



Nature tours in Slovenia: the land of stunning diversity



Paul Veenvliet



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1. Nature tours in Slovenia

Combine the incredible diversity of nature in Slovenia with delicious local meals and expert guiding: this is what my tours are about. I am Paul Veenliet, a Dutch biologist living in Slovenia and a specialized nature guide for over 25 years. I organize exclusive day trips and tours for single travelers, couples, families and small groups. Also when I am not guiding, you can find me in nature: exploring potential destinations, conducting research or just enjoying the outdoors. Only in this way, I can ensure the best possible nature experiences.

Day trips typically include one or several hikes (1-5 km, easy paths) and a delicious picnic lunch. We reach the destinations either with my car (I have a place for up to two passengers) or you drive behind me with your own vehicle.

Longer tours often take a whole week, during which I drive a minivan, which limits the group size to 5-8 participants (other travel durations and group-sizes are possible). Such small groups offer the best nature experience while we have negligible impact on vulnerable nature areas. For these tours, I take care of all arrangements within Slovenia: I come to either the airport or train station to pick up travelers and I take care of transport, accommodations, meals, destinations, entrance fees and, of course, guiding. The program is customized for each group separately. While I have favourite nature areas that I visit with most groups, no two tours are exactly the same.

For each day trip and longer tour, I work with other local providers, with many of whom I have a long-standing cooperation. Most places that I visit are off the beaten path: you won't find them in travel guides, and we meet few other travelers, if any.



2. About Slovenia

Slovenia is a small country in Central Europe, which harbours a stunning diversity of landscapes. Here, you find **high mountains, vast forests, disappearing lakes, mysterious caves and a romantic seaside**. For my tours I take full advantage of this diversity, while I keep most driving times under one hour.



Slovenia ranks fifth in the world regarding **safety**, the **air is clean** and unpolluted and Slovenes react surprised that tap-water is not drinkable in some other parts of the world. Slovenia has a surface area of a bit over 20.000 square kilometers, which makes it comparable with New Jersey, or roughly half the size of Taiwan. It has only 2 million inhabitants, of which 10% live in the capital, Ljubljana. The official language is **Slovenian**, of which there are around 48 local dialects. Many Slovenes speak English as a second language, while other languages are spoken in the border regions. Slovenia uses the Euro for payment and cards can be used in almost all shops.

Most Slovenes will tell you that they love nature, but I find that many people hike towards the same destinations, like mountain tops with breathtaking views. Even at the most touristic places, it is easy to go around the corner and find yourself **alone in nature**. During my tours, I tend to avoid these touristic places entirely, even though most are extremely quiet compared to other countries.





Slovenia has a mostly continental climate with **warm summers and cold winters**, that can bring snow for several months. At the coast, the climate is much milder with Mediterranean influences. The climate further depends on the altitude and the mountains can be inaccessible for a part of the year.



This strong seasonality is reflected in the animals and plants that we can see. While I can organize day trips and longer tours throughout the year **the best season is April-June**. In the end of **March** there is a spectacular flush of **early spring flowers** that is a must for botanists and gardeners alike. The beginning of **October** offers a photographers dream of **autumn colours** in the forest, while it can still be good for **migratory birds**.

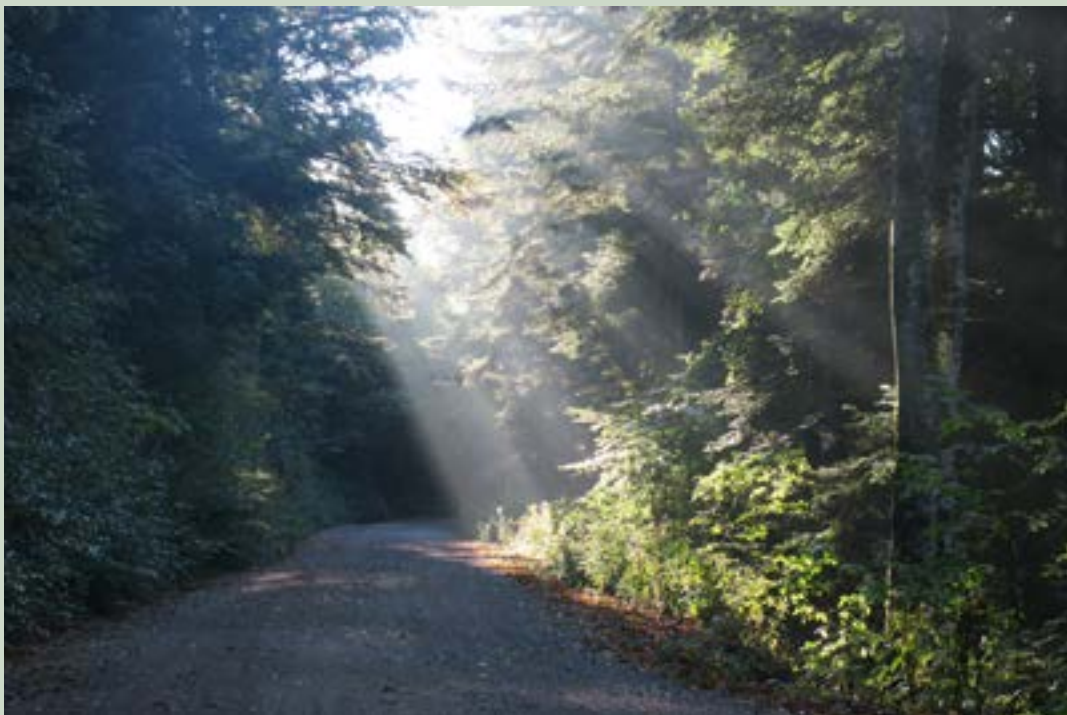


3. Nature in Slovenia

During my multi-day tours, we take full advantage of the wide variation of natural areas in Slovenia. Most day trips focus on only one of these areas, in order to limit driving hours and distances.

I often start with a **forest excursion**, and with good reason: Slovenia is the third most afforested European country, directly after Finland and Sweden. Well over 60% of Slovenia is covered with forests! These vast forests are home to wolves, bears and lynx, of which we often find tracks during my tours.

With wood being one of the most valuable economic resources, it is not surprising that most of the forest is in use for the production of timber. Harvesting is done in a way that both prevents soil erosion and protects the forest's biodiversity. Only single trees are cut and clear-cutting is prohibited. This results in an incredibly beautiful mixed forest with a species-rich understory.





Parts of the forest are set aside as **forest reserves**, with little or no human impact. While direct access is prohibited, we can go to the edge of these stunning reserves, which are becoming increasingly wild and natural over the years. A visit to a forest reserve is certainly one of the highlights of my tours!



Around 1200 **brown bears** live in southern Slovenia, which means that this region has the highest bear density worldwide! During my multi-day tours and even at many of my one-day excursions we can see their footprints and other tracks. However, these bears are very shy and the best option to see them is from a special bear-watching hide in the forest. I arrange an evening of bear-watching in most multi-day tours. For the one-day excursions I will direct you to a specialized external provider.



Sometimes the lake is, and sometimes it is not. This is how the people in the Notranjska region describe the **karst lakes**. In these unique lakes, the water level fluctuates wildly, and often they dry out entirely. When there is water, this attracts a wide variety of water-birds. At other times, we might see a single harrier hunting over what appears to be a grassy plain, but what is the desiccated bottom of the lake!

These dynamics mean that they are among the most unique and valuable wetlands worldwide. The fluctuating water levels as well as seasonal changes mean that it is unpredictable what we see at any given day, even to me. However, these special lakes never disappoint nature lovers!







Karst springs, that feed the lakes and streams in Notranjska, deserve to be specially mentioned. Like the lakes and streams, they are **intermittent**: they are often entirely dry, while on other days entire mountain streams burst out of the hillside. For a few days in spring, millions of **mayflies** swarm here, forming one of nature's great spectacles!

Deep underneath our feet, there is a mysterious world of **16.000 caves**. Here, in eternal darkness, live specially adapted animals, without eyes, but whose other senses are greatly heightened. Only some of these caves are accessible for casual visitors, and we visit one that is left in its natural state: **Križna jama**, the cross cave. We enter the caves like true explorers do: with torches in our hands, because the cave has neither electricity nor concrete paths. With some luck, we may find some of the tiny cave animals, as well as the remains of the largest of all: the long extinct cave-bear!







In some places, the underground world of caves combines with our above-ground world. And nowhere is that more spectacular than in the ravine of **Rakov Škocjan!**

Not all streams flow underground. In some places, cool gin-clear **mountain streams** cascade over Dolomite rock. These are the places where grey wagtails and dippers roam. If we feel adventurous (only for groups with a good physical condition), we may walk straight through one of these streams, to explore a wild area without any paths!



Midway through the multi-day tours, the direction of our daily explorations changes. We go southwards and enter an area known as the **dry karst**. We can feel the Mediterranean influence as it is noticeably warmer, more open, rocky and dry. Just when we got used to the diversity of animals and plants of central Slovenia, we encounter a whole new set of species. This makes Slovenia unique: we have entered **an entirely different biogeographical zone!**





From the Dry karst we go westwards, and we go up into a **vast inland cliff**, which is so weather exposed that the vegetation is largely **Alpine**. Besides a wide diversity of flowers, this is one of the **best places for butterflies** and, when we are lucky, we may spot various **birds of prey** taking advantage of the air currents.





Slovenia's 46.6 kilometers long **coast** is packed with hotels, boulevards, gravel beaches and one of the most important industrial harbours in the Adriatic. In between there are **coastal wetlands**, that offer some of the best birdwatching opportunities in the country! Avocets, little terns and pygmy cormorants are present year-round, and we can expect many other waterbirds, partly dependent on season and water level. The coastal wetlands are also good for dragonflies and amphibians, while the vegetation differs vastly from the rest of the country. It is probably no surprise that I include them in most of my multi-day tours.





4. Species tours

Besides general nature tours, I organize multi-day tours with **special themes** like **nature-photography tours**, **botanical tours** (including the magical **early-spring flower tour** to see millions of wild snowdrops, crocuses and hellebores), **butterfly tours**, general **entomological tours** and **reptile tours**.

These tours differ in the places where I take you, as well as the season when they can be organized. Please keep in mind that the theme of a species tour continues throughout the entire tour, from the first day to the last. For instance, we will not visit caves or go bear watching during a butterfly tour. Instead, we may attract moths with a light at night.

Birdwatching can be challenging here, and although I have organized birdwatching tours in the past, I rather avoid unrealistic expectations and call them “**nature tours during which we also see birds**”. That said, when you come in spring you will almost certainly see many special bird species like red-backed shrike, grey-headed woodpecker and wry-neck.





5. Cultural history

Slovenia has a rich cultural history with historical cities, castles museums and ethnological collections that you can visit. While they are not part of a typical nature tour, I am happy to include them in a program upon prior arrangement.



6. Examples of itineraries

Itinerary of a one-day excursion

9:00 meeting at an agreed place (mostly Lake Cerknica)

15 minutes drive to the starting point

9:15 start of a hiking excursion, mostly over easy terrain and taking up to 5 km

12:30 outdoor picnic lunch

15 minutes drive to one or several additional locations where we have short hikes

15:00-16:00 ending of the one-day excursion





Itinerary of a multi-day tour

Daily schedule:

8:00 breakfast

9:00 departure

9:30-10:00 arrival at the nature area

12.30 outdoor picnic lunch

15:00 departure from the nature area

16:00 arrival at the accommodation

18:30 dinner

Day 1: Arrival; pick up at the airport or at the train station;

Day 2: Forest excursion including forest reserve

Day 3: Lake Cerknica: the largest Karst lake in Europe; visitors center

Day 4: Cave expedition; in the evening brown bear observation

Day 5: Dry karst region: flowers and butterflies

Day 6: Inland cliffs

Day 7: Coastal area; bird reserve

Day 8: Departure

7. Cuisine, transport and accommodations

Nature tourism is one of the most sustainable ways to explore new areas. Because of the small group size, the impact on vulnerable nature areas is negligible. But, it goes much further than that. These tours support the local economy because many local providers are involved. All meals are provided by ecological farms, which is both sustainable and delicious: we only eat freshly prepared dishes made from local products.

I aim to limit daily commuting times, but without some form of transport, the options are too limited. On one day excursions, up to two guests can join me in my car. Larger families will have to use their own transport. On multi-day tours I arrange a minivan, which automatically limits the group size (exceptionally I can arrange a second van & driver).

For the multi-day tours I have a long-standing cooperation with local farmstays, which offer comfortable rooms in an authentic rural setting, in the immediate vicinity of wonderful nature areas.





8. About me

Nature is the central theme of my life, and some say that I was a biologist long before went to study biology. Also with guiding, I started early: I organized the first nature excursions while I was still in secondary school. Now, about four decades later, I am just as enthusiastic as when I started. I only have stories to tell. Way more.

As you might guess from my name, I am Dutch. 25 years ago, I moved to Slovenia, and I never looked back. Here, I find all the animals and plants that I knew from books. I also find quiet places in nature, which I consider essential for my mental wellbeing. When I mention something like this, it is pretty surprising how many of my guests have similar experiences.

Besides guiding, I work as a scientific illustrator (www.paulveenvliet.art) and as a freelance field researcher.





9. Contact

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