



# FLY FISHING SLOVENIA

A little-known European gem

By Bill Toone

To the fly fishing trout angler traveling outside of Canada or the Lower 48, places such as Argentina, New Zealand and Alaska are generally considered must-fish destinations. While these areas are well-deserved of their excellent reputation, other less-known gems can stand proud with those better-known destinations. Slovenia with its Soča, Sava and Idrijca rivers along with their tributaries is one such place. If you are willing to be a little adventuresome, this great destination may hold some of the best fly fishing you will encounter anywhere in the world.

## THE COUNTRY

While more popular with the European angler, fly fishing Slovenia is little heard about in the United States; many people would be hard-pressed to identify geographically where the country is located on a global map. Slovenia is a central European country bordered by Austria to the north and Italy to the west. Although not large, Slovenia's diverse beauty, culture and rich history could easily provide material for a *Condé Nast Traveler* log. With its Adriatic Sea coastline, southern Alps, Roman ruins dating to A.D. 7, medieval castles and World War I battlefields (where more than a million men saw combat), Slovenia offers plenty to do and see on non-fishing days or for non-fishing travel companions. If that isn't enough, the wonderful food and excellent local wines are a special allure to any visitor, angler or non-angler alike.

While Slovenia has its own language, most of its citizens speak other languages, including English. It is a relatively new country, as Slovenia has been ruled by other nations throughout much of its history, including Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, France, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy, Germany, or as part of Yugoslavia. Slovenia had



Top: The author with fish on in the aquamarine waters of the Soča River. Above: The Predjama Castle is one of many throughout the countryside.

never been an independent country until the breakup of Communist-controlled Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. As a new, emerging citizenry, Slovenians are proud of their country and more than happy to share it and its history with visitors.

## THE FISHING

The country is blessed with abundant rivers and streams, but it is the Soča, Sava and Idrijca rivers with their



PHOTO BY BILL TOONE

A typical Slovenian village.



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PHOTO BY BILL TOONE

Guide Rok Lustrik and a happy John Sunderland with a nice Sava River rainbow.

tributaries that are the primary fly-fishing waters. Within Slovenian waters, the visiting angler will find many different fish to target. They include four species of trout, the marble, brown, rainbow and brook; the Danube salmon or huchen, a cousin of the taimen; and two species of grayling. Of the seven species mentioned, two are limited in scope. The non-indigenous brook trout has a limited environmental range, and fishing for Huchen is restricted by law to winter months only. Because our visit was in early June, my fishing partner, John Sunderland, and I concentrated our fishing efforts on the remaining five species, which was more than enough to keep us busy.

Slovenia has an extremely generous access policy that allows many fishable waters; however, licensing for the angler is a different story. Because there is no Slovenian fishing license, fishing rights are controlled by the local fishing club. A daily fishing license must be purchased for each specific river, tributary or drainage fished. Purchasing them is relatively easy as they are sold in area pubs and sports stores. The cost for each day license varies from approximately \$40 to \$128, based on the current



PHOTO BY ROK LUSTRIK

John Sunderland and his 20-pound marble trout.



PHOTO BY ROK LUSTRIK

A beautiful Adriatic grayling.



PHOTO BY JOHN SUNDERLAND

A monster marble trout.



PHOTO BY ROK LUSTRIK

The author landed this marble trout on a dry.



PHOTO BY JOHN SUNDERLAND

Rok Lustrik holds a nice marble trout.

dollar-to-Euro exchange rates. While this can be a bit pricey, it's no different than paying a rod fee to fish the famous spring creeks and private waters here in the United States. Fortunately, guide fees are relatively inexpensive – by our standards anyway – so this helps take some of the sting out of the cost of the daily license fees.

Fishing on your own is certainly possible. Some waters do lend themselves to blind fishing techniques; however, much of the waters are better sight-fished. Thus, hiring guides is highly recommended; their knowledge of the local waters and fishing techniques can save valuable time when your fishing days are limited.

Sunderland and I were fortunate to have Rok Lustrik ([www.lustrik.com](http://www.lustrik.com)) as our guide. Not only was he extremely knowledgeable, but his ability to spot fish was simply incredible. It was equal or better than any guide I have fished with on any of my travels, including both islands of New Zealand and bonefishing in the Caribbean. He often saw fish take the fly long before we had any indication they had made their move. This ability was most helpful because the fish in Slovenia have such an incredibly quick, yet subtle take that we would have missed many without his help.

Hatches and fly patterns weren't particularly complicated. For our arsenal of choice, we discovered that a standard American setup with a 4- to 6-weight rod, leader and flies successfully covered the Slovenian waters we encountered.

## THE FISH

**Marble trout**, or Ghost of the Soča, as it is known in Slovenia, is an indigenous species unique to the drainages of the Adriatic Sea that is believed to have evolved from a brown trout lineage. In North American terms they loosely compare to our bull trout. While there are a few marble trout in Italy and other Balkan countries, they are most associated with the Slovenian Soča and its tributaries. Fishing techniques often include the use of dry flies or nymphs, but the most common approach was throwing large, heavily weighted streamers. This is true "chuck and duck" fishing because the large streamers seemed more appropriate for 9- or 10-weight saltwater rods than the much lighter 6-weights we were using.



An example of the well-managed Slovenian waters

When streamer fishing, we needed 100 percent concentration *all* the time. There is little room for error when using a strong strip-strike on the hook set for the marble trout's extremely quick and almost subtle take. It's definitely not the strike I would associate with a fish capable of reaching 50 pounds or more. You might think that Murphy's Law wouldn't be alive and well in Slovenia, but I assure you it was. Just when we would let our guard down and get distracted by the beautiful surroundings, a strike would occur.

Having not known a great deal about marble trout before my trip, I was hoping to land one in the size range of a good rainbow or brown, maybe around 20 inches. I was taken back a bit when Lustrik, our guide, started talking in terms of 8- to 12-pound fish, and I was totally stunned when Sunderland landed a 20-pounder in a stream no wider than a two-lane road! In short order we learned that, in Slovenia, stream size was not indicative of fish size. For example: On a stream no wider than a single-lane highway, within three casts I hooked and lost a nice 6-pound marble trout and badly missed another in the 10-pound range. This was *after* bypassing a couple of rainbows in the 20-plus-inch range lower in the pool. The more typical marble trout,



The author landed this brute in a stream no more than 12 feet wide.

however, was in the 18- to 24-inch range, but there were enough big ones to keep your heart in your throat.

**Brown trout**, unlike marble trout, are only in the Black Sea drainages of Slovenia that include the Sava River and its tributaries. Slovenian brown trout are also indigenous but not much different in size, fight or personality from the ones we catch in here in North America. Their coloring was stunning. The brown trout we caught were some of the prettiest fish I have had the luck to net. With their bright spots and color rings, they are a sight to see and visually much different than ours. Unfortunately, while we were there, the Sava River was blown out with an unusually wet, late spring, so we were only able to fish some of its clearer, higher tributaries. This didn't dampen our fishing any; browns up to 18 inches seemed to be

common with larger ones lurking about.

**Rainbow trout** are not indigenous to Slovenia but have taken to both the Adriatic and Black Sea drainages. In the Soča, Sava or Idrijca rivers and their tributaries, rainbows are available and in good numbers. Slovenian rainbows are similar in personality to our rainbows, including coloring and the fly patterns they find attractive. We caught many 20-inch rainbows, plus a few exceeding that size. As with the marble trout, stream size seemed to have no bearing on fish size. I landed a 6-pound beast – possibly larger – out of a stream not more than 12 feet wide while my partner landed one almost as large 75 yards up stream.

**Sava grayling** are found only in the drainages flowing to the Black Sea; in Slovenia that means primarily the Sava

River and its tributaries. Related to our Arctic grayling, Sava grayling, known as Black Sea grayling, are good fighters and readily take a dry fly or nymph. They have black spots on their head with a reddish-orange tail. Their take is quick, and they drop your nymph equally quickly if you are slow on the hook set. One must look for an excuse each and every drift to set the hook to stay prepared for their lightning fast, yet almost inconspicuous, takes. These 14- to 18-inch fish were to fun to catch and worthy of the challenge.

**Adriatic grayling**, as the name implies, are only found in the drainages flowing to the Adriatic Sea, namely the Soča and Idrijca rivers along with their tributaries. They are also similar to our Arctic grayling but have a golden-yellow coloring to their pelvic, pectoral and anal fins along with the bottom portion of their tail. This gives them perfect camouflage along the yellow, rocky bottom found in many of the streams they inhabit. From a sight-fishing perspective, this made our guide's uncanny spotting ability that much more valuable. Their takes were equally as quick and low-key as the Sava grayling, but their fight was not as prolonged or dogged as their cousins. They were still a robust and exciting 16- to 18-inch fish to catch.

To me, the mark of a good trip is not just whether I had fun but also considering whether I would do it again. I can say wholeheartedly I would, and will, fish Slovenia again. Its beautiful countryside, wonderful food and wines, and absolutely superb fishing have me already thinking of my return trip. With its quality of fishing, diversity of waters and variety of fish, Slovenia deserves to be in the conversation with the better-known, destination fly-fishing spots. As such, it should clearly be near the top of any traveling angler's must-fish list; go soon before this well-kept secret gets out. You won't regret it. 🍷

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