



Europe Trip, Visiting Central Europe (E26A-2)

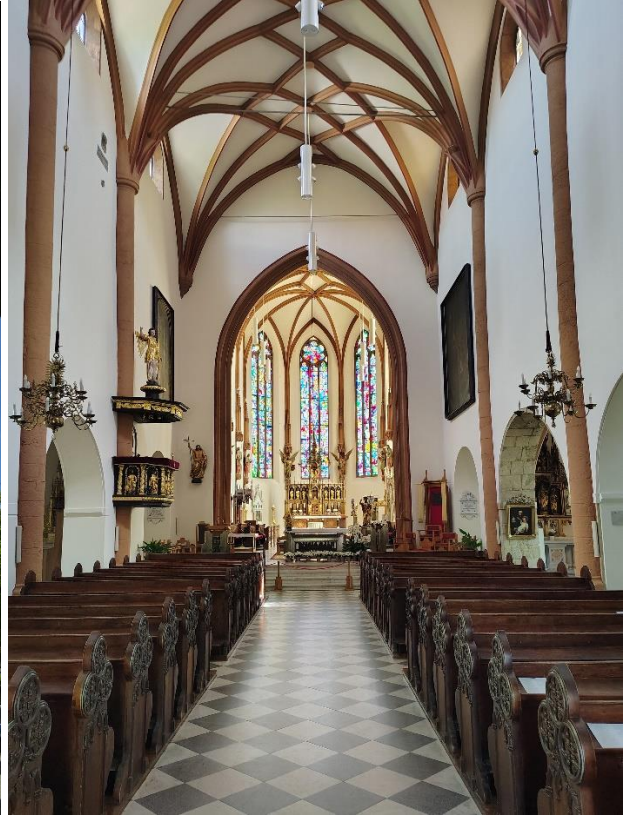
Slovenia – Ljubljana and Day Trips

After Hungary, my next destination was Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. For my second use of Daytrip.com on the trip, I hired a driver to transfer me from Budapest to Ljubljana. I added two sightseeing stops along the way, one in each country. For my Slovenia stop, I explored the town of Maribor.

Although Maribor has only about 100,000 people, it is the second largest city in Slovenia. The area was settled by Slavs about 1000 years ago, but it was another 200 years before the town started developing. Maribor Castle was built in the 1400s, and is now home to a regional museum. Maribor Cathedral was built in the 13th century. Maribor is also the center of a wine-producing region. I used my time there to explore sites in the historic city center.



Maribor's Main Square features the towered Town Hall. Standing in front of the Town Hall is the Plague Column, first erected by city leaders in 1681 in gratitude for the end of a 1680 plague that killed a third of the people in town.



Maribor Cathedral



Today, Maribor Castle is home to the Maribor Regional Museum



Maribor is just a few miles from Austria. During World War II, Germany annexed Maribor and planned to Germanize the city by pushing out the Slovenes. This goal was so important that Maribor was the only city in German-occupied Yugoslavia that Adolf Hitler himself visited. Slovene partisans rose up against the Germans in 1941, prompting the Germans to take many prominent Slovenes hostage, and executing some of them in response to each act of resistance, often doing so in rather grisly ways to deter Slovene resistance. By the end of the war, German occupiers had murdered 700 of these hostages. The Maribor Liberation Monument commemorates the hostages and the Slovene resisters.



View of Maribor's Lent waterfront district along the Drava River



This Lent district grapevine is more than 450 years old, and has been certified as the oldest grapevine in the world (by the Guinness folks). It has its own museum, and it still produces grapes, enough to make about 40 small bottles of wine each year.

I did get a chuckle as we continued the drive to Ljubljana. I chose Maribor as a Slovenia stop because it was described as a town with a pretty historic center. But as we passed highway exits for numerous towns, signs for just about every town highlighted their historic town centers, castles or both.

The area around Ljubljana has been settled since Neanderthal times. The Romans established a town and military outpost called Emona on the site of present-day Ljubljana around 14AD, but it had been long-abandoned when Ljubljana itself was established along the Ljubljanica River sometime around the 12th century, with a castle built on top of a prominent hill just east of the river, and the town itself lining the river banks, today's Old Town. The city and castle are home to a number of museums.

The city is also home to a UNESCO World Heritage Site that honors the works of urban architect Hiša Plečnik, who put his stamp on the city in a number of places.

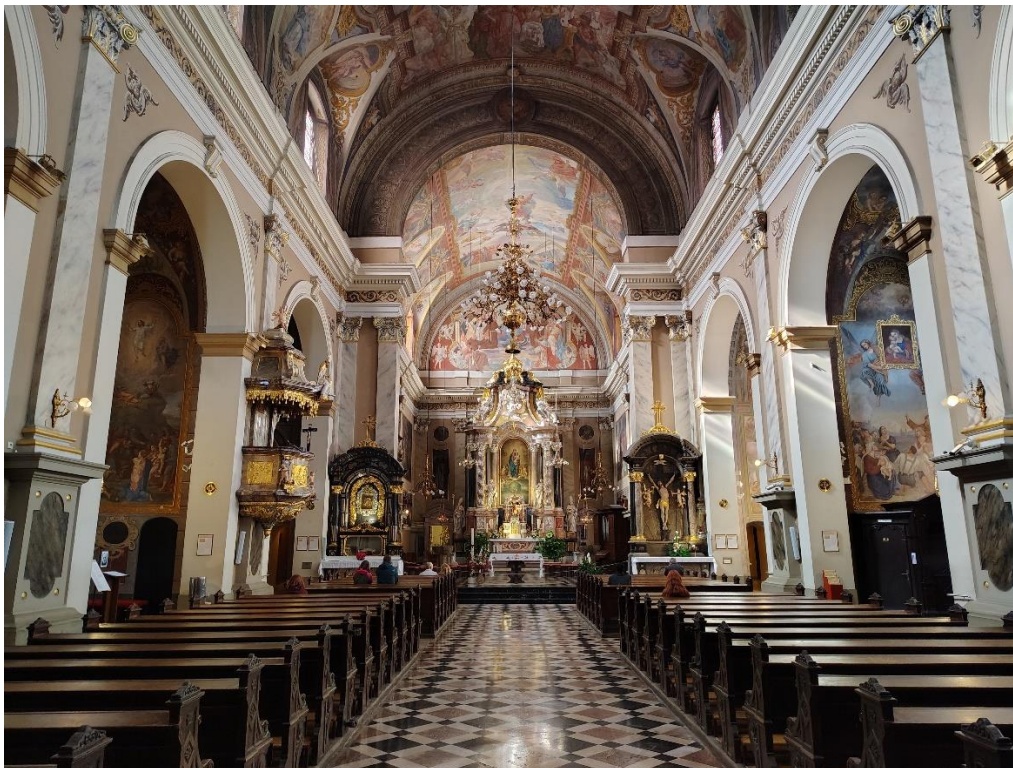


I got to Ljubljana late on a Friday afternoon. When I headed out for my first look around the town and to find something for dinner, I came across crowded Krekov Square, where several food, beverage and dessert booths were serving a big Friday evening crowd. I ended up putting together dinner from some of the booths. The city center was always full of people in the early evening.

I started my explorations of Ljubljana with a walk through Old Town that followed both sides of the river, starting at the main square – Prešeren Square – and crossing the Triple Bridge, one of Plečnik's contributions.



Prešeren Square



Inside the Franciscan Church of the Annunciation on Prešeren Square



The Triple Bridge. When one historic bridge proved to be too narrow for both vehicles and pedestrians, rather than replace it, two pedestrian bridges were added, one on each side.



Walking along the river through Old Town. Many of the buildings house riverfront cafés and restaurants.



Town Square, with the Ljubljana Town Hall to the right and Ljubljana Cathedral down the street



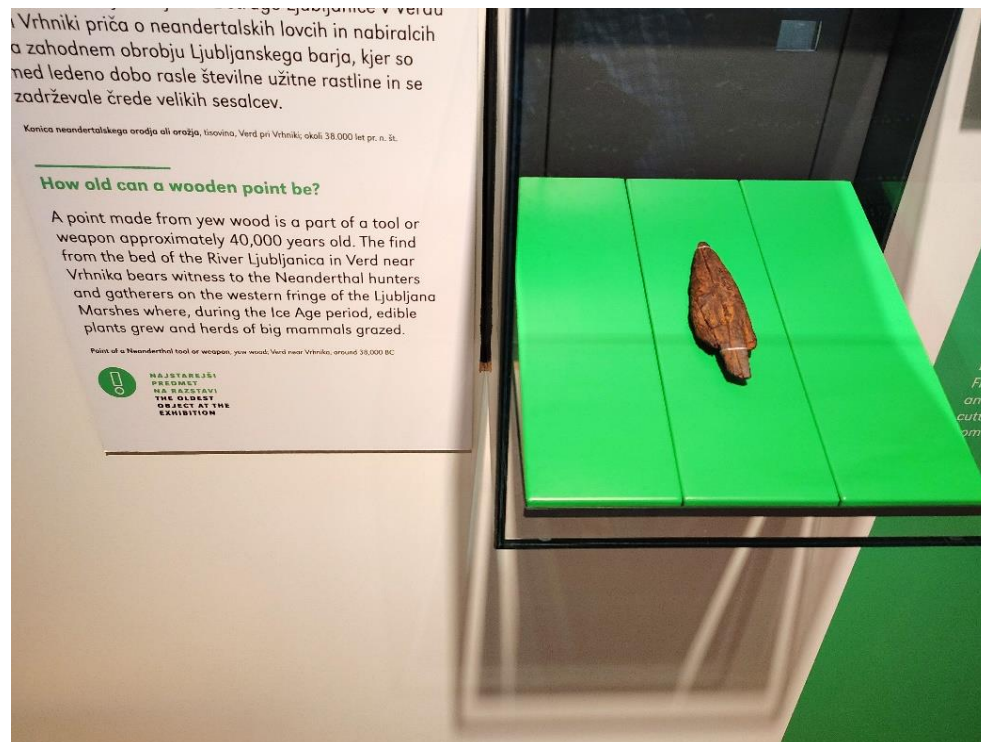
Inside Ljubljana Cathedral

The first museum I visited was the Ljubljana City Museum. It featured artifacts from early pile dweller settlers who lived in the nearby Ljubljana Marshes area south of town, from the Romans who established Emona, and from the Slavs and others who ultimately established Ljubljana itself.



The museum's most famous artifact is this, the Ljubljana Marshes Wheel. At about 5,100 to 5,350 years old, this is the world's oldest wooden wheel yet discovered. It was found near a pile dweller settlement in the Ljubljana Marshes. The wheel is made of two pieces of ash wood held together with four oak cross braces. The axle itself is also made of oak. The wheel's square opening means that the wheel rotated with the axle. It is believed to have been part of a two-wheel chariot. Something to think about next time you're sitting in traffic.

Or watching *Wheel of Fortune*.



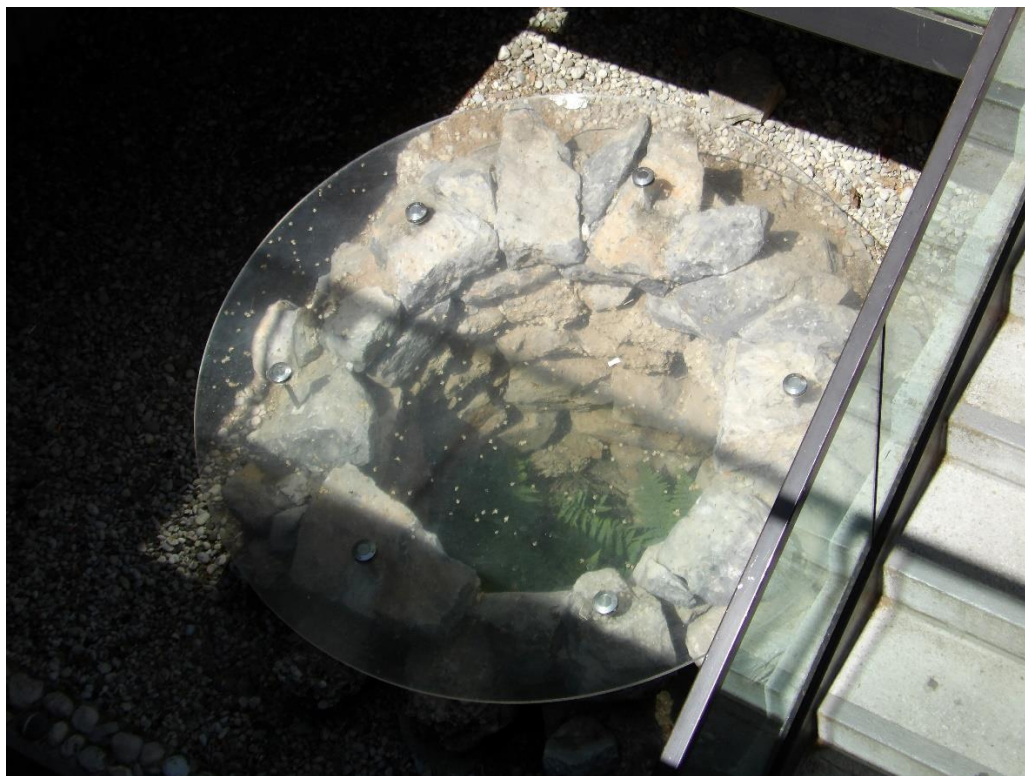
A 40,000-year-old point made from yew wood survives from Neanderthal times.



In addition to Roman and Middle Ages artifacts on display in the museum's main exhibit halls, an archaeology dig site beneath the museum has uncovered a Roman tavern and part of Habsburg structure.



Post-World War II Ljubljana



Remnants of the Roman Emona settlement, such as this well, are exposed at several places in the city center.



View from Congress Square across the street towards Slovenia's Monument to the Victims of All Wars



The Ljubljana Opera House



Entrance to the Slovenian Parliament

The National Museum of Slovenia features artifacts dating from Neanderthal times to more recent times. Its most prominent artifact is believed to be the world's oldest wind instrument, a flute made from a cave bear femur. The Divje Babe flute – names for the Slovenian cave in which it was found – dates back to about 55,000 years ago, putting it squarely in Neanderthal times.

And that's where the controversy comes in, because of it is the only such evidence of rather advanced musical skills among the Neanderthals. Some suggest that instead the holes were made by the teeth of some carnivore biting into the bone fragment. But the holes show differences with both holes created with stone tools and holes created by teeth.

On the other hand, the size and position of the holes are consistent with other primitive flutes and with the positions of four fingers and an opposing thumb, and a reconstruction of the flute demonstrated the ability to produce music.

In any event, the museum is certainly convinced they've got the world's oldest wind instrument.



The world's oldest flute?



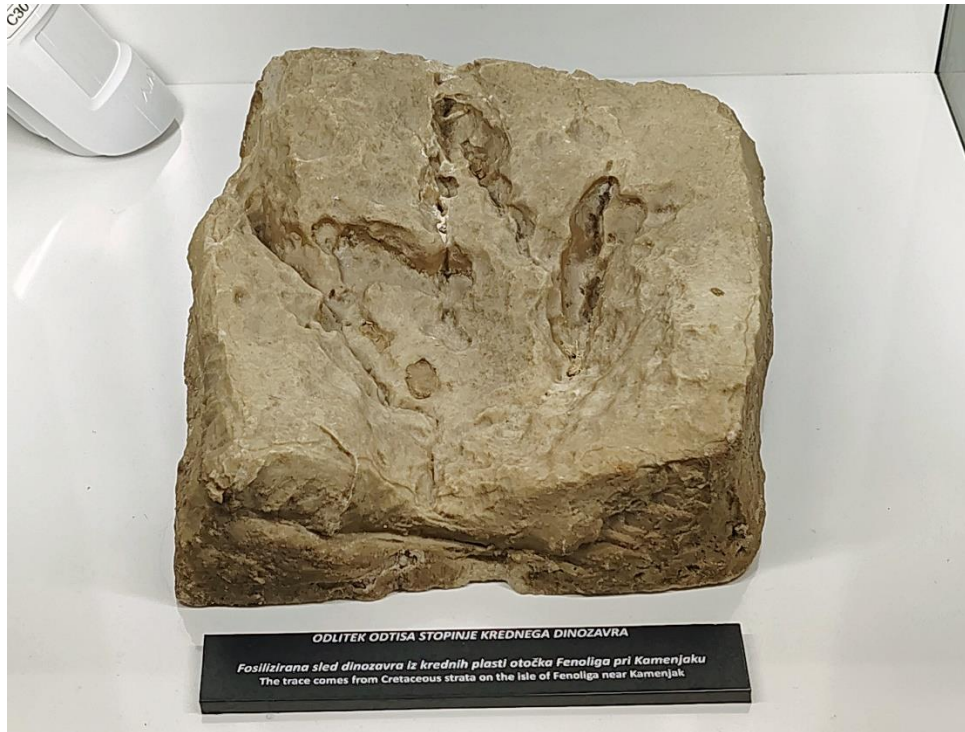
Artifacts discovered at pile dwelling sites



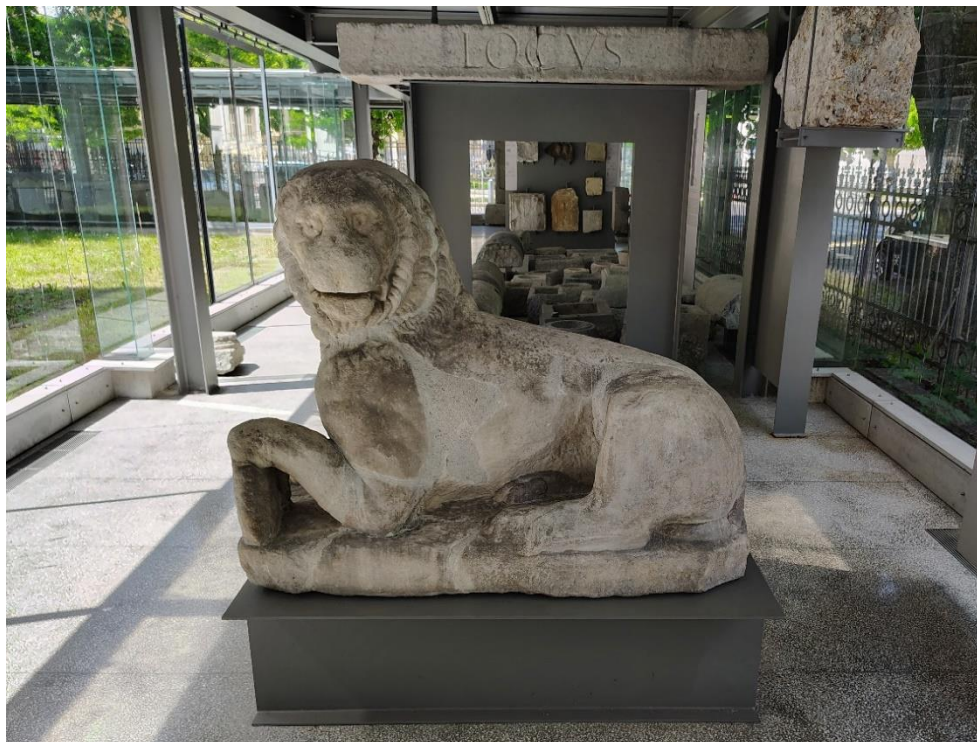
A 3rd century Roman floor tile mosaic discovered in Ljubljana



Artifacts from the Slavic migration into the region



The National Museum of Slovenia shares a building with the Slovenian Natural History Museum, so I toured that, too. It has a limited number of fossils and trace fossils on display, from before the Age of Dinosaurs to the Ice Age, including this theropod dinosaur track.



Next door is the National Museum of Slovenia Roman Lapidarium, which displays a collection of Roman stonework collected from the Emona site in Ljubljana.



Ljubljana Castle sits on a hilltop above the city's Old Town.



Ticket prices include rides up and down the funicular that connects Old Town to Ljubljana Castle and entrance to the castle itself.



View of Ljubljana from Castle Hill at the top of the funicular



From the outside, Ljubljana Castle looks like a castle.



Not so much behind the walls. Ljubljana Castle has undergone substantial restoration and renovation. It now includes two restaurants, a gift shop, meeting rooms, a pair of museums, a nightclub, and bits of the old castle, including its chapel and penitentiary, that can be toured.



Dance of Death mural reproduction in the castle's Slovenian History Exhibition; the original is in a Slovenian church. The exhibition provides a succinct overview of Slovenian history, with reproductions of artifacts like the world's oldest wheel and world's oldest wind instrument. It's not anywhere as good as the other museums I saw, but it would be worthwhile to see for castle visitors who skipped the other museums in town.



The exhibition had more on Slovenia in the post-World War II period when it was part of Yugoslavia under socialist dictator Josip Broz Tito. Unlike the rest of eastern Europe, Tito kept Yugoslavia out from under Soviet domination, and Slovenes like other Yugoslavs had more rights and freedoms, but it was no western-style democracy at the time. Slovenia got its independence in 1991.



The castle's penitentiary was used for centuries until an 1895 earthquake. It was used again as a penitentiary in World War II operated first by Italy and then by Germany.



Puppetry plays a big role in Slovenia's cultural heritage. Ljubljana Castle includes a Museum of Puppetry.



After finishing up at Ljubljana Castle, rather than take the funicular back down to Old Town, I decided to hike down from Castle Hill along the Mačja Steza (Cat's Path) Trail.

My plans for my final day in Ljubljana were killed when I woke to heavy rain, strong winds, and temperatures in the 40s that finally settled down late in the afternoon, and I also had a worsening cold. A few miles south of town on the bus line is the town of Ig, in a part of the Ljubljana Marshes area that was settled about 4,000 years ago by people living in pile dwellings. Ig has a small museum about these people, and a couple nearby sites have been rebuilt for touring, part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Fortunately, both the Ljubljana City Museum and the National Museum of Slovenia had nice exhibits about the pile dwellers culture and related artifacts.

After the weather settled, I did a last bit of sightseeing in the city center, and then I headed out for a traditional Slovenian dinner.

For my third use of Daytrip.com on the trip, I hired one of their drivers to transfer me from Ljubljana, Slovenia to Zagreb, Croatia, adding two sightseeing stops along the way – one in each country. For my Slovenia stop, I actually headed in the opposite direction towards Bled, where I did some hiking at Lake Bled, a picturesque lake in the Julian Alps. If you've seen a few travel photos from Slovenia, you have probably seen Lake Bled. In the middle of the lake is an island with several buildings, the most prominent of which is a pilgrimage church, the Church of the Mother of God on the Lake, dedicated to the Assumption of Mary. On a cliff above the lake is Bled Castle. Then there is the village of Bled itself, with the Alps providing a scenic backdrop.



The church on Bled Island



A pletna boat ferries visitors to Bled Island. Pletna boats are similar to gondolas, but can seat up to 20 people. They are rowed by oarsmen, as motorized boats are not permitted on Lake Bled. Bled Castle and the village of Bled are in the background.

After finishing here, I was off to Croatia.