

ShortBreak

Little Venice

The Slovenian coastline is tiny, but it boasts one of the undiscovered gems of the Adriatic

In the corner of a tiny courtyard surrounded by peeling baroque facades, under a veranda sparsely clad with vines, a handful of fishermen were being about as noisy as people get in Piran. Wine was being tapped from a wooden barrel, ferried out to the tables, and poured down gullets at 80 cents a pop. As they drank into the night, their morning catch was being steamed and guzzled. A few weeks before, I had never heard of Piran; now it was charming the hell out of me.

All this because of a lost afternoon whizzing around Google Maps. Looking longingly at the Adriatic coast, I'd noticed a blip where Italy stops and Croatia starts. Zooming in, I discovered that this blip is Slovenian. A tiny chunk of prime coastal real estate. It's as if Italy and Croatia were once minding their own business on the European couch, and, when they weren't paying attention, a tiny morsel of Slovenia snuggled in between them.

The Slovenian coast is 46km long. At Koper in the north, the road from Ljubljana bends towards the sea, flanked by lush countryside. Driving south, pine trees form tunnels over the road and the sea rises occasionally over the rolling hinterland to our right. Descending towards the tip of the peninsula on which Piran sits, the ancient ramparts and terraced hills stacked with cypress and olive trees wouldn't look out of place in Tuscany.

A more direct comparison lies on Italy's Adriatic seaboard. Piran, the jewel of the Slovenian coast, is nicknamed "piccola Venezia", largely due to its 500 years under Venetian rule. Say it quietly, but there's a decent case for Venice being called the "grande Piran" as almost 70% of the city is moulded from Istrian limestone and marble.

People have been pinching from poor old Piran for years. Venetian princes developed a taste for the local wine and salt, and ferried it back home by the shipload. Napoleon nabbed a handful of masterpieces from the town's largest church, some of which currently reside in the Louvre. Perhaps the drunken fishermen were lambasting their pesky Croatian kin south of the border, who frequently try to muscle in on the fish-rich waters of Piran's bay.

But in tourist terms at least Piran has remained unplundered – most visitors to Slovenia spend a few days in the capital, followed by a few days up in the Alpine lakes. In doing so, they are missing the best bit. If you're looking for an undiscovered gem on your way down

the Adriatic coast, or a couple of days' diversion from the city, Piran is perfect.

To get our bearings, we climbed through cobbled streets towards the vast Church of St George which peers over the town from one of the two hills that mark its bounds. The view is superb. Piran cascades towards the sea in glorious non-uniformity; a barely organised muddle of white stone and terracotta roofs in which no two houses are the same.

Down on the main square, the polished marble was providing an excellent surface for scooter races and three-and-in. On its fringes, old men crowded around chess boards. Mums sipped cappuccinos in front of a handful of cafes, as their kids zoomed around the square. The small marina is cluttered with old fishing boats and the occasional yacht.

Piran is buffered on all sides by rich pickings, so eating and drinking is a satisfying local affair. Over the course of two days, we gorged. In **Ivo** (Gregorciceva 31), one of a row of restaurants lining the southern strip of the peninsula, the highlight is creamy tagliatelle with a respectable serving of white truffle shavings sprinkled on top (€15). For the record, that's another thing that was pilfered from the region in days gone by. The grey, clayish soil of the Slovenian interior is chocker with truffles, and the Austro-Hungarian aristocrats couldn't cart it back to Vienna quick enough.

At **Stara Gostilna** (Savudrijska 2), a steaming bowl of fish soup teeming

ADVENTURES



On the waterfront . . . the town cascades towards the sea in a muddle of white stone and terracotta

with mussels, langoustines and octopus costs €3. Piran has a microclimate that can yield 285 days of sunshine a year, granting local vineyards the occasional treat of two harvests annually. The local wine is organic and small-batch, and incredibly cheap. At almost all the restaurants, a half litre of local wine won't cost more than €5. And it's not to be sniffed at. Swish restaurants in the capital snap up as much of the coastal wine as they can, serving MonteMoro Refosk (a robust red) for €20 a bottle.

This is the same wine that flows from the taps in the tiny cellar where we found the tipsy fishermen (**Klet**, on Trg 1 Maja square) – the MonteMoro vintners are friends of the cellar's owners.

The local "beach" – like Croatia's "beaches" – isn't really a beach, but we swiftly got over it. On the northern side of the peninsula, with Trieste visible across the water, four or five cafes spill on to the concrete bathing area on the seafront. As the sun set on our second day, we ordered drinks, and went for a

quick swim as the ice in our apricot juice melted. Boats began chugging past from the harbour, dropping nets for tomorrow morning's catch. We dried ourselves, weaved back into the centre through a succession of alleys, and ordered two plates of today's haul.

● *EasyJet (easyjet.com) flies Stansted-Ljubljana from £43.98 return. The Hotel Tartini (hotel-tartini-piran.com, 00386 567 11000), doubles from €76pn B&B.*

Benji Lanyado
benji.lanyado@guardian.co.uk