



Exploring The Balkans

Slovenia and Croatia—and their neighboring Balkan countries—are becoming popular destinations for American tourists. Charlottean Christopher George offers customized trips to these European nations, located just east of Italy along the Adriatic Sea.

Man rowing on Lake Bled

A jewel of medieval and Baroque architecture

Several years ago, a well-traveled friend told us, “You must go to Slovenia. The country has it all—a capital city with architecture as beautiful as Prague, sophisticated cultural attractions, stunning mountains, great wines, and friendly people.”

Given this introduction, it was a pleasant surprise when we met Christopher George, a Charlottean with a travel company that specializes in customized trips to Slovenia and Croatia, a country known for its dramatic coastline and historic towns along the Adriatic Sea.

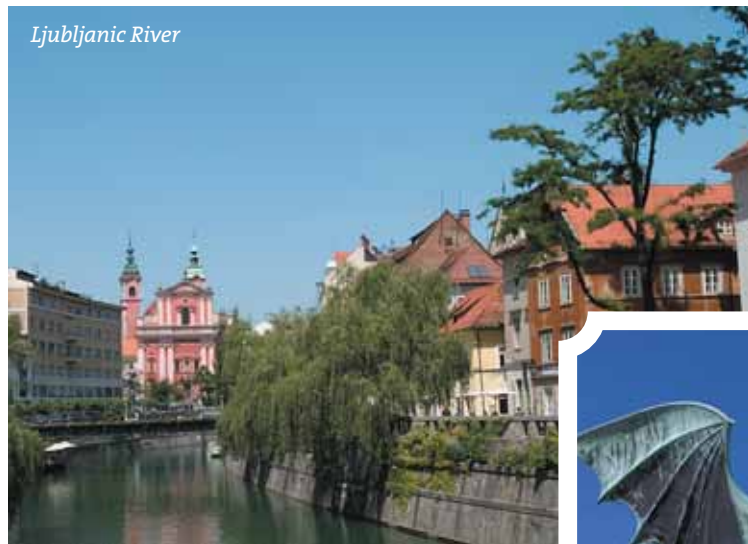
George told us he and his Croatian partner, Ivan Boban, could plan our itinerary details and organize experiences not usually available to other tourists. As it turned out, George planned our trip and personally accompanied us to Slovenia and Croatia, as well as to neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina—all sovereign states formerly part of Yugoslavia.

Slovenia exceeded our expectations. Ljubljana, the capital, is a jewel of medieval and Baroque architecture situated along the Ljubljanic River and overlooked by a stunning hilltop castle. In the Old Town, people stroll along riverfront promenades and socialize at sidewalk cafes—creating a convivial atmosphere that’s as energetic as, yet more intimate than, Prague or Krakow.

The country is so small it doesn’t take long to travel from Ljubljana to other key attractions in the country: the alpine scenery of the Julian Alps; the tranquil resort town of Bled, where we stayed in a charming pension; and the old seaport of Piran, a gem of Venetian Gothic architecture. Between the mountains and the sea, we visited Lipica, home of the renowned Lipizzaner show horses, and the Postojna Caves, one of the largest, most spectacular subterranean sites in the world.

A special treat one evening was experiencing an *osmica*, a tradition dating from the 18th century when Austro-Hungarian Empress Maria Theresa required farmers to sell their surpluses. Today, farmers carry on the tradition by offering local wines and meals at their homes for a limited period of time. We savored traditional cuisine at a private farm—outdoors under a grape arbor—while locals spontaneously sang folk songs throughout the evening.

Later, we traveled down the rocky Croatian coast exploring historic villages, attending local wine tastings, swimming in the sea and enjoying the excellent seafood for which the region is known. Finally, George and his partner accompanied us to several small towns in neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina, a fascinating East-West melting pot of ethnic groups and religions.



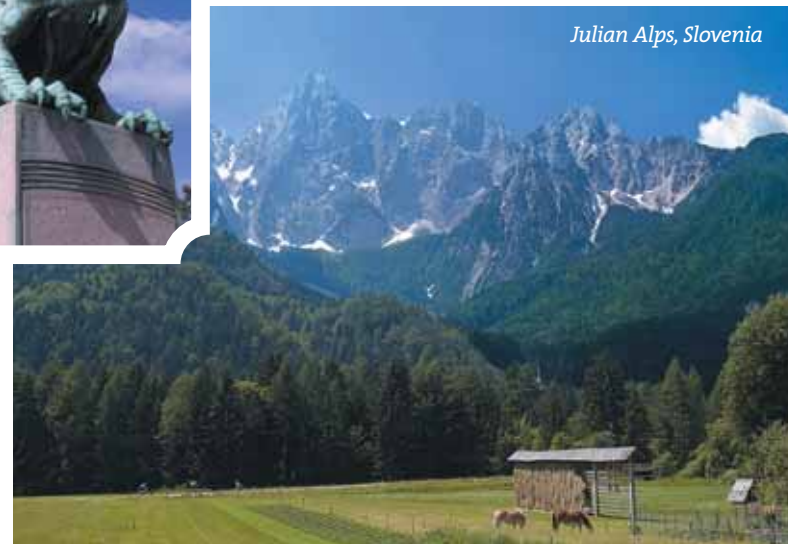
Ljubljanic River



The old bridge in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina



Korcula, Croatia



Julian Alps, Slovenia



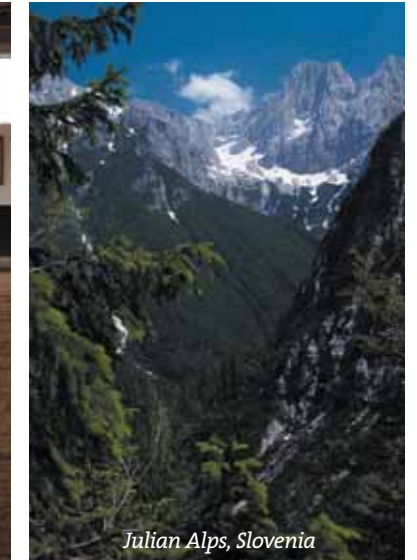
Lake Bohinj



Presiernov Square in Ljubljana, Slovenia



Lipizzaner show horses in Lipica



Julian Alps, Slovenia



Side Street in Korcula Town, Croatia

ON THE HORIZON

As we traveled, we asked George about his background and travel company, *Madriatic Blu*:

LOVES Where are you from originally? How did you happen to move to Charlotte?

CHRIS GEORGE I was born and raised in Hickory, North Carolina. When I graduated from Georgetown University, I formed our travel company. Charlotte was close enough to home that I could visit my family often and still live in a large city with a cosmopolitan atmosphere.

LOVES How did you become interested in Slovenia?

CG My best friend in Salzburg was from Slovenia, which I first visited in 1997. The country's small—you can cross it by auto in less than four hours—yet it offers just about everything; mountains, beaches, charming towns and cities, and great food and wine. It's very easy to reach Slovenia from Charlotte—you can fly to the capital city Ljubljana with as little as one connection.

LOVES Most Americans know little about Slovenia. What would be the ideal itinerary on a first visit?

CG I recommend first-time visitors to base themselves in the capital city, Ljubljana, which many

people consider to be the next Prague. Its central location allows easy access to all regions of the country. For me, the most important sites are Lake Bled for its natural beauty, the spectacular Postojna Caves and the port of Piran because of its Venetian architecture. I also enjoy visiting the country's many other small towns and villages.

LOVES What is it about neighboring Croatia that is special for you? What are your favorite places?

CG The wheels in my brain are always turning when I'm in Croatia, whether I'm trying to understand the history of the region or just wrap my head around the beauty of the coastline. My favorite part of Croatia is Southern Dalmatia, from Split to Dubrovnik. Once you've seen the colors of the Adriatic Sea and the quaint villages along this stretch of coast, you'll understand my enthusiasm.

LOVES What would be the ideal itinerary for an auto trip in Southern Croatia?

CG I would limit the tour to Southern Dalmatia picking one or two locations for overnight stays. There is so much to see and do in the region, but I would say the most important highlights are Split, Dubrovnik, the island of Korcula and the villages of Ston and Trsteno. These areas offer the most impressive historical sites, great atmosphere and the best beaches. We work closely with many hotels and guesthouses in the region so that we can offer our customers everything from five-star hotels to small homes in sleepy villages.

LOVES Many people we have met dream of a boat-based trip down the Croatian coast, visiting both mainland ports and various islands? Can you arrange this kind of trip?

CG Of course we can arrange this type of trip. Croatia is a dream destination for anyone that likes to sail. For a sailing trip in the South, the most important stops would be the same destinations I've already mentioned with the addition of Mljet, a beautiful island that is also a National Park. *

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