ee-Tan

Step into a magical world of cobblestone streets, colourful facades and enchanting bridges in Ljubljana, Slovenia's capital. Experience its vibrant traditional cuisine and rich cultural heritage.

The name Ljubljana (loo-bee-ah-nuh) may be a mouthful to pronounce. But one can easily fall in love with the charming and picturesque capital city of Slovenia. After all, Ljubljana means 'beloved' in Slovenian.

Last October, when I spent three weeks studying Italian in Trieste, the most north-eastern part of Italy (bordering Slovenia and Croatia), I took the opportunity to visit Ljubljana over a weekend. It was easy to travel there with several direct bus services from Trieste centre to Ljubljana daily. It took around one-and-a-half hours of scenic driving.

So, after my class finished on a Friday, a friend and I boarded the bus and arrived in the Slovenian capital on a cool but beautiful autumn evening. It took only a few minutes on foot to arrive at our hotel right in the centre of Slovenian Old Town.

Robba Fountain in Mestni Trig is one of Ljubljana's historical attractions.



A PICTURESQUE GREEN CAPITAL

Ljubljana is not big, and one can cover most of the Old Town's attractions in a day, but I recommend spending at least two nights there for a more leisurely trip.

One of the greenest and most livable cities in Europe, Ljubljana was crowned the Green Capital of Europe in 2016, and the city prides itself on its "zero waste" recycling programme and the highest percentage of pedestrianised streets of any capital in Europe. Indeed, it has a few pedestrian-only streets in the Old Town and bicycles are available for rent in many parts of the city.

Slovenia has a long history with a strong medieval influence and is heavily influenced by nearby Austria and Italy.

Today, it is establishing itself as one of Europe's must-visit cities. It is very easy to explore and navigate by foot; it is a safe and walkable place

with lots to see, do and eat. So that's what we did—chill and soak in the beautiful atmosphere and vibes of the city.

The heart and soul of the capital is Ljubljana Old Town (Staro Mesto), which is flanked by the picturesque Ljubljanica River and a few magnificent bridges.

The wide pedestrian streets are laced with cobblestones surrounded by impressive architecture, such as intricate and colourful townhouse facades, palaces, fountains, statues, monuments, churches and squares.

Many restaurants, cafés and bars are littered along the river, and this is where the nightlife of Ljubljana comes alive after dark amidst the reflections of lights of the river.

After checking into our hotel, we were ready to explore Ljubljana Old Town. As night fell, we were greeted by a wonderful and almost fairy-tale sight as we approached the river—where the violet lights of the bridge and their reflections from the river lit up the surroundings like jewels.

Pedestrian only street flanked by interesting architecture.

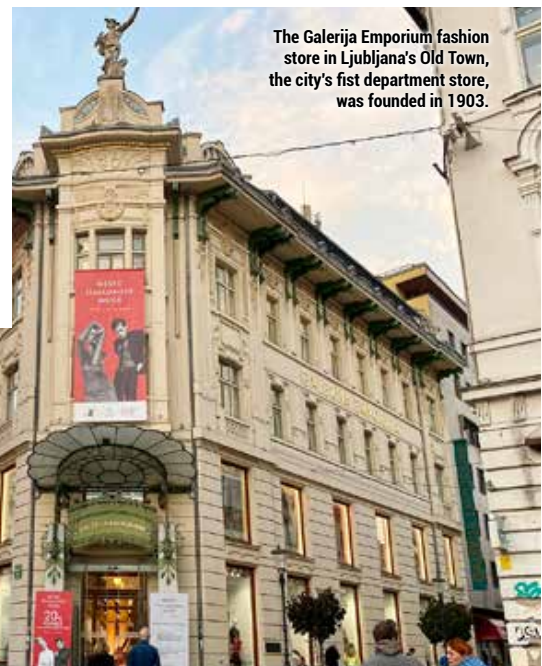


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A beautiful fountain near some restaurants.

The Galerija Emporium fashion store in Ljubljana's Old Town, the city's first department store, was founded in 1903.



Peculiar bronze faces
on the ground of
Locksmith Street.



Carniolan Sausages with
mashed potato, sauteed turnips
with crackling—one of the tradi-
tional Slovenian dishes.

**“I chose a dish with
Carniolan sausages,
roasted sauteed potatoes
and turnips with
crackling and thoroughly
enjoyed my meal.”**

TYPICAL SLOVENIAN DISHES

Our hotel recommended we sample some traditional Slovenian cuisine at Gostilna (Restaurant) Sokol, which has both indoor and al fresco dining. We braved the cool air (but the restaurant provided a heater outdoors), and we enjoyed the outdoor street atmosphere while we dined.

There were a number of traditional dishes on the menu, including for an appetiser, a selection of Slovenian cheeses from the Planika dairy in Kobarid and Pustotnik farm in Gorenja Village. Their signature traditional main dish is known as ‘a Peasant Plate’ and consists of a combination of Krvavica (blood sausage), Carniolan Sausage, sauerkraut (fermented raw cabbage) and martevz (beans and potatoes).

I chose a dish with Carniolan



Venison Goulash in a bread
cup (below) and
Mushroom Soup
in a Bread Cup.

sausages, roasted sauteed potatoes and turnips with crackling and thoroughly enjoyed my meal. The sausages were flavourful and accompanied well by the side dishes. Venison goulash in a bread cup is another popular dish I tried on another day, and my friend played it safe with Mushroom Soup in a Bread Cup.

When walking back, we chanced upon an interesting alleyway known as ‘Locksmith Street’. There are more than 700 bronze faces that have been

plastered into the small laneway—with faces ranging from grotesque to cute, as well as skeletal figures. Upon researching a bit on it, I found that the bronze faces were created by local sculptor Jakov Brdar, who was inspired to make the faces after reading a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, who wrote: “To think, for instance, that I have never been aware before of how many faces there are. There are quantities of human beings, but there are many more faces, for each person has several.”

CASTLE WITH A VIEW

Known to be a city of fog during the autumn, we woke up to gloomy drizzling weather but soon it cleared up. Our first destination was the famous Ljubljana Castle that perches on the 375m-high hill east of Old Town. It can be seen from just about anywhere in the city.

We walked past Prešeren Square, the main square in Ljubljana that was named after the greatest Romantic Slovenian poet, France Prešeren. In the middle of the square is a statue of the poet, with the muse of poetry holding a spring of laurel above his head.

The square is a popular meeting point and where major festivals, concerts, events and protests take place. And walking down the street towards Resljeva cesta, we found a lively, bohemian style street dotted with cafes, restaurants, antique shops, stores and graffiti-painted walls

Instead of taking the funicular, a popular way of arriving at the castle, we decided to hike up the walking path, which took us

no more than 15 minutes. The spacious grounds around the castle with the foggy background was a beautiful sight to behold.

There were many vantage points at the Castle offering a panoramic view of the Ljubljana Old Town. For instance, the castle's 19th century watchtower takes a climb via a double wrought-iron staircase (95 steps from the museum level) and a walk along the ramparts. It was worth our effort for the panoramic view of the Old Town and across the river. Descending from the tower, we watched a 12-minute-long documentary about the history of the fortress.

Located just beneath the watchtower is the Chapel of St George, one of the oldest surviving remnants of the castle. This little charming chapel is adorned with beautifully painted frescos. Next to it there is a Puppet Museum on the opposite side of the fort and a souvenir shop by the main entrance. There are also various arts exhibitions that take place in different parts of the castle and entrance is usually free.

OF DRAGON AND BRIDGES

After a pleasant walk down from the castle, we decided to check out the famous Dragon Bridge, one of the most iconic landmarks in the city across the Ljubljanica River. The dragon is the symbol of Ljubljana, representing the famous

legend of Jason and the Argonauts, whereby according to legend, Jason supposedly killed a dragon and founded Ljubljana.

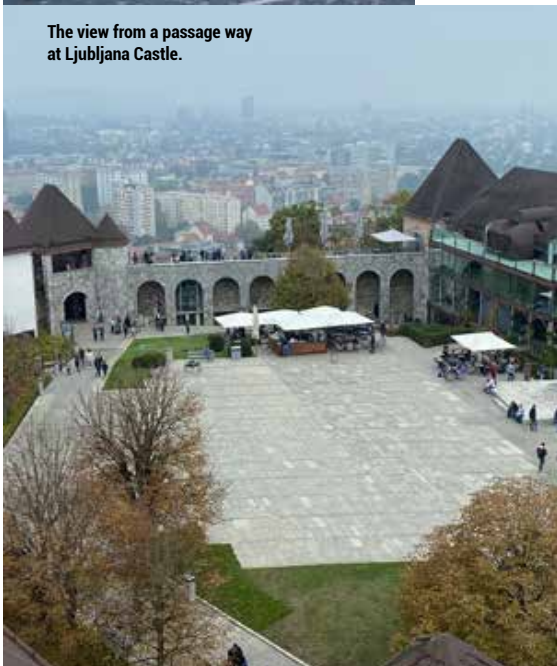
One can see the dragon everywhere

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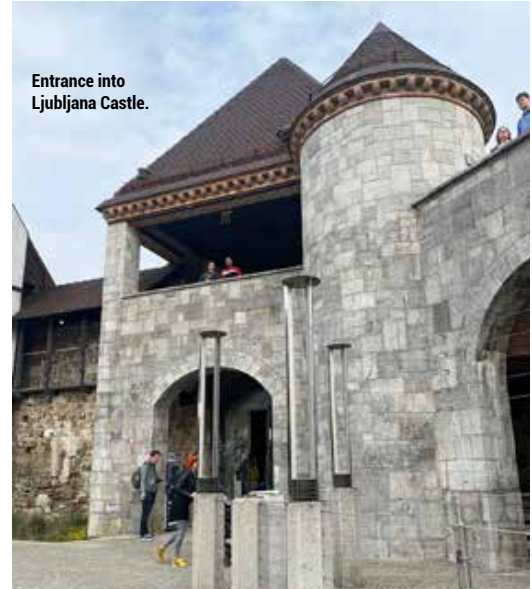
Sun setting in Ljudljana Old Town, with the Castle in the back drop.



The view from a passage way at Ljubljana Castle.



Entrance into Ljubljana Castle.



Prešeren Monument depicting great Slovenian poet is found in the happening Prešeren Square.



A Gothic-turned-Baroque chapel at Ljubljana Castle.

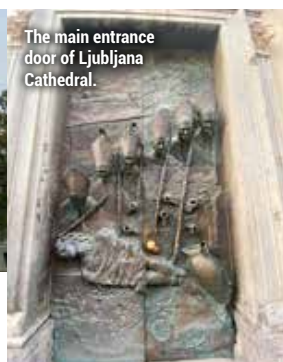


The picturesque Ljubljana River on a cloudy morning.



The imposing famous green dragon at the end of The Dragon's Bridge.

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The main entrance door of Ljubljana Cathedral.



The impressive ornated interior of Ljubljana Cathedral.

in Ljubljana. It is featured in toys, t-shirts, mugs and all types of souvenir items found in many shops across the city.

We were more interested in the dragons of the Dragon Bridge of course. The triple-hinged arched Dragon Bridge is said to be the most beautiful Vienna Secession style bridge. It features four imposing bronze dragon statues, two at each end of the bridge, and there are also 16 smaller dragon statues across the bridge. Tourists such as us would not miss the chance to pose in front of the formidable Dragon Bridge.

Another not-to-be-missed landmark right in the centre of

Ljubljana Old Town is the Triple Bridge—made up of a group of three bridges across the Ljubljanica River, connecting the Old Town on one bank and the modern part of the city on the other. The architecture of the bridges has Venetian influences. It combines a 19th century road bridge and two 1930s pedestrian bridges designed by Joze Plecnik.

Plecnik was a Slovenian master of early-modern art, whose minimalist design has graced Ljubljana with his designs of beautiful bridges and buildings as well as dozens of urban design

elements such as pillars, pyramids and lamp posts.

A short walk from the Triple Bridge, one can explore some boutiques and specialty shops and an open market that operates from Monday to Saturday that sells fruits, vegetables, flowers and clothes as well as some local artifacts.

Along the river were rows of restaurants and cafés serving a variety of international cuisine. We saw a quaint ramen restaurant with a large outdoor dining area. It was a pleasant surprise that the ramen was better than I had expected.

The Ljubljana Cathedral, the main church of the city, was open in the afternoon. It is also known as the Cathedral of St. Nicholas and

“The biggest park just at the fringe of the city, Tivoli Park, seems like a tranquil respite from the touristy town centre on a Sunday morning.”

was built originally in the early 18th century in Gothic style, but it was then replaced by a Baroque building.

While not being very impressive from the outside, the interior of the cathedral was truly magnificent and breathtaking. Intricate artworks adorn almost every inch of the building, featuring gold leaf and ornate frescos on the ceiling and a majestic pipe organ.

When you walk around the outside of the cathedral, it has two huge bronze sculptured doors that were added when Pope John Paul II visited the cathedral in 1996. One portrays the 1250 years of Christianity in Slovenia while the other features the recent bishops in Ljubljana. The external wall is covered by carved statues and colourful murals.

NATURE AND GREENS IN THE CITY

The weather was clear and bright on our last day in Ljubljana. We decided to do something a bit different: to experience the green side of the city. The biggest park

just at the fringe of the city, Tivoli Park, seems like a tranquil respite from the touristy town centre on a Sunday morning.

Designed by French engineer Jean Blanchard, the huge park covers an area of approximately five square kilometres. It includes horse chestnut tree-lined walks landscaped with flower gardens, statues and fountains. The lawns are ideal for picnics, and the park's paths are popular running and jogging spots as they extend into the slopes of Rožnik hill, with several exercise stations along the way.

We ended up doing some exercise by trekking up one of the trails and eventually reached the beautiful 17th century Tivoli Mansion that is flanked by manicured gardens with a fountain. The house features a collection of fine art prints from the 20th century to the present day.

As we strolled back into the Old Town, we checked out from the hotel and had our last meal in the city. On the journey home, I felt glad to have the chance to visit this pretty and idyllic city that has so much to offer, for both its residents and tourists. 📍

Tivoli Mansion and its well manicured garden in the middle of Tivoli Park.



The beautiful lake in Tivoli park in autumn.

