

TOURISM IN SLOVENIA

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Tourist potentials of landscapes in Slovenia

Slovenia comprises regions that are quite diverse in their natural and cultural character. Consequently, features of the landscape that can influence tourist amenities or its suitability for different modes of tourism and recreation vary considerably across relatively short distances.

The Submediterranean region includes a forty-six kilometer coastal belt along the Adriatic Sea. Temperatures suitable for bathing and sunbathing (air: above 25° C; sea: above 19° C) last from the end of May until October. The medieval cores of coastal towns with their age-old urban organization and architectural heritage also offer an attractive environment for tourists.

Behind the coastal belt at an altitude of 400–500 meters is the Karst region. The limestone plateaus are of typically karstic character with numerous morphologically interesting karst caves and karst surface phenomena. Typical of the cultural landscape are the old central cores of karst villages with their almost urban structure and the vineyard complexes scattered over the more fertile patches of karst soil.

The Dinaric plateaus rise toward the interior of Slovenia and quite frequently reach altitudes of 1,000–1,200 meters or even more. From the viewpoint of tourist attractions, we need to point out the karst poljes (containing periodic karst lakes), underground karst caves (with long tunnels, great caverns, and rich dripstone decoration), and vast, sparsely inhabited forested plateaus (with the most diverse species of wildlife, including brown bears).

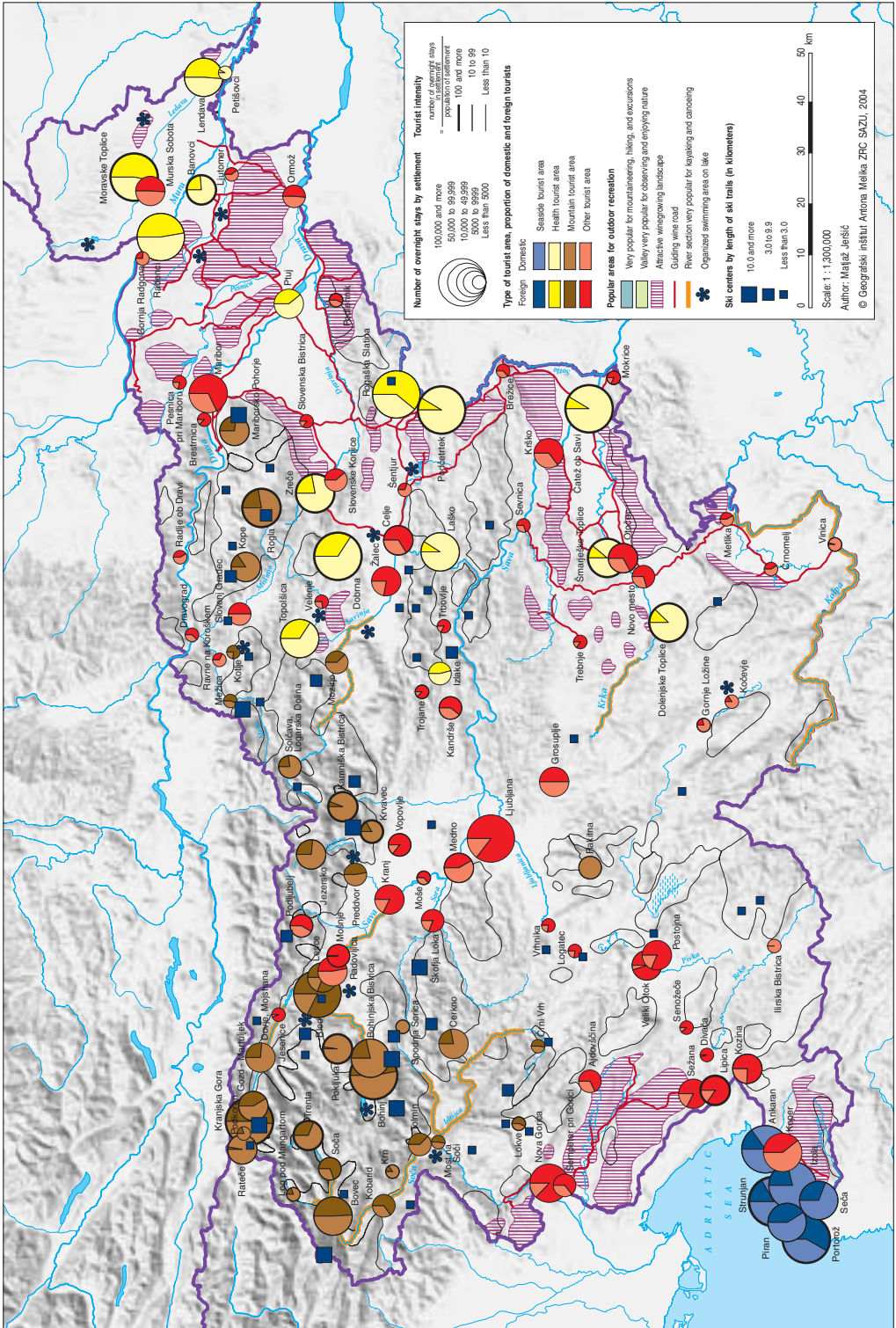
The Alpine region covers the western and northern parts of Slovenia. Only a small portion of this area reaches altitudes over 2,000 meters. Typical of this region are sharp relief forms with glacially transformed valleys (which gives this landscape a high-mountainous character at lower altitudes), diversity of relief and vegetation (these vary over quite short distances, so the region is particularly suited for hiking and landscape sightseeing), considerably long-lasting snow cover (suitable for winter sports), mountain brooks and smaller rivers, etc. Alpine pastures are particularly characteristic of the cultural landscape, and together with the traditional architecture increase the landscape diversity of the region.

Subpannonian hills with intervening plains are located in eastern and northeastern Slovenia. From the viewpoint of tourist attractions, we need to point out the »belvedere« ridges, sunny slopes with typical vineyard landscapes, and the region's numerous thermal and mineral springs.

Tourist flows to Slovenia and the development of tourism

An important turning point that marked the beginning of more intensive tourist travel to Slovenia occurred in the middle of the 19th century when a railroad was built linking Vienna (Austria), Ljubljana (Slovenia), and Trieste (Italy). The railroad enabled tourists to observe natural karst phenomena (in particular, the two world-famous caves of Postojna and Škocjan) or to visit health spas in eastern Slovenia.

When the Salzburg (Austria)–Jesenice (northwestern Slovenia)–Ljubljana railroad was also built in the second half of the 19th century, it linked Slovenia with southern Germany. The improved railroad connections through the Slovene Alps contributed to the flourishing of alpine tourist resorts,



◀ *Figure 1: Tourism and recreation in 1996.*

particularly beside Lake Bled and Lake Bohinj. At that time, Slovenia was a tourist destination for visitors coming mainly from Austria, Germany, and Hungary. After World War I, visitors from the larger cities in the former Yugoslavia gradually appeared as well.

Slovenia's tourist gravitation area expanded after World War II, mainly the result of new highway connections across the Eastern Alps, as well between northern Italian cities and Slovenia. Highways opened the possibility for several important tourist road flows from more remote parts of Western Europe. The international Ljubljana-Brnik airport also contributed to the extension of the Slovenia's tourist gravitation area in the 1960's. However, Slovenia was not only a destination area for international tourist travels; at the same time, it was also an important transit tourist area. A great number of tourists from abroad bound for the Mediterranean coast of southern Europe (the coasts of Croatia and Greece) only passed through Slovenia.

The development of tourism in Slovenia after World War II is evident from the following indicators of tourist overnight capacities and tourist traffic. There were three major periods of tourist development: after World War II to the end of the 1960's (tourist traffic orientated mostly on domestic tourists), between 1970 and 1990 (the peak of tourist traffic), and after 1990 (a decrease in tourist traffic caused by the war in the Balkans).

- From 1953 to 1990, the number of all tourist beds increased from roughly 30,000 to 90,000. In 2003, we had around 80,000 tourist beds, 32% in hotels.
- In the same period, the total number of overnight stays increased from 1.1 to 9.2 million (in 1986). After the beginning of the war in the Balkans, they dropped to 5.8 million (in 1996). In 2003, we had around 7.5 million overnight stays.
- The average number of overnight stays is the highest at health resorts (4.9 days) and seaside resorts (4.1 days); the average for Slovenia is 3.4 days.
- The increasing significance of new types of tourism (short-term trips, transit tourism, winter tourism) became important particularly after the 1970's. Thus the seasonal concentration of tourist traffic became less acute (around 42% of overnight stays are recorded from June to August).

International tourist flows in the last four decades established tourist starting points for Slovenia principally in the sphere of Western and Central Europe. Parallel to this, in the 1980's an important proportion of tourists (around 30%) came from former Yugoslav republics, especially Croatia and Serbia. After the war in the Balkans, the proportion of tourists from former Yugoslav republics dropped drastically to just 6%. In 2003, foreign tourists accounted for about 56% of overnight stays in Slovenia, coming mostly from Germany (10.8%), Italy (9.7%), Austria (9.2%), Croatia (3.5%), Great Britain (2.7%), The Netherlands (2.6%), Hungary (1.4%), the Russian Federation (1.3%), and elsewhere.

Characteristics of Foreign Tourists in Slovenia

The results of a survey in the 2000 summer season show the following:

- 64% of foreign tourists stated that holidays were the main reason for coming to Slovenia, 17% came for business and educational reasons, and 11% were in transit.
- Tourists were also asked about their motives for coming to Slovenia. They were drawn to Slovenia mostly by its natural attractions (25%), tranquility and possibilities to rest (19%), and the climate (17%). Only 8% of the tourists came due to »low« prices.
- 56% of the tourists came to Slovenia by car or van, 14% by bus, and 18% by plane. The proportion of tourists travelling by car is highest for tourists from Croatia and Italy, while the proportion of tourists using buses is over one fifth for tourists from Austria and Germany.

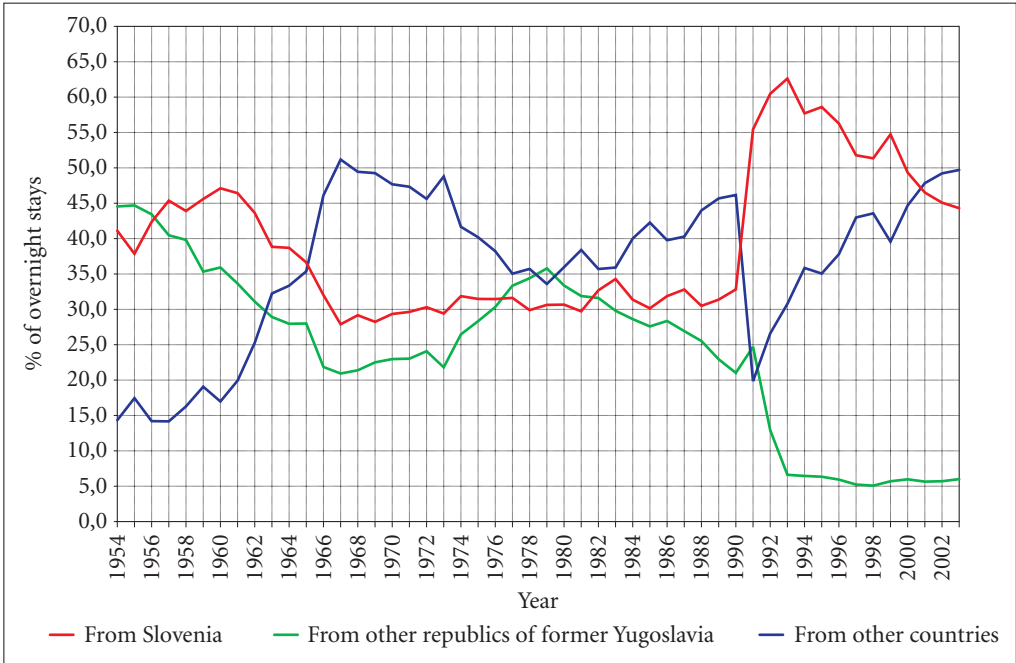


Figure 2: Share of overnight stays in Slovenia by origin of tourists.

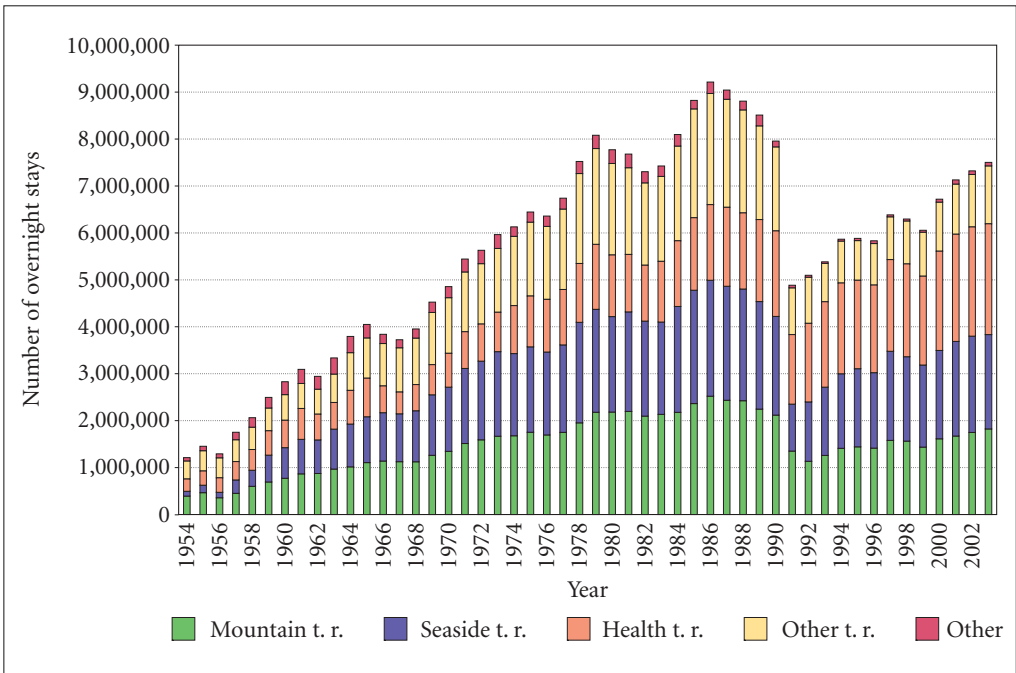


Figure 3: Number of overnight stays in Slovenia per resort type.

- Over of third of the tourists came to Slovenia with the assistance of travel agencies. In deciding to spend holidays in Slovenia, the most important factors were personal experiences (39%) and recommendations from friends (31%). Less than 20% of the tourists used the Internet to organize holidays in Slovenia.
- 80% of foreign tourists stayed in hotels and spent on average 3.1 days in Slovenia.
- Almost half of the foreign tourists were middle-aged. 45% were travelling in pairs, and three quarters stated that they live in cities with over 200,000 inhabitants.

Almost three quarters of the tourists would spend their holidays in Slovenia again, and only 3% would not. More than half of the tourists gave the best mark in the evaluation of the hospitality of the Slovenes and the feeling of personal safety during the stay. More than 40% of the tourists evaluated very positively the peace and quiet, the possibility of communicating in foreign languages, and the quality of the environment. The most negative marks were given to arrangements made for entertainment, shopping opportunities, and the quality of roads in Slovenia.

Types of tourist resorts in Slovenia

The vacation travels of tourists have been oriented particularly to three destination areas: the sub-mediterranean region, the alpine region, and the health spas of eastern Slovenia.

Mountain tourist resorts were at first largely devoted to summer vacations, and hiking and mountaineering were the predominant forms of tourist recreation. Their growth was made possible by the widespread network of well-marked mountain trails (8,700 km) and 160 alpine lodges.

When downhill skiing became popular as a form of mass recreation after the 1960's, interest was aroused in the construction of skiing infrastructure at higher altitudes. Two opposing currents of Slovene public opinion evolved: one was inclined to the megalomaniac development of tourist infrastructure while the other strove to preserve the natural and cultural landscape. These opposing interests were spatially demarcated in a formal way by declaring the central part of the Julian Alps a protected area (Triglav National Park). Thus, winter sports tourism has remained limited to mountainous areas outside the central Julian Alps.

Kranjska Gora is the scene of World Cup alpine skiing, and on Mount Kanin, only an hour's drive from the coast, it is possible to ski almost into summer. Below Mount Kanin is the Soča River valley and the resort town of Bovec where the world's best kayakers and canoeists compete. Lake Bohinj, Slovenia's largest lake, is found in Triglav National Park. At the edge of the park lies the world-renowned tourist resort of Bled and its lake. In the middle of the lake is an island with a 17th century pilgrimage church. Bled is the third largest tourist resort in Slovenia with almost 7% of all overnight stays.

Seaside tourist resorts initially had the function of health resorts, but after the 1950's they became typical seaside swimming-oriented resorts. This specific swimming function limited the tourist season to the summer months. After the 1980's, the growing popularity of recreation in the vicinity among the residents of larger towns relatively close to the coast and the widening of tourist offer by building facilities and introducing services for congress tourism, nautical tourism (there are 3 marines), etc., have mitigated the seasonal pattern.

The center of tourism on the coast is Portorož, the largest tourist resort in Slovenia (with almost 15% of all overnight stays). It offers numerous modern hotels, a marina, and an airport. Close to Portorož are Piran, Izola, and Koper, three of Slovenia's oldest coastal towns with medieval cores and a rich architectural heritage. Behind the coast is the world-famous karst region. First mentioned in the 13th century, Postojna Cave is one of the most popular caves in Europe with more than 26 million visitors so far. The Škocjan Caves are on the UNESCO List of Natural and Cultural World Heritage Sites.

Health resorts developed before World War II around springs of thermal and mineral water where no additional pumping was required. After the war, several new springs were developed for use by drilling.

Between 1945 and 1960, health resorts were primarily intended for the so-called »social« tourism and health care, and only after the 1960's were they included in the international tourist offer more extensively.

After the 1990's, Slovenia's spas and health resorts have widened their tourist offer from the prevalent specialized medical service to include more varied recreational activities (swimming, tennis, golf, etc.) and wellness programs and thus became the most important tourist resorts in Slovenia (with around one third of all overnight stays). Among the world-renowned health spas in Slovenia are the Rogaška Slatina Health Resort with 400 years of tradition, the Radenci Health Resort, the Moravske Toplice Health Resort, and the Čatež Thermal Spa, the second largest tourist resort in Slovenia with 7% of all overnight stays.

Tourist sites that are not dependent on natural landscape potentials such as historic, economic, administrative, and transport centers comprise an important group. These are largely concentrated in cities. Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, is the fourth largest tourist site in Slovenia (with 5.5% of all overnight stays).

In the last twenty years, a variety of new tourist offers has appeared. Tourism in villages and on farms is well developed throughout Slovenia. Castle-hotels are also particularly attractive to tourists. Very important for the tourist offer are congress centers and a variety of cultural, sports, and fair events. Active holidays (golf, horseback riding, recreational fishing, rafting, etc.) are increasingly popular. Slovenia has also ten casinos; the most important is in Nova Gorica.

Along with vacation tourist flows, short-term travel flows have begun to occur in Slovenia more and more, particularly the flow of visitors from towns lying along the Italian border, for whom Slovenia's landscape had always represented an attractive nearby recreation area.

Conclusion

After this brief review, the following geographical characteristics of tourism in Slovenia can be listed:

- Tourist sites in Slovenia depend on a variety of natural and cultural tourist amenities that have characteristically marked individual types of resorts.
- The geographical position of Slovenia has influenced the development of a rather large tourist gravitation area, and at the same time, different forms of tourism (vacation or stationary tourism, excursions, transit tourism).
- The situation in the Balkans influenced tourist flows and decreased the tourist traffic, particularly from the former Yugoslav republics.
- Owing to its small tourist market (compared with the neighbouring countries), tourist development in Slovenia has never led to »industrial tourism«. Therefore, the pressures on the environment and the problems of concentration that might occur as a result of advanced tourism are not acute, except in individual cases.
- The essentially positive aspect of Slovenia's tourism (Slovenia's natural and cultural landscape as a precondition for outdoor recreation) offers further possibilities for development in the future.

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