



AN ITALIAN IN SLOVENIA

Of marble trout and memorable desserts

SLOVENIA'S Soca River is renowned for its exceptional fly-fishing for trout and grayling. Indeed, it has played no small role in my family and in my own angling development. I grew up being enthralled by my father's fishing tales based on his experiences on the Soca River, in particular the story of a 20kg marble trout speared by a road worker, with a garden fork in a pool below a small hydro-electric plant.

As I grew older, and more sceptical, I suspected that this was probably a case where the truth was not allowed to spoil a good story. Then a cousin who lives in the area forwarded me a newspaper cutting. A 22.5kg marble trout had been caught near Tolmin by an Italian flyfisher. This convinced me that it was time to explore my roots and fish the area.

ITALY AND SLOVENIA

Before the Second World War, Italy's territory extended into what is now Slovenia, and the 140km long Soca River, known as the Isonzo in Italy, was closely tied to my family's lives during the 1920s and 1930s. My grandfather worked for the government's water

authority, and he and his family lived alternatively in the small towns of Bovec and Tolmin where four of his children, including my father, were born. Nowadays these towns are the springboard for the large adventure sport industry as well as for the amazing flyfishing.

Besides the Soca, this area also hosts the smaller but equally rewarding Beca, Idrijca and Tolminka rivers. All have description-defying clear turquoise-blue water, white gravel and limestone boulders. The Soca is often described as the most beautiful river in Europe, and it not only teems with rainbow trout and the Adriatic sub species of grayling (*Thymallus thymallus*), but is also home to the rare marble trout (*Salmo trutta marmoratus*).

The marble trout is not, as is often thought, a sub species of the brown trout, but a separate species with habits very different from its cousins. It ambushes its prey by shooting out like a torpedo from its hiding place under boulders. It is also mainly piscivorous. A 40cm grayling that I caught had fresh bite marks around its tail peduncle, bearing testimony to the aggression and size that these fish display.

As recently as the 1960s this wonderful fish was facing extinction, but then the authorities and the flyfishing community decided it needed protection and the results are a success story that warrants greater recognition.

TIME TO GO FISHING ...

The Tolmin Angling Club controls, stocks and manages the rivers in the area. Fishing inspectors patrol all the waters and a permit is required to fish. This permit can be obtained at numerous venues in the town and costs approximately R540 per day — a bit stiff for South Africans, but as soon as the quality of the flyfishing is experienced, the cost is quickly forgotten.

I always employ a guide when fishing new waters, as I believe that it's usually well worth the expense. Bob Lustrik, regarded as one of the best local guides, met me in Tolmin and we fished the Soca River just outside the town.

Despite earlier rain having made the river a little cloudy, he quickly spotted what turned out to be my first grayling and then a salmon-silver rainbow trout of 50cm. Moving downstream we caught more rainbow trout and



Fishing on the Soca, a river renowned for its exceptional flyfishing for trout and grayling.

grayling, but when the marble trout proved elusive we decided to return to the town for a well deserved lunch and a large and very good Slovenian beer. It was hot and muggy, typical for this time of the year, but we did not take a break after lunch because in the constantly cold water the fish tend to feed throughout the day.

Moving to the outskirts of the town we looked down into the Tolminka River gorge. In a pool fed by a small hydro-electric station swam several big fish, including one definitely in excess of 10kg that was shaped like a yellowfin tuna. Trembling with anticipation I followed Rok down some concrete stairs, past the back of a derelict house to the river.

These fish have, however, grown to their extraordinary size because they are cleverer than anglers like me, and I could get neither them nor some sizable fish holding in adjacent pools to accept my flies. This is perhaps due to the heavy fishing pressure, as this section of the river is only a roll cast away from the town centre, and because presenting the fly without drag is difficult in the converging and braided currents.

Rok suggested we make some changes to the leader and flies, something that he did often in order to adapt to the conditions. We also moved upstream to a spot where he had noticed a large grayling. Struggling to control the drag on the line, I eventually spooked the grayling, but with my first cast slightly further upstream a large trout sipped in the #16 black nymph and the chaos began.

The 5kg-plus rainbow trout fled downstream, crossing a gravel beach barely covered by shallow water, jumped twice, nearly giving me a heart attack as I was only fishing 6 lb breaking strain tippet, and eventually stitched

itself in the overhanging branches of a willow tree. Determined not to lose my fish, Rok rushed into the river, and after I somehow managed to free the line from the tree, he netted it in the shallow water.

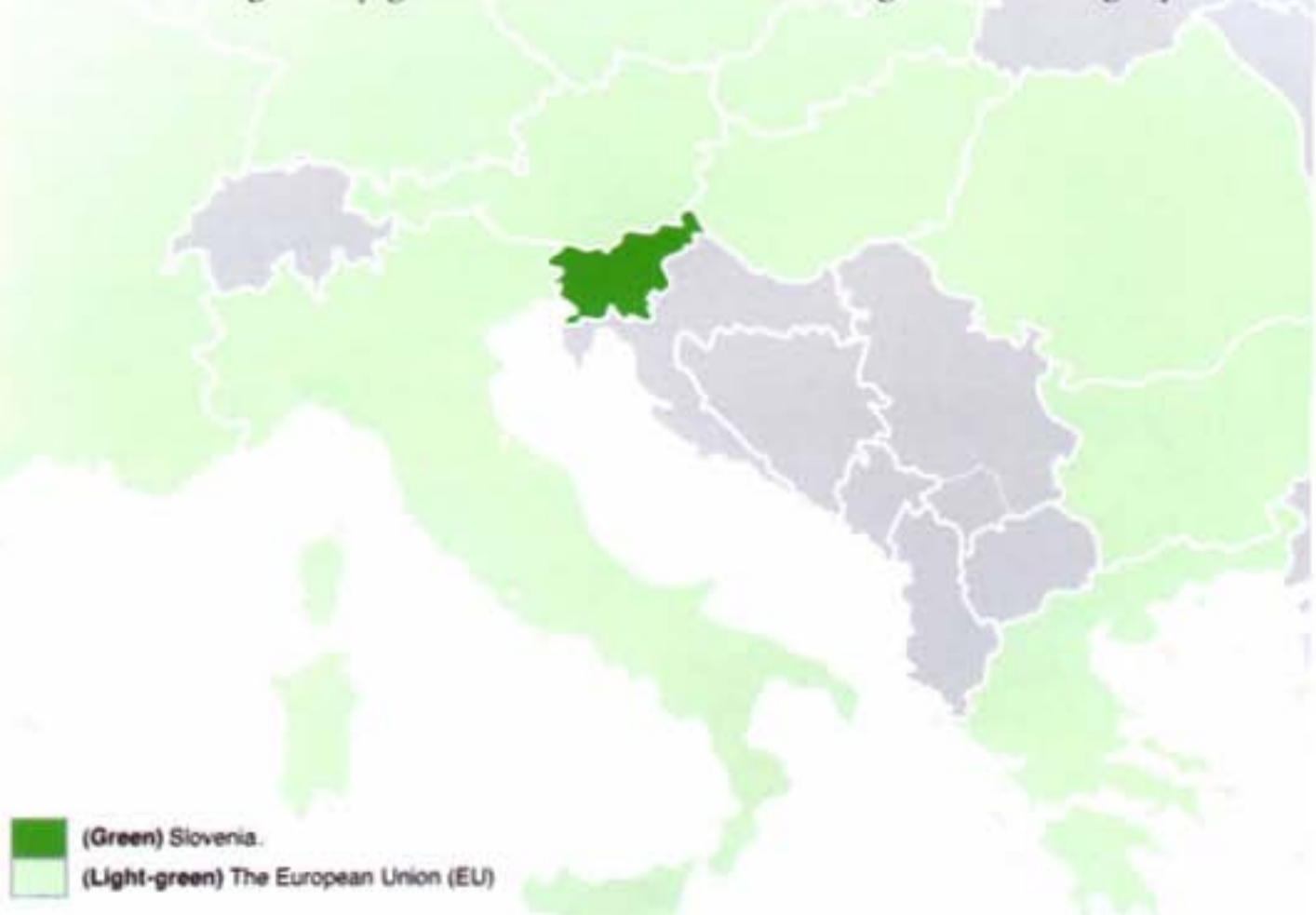
We then moved to a beautiful stretch on the Idrijca River just above its confluence with the Soca. I took some more good fish in the many pools and riffles that are formed by the various channels flowing in the wide, rock-strewn river bed. In the low summer flows every suitable lie held an unexpectedly large number of big fish.

That evening, after I had topped up my fluid levels by downing a number of the good Slovenian beers, my wife and I decided to have dinner at the hotel. Sitting outdoors in the balmy weather we sipped excellent Slovenian wine whilst savouring a very good dinner

which included deer and wild mushrooms.

Every young person in the country speaks at least passable English, the government making it compulsory to learn the language from primary school, so I was puzzled when the waitress struggled to explain what the local speciality dessert was. Intrigued, I ordered it. Surprisingly, it was my grandmother's famous sweet dumpling-like dish that I last ate 45 years ago. She must have picked up the recipe during her stay in the town in the 1930s and the waitress's inability to name it was understandable as there is no word in English that can adequately describe it.

Later in the evening we were joined by Thomaz, the owner of the hotel, and over a very good local sparkling wine we discussed the interesting history of the area including Ernest Hemingway's





The Soca River (left), a picture as it winds its way towards a confluence with the Idrijca River a few kilometres from Tolmin. The author with his 5kg-plus rainbow — and a very good reason to smile! — on the Tolminka River (right).

book, *A Farewell to Arms*, which was partly inspired by his experience as a volunteer ambulance driver during the bloody battles waged on the banks of the Soca River.

TIME TO PLAY MARBLES

I met Rok at the hotel the next morning

and we decided to target the marble trout on the Beca River about 20km from Tolmin. Driving on the main roads in Slovenia presents no problems, but when you're making your way up into the Julian Alps, switchbacks, narrow tunnels and bridges — and truck and bus drivers with similar attitudes to our taxi

drivers — make for hair-raising driving.

With my first cast on the Beca, I managed to drift a dry fly under the overhanging branches of a willow tree and hooked a marble trout of about 50cm, eventually losing it. I hooked and lost many fish over the two days and was told that it was because I strike like

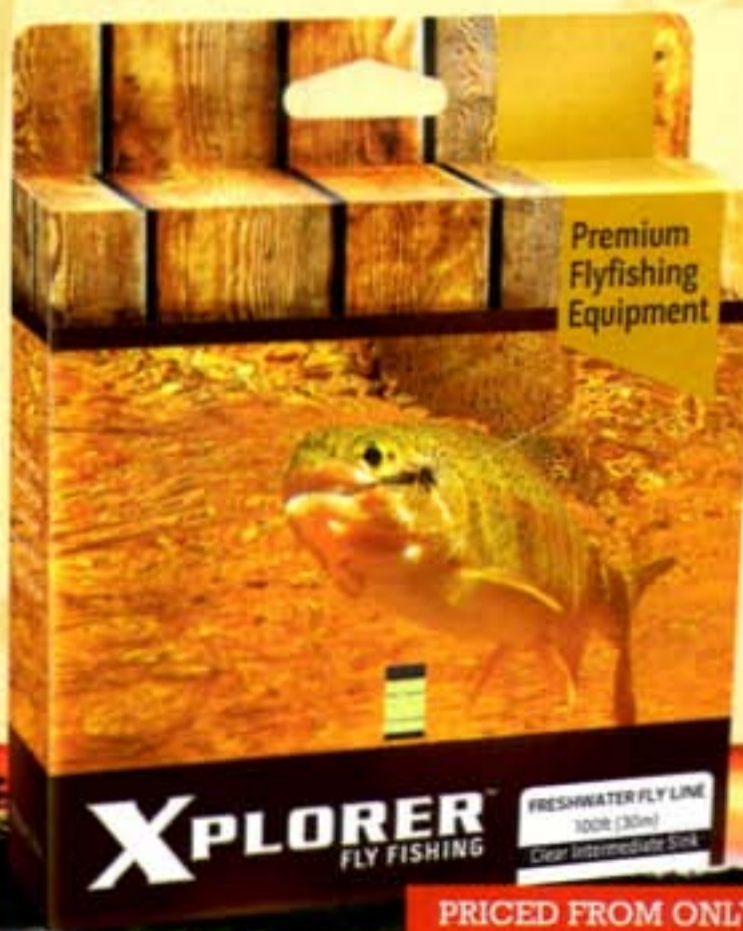
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a sissy — no simple lifting of the rod to set the hook here, you must physically strike with your line hand. Undoing a 30 year old habit is easier said than done, however, and marble trout apparently have tougher mouths than their cousins. During the next fifteen minutes I had some of the best fishing of my life, taking five fish from the small pool, including two marble trout-brown trout hybrids, a big grayling and, at last, a pure-bred, beautifully marked marble trout, even though it was only about 40cm long.

Moving upstream we tackled a section beneath a weir that Rok knew held some big marble trout. The method used to fish the very fast waters was to lob a large leadhead streamer, heavy enough to pop my eyes out of my head if it hit me, into both the current and the seams. We had no luck, but Rok waded into the water and prodded his foot under the large boulders, dislodging a marble trout of at least 4kg, proof enough that this finicky and temperamental species was there.

FLYFISHER BECOMES MOUNTAINEER

We then drove further upriver to a section that cut deeply into the valley. Looking down at the river 50m below me, I wondered if my optimistic guide hadn't noticed that I looked more like the Michelin Man than a mountaineer. Thankfully, the first part of the descent was down a concrete staircase leading to, you guessed it, a small hydro-electric plant. At the end of the stairs I had to scale a 1.5 metre wall and then slide for a couple of metres on my backside to a small ledge in order to cast to the trout in the pool below.

I lob-cast the leadhead into the pool and missed four strikes from trout that emerged from under the boulders. You only get one chance with these fish as the speed with which they attack a fly is astonishing.

The rest of the day was spent targeting rainbows and grayling on the Idrijca River. I managed to catch some attractive fish on this stretch that ends at the confluence of the Idrijca and the Soca rivers, a most beautiful natural setting where I had the privilege to see at least 50 grayling and a few rainbows finning in the slack water at the edge of the main current. We made a few casts at them, but they were obviously not feeding.



Zamps Zamparini and a good grayling. Note its streamlined body and big dorsal fin.



At last, a beautiful marble trout for Zamps. Guide Rok Lustrik does the honours ...

By that stage the heat, exercise and the previous night's mixture of alcohol had started to take its toll and, well pleased by the two days' fishing, I decid-

ed to call it a day. As we walked the kilometre or so back to the car, I realised that my experience in Slovenia far exceeded what I had expected.