

Hemingway`s Trails – the Slovenian Adventure – Trekking in the Julijske Alps

September 2006

We met up in Bled in the afternoon – some came in by air to Ljubljana and continued by car to Bled (one hour). Others took their own cars and drove to Bled. Bled is situated only four kilometres from the Austrian border and is a charming tourist-resort at a romantic lake. The castle from the 11th century is situated on the peak of a steep cliff and Marshal Tito`s summer residence (now a hotel) is proudly situated at the lake just in the outskirts of the small town. The boats are not allowed to carry motors, but big gondolas carry people criss cross on the lake. We visited the old church from the 13th century situated on the island in the lake and were invited to a very beautiful wedding. The singing of Ave Maria was carried out with a wonderful feeling and there were tears in the eyes and the bride looked very expectant.

In the evening the guides came to our small but well kept hotel to brief us about the trekking. They showed us the maps and described all the dangers that we could expect and the long days with steep rather airy treks which we were going to walk the coming days. Now there was no turning back – after all we were rather well trained – it was time to face the truth. Some of the accompanied ladies looked a bit worried, and we all went early to bed in order to in our dreams ponder upon the possible dangers we could expect in the coming days.

Great breakfast – up in the minibuses – and away we went. We were let off in Rowenski Rovti. We put on our rucksacks, our walking-sticks were ready, the sun was shining, and away we went. Now we were twelve friends, two guides (no sherpas!) and a young lady from Miami, whom we expected to belong to one of the guides. Up, up and again up we went. Beautiful transparent beech wood grew along our path and after a couple of hours we arrived puffing and dipping with perspiration – but in good spirit – to the first stop – Oroznova Koca (1346 m) – where grilled beef and lovely cold beer awaited us to the accompaniment of accordion music.

The trekking then continued during the next five days with over-night stays in manned huts high up in the mountains. One day we walked for some nine hours on a mountain-ridge - the views were extravagant, but some quite steep and airy parts, made this particular day especially memorable both for us as well as for the guides. Other days we crossed over lovely flower-fields , where the melancholy belching from the goats was the only sound that disturbed the sacred silence. The weathered limestone is sometimes treacherous with falling and slippery stones where it can be difficult to get a hold for the feet. The tremendously beautiful view of the Slovenian Alps with the highest peak, Triklav (2.864 meter) always as an eye-catcher made our steps easy. The view often reached from the Karavanke mountain range all the way down to the Adriatic sea. The huts had a good but somewhat varied quality and they served genuine homely fare, which we swallowed with the assistance of juicy local wines and tasty Slovenian beer and dann und wann a small schnapps. Most of the time we slept in dormitories, where different sort of blankets and sheets were provided, and where earplugs to be used both in the ears as well as in the noses came in handy.... Sometimes there was some running cold water but it was possible to take a shower only in one hut (beastly cold!), but since we were all in the same boat, the odours probably evened out. Some of the participating ladies probably had brought along different kind of talcum powder, because they all looked very fresh and jolly. Our two guides however looked more and more shabby. One of them lived almost entirely on beer and cigarettes and the other one probably only on his love for the young lady from Miami.

The availability of fresh water in the mountain-ranges at this time of year (September) in the form streams etc. was practically nonexistent, thus all drinking-water which we needed for the day – and that was a lot! – we bought in the huts and carried with us.

The sighting of wild animals along the way was meagre – some deer on lower altitude. Otherwise, Slovenia is inhabited by very much the same animals as in Sweden, and thus they also have bears and wolves – however they do not have any elks. We saw quite a number of vipers and we even spotted the magnificent but somewhat more poisonous black mountain-viper. Alp-crows and ravens kept their watching eyes on us and the marmots' loud whistles could frequently be heard from the slopes. In spite of the late time of year – middle of September – we could enjoy a number of wild flowers, such as Edelweiss, Triklav-rose (potentilla nitida), gentian and many others.

The First World War makes its presence everywhere in the form of old rusty wires, old bunkers and trenches. Also some ruins from houses which had been used by officers and soldiers were left in the valleys. Some 400.000 men were killed and may be some 600.000 men were wounded in these mountains during the war, which is called The Great War. Hemingway wrote his book “A Farewell to Arms”, which in such a stunning way describes this horrible war-zone high up in this mountain range. Hemingway was drafted as a volunteer in the Italian army as an ambulance-driver and after a lot of struggle succeeded in escaping into Switzerland. At that time, Slovenia was part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and then became a part of Yugoslavia (1918), and a free and independent nation only in 1991. The country with its 2 million people is now a member of NATO and the European Union and is about to launch the Euro on January 1, 2007. (Already, when we were there they accepted the Euro in most places.)

Our trekking finished on the fifth day by a descent to lake Bohinjsko Jezero, where we finally got our well-deserved swims. We had discovered that our new pal from Miami had a very suggestive tattooing in the form of an Alp-rose placed on her lower back and we now got the opportunity to take some photos of this beautiful creation. (The other ladies were probably somewhat jealous of this, since they most likely did not have any tattoos to show us, at least not any which so well harmonised to the alp-atmosphere like this beautiful rose!)

We had covered some 7045 meters in altitude difference – 3.475 meters up, and 3.570 meters down – not so bad for this bold gang.

Yes, trekking in Slovenia can warmly be recommended – kind local people, not too many tourists (so far!), relatively low cost (so far!), great – although somewhat airy - mountains – lovely views and the hard memories of war – partly marked excellent trails –which thanks to old army tracks/paths are to be found in many places in these mountains. Using the manned huts one can get away by only carrying light-weight rucksacks (totally about 10-12 kg per person).

Our trekking-adventure had been arranged by The Dilettante Society (www.dilettantesociety.com) in cooperation with Humanfish (www.humanfish.com) in Slovenia.

The magnificent farewell dinner was held in the best restaurant in Bled and we were very well treated. New adventures in other “new” countries were being planned already at the dinner.

September, 2006, Anders Biörck