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Slovenia: A small country with a big heart.

Is there a friendlier country in Europe than Slovenia? The man at passport control greets us like long-lost relatives. The policeman in the baggage hall is grinning from ear to ear. And the man at the car-hire desk is so pleased to see us that he insists on buying us a cup of coffee.

Anglo-Slovenian relations will need to be put on hold on June 23, when the two countries meet in the World Cup. But for the first-time British visitor to Slovenia, the uncomplicated warmth of the welcome makes an indelible impression. Like Ireland, like Estonia, it is a small country with a big heart.

Ljubljana, the capital, is a few architectural gems short of being a Prague or Kraków. Shopping options are limited, particularly on a Sunday when half the city closes down, but head for the old town, pull up a chair at one of the cafés – teeming with people – beside the river and you will not be disappointed.

The afternoon sun falls on cobbled streets, dainty bridges, beautiful old churches shaded by spreading trees. The river glides so quietly that you hardly notice it, but the human pageant is incessant: backpackers; feral teenagers; businessmen clutching briefcases; babies in pushchairs; old men in berets; very large women walking very small dogs.

It is people-watching heaven – with a fabulous dinner to follow. They like their food here: hearty meat dishes are succeeded by equally hearty desserts, packed with walnuts, poppy seeds and other goodies.

But Ljubljana, though charming, is not Slovenia's trump card. The best of the country is to be found in the unspoilt rural areas, particularly in the mountains abutting the Austrian border. Slovenia is the third most wooded country in Europe, after Finland and Sweden, and you get a sense of that as you drive north from the capital, with the scent of pine needles in your nostrils and one gorgeous forest blending seamlessly into another.

The tallest mountains still have snow on them, but the meadows are a riot of colour: crocuses, dandelions, forget-me-nots, even the odd wild strawberry, peeping through the lush grass. Thrillingly clear rivers wind through dappled valleys, past fields of cows that look so happy you expect them to burst into song at any minute.

We spend the night in the medieval city of Radovljica, eating like kings in the panelled dining room of the Pension Lectar, a rabbit warren of wooden beams, mullion windows and creaky staircases. The hotel doubles as a gingerbread factory and in the basement you can watch women in long white dresses crouched over their work benches producing exquisitely decorated delicacies, as they have been doing for hundreds of years.

Then we drive on to Lake Bled, probably the best-known tourist attraction in Slovenia, dominated by an 11th-century castle, which perches on a rocky outcrop like a brooding bird of prey.

You can walk around the lake in an hour, but we take nearly three and a half, stopping at a café, then taking a boat across to the island in the middle of the lake, where a flight of steps leads to the tiny Church of the Assumption. There is a wedding just finishing and, as the bells toll across the lake, even the bride finds time to flash us one of those ubiquitous Slovenian smiles.

After a stop at an arboretum and a drive through the majestic Logarska Dolina, a glacial alpine valley, we spend our final night at a tourist farm at Robanov Kot.

We have been feeling a bit dubious about this part of the itinerary. Will we be expected to milk the cows in the morning? You never know with these one-time communist states.

But our fears are quickly assuaged by our jovial hostess and her large extended family, who are up half the night singing folk songs to celebrate a first communion. We are tempted to join in, but realise, to our shame, that we don't know the words of any English folk songs. Would they fancy a few verses of *Jerusalem*? Or a Beatles medley? Probably not. So we tiptoe upstairs to bed, with the music still ringing in our ears.

The next morning, after a large breakfast, we take a walk along the valley, hugging the banks of the river, which tinkles amiably in the background.

All around us, in the tumbledown farmhouses, with their pig sties and painted beehives and carefully tended vegetable gardens, there is a vivid sense of an unchanging rural community, rooted in family life. The mountain scenery is glorious, but the human landscape, or what we can glimpse of it, also tugs strongly at the heartstrings.

As a middle-aged couple in anoraks approach, hiking in the opposite direction, we know, before they have got within a hundred yards, that they will greet us with ear-to-ear smiles. Slovenia is that sort of place.