

The downhill Blokes of

Slovenia has a place in skiing history, as well as modern resorts, says **Arnie Wilson**

Slovenia is roughly the size of East Anglia – rather less flat, admittedly, but with a much briefer coastline. More like Switzerland in its contours but considerably smaller than that country too – only 20,273 sq km, and barely 300km across. It is also considerably less expensive.

Slovenia makes the most of the hand it has been dealt since the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and, much more recently, Yugoslavia. "It is large enough to have everything," says the publicity blurb optimistically. But it does have the Alps (the Julian Alps in particular), the Mediterranean (albeit less than 50km of Adriatic coastline), the vast Pannonian Plain, and the "mysterious Dinaric Karst world" (a system of thousands of underground and surface caves) that will, we were told extravagantly, "widen (our) pupils!" Slovenia is also the most forested country in mainland Europe – in spite of the fact that it is said that most of the forest in the Karst system was chopped down long ago to provide the wooden pylons on which the city of Venice now stands.

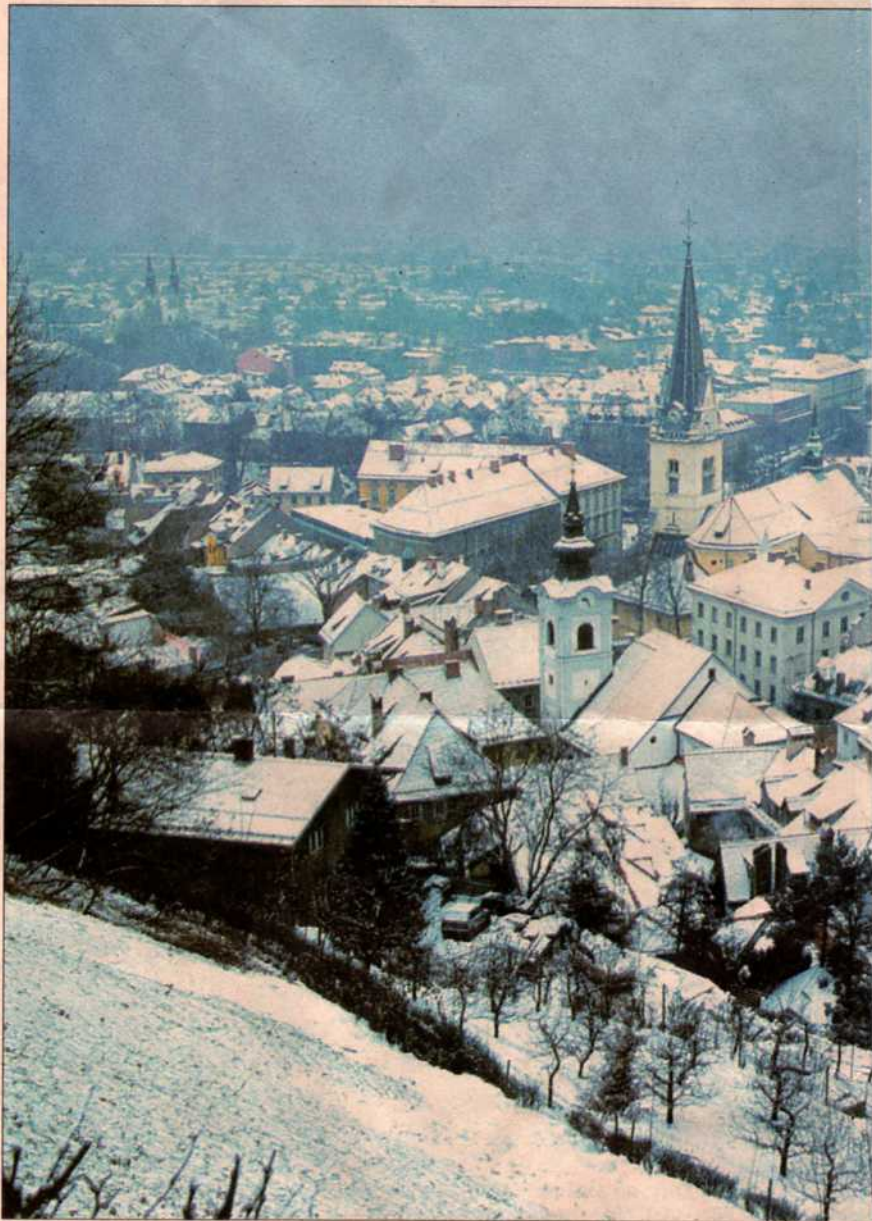
It also has skiing. Indeed, the curiously named Bloke Plateau was the setting for some of the first-documented downhill skiing in central Europe – as early as the 17th century, when they pioneered a primitive ability to steer their skis. "They have swerved like snakes at an incredible speed to avoid obstacles," wrote Janez Vajkard Valvasor in 1689.

An old Slovenian ski song begins: "Old Bloke skiers, like ancient Norse/ Love the skisport and brave the course/ They speed 'cross field and down through trees/ On barrel staves, not real skis."

Slovenia has as many as 50 ski areas but only half are marketed to tourists and only one – Kranjska Gora – has an international reputation. (Sarajevo, the war-ravaged Bosnian city that hosted the 1984 Winter Olympics, is staging something of a comeback.) All are small-to-medium resorts, with easy slopes and few surprises.

The country's attractions as a ski destination were highlighted when the Olympic champion Franz Klammer spearheaded a campaign to hold the 2006 Winter Olympics at Klagenfurt, in his native Austria. For the first time in Winter Games history, they would have been shared by three countries: Austria, Italy and Slovenia. But the bid lost out to Turin in Italy.

Kranjska Gora (811m), an attractive little town in the Zgornjesavska Valley,



Snow-clad Slovenia: the capital Ljubljana is like a smaller version of Prague

has a good variety of skiing, with slopes for all levels, including World Cup runs at Podkoren. But in terms of easy access, Krvavec (pronounced Kr-var-vets) takes some beating. The transfer from Slovenia's delightful capital, Ljubljana (a smaller version of Prague) is a mere 15 minutes, and the gondola ride to the top of the mountain takes seven minutes. Situated in the Karavanke range, with the Kamnik Alps as a backdrop, Krvavec is known as the sunniest ski area in Slovenia. The slopes start at getting on for 1,524m, with skiing up to 1,971m.

Only 45 minutes away is the picturesque Lake Bohinj, which some visitors have said reminds them of Coniston Water in the English Lake District. To the south-east is a spectacular range of peaks – the first mountain barrier above the Adriatic, which tends to produce substantially more snowfall than anywhere else of similar altitude in the Alps. The mountains are dotted with

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