

Slovenia and Croatia

From the peaks of the Julian Alps to the Adriatic Coast

Slovenia and Croatia are situated in Central Europe between Italy, Austria and Hungary, being a historical heritage of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and more recently, Tito's Yugoslavia. Both countries gained their independence in the early 90s and now they are the new and shining jewels on the European wildlife horizon. Slovenia offers fantastic mountain scenery, exciting Alpine and Mediterranean fauna and flora as well as world famous caves and a short but beautiful Adriatic Coast. Contrary to the vast forests and gorgeous peaks of Slovenia, Croatia is different in many aspects. The sometimes very rough mountain ridges, the karstic terrain, the huge alluvial forests, the very under-explored birdlife in combination with the fantastic seacoast, the most translucent sea of the World, and the fabulous insect and reptile fauna, provide a great experience for every keen nature lover.

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

To Ljubljana, Lake Bohinj & Bled Castle

After arrival in Ljubljana airport we drive to the wonderful area of Lake Bohinj 60 km northwest of the capital, where we will be based for three nights.

On the way we can admire one of the gems of the area, Lake Bled and the imposing Castle Bled perched some 130m above the lake on the north shore. Our hotel in Bohinj is situated close to Lake Bohinj, a fairy-tale location amongst the craggy peaks of the Julian Alps which includes the highest peak of Slovenia, Mt Triglav.

Day 2

Lake Bohinj & the Pokljuka plateau

We will walk the path along the north side of Lake Bohinj. This route will take us through pastures, natural woodland of Beech and Norway Spruce. Walking along the path at the bottom of the rocky hillside we may see Grey-headed Woodpecker, Western Bonelli's Warbler, while White-throated Dipper breeds along the translucent mountain stream, Red-backed Shrike, Yellow Wagtail are common in the meadows, and a nearby forest holds a few breeding pairs of Red-breasted Flycatcher. Reptiles may include Eastern Green Lizard, while Yellow-bellied Toad can be a nice find for our amphibian list. Butterflies are numerous as well with Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Silver-washed Fritillary, Marbled Fritillary, Comma, Blue-spot Hairstreak, Wood White, Woodland Brown, Chequered Skipper, Holly Blue and Large Skipper are fairly common depending on the season.

In the afternoon we will visit Pokljuka plateau. This is a forested karst plateau at an elevation of around 1,100 to 1,400 metres (3,600 to 4,600 ft). Here extensive Norway Spruce forests and some of the southernmost peat bogs of Europe hold diverse wildlife including a solid population of European Brown Bears and a high density of Pygmy Owls. Other bird species of interest may include Common Crossbill, Firecrest, Crested Tit, Nutcracker, Ring Ouzel or perhaps even Three toed Woodpecker.

Depending on the time of our visit we may encounter several species of orchids including Early Marsh Orchid, Marsh Fragrant Orchid, Bird's-nest Orchid. Reptiles and amphibians can also be found in good numbers. One of the most interesting will most probably be the endemic oviparous subspecies of the Common (or Viviparous) Lizard. Common Frogs can be found in the area and with luck (or with rain) the strikingly looking Fire Salamanders might emerge. Alpine or Black Salamander is considered a critically endangered species but can be abundant in its ideal habitat. Its most interesting aspect is that it is quiet stationary, sometimes not moving more than 10 meters in an entire summer. Alpine Newts might not be difficult to find in small pools along the forest tracks depending on the time of our visit. Other species expected are Smooth and Aesculapian Snake. We can also admire the traditionally managed hay meadows, and typical hay drying racks in this calm and inspiring place.

Day 3

Mount Mangart

Mangart is a high mountain in the Julian Alps located on the border between Italy and Slovenia. The road to the Mangart pass at 2070 m is the highest road in Slovenia, a truly unique opportunity to get high into a real alpine habitat (the road is usually open for traffic from beginning of June). It offers stunning views of the surrounding mountains and into Italy and Lake Fusine below. Thanks to the unique composition of rocks one can encounter an extremely rich and diverse array of plants here. This is the place to see and photograph the famous Edelweiss and many colourful Alpine flowers. Those with a keen eye will be able to spot Alpine Marmots, which thrive well in depressions with succulent grasses and luxurious mountain flowers.

We will be strolling along the area admiring the variety of flora and fauna. Wallcreeper, Alpine Accentor, Water Pipit, Alpine Swift, Alpine Chough, Ring Ouzel, Rock Ptarmigan can be the avian highlights. Golden Eagle hunts for marmots and we also hold good chance to see Chamois and with luck even Alpine Ibex. The site is excellent for butterfly enthusiasts during the summer, having a very high number of Ringlets, including the endemic Lorkovich's Brassy Ringlet. Alpine Heath, Alpine Blue, Mountain Fritillary, Warren's Skipper all occurs here in good numbers, not to mention the abundance of the magnificent red spotted Apollos. Slovenia has a very high butterfly list for its small size (181 species). Green Club-tailed Dragonflies and Two-toothed Golden-ringed Dragonflies are also possible along the streams. Descending we make a short stop hoping to see one of the rarest lizards of Europe, the Horvath's Wall Lizard. This attractive small species has a very limited distribution, and this location is one of the best sites for it.

Day 4

Postojna Cave UNESCO World Heritage site

Leaving the Bohinj area we drive to Postojna for our next base. Depending on our interest, we might stop in Ljubljana to have a short sightseeing in the beautifully charming capital, taste the local pastry before we move on to our next site. The spectacular Postojna cave belongs to the UNESCO World Heritage sites and is the best-known cave in the World. A fantastic web of tunnels, passages, galleries and halls, the astonishing diversity of Karst features as well as easy access are

certainly the main reasons for such popularity of the cave and many visitors, which has already reached 35 million in 200 years. 21 km of passages, galleries and magnificent halls offer a unique experience of the underground world. In the past people would see the cave on foot, while today they are taken around, a kilometre and a half deep into the underground world, by an electric double deck cave train. The whole underground journey is about 5 kms long.

One of the highlights of the cave is a small pool, filled with pink Olms (fully aquatic, blind cave salamanders). This is a unique species, living only in few inaccessible caves along the Dalmatian coast.

Day 5

Mount Nanos

We'll explore magnificent Mt Nanos, a huge island rock standing like a secret garden above the surrounding plain full of amazing flowers and wildlife. The mountain has a very interesting flora and fauna holding many rare butterflies, including Poplar Admiral, Assmann's Fritillary (endemic ssp. *mitchiellii*), Marsh Fritillary, Mountain Argus, Scarce Large Blue, Alcon Blue, Amanda's Blue, Great Sooty Satyr, Large Grizzled Skipper. The crags and woodlands are home to Golden Eagle and Chamois. On the high plateau of the hill, we will look for Woodlark, Rock Bunting and Rock Thrush. Rock Partridge is also in the area but is very shy and rarely seen. Our guide will seek Nose-horned Vipers. Other reptiles we might find here include Western Green Lizard, Dalmatian Wall Lizard and the almost totally black and very fast Western Whip Snake.

Day 6

Plitvička Lakes National Park

Today we leave this wonderful hilly country and drive to an increasingly different landscape. The area of Plitvice Lakes, declared a National Park in 1949, is a valley situated between high forested mountains in which a string of sixteen beautiful lakes of crystal blue-green colour is situated. They are fed by many small streams and brooks and spill into each other in foaming cascades and thundering waterfalls. Due to their unique evolution and beauty, in 1979, the Plitvice Lakes were entered in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The exceptional beauty of the lakes and waterfalls, the rich plant and animal life attract nature lovers from all over the world. Among the old trees and amazing waterfalls, we expect to see the classic forests fauna, including Middle Spotted, Grey-headed and Black Woodpeckers, Collared Flycatcher, Dipper and Grey Wagtail.

The list of amphibians and reptiles found here is fairly long and includes Fire Salamander, Smooth and Italian Crested Newt, Yellow-bellied Toad, European Tree Frog, Common Toad, Edible Frog, Grass Snake, Dice Snake and Aesculapian Snake. Brown Trout is common and can be easily seen in the crystal-clear water. After walking on the wooden trails in this amazing area we drive further South towards the Mediterranean coast and arrive to our hotel in Starigrad.

Day 7

Paklenica National Park

Paklenica National Park covers the area of torrent flows of Velika Paklenica and Mala Paklenica, and their distinctive canyons carved vertically into the south slopes of Velebit Mountains and the broader surrounding area. The relatively small area has an abundance of geomorphological phenomena and forms, diverse flora and fauna, attractive landscapes and intact nature. The crags are home to such species as Sombre Tit, Western Rock Nuthatch, Crag Martin, Blue Rock Thrush and Eastern Black-eared Wheatear. Paklenica is a very good site for Rock Partridge with a healthy population. In the scrub Eastern Orphee, Subalpine and Sardinian Warblers provide a soundtrack along with Lesser Whitethroat, Wryneck and Golden Oriole.

Paklenica is home to a fantastic diversity of wildlife, and we are likely to see many butterflies including Swallowtails, Southern White Admiral and many whites, blues and hairstreaks. 31 amphibian and reptile species have been recorded here, from these 11 snake species. The most common ones in the park are the non-poisonous Balkan Whip Snake, Leopard Snake, Aesculapian Snake and Dahl's Whip Snake. We have another chance to find the Nose-horned Viper one of the most poisonous snakes in Europe, but the beautifully coloured Dalmatian Algyroides, Four-lined Snake, Cat Snake, Dalmatian and Italian Wall Lizard, Balkan Green Lizard, Common Wall Lizard, European Legless Lizard are all here.

Day 8

Pag Island and Lake Vrana

Pag is the fifth largest island of the Croatian coast and the one with the longest coastline. Most of the island is rocky, while some areas are covered with Mediterranean shrubs. It is a typical Mediterranean landscape with vineyards, vegetable plantations and orchards. The northern area of the Lun peninsula is covered with olive groves among them some truly old ones.

Old salt pans, lakes, wet meadows, marshy shorelines are hotspots for birds and other wildlife. We will look out for Rock Partridge, Little Egret, Stone Curlew, Kentish Plover, Montague's Harrier, Bee-eater and Spanish Sparrow among commoner species. Many waterbirds can be found here during migration. Amphibians are rare, reptiles are much more diverse. The *hercegovinensis* form of Hermann's Tortoise is quite common, also European Pond Terrapin. Lizards found are mostly Italian Wall Lizard and European Legless Lizard. Balkan Whip Snake and Eastern Montpellier Snake may be found everywhere, but other snake species like European Cat Snake, Grass Snake, Leopard Snake and Nose-horned Viper are more difficult to find.

In the afternoon we drive southeast to reach Lake Vrana, the biggest freshwater lake in Croatia. The lake is fringed by reeds from the west providing home to Pygmy Cormorant, Purple Heron, occasionally Glossy Ibis, Whiskered Tern, Cetti's Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, Bearded and Penduline Tits. During migration the lakeshore holds waders and White-winged Tern can be seen hunting above the shallow water. We check the adjacent farmlands to look for Montagu's Harrier, Calandra Lark and big flocks of Spanish Sparrow. The nearby orchards are a good place for European Bee-eater, Woodchat Shrike and Black-headed Bunting.

Day 9
Depart from Split Airport

If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

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