

FOOD

Slovenia

A country that tastes as good as it looks

Cosy lodges, sophisticated cooking, and world-class wines. Can this be Slovenia, asks Fiona Sims



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I could be in a restaurant in Soho. But I'm in Slovenia, in the Soca Valley, eating a delicate Jerusalem artichoke dumpling with a yellow-pepper cream, horseradish and low-temperature-cooked trout.

This isn't what I expected. In fact, none of it is — chic accommodation with plenty of sophisticated cooking, washed down with world-class wines.

To be honest, I'm not sure that I really knew where Slovenia was. OK, so I knew that it was part of the former Yugoslavia, the first republic to establish independence in 1991, and that things have moved on a bit since those dour communist days. I knew too that it joined the EU in 2004 and adopted the euro.

And I was vaguely aware that some of it bordered Italy because a fair few wine producers in the neighbouring Italian wine zone of Collio have Slavic names.

It is to Trieste that I head. A quick nip over the border and an hour and a half later I am standing in one of the most breathtaking valleys that I've ever seen.

It's Narnia good; towering snow-capped peaks, densely wooded slopes and a picture-postcard valley. I find out later that some scenes in *The Chronicles of Narnia* were filmed in the Soca Valley and that its stars stayed at Hisa Franko, just outside Kobarid, my sleek resting place for the next couple of days.

Owned by Valter Kramar and Ana Ros, it's one of the country's top dining spots. Ros cooks while Kramar serves, flitting between the tables and his huge wine cellar, which stocks 400 wines, 95 per cent of them from Slovenia.

The amount of good wine in Slovenia is another revelation. Kramar thinks that the whites are best, plus a handful of top reds, something that I need to confirm for myself over the next few days.

Ros was a diplomat before she swapped

her suit for a set of chef's whites. She regularly eats at some of the world's top restaurants to keep up with trends, so her menu is littered with the latest cooking methods and ingredients.

She has some seriously good ingredients to play with here; that trout, caught in the nearby Soca River, plus lamb, wild boar and venison, all from the surrounding hills. "Any bear?" I snigger. "Plenty," she says. "We cook it slowly — not all parts of the animal, you understand, some are too tough. But a bear fillet can be very tender."

We don't get the chance to try any, but we do eat octopus (the sea is only 40 minutes away) poached in saffron, served with a foam made from the water that it was cooked in. It's a perfect match for a 2002 rebula from the Vipava Valley.

Yes, it's all new to me, too. But the wines that we try that night are a revelation. Aged whites mostly, with intense, waxy, mineral fruit.

But you are unlikely to get the chance to try them in the UK as only a handful of producers are sold to top restaurants. They're not cheap, either, so enjoy them while you're in Slovenia.

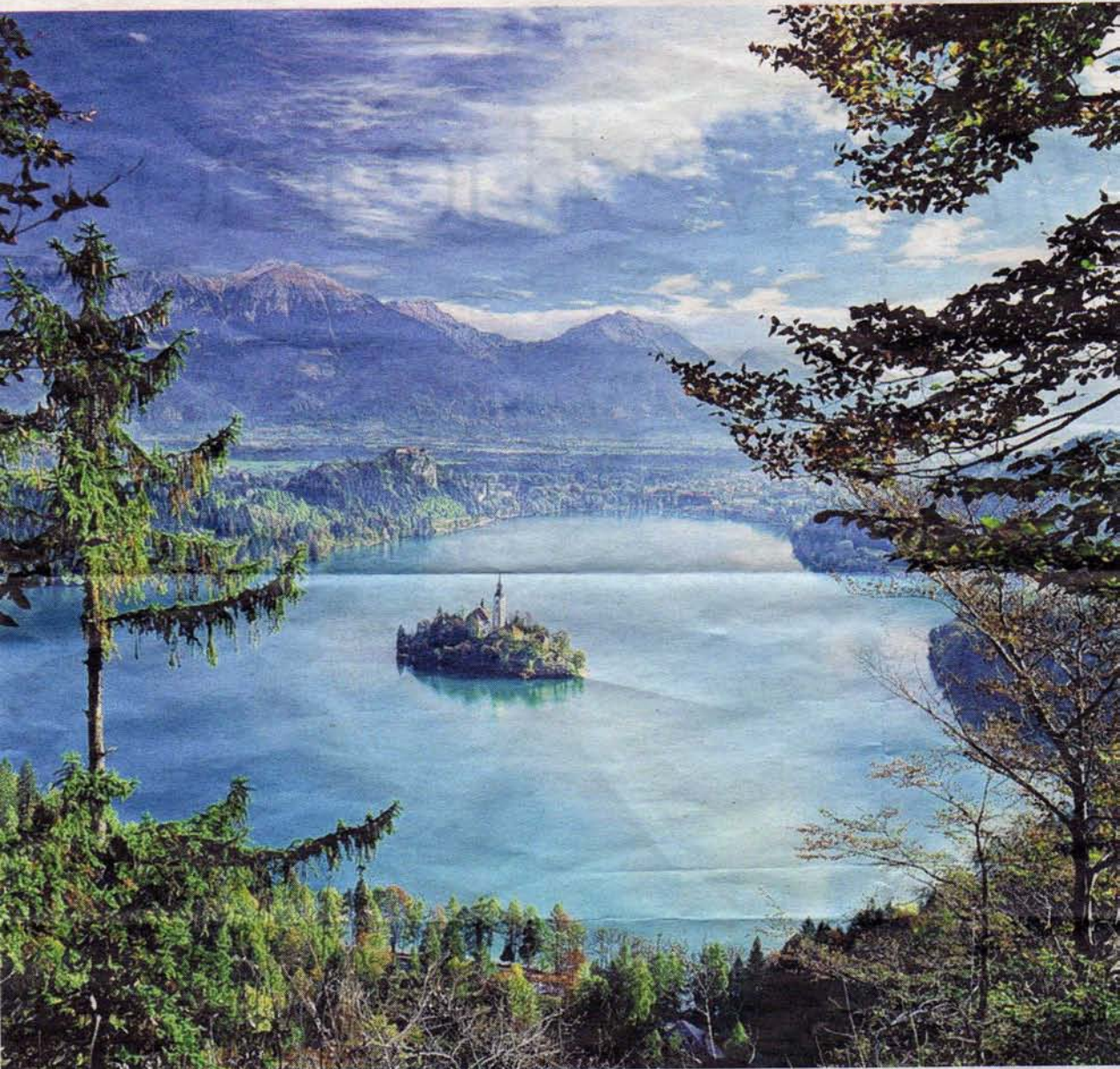
Another reason to come back, I ponder. Kramar particularly loves rebula (known as ribolla over the border in Italy), and also rates Slovenia's sauvignon blanc, vitovska (a local grape) and malvasia.

"Slovenia is a country of boutique wine producers and boutique restaurants — which is not the perception that many people have," he says. You don't say, I mutter, as I sip green bean soup with almond foam, basil and clams.

We spend the next day walking off the more traditional but equally delicious potato and meat *žlikrofi* (ravioli) that we have for lunch at Pristava Lepena ([pristava-lepena.com](http://pristava-lepena.com)), a cosy, eco-minded holiday resort hidden in the hills of the nearby Triglav National Park. We scoff wild strawberries and drink soft, sweet



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river water. The next morning we push on to Spodnja Idrija, to the 11-roomed Kendov Dvorec, our smart base for exploring the Vipava Valley, the most well trodden of Slovenia's wine routes.

It's a fabulous spot, in a polished, creaky, grandma's furniture kind of way, lording over a town once famous for its mercury mines (the lace industry rules now). It's worth staying for the *potica* alone, a stuffed brioche-cum-streudel made by a 78-year-old woman from the town who's a dab hand at this fiddly pastry.

The two-hour drive from Soca to Vipava is a topographical about-turn. We go from damp, misty, fern-covered mountain valleys to rolling hills dotted with cypress and olive trees, scented with rosemary and lined with lemon trees. We also get to our first vineyard.

It's early days for the Vipava wine route. As yet there are no smart hotels (though plans are afoot), but there is a swanky restaurant, Castle Zemono, where Tomaz Kavcic does some of the country's most innovative cooking.

Who's travelling the wine route? The Italians, mostly. They flock here in their droves to spend long afternoons hanging out in restaurants that are significantly cheaper but just as good as their own. Slovenian cuisine borrows more than a touch from its gregarious neighbour, with influences from Austria, Poland and beyond.

A good place to start your wine tour is at Vinoteka Brda ([vinotekabrda.si](http://vinotekabrda.si)), a wine bar and shop in the castle dominating the pretty village of Dobrovo, where you can taste up to 250 wines. Come for a mea

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platter and get the lowdown on local producers from the manager, Toni Gomišček. It's best to ring ahead if you want to taste wines with any of the producers themselves (grab a wine route map from Gomišček.). The younger generation speak English, but you'll need some Slovenian, or an interpreter, to converse with the older folks, who will tell you how hard it is to carve out decent vineyards from the region's famous terra rossa; how they had to crush big boulders to make way for the vines, battling the strong winds that course through the valley, using minimal chemicals, minimal or no sulphur, and only natural yeasts.

Why do it then? "Because we're tough and we're stubborn, and we've always made wine here," grins a grizzled Branko Cotar, who makes curious but delicious aged malvasia and sauvignon blanc. These sit on the skins for much longer than the norm, then are left in the barrel for up to three years before they are bottled.

We find many more whites made this way, and some chewy reds (a red variety called teran rules), but it's the former that delight the most. The producers have taken their cue from Josko Gravner, a maverick Italian winemaker who does his eccentric stuff a few miles over the border. Other names to look out for include Marjan Simcic, Sutor, Movia and Edi Simcic.

The growing buzz about Slovenia's wine industry mirrors the buzz about the country itself, with its beautiful, unspoiled countryside that stretches from the Adriatic to the Alps. It won't be long before we all know where it is, and what it offers.

A traditional building at Pristava Lepena holiday resort, far left, Lake Bled, main picture, and firing up the barbie for tasty local produce, above

## Need to know

### Getting there

Ryanair ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) flies from London Stansted to Trieste.

### Where to stay and eat

Hisa Franko Casa (0038653894120, [hisafranko.com](http://hisafranko.com)). Dinner, B&B packages from €250 a night for two people. Kendov Dvorec (0038653725100, [kendov-dvorec.com](http://kendov-dvorec.com)). Doubles from €170.

### Further information

[slovenia.info](http://slovenia.info).