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Slovenia: The country takes in a sweep of geological diversity, from Alps to Adriatic

» The food, for one. At Izola's Hotel Marina, I had one of the best lunches of my life – a long, lazy meal made up of an absurd number of miniature claws and shells that I drizzled with olive oil and sea salt. The oil came from the vineyards in the hills just over the harbour; the salt from the Piranske Soline, part of the Secovlje salt pans – the northernmost in the Mediterranean – located just 10 km south of where I sat.

To find out more about the staple of cuisine in this part of Slovenia – fish – I headed to the Fonda Fish Farm. Funded in part by the Slovenian government and the European Union, Mediterranean Slovenia's only fish farm is run by three siblings, all of whom are also biologists – and who have an obvious passion for not only the sea, but maintaining its health. “The sea is pretty empty,” Irena Fonda, the company's manager, told me as we stood overlooking the water, the hills of Croatia just beyond, nibbling on fresh, raw sea bass – accompanied, of course, by Piranske Soline salt and local olive oil. Instead of continuing to strip the sea of the few schools left, the family decided to farm the bass. They don't use any chemicals or antibiotics; they hand-feed the sea bass bluefish and plants. They ice the animals before they're killed, a way to ensure both less suffering and, Irena said, that they produce less adrenaline. Whatever the family did, it made a difference: Their fish tasted clean.

On a boat ride out to the farm, I could see why. The bass splashed in large underwater nets. The water was clear. Ropes of mussels hung nearby, the shellfish cleaning the water. Fonda Fish Farm wants to help change how the fishing industry does business – to set the expectation that fish should come with a label of origin and guarantee of quality, just like wine and olive oil. Fonda Fish Farm's fish are sold with a mark on their gill flaps indicating where they came from and when they were caught. “When we first started putting fish as a brand,



Piran, with its glassy water, salty air and beautiful view of the Adriatic Sea, is touted as the pearl of Slovenia's coast. PHOTOS BY AMANDA RUGGERI



Lunch at Hotel Marina is perfect for a long, lazy afternoon.

everyone was laughing at us,” Fonda said. Not any more: The farm's bass are sold to restaurants and shops across Slovenia and into Austria.

But as much as I loved delving

into Slovenian Istria's culture, as much as I enjoyed the sun-soaked meals and the friendly conversations and the happy-seeming Fonda fish, where I really fell in love – the real rea-

son I'll return – I can say in one word: Piran.

The town is touted as the pearl of Slovenia's coast. Rarely, though, has marketing lingo matched up so perfectly with reality.

When I arrived, the sun was already setting. I was impatient to explore. Instead, I was arrested by my own hotel room – or, I should say, by the view. The water was glassy; in the distance, the sky's smoky pink set a sailboat's silhouette in stark relief. I threw open the doors and hung over the rail. Church bells chimed. The water lapped. I could smell salt on the air. Beneath my balcony, people chatted over aperitivi or strolled slowly along the water, their faces turned west.

The next day, I would explore Piran more fully. I would walk past the forest of sailboat masts in the small harbour, dreaming of what it would be like to stay

there. I would watch children bicycling across the town's pristine piazza, their play overlooked by cypress trees and elegant columns, families sipping espresso in the cafés and the statue of 18th-century Italian Baroque composer and Piran native Giuseppe Tartini. I would climb up to the 17th-century Church of St. George, where I'd try to fix the view of pastel façades topped by red-tiled roofs, the impossibly vivid Adriatic in the background, forever in my memory.

Tomorrow, I would do all of these things. But today, for now, I would just enjoy this little corner of the Mediterranean – a corner I hadn't known existed, but couldn't be more glad to find.

Special to The Globe and Mail

The writer travelled as a guest of the Slovenia Tourist Board. It did not review or approve this article.

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IF YOU GO

The most convenient airport is the Friuli-Venezia Giulia airport near Trieste, Italy, which is located about 45 km from Slovenian Istria. Although there are no direct Toronto-to-Trieste flights, Lufthansa has flights with one stop in Munich that can get you there in less than 10 hours. Other airport options include the Ljubljana airport, 100 km away, and the Venice airport, 200 km away.

WHERE TO STAY

The romantic, five-star Kempinski Palace, located in the centre of Portoroz, has all the fixings, including spacious rooms, 24-hour room service, outdoor and indoor swimming pools. From \$255 a night; [kempinski.com](#).

The 102-year-old Hotel Piran has 89 contemporary, comfortable rooms, a 4-star rating and a small spa – but its real asset is its waterfront location. From \$105; [hotel-piran.si/en](#).

The farm-stay Casa del Sal

has clean, modern rooms, home-grown breakfasts and beautiful views of the salt pans. From \$75 a night, minimum three-night stay; [casadelsal.wordpress.com](#).

WHERE TO EAT

Whether or not you stay here, head to Izola's Hotel Marina for the restaurant. Like other “kilometre zero” spots, they've committed to sourcing at least 70 per cent of their ingredients and wine from Slovenian Istria. From octopus salad to scallops, they do Slovenia proud. [hotelmarina.si](#)

Pick the right table at Rizibizi in Portoroz and you get sweeping views of the blue Adriatic below. For a real showcase of Rizibizi's fresh, clean take on contemporary Adriatic cuisine, opt for one of the tasting menus (starting from €33/\$46 for four courses), where you can try everything from homemade pasta with truffle to lobster-and-peach salad. [rizibizi.si](#)

– Amanda Ruggeri

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