

# SLOVENIA

IN SEVEN DAYS



A WHISTLE-STOP TOUR OF THIS SMALL BUT  
PERFECTLY FORMED SLICE OF CENTRAL EUROPE  
UNCOVERS SOME REMARKABLE RIDING

Words James McKnight Photos Andy Lloyd









**F**rom blustery summits to calm blue seas, warm vineyards to icy valleys, Slovenia offers a huge variety of terrain, all within a country small enough that you can see its every corner in one week. Now, that sounds like a challenge... Keen to find out what the country's mountain biking is like, photographers Andy Lloyd, Ben Winder and I allot ourselves just seven days to explore all four corners of this diverse land.

**DAY 1 DROPPING IN: KRVAVEC** We wake to bright skies and the deafening call of trails – the first starting from the door of our log cabin before plummeting to the valley floor 1,000m below. It's a great way to get things rolling. Our locale for the day is Krvavec, one of Slovenia's busiest bike parks, which lies just a stone's throw from the nation's capital, Ljubljana. We're joined by our host for the week, MTB tourism developer Andrej Žigon, along with pro rider Žiga Pandur and trail builder Anže Bizjak. Between hammering out runs, we discover that the resort has a longer season than its alpine counterparts, with the gondola staying open beyond summer "until the weather gets too bad".

We make the most of it – so much so that I burn through my brake pads in one particularly steep chute and end up in the bushes. One minute we're riding hardpack turns, the next we're rocketing over greasy

rocks and through unimaginably gnarled tree roots. Our first encounter with the country's sheer diversity gets us set for a riot of a week, but eventually we have to call it a day – we have an appointment with a brewery.

**DAY 2 CRN TRN CREW: AJDOVŠČINA** Crn Trn bike club's warm welcome to Ajdovščina means the morning begins hazily, with a homegrown breakfast on a farm nestled between the vines of the breathtakingly beautiful Vipava Valley. We're abruptly in the thick of things as we cram into a shuttle wagon with our new friends. As we make our way into the mountains that rear up sharply behind the club's impressive 4X track (good enough to produce the 2016 4X world champion, Mitja Ergaver), it becomes apparent that this is a hotspot for mountain bikers.

After a long morning sessioning an endless range of trails, we stop briefly in an almost

Tuscan-looking vineyard for a spot of grub, then climb to one of the highest points in the area. The sun is beating down. We peer over lush green hills and across to the gleaming blue Mediterranean Sea. Not a bad place to kick off an epic descent!

Meandering to start with, our trail soon drops into the forest and picks up speed as loam is spat left and right. As we pop out onto the valley floor there's still plenty of fun to be had, the route taking us down ancient streets and centuries-old farm trails before eventually

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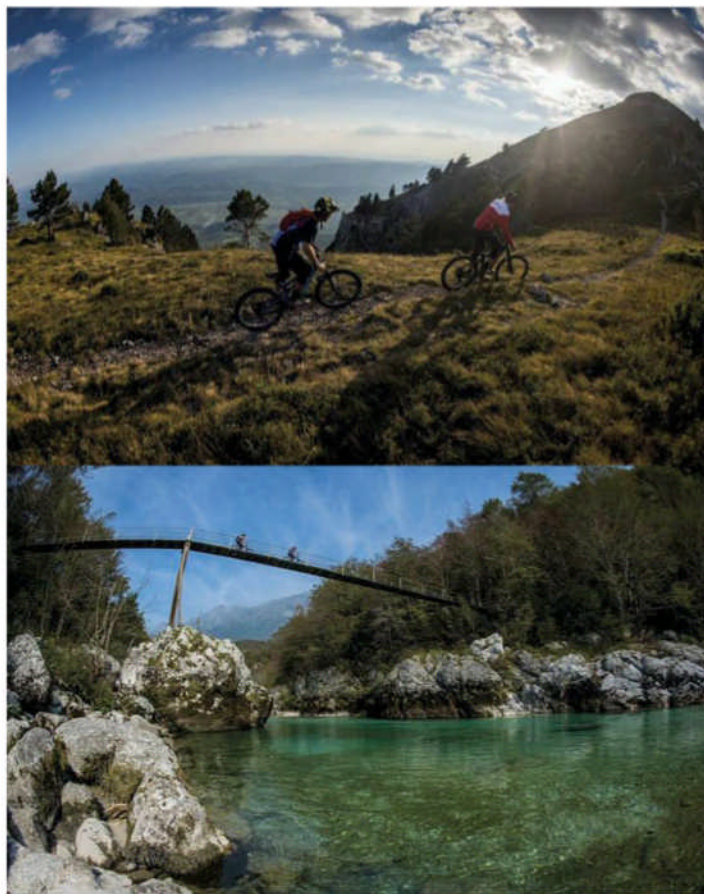




ending at one of our friends' houses. Lying in the warm grass, looking back to our lofty start point, we reflect on the perfect turns of the seemingly endless natural singletrack we've just ridden.

**DAY 3 SUBLIME NATURE: SOCA VALLEY** We wish our carefree time in Ajdovščina never had to end, but we're heading to Slovenia's 'outdoor capital', the Soca Valley. Far-too-few hours later, we wake to a godly surround of natural verticality buffered by sleep-deprived weariness – nothing that strong coffee, a brisk morning and a beastly climb can't shake.

We meet our guide, Jan Klavara, and our first trail begins on a grassy peak, from where we glimpse the Soca River's pristine waters between a tangle of dense forest and fearsome rocky slopes. Picking our way along grassland singletrack with vast views, our ride gathers pace and we thunder into the forest canopy, hard-braking for unplanned 180-degree turns as the trail



darts left and right. Some 45 blissful minutes later, we join an ancient network of trails that delivers us to the valley's welcoming meadows.

Next, we move to the Kanin gondola, part of an old ski resort's infrastructure and set for a new lease of life. Two wheels aren't unfamiliar here though – we find remnants of a bike park scattered across the hillside. The lift whisks us up to great height, affording a view into the enormous forest below. Our trail is a freefall through rocks and gullies, cramming in miles of perfect singletrack before popping us back out into civilisation.

**DAY 4 RIDGELINE BLISS: TRŽIČ** From the town of Tržič, we survey the adjacent lofty mountains – we're in for a big day. A 15-minute warm-up trail gives a taster of what to expect – natural lines snaking through enormous trees, clinging to steep-sided mountains and flowing along exposed ridgelines. Our guides here, Andrej Remškar and Aljaz Anderle, have arranged a shuttle to alleviate some of the pain of the ensuing monster climb. Thankfully, the remaining ascent is reasonably pain-free, bringing us to a high point where we peer into the depths of the valley from a mountain hut. We dine on fine alpine food (cheese and rustic bread) before setting off on the most epic of trails.

Ridgeline singletrack is to mountain bikers what barrels are to surfers – the stuff dreams are made of.

**Main pic** A proper wake-up on day one at Krvavec while trying to follow pro racer Žiga Pandur

**Above top** Epic evenings start here, with an enormous view over Ajdovščina and a lengthy descent

**Above bottom** Time for a quick cool-off? Who could resist the beautiful turquoise waters of the Soca?

**Below left** The Crn Trn crew have trails dotted about everywhere in the woodlands near their clubhouse

**Below right** A sneaky morning ride in the sublime Soca Valley. Who could resist?





Bordered by four countries – Italy, Croatia, Hungary and Austria – Slovenia's culture is as diverse as its climate. Summer is the best season to visit, but many locations are open to ride from early spring to late autumn. Budget airlines fly from most major UK airports to the nation's capital, Ljubljana. Some towns, such as Tržič, are well set up for visiting mountain bikers, while elsewhere it's recommended to get in touch with local clubs. If you fancy booking a similar trip, head to [www.bike-goodplace.com](http://www.bike-goodplace.com) and [www.slovenia.info](http://www.slovenia.info) for more information.

THIS FLOWY, FREE-SPIRITED TRAIL CRESTS AND FALLS AGAINST A BACKDROP OF LAYERED MOUNTAINS. TALL PINES LINE THE TRACK



This flowy, free-spirited trail crests and falls against a backdrop of layered mountains. Tall pines line the narrow track, occasional panoramic views remind us just how high up we are and more severe sections drop into denser woodland and ensure no snoozing. An hour later we roll into town for a feast of sugary snacks and the chance to watch an evening session at the local dirt jumps. This larger-than-life ride will be forever etched into our memories.

**DAY 5 PERFECT CONTRAST: ROGLA** How to follow a 'best ever' bike ride? Is there even a better trail anywhere in Europe? It's time to take things in a new direction. Our fifth day begins at the Unior Tools factory, a massive plant employing 2,000 people. Unior are rooted in the sport – they have their own world-class downhill race team and also support a bike park by the name of Rogla, which is our next stop.

We head straight into a blast of fun, sweeping turns, with enduro racer Vid Persak showing us how it's done. Rogla is somewhat akin to a UK trail centre in its flow and use of minimal elevation drop. It's got a chairlift, but we're here out of season so we spend our afternoon pedalling back up the short, steep climb before dropping into its array of trails. Some simply twist and turn, while others have big stretches of North Shore boardwalk. One track has a 'supercross' section of back-to-back jumps and berms. Altogether Rogla is a hell of a lot of fun, and the stark contrast between this manmade venue and yesterday's natural riding perfectly illustrates

the diversity of this fantastic country. Late in the day we pack up and make our way to our penultimate meeting place, which is deep in the sprawling forest near the Croatian border.

**DAY 6 PEDALLING WITH BEARS: KOČEVJE** Igor Kaligarić and Janez Dejak, the driving forces behind mountain biking in this region, are waiting in the dining room of our hotel, which is filled with paintings, statues, photographs and stories of bears. Igor greets us with a Canadian accent – it turns out he lived in BC for several years, before bringing his new trail-building skills back to a community in need of mountain biking. Janez, a cross-country racer with a penchant for eye-wateringly strong beverages, was involved from the start of Igor's hometown project. Together, they're the main instigators of the Melamin Bike Club.

After dinner we drive into the forest to check out the toils of the local riders. Since early 2016, Igor has spent every free moment shaping trails on the site of an abandoned ski slope. Now there are several options, starting from an easily climbable height (no shuttles

**Above** Tržič's endless trails and unbelievable ridgeline riding make for one of the highlights of our trip

**Below** Rogla's manmade fun and flowy trails are the perfect contrast to our previous day's riding







AFTER TAKING IN THE BIKE  
PARK TRAILS, WE HEAD FOR THE  
BACKCOUNTRY TO TOP OFF OUR WEEK  
WITH A FLOWY, LOAMY SECRET



**Above** Pohorje, Maribor's bike park, had a bit of downtime but is now being resurrected to its former glory

**Left** Kocevje hides not only bears on its wooded slopes, but also super-fun trails



here) and all feeding back to a small clubhouse. This is a social hub for the many varying characters who comprise the club. We join some of them there and toast Slovenia and head for a late-night walk in the woods – it seems like a good idea at the time.

Having avoided any potentially life-ending meetings with the numerous bears that inhabit this great forest, we're up and at 'em next morning. On arrival, there's already a large congregation of folk, some sessioning the jump trail in the adjacent field, some lapping the techy singletrack, others just hanging out at the pump track.

This area provides neither the greatest elevation nor the most epic trails of our week, but the people and their sheer passion for a sport only recently discovered will stick in our minds forever. We finish another fantastic day with a trip to an old forester's hut, where we cook freshly caught fish over the fire and toast, once again, a country full to the brim with warmly welcoming people.

## DAY 7 BEST FOR LAST: MARIBOR

Our whirlwind week ends in the vibrant town of Maribor, which hosted some of the most memorable World Cup downhill races of all time, after first welcoming the likes of Nicolas Vouilloz and Shaun Palmer back in 1999. The town's ski resort, Pohorje, was one of the most popular bike parks in Europe at its height. It's since dropped off the radar, so it's good to see things picking back up, with improved infrastructure and a goal to get mountain biking on these famous slopes back to its best.

After taking in the bike park trails, we head for the backcountry to top off our week with a flowy, loamy secret. Our local guides, Jure Logar and Luka Rakuša, take us into the hills behind Pohorje, where we're soon up to speed on a well-hidden stretch of singletrack. Flat out from the very start, this rollercoaster ride is a natural blast through the undergrowth, a line sketched by locals and left to develop into a trail with godly flow. Each lump is a launch pad, every turn a perfect radius and the ground under tyre is fresh and springy – the equivalent of a skier's powder run.

Rocketing through the forest, we're thrust onto an open ridgeline to glimpse a view over the surrounding hills, mountains, valleys and forests – an expansive surround that incorporates every natural element to which we've been introduced over our seven short days in Slovenia. The proximity of such diverse riding is mindblowing. "I'll be back here very soon," I think, before plunging back into the best trail of the trip. 🌀

## HVALA!

Many thanks to I Feel Slovenia, Andrej at Alliance ASE, Jan at the Association for Sustainable Tourism GoodPlace and the welcoming riders and clubs in each destination.