

Maribor, Slovenia's second largest city, sits on the River Drava, among the rolling green hills of North-East Slovenia wedged between Austria, Hungary and Croatia.

■ BY KALPANA SUNDER

Fresh off the *Vine*

Phil Robinson/age fotostock/DinodiaPhoto





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Facing page: A view of the Stadtburg Maribor.

Above: The Old Vine House, through guided tours, exhibits the rich wine heritage of Maribor and is a temple of culture.

Below: The biggest wine cellar belonging to a wine company called Vinag.

I am looking at an old gnarled piece of vine—not any ordinary vine; mark you, but the oldest in the world as certified by the *Guinness Book of Records*. This has survived two wars, an epidemic which ravaged vineyards across Europe, fires, Napoleon’s invasion, and has been revived to produce grapes. I am in the heart of the old city centre of Maribor in Slovenia, where the oldest vine in the world still grows in front of the ‘Old Vine House’ which is today both a museum and wine shop-cum-tasting centre. The vine wraps itself around the building and it produces wine even today. Any chance of tasting the precious wine is dashed to the ground, as my local guide

Luka Hrvatin tells me that the yearly harvest of around 35 to 55 kg of grapes is put into 100 specially designed bottles and used as a protocol gift for heads of states and dignitaries like popes, presidents and emperors who visit Maribor! “Bill Clinton has a bottle. So does the pope and the emperor of Japan,” he adds.

I am in Maribor, which in the 15th and 16th centuries came under attack by the Turks; some of its old fortifications survive, including the picturesque Judgement Tower (so called because witches were tried here) and Water Tower, with their red-tiled roofs. The city was heavily bombed during the Nazi



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View of the Trg Svobode (Freedom Square) leading to Partizanska cesta (name of a street in Maribor).

occupation, so much of the centre is modern. “This is a great city for square hopping,” says Luka with a smile. “It’s in the squares that you will find the city’s wealth of baroque churches and rococo palaces,” he says.

A WALK DOWN HISTORY

We walk down Postna *ulica*, a lively street lined with pubs and cafes and along the old riverside trading area called Lent, which used to be the city’s principal docking port before the arrival of the railway in 1862. It is studded with a number of medieval buildings which were spared from the worst of the Allied bombing. The word Lent is not connected to religious piety but derived from the German verb meaning ‘to land’, after the rafts and boats that used to put in to collect timber and wine en route to the Black Sea.

FAIR AND SQUARE

Luka tells me that the city had a chance to shine when it was the European Capital of Culture in 2012. He tells me what he likes most about living in the city. Pointing to the vineyards at the end of the long street, he says, “Imagine having nature at your doorstep!” He shows me the modernistic centrepiece of the Freedom Square—a spherical bronze memorial which pays tribute to those gunned down by the Nazis during World War II for rising up against the occupation. By walking around the monument you can look at public announcements of the executions of some 667 people who were condemned to death by the German forces. The note inscribed at its base is a letter written by a partisan to his wife before he was executed. The sculpture is the work of local artist Slavko Tihec, and locals have dubbed the monument ‘Kojak’ because of its resemblance to a bald head! Under the Freedom Square with the unusual memorial, there are some of the biggest wine cellars belonging to a wine company called Vinag, it holds about five million litres of wine in two-kilometre-long tunnels. You can take a guided tour of its stone cellar, filled with some 150 huge wooden barrels.

My favourite square is the Slomškov Square—flanked by the pistachio green coloured post office, the Gothic cathedral and the Slovenian

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MARIBOR TAKES ITS WINE SO SERIOUSLY THAT THEY EVEN NAME A 'WINE QUEEN' EVERY YEAR TO PRESENT AND PROMOTE THE WINE!

National Theatre Maribor—is peppered with dog walkers, bookworms and young families. “This square was actually a cemetery and prized gravestones are embedded in the facade of the cathedral,” explains Luka. Inside the Cathedral of St John the Baptist I admire the modern stained-glass windows and intricately carved and gilded choir benches dating back to 1771, depicting the life of St John the Baptist. All this under the watchful bronzed gaze of beatified Slovenian bishop Anton Martin Slomšek. Bishop Anton, a cleric who keeping with the great tradition of the city, wrote a popular song about drinking wine! The song’s lyrics read: “I will buy a little hill/upon which I will plant vines/ Invite friends and drink it too.” Close by is the ornate Slovenian National Theatre Maribor, the largest public cultural institution in Slovenia and one of only a few European theatres that unites Opera, Ballet, Drama and Symphonic Orchestra under one roof.

A whiff of modernistic architecture is Leon Štukelj Square in Maribor designed by architects Prinčič & Partners; named after the Slovenian gymnast who won an Olympic Gold Medal in 1924. In June, Lent takes place: it’s an international arts festival that brings more than half a million visitors to the city. There are musical concerts, dance demonstrations and street theatre with performers coming from the four corners of the globe. Every September a ten-day-long gastronomic festival finishes with the cutting of the grapes from the vine. The grape pickers, chosen from a different Maribor wine district each year, arrive at the Old Vine House amidst much pantomime, the whole town and often lots of tourists having come to watch. Maribor takes its wine so seriously that they even name a ‘wine queen’ every year to present and promote the wine! A fair maiden not beyond the age of 26 with a healthy knowledge of the region’s products

Above:
The sunset view of the historical city centre in Maribor.



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Above left and right:

The statue of Anton Martin Slomsek.

Basilica of Our Lady of Mercy, Franciscan Church.

is named each year just to be the poster girl. As an honour I get to pose with the crown on a throne at the wine centre!

Glavni Trg is one of the most important squares of the city which used to host a market in medieval times. In the square is the town hall from whose balcony Hitler is supposed to have claimed Maribor for the Nazis. A baroque style small tower with a bulbous roof stands above the eastern side of the building. Luka tells me a popular local legend that says that the job of building the tower was given to a master builder, but he didn't receive enough golden coins; filled with anger the builder did not construct the middle part of the tower! Ahead is an extravagant Plague memorial with golden figures of saints. A third of the city's residents were wiped out by the plague in the 17th century and when the disease finally left the city the citizens constructed this memorial. The Franciscan Church of St Mary stands covered with red bricks. Luka tells me another

local lore—that two bricks were contributed by women who wanted to receive atonement for one sin each! “That’s a lot of sin for a small town like Maribor,” he quips.

My favourite place in the city is the Salon of Applied Arts on Glavni Square. This is a symbol of this city’s slow regeneration—formerly a grand cafe from 1913, it later became a casino, which went bust. Now it is a beautifully restored cafe-bar with mismatched furniture from different periods of the city’s history that hosts parties and sells work by local designers. It’s the perfect place to sip a coffee and muse on the city’s past. 

FACT FILE

Where to stay

Hotel Adora at the edge of old town Ljubljana has a great view and cozy rooms and apartments. In Maribor, stay at Hotel Habakuk—with splendid views and comfortable doubles.

Where to eat

Have authentic Slovenian cuisine and local wine. *Žlikrofi*, small boiled dumplings filled with potatoes, onions, and lards. Try their traditional sweet *gibanica*; a pastry, made of eight layers, it contains poppy seeds, walnuts, apples, raisins, and ricotta fillings. For some inspired Mediterranean food with good veggie options, have a meal at Pri Florjanu, a great spot in full view of the Column of St Florian.

What to buy

Honey, hand-painted glass and local wine.