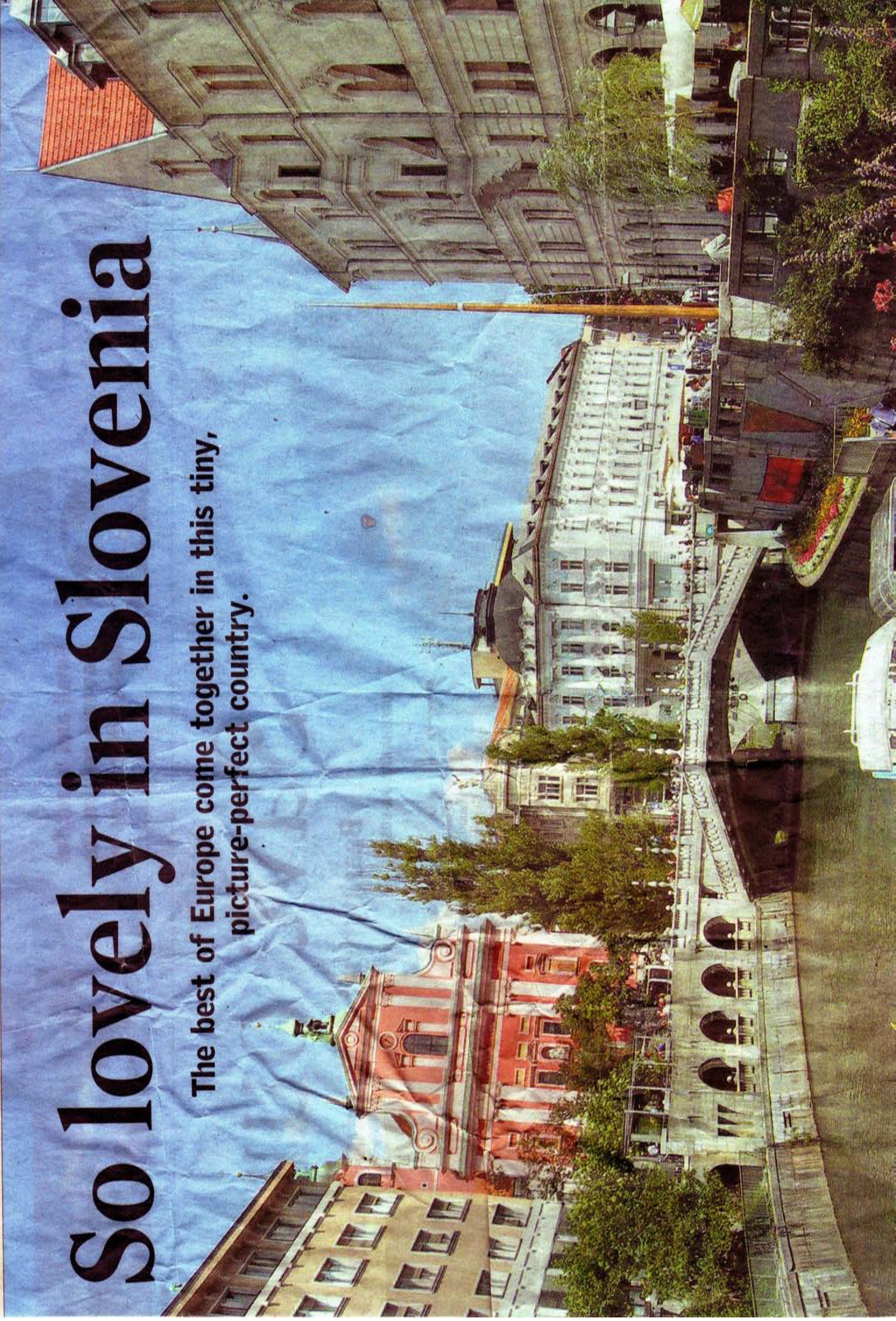


So lovely in Slovenia

The best of Europe come together in this tiny, picture-perfect country.



Slovenia was once the lush, hilly playground of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with its grand lakes from resorts. Today, the world is rediscovering the varied charms of this small country. Barely an hour's drive from its beautiful Capital (Ljubljana) is the magnificent Julian Alps on one side and the sea resorts of the Adriatic on the other. This, indeed, was a perfect holiday combination for us. The town's architecture bears testimony to the more than two centuries of rule by the Hapsburg (Austro-Hungarian) Empire. Ljubljana (pronounced Looob-Lyana) has the air of an older, cultured world. The city centre is ideal for a stroll, while observing and mingling with the locals. The city's impressive architecture dates back to the 15th Century, with Italian Rococo, Art Deco and French Empire styles vying for attention. More such buildings can be found at the delightful, compact city square close to the much-photographed Three Bridges — a single span over the Ljubljana river.

The landmark St. Nicolas Cathedral is a spectacular Baroque building. We also sauntered through a rather simple Parliament building, a classy Opera/Ballet house, and the National Museum — one of the oldest in Europe. In the evening, we climbed a hill to reach the castle on top, from where we had a charming view of the city below.

Istria is a sliver of fishing villages and coastal resort towns that were founded as a Venetian colony and have a distinctive Venetian-Gothic style. Here you witness old-world charm in the cobbled streets, squares, churches, houses and the idyllic rhythm of everyday life. This is also home to the delicious Istrian cuisine and excellent wines.

Koper, Slovenia's chief port, is an ancient town dating back to the Roman period, making it a worthwhile stopover en route to Ljola. Built on an island, Ljola is a picturesque mosaic of tradition, history and architectural sights. The remains of ancient Roman settlements can still be found in the villages located on nearby hilltops.

Located about 20 minutes' away is the Piran, the best preserved cultural monument of Istria. The seaside city surrounded by an ancient circular wall is pretty, small and decidedly picturesque. The interior Old Town is a dense tangle of streets and houses huddled together and rising in cascades, punctuated by small hidden squares. Tartini Square in the very centre of Piran is a beautiful spot. The Church of St. George, the patron saint of Piran, rises above the town. From its lookout tower you have a wonderful view of the city and its surroundings all the way across the sea to the Croatian and Italian coast.

Our final destination was Ptuj, the luxurious resort city of flowers. It is Slovenia's largest and best-known seaside resort, boasting many famous spas and hotels.

We certainly have asked for a better spot to end our idyllic summer holiday than at Lake Bled, an Alpine jewel situated at an elevation of 1,500 ft. We found a hostel near its gorgeous and clear spring-fed lake, surrounded by Julian Alps and adorned by a small island complete with a white church bell tower, et al. Bled Castle, whose origins go back to the 11th Century, is located on a promontory overlooking the lake. We took the region's famous *pletna* boat (gondola-like) to the small island in the middle of the lake. Bled is also famous for its natural springs and restorative climate. This small resort town of about 6,000 people also

boasts an 18-hole golf course, the only one in Slovenia and one of the finest in Europe.

Bled is situated on the edge of the Triglav national park, named after Mt. Triglav (9,000 ft) in the Julian Alps range. The huge park practically spans the entire Julian Alps range in the Slovene territory and seven Triglav lakes. We visited Lake Bohinj, taking a cable car that climbs to 1,540 metres and provides a magnificent view of the valley, the lake and Mt. Triglav in the distance. Perfect solitude envelops the lake as it is sparsely visited and follows a 'no motorboat' policy.

Vintgar Gorge, 5 km from Bled, is a natural site carved out by the Radovna river and has a century-old footbridge that takes hikers to a nearby waterfall. A restaurant here serves trout freshly caught from the fast flowing stream, making for a delightful lunch washed down with Slovenian brewed Union beer.

Classic beauty: Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, has the air of an older, cultured world. UDAY K. CHAKRABORTY