

KARST COUNTRY

After much twisting of Steve Watkins' arm to pick a favourite from his new book of thirty walks to do before you die, he finally plumped for Slovenia (and a sore limb - sorry Steve). Is this spectacular region or any of the other worldwide walking spots listed among your top choices?

Set in a notch at the northeastern border of Italy, and relatively little known, Slovenia is fast becoming Europe's hottest new hiking destination. Although most walkers head for its Alps, the adjoining Karst country offers perhaps the most enthralling mix of landscape, culture and history. With Slovenian wine, delicious home-grown food, vast cave systems and a chance to see the famous Lipizzaner horses, walking the Karst is a revitalizing step into a bygone age.

After a chequered history as part of Yugoslavia, Slovenia finally gained its independence in 1991. Although the break-up of the Yugoslavian bloc had started after Tito's death in 1980, Slovenia was the first country to secede, sparking a ten-day war with the then Serb-led Yugoslav government. It has successfully shifted to a market economy and secured full membership of the European Union - no mean feat in such a short time.

Although there are many possible walking routes across the Karst plateau - the name comes from the Slovenian *grast* and means limestone landscapes weathered and dissolved by water - an excellent itinerary for a week of walking takes you from Predjama Castle to the astonishing cave system at Skocjan.

CLIFF-TOP CASTLES AND CAVES

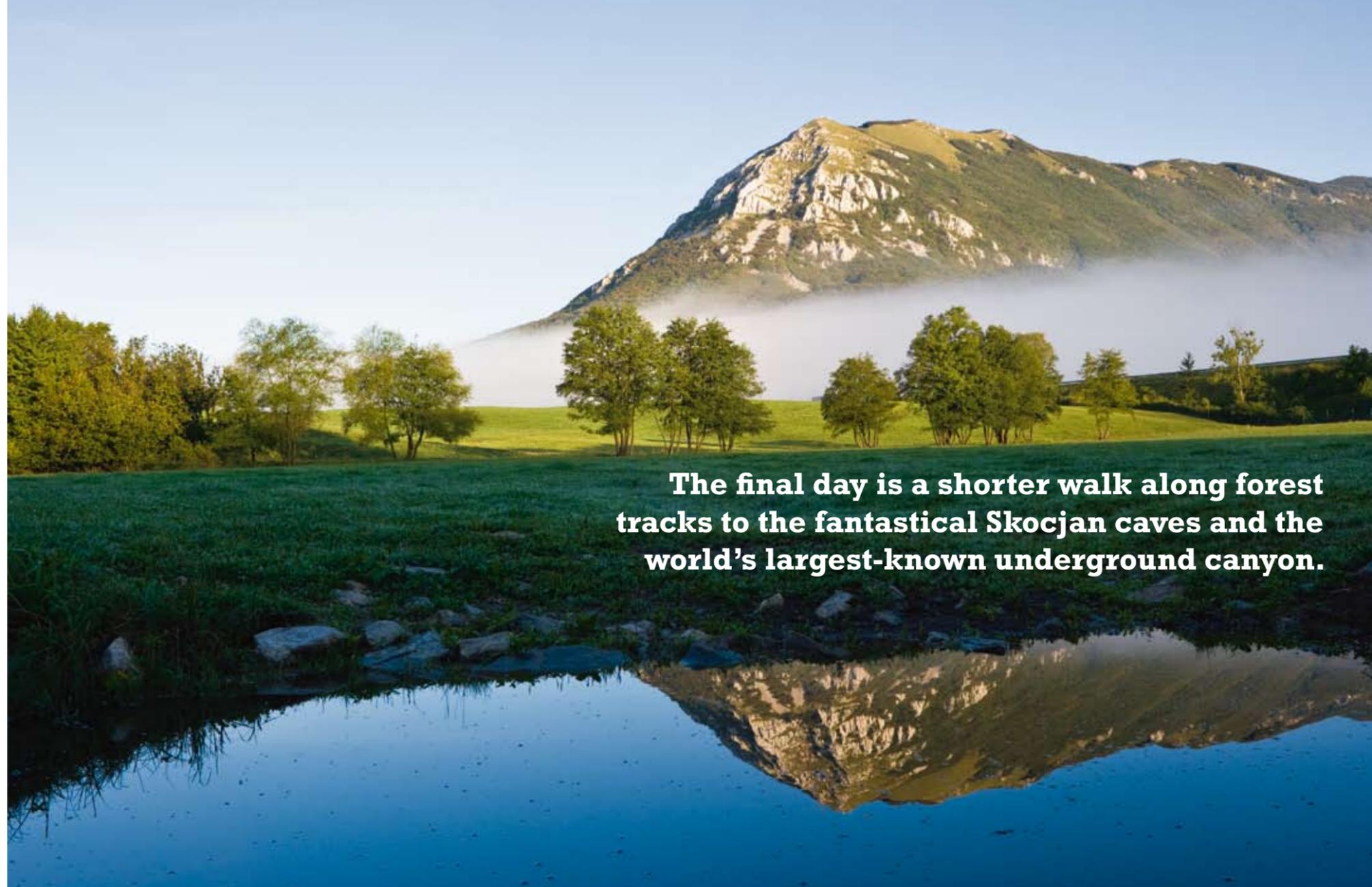
Predjama Castle is reached on a five-hour loop walk from Hudicevec, where you can stay on a farm and have your first chance to taste *teran*, a spicy red Slovenian wine. The track threads its way among rolling hills until it drops into the Lovka Valley, where the castle is dramatically set in a cavern at the base of a 123m cliff. It was first established in about the twelfth century, but what you see today was primarily built by

the Kobenc family during the sixteenth-century Renaissance period. From its top floor you can enter the large cave behind it. Another cave system below the castle, part of which you can explore on a guided tour, runs for more than 13km to the Vipava Valley. The walk back to Hudicevec is a gentle woodland stroll via the rural villages of Smihel and Strane. Life here seems to have stood still for centuries and a horse and cart is still a popular mode of transport.

From Hudicevec, the route heads northwest along quiet country roads through Lozice and Podnanos, before becoming a trail again at Podraga village. Vineyards cover almost every slope, and the path winds through the terraces. Slovenian wine is not well known, but it is exceptionally good and the local people may well invite you to join them in sampling their latest vintage.

After climbing again to Goce, the trail descends through Slap and turns west towards Gaberge. It takes you along a low ridge with expansive views across distant hills before ascending to an overnight stop in the charming village of Stanjel. Set on a prominent hill top, with the tower of St Daniel's Church its most obvious landmark, this medieval village was first settled by the Halstatt people during the late Bronze to early Iron Age period. Allow plenty of time to explore its narrow, cobbled streets, old stone houses, castle remains and the grandiose Ferrari Garden, which boasts the most inspiring views of the entire walk - across the Vipava Valley back to Mount Nanos.

After leaving Stanjel, you meander southwards across typical Karst terrain of woodland sprinkled with limestone boulders and rocks. Sinkholes are a peculiar feature of the landscape. Many of these large, saucer-shaped



The final day is a shorter walk along forest tracks to the fantastical Skocjan caves and the world's largest-known underground canyon.



THE 29 OTHER WALKS TO DO BEFORE YOU DIE

UK

Coast to Coast ENGLAND
South West Coast Path ENGLAND
West Highland Way SCOTLAND

EUROPE

Battlefields of the Somme FRANCE
King Ludwig's Way GERMANY
 Meteora GREECE
 Amalfi Coast ITALY
 The Dolomites ITALY
 Canals of Amsterdam THE NETHERLANDS
 Lofoten Islands NORWAY
 Drovers' Roads SPAIN
 Tour du Mont Blanc
 SWITZERLAND-ITALY-FRANCE
 Lycian Way TURKEY

REST OF THE WORLD

Great Ocean Walk AUSTRALIA
 Takesi Trail BOLIVIA
 Tiger Leaping Gorge CHINA
 Wolong Nature Reserve CHINA
 Morne Trois Pitons DOMINICA
 Darjeeling Tea Trek INDIA
 Temples of Kyoto JAPAN
 Dogon Country MALI
 Routeburn Track NEW ZEALAND
 Inca Trail PERU
 Garden Route SOUTH AFRICA
 Mount Kilimanjaro TANZANIA
 Boston's Freedom Trail USA
 Coyote Buttes USA
 Fallingwater USA
 Yellowstone National Park USA



depressions in the plateau are used for growing crops and grazing animals, as they offer natural protection from the burja - the powerful wind that gusts across the region during winter. There are numerous examples on the trail towards Tomaj from Brje; they are sometimes unused and shrouded with trees, so be careful if you wander off the main path.

Vineyards and canyons
A real culinary treat awaits you at the Skerlj farm stay in the village of Tomaj, which is enveloped by acres of teran grape vineyards. Its owners conjure up delicious dishes featuring home-produced prsut (thin slivers of air-dried ham, known as prosciutto in neighbouring Italy), wine from their own vineyard, freshly baked bread and tasty vegetables plucked straight from their garden.

Overindulgence at dinner will serve you well on the five-hour walk from Tomaj to Lipica, via the large town of Sezana. The botanical garden here is a delightful spot for a break, before you start the long haul down an arrow-straight forestry track and through idyllic Karst woodland to Lipica. The town is famed for its horse stable, which is the home of the Lipizzaner breed. These magnificent, strong stallions are capable of the most demanding

dressage routines and are exported to the renowned Spanish Riding School in Vienna, Austria. A tour of the stable is well worth while, but don't miss the daily dressage show, where you see the horses in breathtaking action.

The final day is a shorter walk, just three and half hours along forest tracks and through the town of Lokev to what for many people will be the highlight of the week: the fantastical Skocjan caves. Almost 6km in length, they boast what is thought to be the world's largest-known underground canyon: a 100m-deep, 3.5km-long gorge carved by the rumbling waters of the Reka river. As you edge through the subtly lit cave on a dramatic rock path halfway up the wall, the most awe-inspiring moment is crossing the Cerkevnik Bridge, which spans the canyon and is 45 metres above the river. It

is an epic finale to a memorable walk through one of Europe's least-known treasures.

Unforgettable Walks to Take Before You Die by Steve Watkins and Clare Jones (BBC Books) is available now in all good bookstores priced £18.99.



WALK IT!

Throughout the Karst, the walking is generally easy to moderately difficult, with no big mountains to conquer. The trail through the Skocjan canyon can be slippery and the height may affect vertigo sufferers.

Getting there: The region is best accessed from the international airports at Trieste, in Italy, or Ljubljana, the Slovenian capital. You can also take the Eurostar to Cologne then take a connecting service to Munich and on to Slovenia. Visit www.raileurope.co.uk for more details.

Further info: Slovenia Tourist Board www.slovenia.info

