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ADVENTURE NO.4

# Balkan beauty



A cornucopia of trout inhabit the rivers of Slovenia

WORDS John Bailey PICTURE Fotolia

## FACTFILE SLOVENIA

- **Location:** Slovenia is a small, independent country of 1.9 million inhabitants. It is east of Italy, south of Austria and not far from being the size of Wales. Stunningly beautiful, most of Slovenia has been protected under the European Environmental Protection Legislation since 2000.
- **How to get there:** The national carrier is Adria Airways ([www.adria.si](http://www.adria.si)). EasyJet runs frequent flights out of Stansted to the capital Ljubljana. Flight times are approximately two hours.
- **Accommodation:** Slovenia is very much a holiday destination for central Europe so accommodation is plentiful and varied. At the top end, for example, there is the Vila Bled Hotel, a former residence of President Tito. ([www.vila-bled.com](http://www.vila-bled.com)) But you don't necessarily have to do grand. My own high recommendation is to contact Clive Judge ([clivejudge@hotmail.com](mailto:clivejudge@hotmail.com)) who has an enchanting guesthouse with his lovely wife, Myrna, with all rooms overlooking the river.
- **Guiding:** As for guiding, you simply cannot do better than Rok Lustrik ([www.lustrik.com](http://www.lustrik.com)). It's been my privilege to fish with Rok on numerous occasions and also enjoy the company of his brilliant guiding team. Rok will sort out all licences and permissions as well as dealing with internal transport logistics. Rok by name, rock by nature.
- **Currency and prices:** Slovenia has joined the Euro and you will find it somewhat cheaper than both Italy and Austria. Get into the countryside and you will find food and accommodation exceptionally reasonable.

SLOVENIA ABSOLUTELY must be the least discovered gem on the anglers' European map. Not only is the country achingly beautiful geographically, but it is home to wonderful, welcoming people, sparkling river valleys and an array of fish to make your mouth water. Of course, there are fish species there that you would expect: the brown trout, for example, are plentiful and beautiful. The rainbow trout are superb and, in many rivers, breed naturally, so expect big, full finned, turbo-charged rainbows from the off. However, it is the unexpected species that make this delightful corner of Europe so unique and intriguing.

For starters, you have the marble trout (*salmo trutta marmoratus*) which exists in those watersheds that flow into the Adriatic. The Soca watershed is the star, consisting of the Soca itself and its tributaries the Rizana and the Reka. And marbles are stunners. Their colouring is spectacular and their size often awesome. There are 20 pounders there to be caught in these comparatively small, twinkling streams.

For me, the absolute star of Slovenia must be the Danubian salmon (*hucho hucho*). This massive, fascinating, landlocked salmon is found in the Sava River and its tributaries. It's a very close relative of the Mongolian taimen but is, of course, much more easily located with far less expense, time and downright pain!

The Danubian salmon is a big fish – I've seen them caught to 30 pounds and I've seen them in the water to nearly double that. They're a fish of the winter – the season is from November to February, when there is snow on the ground and often ice on the slowest of the pools. Fishing for these magnificent giants amidst the white-capped mountains and silent forests, with only the woodcutter's saw breaking the silence is a magical experience.

You fish for a Danubian salmon either with fly or with lure and there can't be a more thrilling experience in Europe than to see one of these monsters close in on your mouse pattern in crystal clear

water often only a couple of feet deep. It's sights like these that you'd expect to have to travel the moon to see – not just a couple of hours from London airports.

I haven't mentioned the grayling yet. In Slovenia, there are two distinctly different types of grayling: Sava grayling have black spots on their head with an orange tail. The Soca grayling are more subdued with dark tails. They are classified as the same species but the difference is obvious to all. But both types are big, beautiful and are found in rivers that take your breath away.

For the bait fisherman, I haven't even mentioned many other Slovenian delights. For example, in the beautiful Lake Bled, you will find carp, catfish and awe-inspiring rudd. There are grass carp in lowland lakes and for me, best of all, there are European barbel in many of the rivers. Some of them are so crystal you can see the fish working and feeding from hundreds of feet up the mountainside.

For me, there are two times to go to Slovenia: the first would be in early May, when the valleys are cascaded in colour, awash with wildflowers. Snowmelt can sometimes be a problem but generally the rivers run crystal and expect the fish to come to the dry fly.

Though the summer and autumn can both be awesome, give me the start of the winter, when the snow is beginning to fall, crisp and dry and when the sky alternates between the blackest of clouds and the most aching of blue. This is when the streams are at their clearest and when tramping through the forest, breath billowing, is an absolute delight. Catch the last of the browns and rainbows, the best of the grayling and the very start of the Danubian salmon. Celebrate every capture with a swig from the hipflask and settle down at night in front of a roaring fire. ■