

'SLOWvenia' Study Tour 12 – 16 July 2004



Background

Slovenia gained its independence in 1991 and is therefore undamaged by war in the way that so many countries in the region have been. It has been influenced over the centuries by surrounding powers, which is reflected in the architecture and culture. Approximately the size of Wales, the topography is very varied, from the highest mountain - Triglav ("three heads") at 2,864m almost to fertile river valleys.

Agriculture appears to work on an almost subsistence level, with fields divided into 'strips' and very little of the wine produced is exported. Slovenia joined the EU in May 2004 so it will be interesting to see how this might change. There are several ski resorts in the mountains, spa towns and a very short length of coast line, which together with Lake Bled are currently the main focuses of tourism.

With a population of only 2 million, plus a further half million Slovenians living around the world, it is a credit to them that their language and culture has been retained. The American company Goodyear now has a significant impact on the economy, but Slovenians seem fully aware of the potential of 'Americanisation'.

Frequent fires and earthquakes have damaged buildings over the centuries leading to the use of distinctive metal doors and shutters and the re-construction of facades etc.

Monday 12th July 2004

After only a minor incident at security – one of our number apprehended for possession of a weapon of mass destruction (ie: a pair of nail scissors) - all aboard the 12.55 from London Stansted to Lubjana.

Arrive 15.45 local time and met by Mateja Hafner Dolenc, General Secretary of the Association of Historic Towns of Slovenia, and Jasna Pisanec, our guide for the duration, and on the coach to BLED. A shower of rain meant a drive around LAKE BLED rather than a walk but, after checking into Hotel Klim and an assault on the local travel agency for copious supplies of tolas, this had passed, to allow the boat trip across the Lake in the "pletna" (small wooden boat) to the C17th Church on the island and an opportunity to ring the bell for a wish.

Strong rules against any motorized boats on the lake have maintained its cleanliness and tranquility, which reflects in the clear surface the surrounding mountains and villas. Licenses for the boatmen ("pletnar") are highly prized and tend to remain in the family. At €10 each for the crossing it is presumably quite a lucrative pastime, if only in the summer months.

The solitude of little church on the island is relieved by the obligatory bar and ice cream concessions – which were very welcome.

The members of the party by this time were familiar with each other:

Sam Howes, our esteemed chairman and Frau Karen; Ian Poole (the next in line) with Lady Sarah,; Prue Smith, *currently* Norwich City Council and Built Environment Working Group Chair; Nigel Green, 'new career opportunity' – post Brighton & Hove/Exec of long standing; Steve Bee, post-Winchester/Exec now English Heritage; Jocelyn Feilding, Bradford-on-Avon Cllr armed with panama and pipe and Madam Harriet; Cllr Janet Repton, also B-o-A, our very amiable and sprightly senior delegate, held back unfortunately by a recently sprained ankle; Rosalind Willatts, conservation officer at Market Harborough – the aforementioned 'terrorist'; John Small, of the Brighton Regency Society and retired architect, our quiet, intelligence

agent; Cllr Peter Leach, deputy Mayor of B-o-A, entrepreneur and responsible for halving the average age of the B-o-A council.

After a meal at a 'typical local restaurant' which was very jovial, we adjourned to bed – ahead of what promised to be a challenging itinerary.

Tuesday 13th July

A very busy day with departure from hotel at 8.30 and return at 11.45pm. To KRANJ first for the Mayor's reception, tour of the town and lunch courtesy of the Municipality. The town has a strong association with the national poet - France Prešeren- and we were given a tour of his house and presented with a volume of his poems. Then on to TRZIC for a tour of the town which demonstrated a wide variety of historical architectural styles and the distinguishing features of the trades and uses of the buildings, including the 'God's eye' and 'nosey windows'.



On to RADOVLJICA, with its distinctive iron shutters and doors and for a tour of the Bee Museum. KROPA, the next town on the day's tour, was the location of a famous iron works and forge. Nails made in this town were at one time a significant part of the Slovenian economy.

At each of these towns we were received with the same generous welcome and hospitality. As the timetable inevitably slipped, mobile telephone calls kept everyone in place for our arrival – even the blacksmith was still

hammering out his nails at the old smithy in Kropa. A fascinating day, surrounded by beautiful scenery – quite 'tyrolian'. Rather than return to the hotel before dinner we returned to Radovljica, sampling the local 'dumplings'. The diet is very meat-based – which even for the carnivores amongst us proved rather much! The meal cost around £11 each, which included copious amounts of local wine.

The general atmosphere of the towns is of tranquility and cleanliness, with a long and well preserved history. Slovenians are proud of their evolution through various dominating powers – Italy, Austrian, Hungarian, German – and work hard to maintain good relationships with their neighbours. The built heritage reflects these influences, and is what the Slovenians are striving to promote as a tourist attraction. There is a surprisingly 'slow' atmosphere; like the music, it is reminiscent of 1950's England.

Wednesday 14th July



Off at 8.45 to SKOFJA LOKA, seat of the Association of Historic Towns of Slovenia. A greeting from the Deputy Mayor at the Town Hall and another exchange of gifts. The *weight* of the generosity was beginning to worry us regarding luggage allowances! A guided tour of the town with a brief coffee and shopping stop and walk to NACE'S HOUSE. This wooden house, with its origins in the 15th century, continues to be maintained by the grand-daughter of the last inhabitant and it demonstrates a wide variety of ways of life over several centuries. The working 'black kitchen' was used to prepare a splendid lunch which was laid out in grand style in the pretty gardens, overlooked by the surrounding mountains. When presented with a china mug from Bury St Edmunds, our hostess declared that she had been there! The truly glorious setting did not encourage haste, therefore about an hour late, we reluctantly continued our journey.

Up until this stage we had been followed by a camera and sound team who were making a 45 minute programme for regional television about our visit and as well as general filming we were each interviewed for our impressions to date.

The drive to KOPER allowed a short siesta on the bus, prior to the rather rapid walking tour of the town, and then on to PIRAN. As the only 'sea side' venue on the tour, delegates had looked forward to slightly more free time to dip in the Adriatic and to take advantage of some of the facilities at the resort hotel. However, running late as we were, we were soon back on the bus to the town centre for a tour and another (deputy) Mayoral reception, more exchange of gifts and on to a local restaurant (not a fish restaurant and not alfresco as expected – but very nice!); also part of the local hospitality – although we were asked to pay for the wine – I insisted that we pay for *everyone's* wine, which at only about £5 each seemed only reasonable!

Hotel facilities do not quite match up to international standards – bunk beds in my room for instance! But at nearly mid-night again we would have slept almost anywhere.

The arrival of Brian Smith, hot-foot from the EAHTR Bureau meeting in Paris, added to our number tonight.

It has since been confirmed that Piran has been successful in a joint Interreg IIIc funding bid (with UWE as the academic partner). Amongst other issues, its congestion charging strategy will be explored in one of a series of workshops to be held in the Europe-wide partner towns.

Thursday 15th July

Very early breakfast and depart hotel at 7am. Three and a half hour bus drive to PTJU in the east of Slovenia. It was evidently vital that we meet with the Mayor (not the deputy this time) before he attended a very important meeting. Coffee and more gift exchange and on to the Castle where a huge media reception awaited us.

The director of the Museum in the Castle gave a long speech which was televised for national coverage. I suspect there was a political point to be made and our visit offered a very good opportunity to get this across to the whole nation. Several more presentations followed and then an invitation for us to enter into discussions – having not even seen the town yet! We did our best, until the translator, Tanja, who had worked incredibly hard since our arrival looked so exhausted that I suggested we adjourn for lunch – which was again provided for us. By this time the cameras and microphones had gradually drifted away.

We were expected to take a tour of the Castle but declined, politely, in favour of a tour of the town. Each tour has been accompanied by a long recital of the history of Slovenia, but the hospitality and generosity of each venue has tempered complaints about the repetition.

On to SLOVENSKE KONJICE, arriving around 5.30pm for another Mayoral reception, this time with a tour of the Art Gallery – which houses some quite prestigious paintings. After a walking tour of the town we drove to the nearby 14th century Carthusian Monastery. It was a ruin in a beautiful setting and housing a small herbal medicine shop.

As, by this time we were running late again, the decision was made to have dinner before going to the hotel, as we were scheduled to attend a wine tasting and would be able to have dinner at the same venue.

This proved a most enjoyable experience and we were able to buy some of the local wine – this being the wine-growing region. Then on to the hotel in Ljubjana – arriving at 11.30 – another long day, laden down again with gifts – including complementary wine from the vineyard.

Friday 16th July

Leaving the hotel at 8.15 we arrived in LUBLJANA centre at 9am for a brief guided tour of the city, with then an hour 'free' before the meeting to be held at the Tourism Information Centre to bring everything together – with all participants invited to join us. We had already

arranged to meet and, over coffee, discuss a joint approach to the meeting. In the event not many of our former contacts arrived, but we were pleased to meet the Minister of Culture, Jelka Pirovic. She gave a speech against the backdrop of very good video footage of all the Association towns.

Sam had prepared a SWOT analysis as we had been asked for feedback on our impressions of Slovenia – in particular management of the towns and the anticipated growth of cultural heritage tourism. There was a good discussion – considering the language situation - most Slovenians seem to have some English which is taught together with the language of the neighbouring country in schools, however, few have the opportunity to practice or learn 'conversational' English. This highlighted the concerns of the party about the infrastructure to support increased tourism, traffic congestion / management, the lack of high quality contemporary buildings, but also with very positive comments about our experiences.

The meeting ended at 12o/c with convivial promises for a return visit. We were then free until 1.45pm when the bus would depart for the airport. Many pairs of shoes seem to have been purchased during this time.

Ljubjana is a very attractive city; certainly the liveliest we visited. In conversation with the manager of the TIC, it seems that although it would be possible logistically to see most of Slovenia with a holiday based here, in fact the hotel provision is directed more towards the business trade, and therefore there is a limited range of accommodation. The TIC does co-ordinate the other tourist venues, bookings etc but could do more to reach a broader market once the infrastructure to support it is in place. A multi-location / multi-activity holiday might prove very popular in western Europe and the US.



Arriving at the airport, more gifts and 'goodbyes' for the guide, the coach driver and Mateja, who all worked very hard to make it a very enjoyable visit. Time for a beer or two at the airport and an uneventful flight back arriving at Stansted at 5.30pm local time.

Chris Winter, Managing Director, EHTF