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One of the four creatures guarding the Dragon Bridge in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, among the first Balkan states to declare independence from Yugoslavia. MICHAEL MILNE

SOPHISTICATED FAIRY TALE

Standing guard over tiny Slovenia are ancient castles and even dragons, protecting the capital's magical medieval heart and the former Yugoslav state's natural wonders.

By Larissa and Michael Milne
FOR THE INQUIRER

LJUBLJANA, Slovenia — We arrived by train after dark, and despite the late hour, we were eager to begin exploring the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana. It was only a five-minute stroll, under the luminescent glow of a harvest moon, to reach Prešernov Square — five minutes during which we felt we had stepped into the pages of a fairy tale.

With a magical castle perched overhead and the city center encircled by cotton-candy-colored buildings designed in the gaudy Vienna Succession style, as though dressed for a ball, Ljubljana sets the tone for the entire country. It's difficult to visit this pocket-size nation without conjuring up visions of ravishing princesses and handsome princes, witches, and trolls. There's even a Dragon Bridge guarded by four large, copper likenesses of the winged beasts, the symbol of the city.

Once upon a time, Slovenia was the northernmost region, and economic engine, of Yugoslavia. When that man-made collection of Balkan states disintegrated in the 1990s, Slovenia was among the first to declare independence. It seemed a risky step for a nascent nation with a population of only two

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Candy-colored buildings in Prešernov Square in Ljubljana set the fairy-tale tone of the rest of the country. The city's style, a steampunk-type mix of art nouveau and Greek Revival, is by early-20th-century architect Jože Plecnik.

Slovenia

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million, but the Slovenes, who once were members of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, naturally looked toward Western Europe. Slovenia joined the European Union, becoming the only former Yugoslav republic to use the euro as its currency.

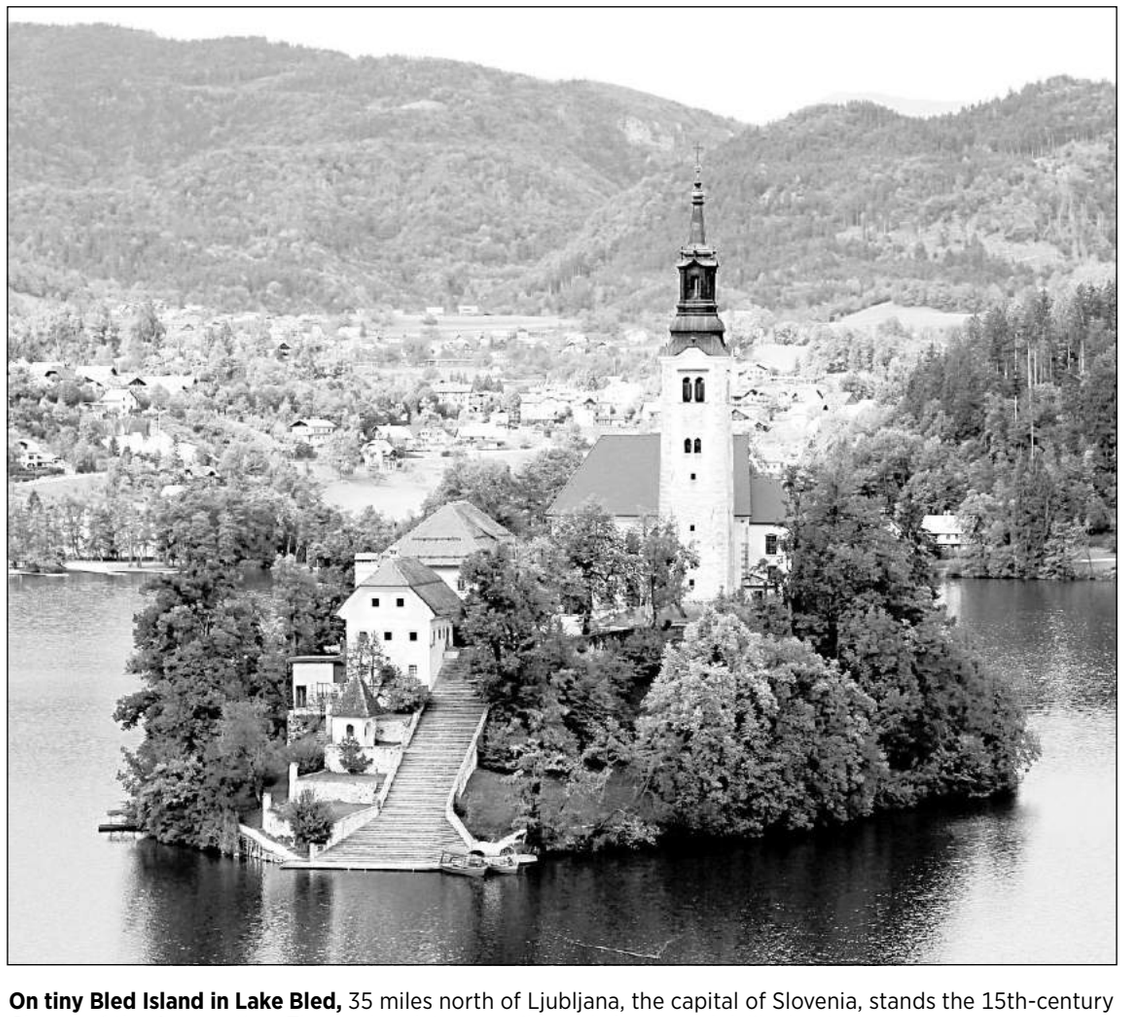
The country packs a little of everything into its compact borders, which encompass an area slightly smaller than New Jersey: sweeping snowcapped alps, quaint medieval villages, a sophisticated capital, UNESCO-sanctioned natural wonders. It even manages to squeeze in a minuscule (30-mile) coastline on the Adriatic Sea, topped by a town that was an outpost of the once-mighty Venetian Republic.

As the clock struck midnight in Ljubljana's pristine Prešernov Square, we wouldn't have been surprised to see Cinderella racing across the Tromostovje (Triple Bridge), leaving a glass slipper in her wake. The three-pronged pedestrian crossing straddles the diminutive Ljubljanica River as it meanders through the city's medieval heart, which was transformed into a pedestrian zone in 2008.

Much of Ljubljana's otherworldly aura is thanks to Jože Plecnik, the de facto architect laureate of Slovenia, who designed the bridge and river esplanades, along with many of the city's decorative elements, in the early 20th century. Plecnik's style is a sort of steampunk merger between art nouveau and Greek Revival; it boasts a unique flair that is spotted on railings and streetlamps throughout the country.

Those longing to rescue Rapunzel can climb the 200-plus feet to Ljubljana Castle, which has been standing guard over the city for more than 500 years. (Better yet, take the ultramodern funicular, which will whisk you up in about 30 seconds.) The hilltop complex includes a selection of small museums and a medieval chapel, along with a commanding view of the city below, with the Alps in the distance.

Sleeping Beauty could easily have been eternally dozing only 35 miles north in the foothills of the Julian Alps, on Lake Bled. The crystalline waters are pierced by tiny Bled Island, barely large enough to embrace the 15th-century Church of the Assumption. To reach and rescue her from her repose, Prince Phillip would have used the services of boatmen with a *pletna,* a traditional wooden craft resembling a large gondola that is still used today.



On tiny Bled Island in Lake Bled, 35 miles north of Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, stands the 15th-century Church of the Assumption. The landmark is accessible only by a gondolalike boat. LARISSA MILNE

The gnarled hands of our boatman were testimony to the demanding work required to row the *pletna* 300 yards to the island. Despite the toil, the profession carries honor, and rowers granted licenses for this job decades ago pass the career down in families. Boatman Janez rowed us out; his son, Klemen, squired us back to shore.

Bled cream cake, rich custard and whipped cream between layers of thin buttery crust. MICHAEL MILNE

After alighting from the boat, visitors to the island climb the 99 steps to the church, where they ring the bell for good luck. Unless you have an urge to unleash your inner Quasimodo, we suggest saving the six euros required for the privilege and, instead, linger outside and listen to tales of others' efforts while you savor *poteca* — a Slovenian coffee cake — at the island's cafe.

The lake is guarded by Bled Castle, perched high atop a stone crag. It's the oldest castle in Slovenia; the first references to it date to 1004. Today, it houses a cluster of craft exhibits and a small museum, and it offers a breathtaking view of the lake.

Just as magical is the famous Bled cream cake, rich custard and whipped cream sandwiched between layers of thin buttery crust and powdered sugar. It's available at restaurants overlooking the lake, but arguably the best view is from Belvedere, the Plecnik-ornamented, hillside teahouse that was once part of Marshal Tito's summer residence. Yugoslavia's late "president for life" enjoyed taking visiting dignitaries to this picture-postcard spot, which is now a luxury hotel that houses displays commemorating his glory days.

Every fairy tale should feature an ogre or troll, and a perfect place to find one is Škocjan Caves, the world's largest underground canyon. The towering stalagmites and drippy stalactites along a three-kilometer subterranean trail could easily have been the setting for *The Lord of the Rings* (our guide assured us it was not). Nevertheless, traversing a narrow footbridge in a huge cavern 150 feet above a rushing underground river makes it easy to imagine Gollum lurking at every turn.

Sixty miles southwest of Ljubljana lies a land that is a mixture of Shakespeare and Arthurian legend. The 1,000-year-old town of Piran occupies pride of place on a walled promontory along Slovenia's brief slice of the Adriatic coast. Known colloquially as "Little Venice," Piran reported to its big brother just 60 miles west across the sea. Perhaps that merchant of Venice, Antonio, strode the narrow alleyways to stock his ships en route to wooing his fair maiden back at the home port.

At an inauspicious fishing pier south of Piran, we met a modern-day version of the Lady of the Lake, Irena Fonda. The microbiologist with a doctorate, along with her scuba-diving brother, Lean, are concerned that the waters of the Gulf of Piran and nearby Adriatic are being depleted of seafood. They established Fonda Fish Farm to grow sea bass using largely sustainable practices.

The Fondas' efforts have paid off. The farm created an ecosystem that has attracted new sea life to the area, and Fonda sea bass is recognized throughout Europe as a premier brand. Visitors can tour the farm, boating out to the seabeds to help Irena feed her "babies." Sample the fish, along with other locavore products, back on land.

To visit with Irena was to gently emerge from our fairy tale. We had glimpsed a land that seemed frozen in a magical time. Yet, while Slovenia cradles its past, it is progressive. With a myriad of historic sights, natural wonders, and 21st-century business savvy, Slovenia is poised to live happily ever after.

If You Go

- Although there are no direct flights from the United States to Slovenia, the main airport at Ljubljana has links to most European gateways. There is also excellent rail service from Munich and Vienna through stunning countryside.
- The Slovenian Tourist Board website has overviews of many sights, including Lake Bled, Ljubljana, and Piran: www.slovenia.info.
- For information on guided tours of the Škocjan Caves: www.park-skocjanske-jame.si//en.
- For tours of Fonda Fish Farm: www.fonda.si/en/fonda/the-fonda-fish-farm.