

Land of plenty



Vampires, castles and fairytales are just a few of the attractions discovered by **Charles Round-Turner** as he hikes his way across the national parks of this small but delectable country. Unfortunately he didn't have time for the wolves, lynxes and eagles

BELOW Stefanova village below Velky Rozsutec peak in Mala Fatra National Park
Canon EOS 50E with Sigma 28-70mm lens, Velvia 50, exposure not recorded, 81B warm-up and polarising filters, tripod

In the summer of 2004, I hiked and photographed my way across one of Eastern Europe's most underrated areas – Slovakia. Now that they have entered the European Union, the Slovaks will be welcoming more than just the few Czechs, Poles and Germans who have already discovered their majestic land.

This small country, about the size of Scotland and Wales together, has outstanding scenery, superb alpine

hiking, several national parks, and more fairytale castles than you could lob a cannonball at. The castles (about 180 are registered and protected) are so picturesque they would almost be cliché – if it weren't that they are centuries old and probably the basis for many of those fairytale stories anyway.

In building these fortresses on hills commanding strategic views over the surrounding countryside, those dukes and kings of old also

created the photographer's dream, ideally placing them to catch the first and last rays of sun. Add to that one of the ubiquitous rocky outcrops that dot the countryside and you will be happily chewing through rolls of film.

With Sky Europe, Easyjet and others flying to the region, very low prices once you're there and beer as good as anywhere in Europe, I marvelled that I hadn't heard more said about the place. My plan was to



SLOVAKIA

concentrate on hiking in the national parks, especially the High Tatra Mountains and see as many of the castles and ruins as possible.

One advantage of the country being small is that you can see two or even three places within a day; one or two hours on a bus or train and you're at the next destination. However, I would stay at least one night anywhere with good photographic potential, giving me both evening light and the chance to scout for the best vantage from which to photograph the following morning. A compass was invaluable and the sun helpfully rose and set pretty much due east and west.

Castles of delight

Highlights of your trip will depend on where you are when you get good conditions. For me, the 13th century Gothic Orava Castle was the most dramatic. It seems precariously balanced on a rocky ridge with a cliff one side and an almost sheer drop the other. It was used to film *Nosferatu*, a 1922 vampire movie and they hold horror theme nights during summer.

Spis Castle, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is the premier castle as far as national heritage and tourism is concerned and certainly is impressively large. Again, some unusual limestone rock formations at nearby Drevenik to the south of the castle provided a great subject.



I chose to have the castle distant but still adding that romantic touch, though the atmospheric mist was just a little too thick. Now I have my excuse for a second trip.

For natural landscape without castles, I thought the Sulov Highlands near Zilina some of the most striking and I didn't even experience them in the best light conditions. Although the area is only a nature reserve, the Sulovske

scaly rock formations provide a large wow factor and limitless composition potential, sitting as they do on a long ridge curving from east to west and overlooking an idyllic farming valley. But you can't get away from those castles for long. If you walk north along the ridge – a nice half-day hike – you will find not one but two semi-overgrown castle ruins. How did they build them on these eagle eyries?

The High Tatra (Vysoke Tatry) National Park is Slovakia's biggest attraction – forgive the pun. The hiking is excellent and very accessible (cost-wise as well) through glacial valleys and over sharp peaks, though some advanced routes are only permitted in the company of a guide.

I had been looking forward to standing on the top of Mount Rysy, one of the highest at 2,499 metres. Based at the nearby mountain hut, I went up in the evening and luck smiled on me. A few high peaks floated above a sea of clouds bathed in rich pink light – I think I was almost overwhelmed with where to point my camera. Photograph this

ABOVE Hincovo Pleso is the largest and deepest – at 53 metres – tarn in the Tatra National Park and, at 1946 metres is the highest in Slovakia containing fish
Canon EOS 50E with 24mm lens, Velvia 50, exposure not recorded, 81B warm-up and graduated ND filters, tripod

LEFT Panorama of Tatra Mountains from Mount Rysy
Canon EOS 50E with 75-300mm lens, Velvia 50, exposure not recorded, 81B warm-up filter, tripod

Outdoor Photography July 2006 55

RIGHT Limestone rock formations at dawn with Spis Castle in the distance
Canon EOS 50E with 24mm lens, Velvia 50, 81B warm-up and polarising filters, tripod

BELOW RIGHT Orava Castle from the northwest
Canon EOS 50E with 75-300mm lens, Velvia 50, 81B warm-up and polarising filters, tripod



and the disappearing sun meant I'd miss that – decisions, decisions...

I had discovered there is a shortage of pictorial books about Slovakia in UK bookstores. Check these out when you arrive in Slovakia, as well as postcards, for ideas on which castles, towns or national parks you most want to see. I found that guidebook descriptions of castles and scenic attractions actually tended to understate their impressiveness, though occasional vividness be too touristy or even kitsch for my taste.

I used Fujifilm Velvia almost exclusively, indulging in black & white occasionally. I usually needed a tripod and often one or all of polarising, graduated neutral density and warming filters – a warm-up filter was useful for when the sun hid behind clouds till mid-morning.

On reflection, I feel I only touched the tip of the iceberg even just for castles and natural scenery. With bears, wolves, lynxes and eagles to spot, wildlife photographers could happily lose themselves in the hills for weeks. Other attractions are the traditional folk festivals, historic architecture and extensive cave systems. This romantic corner of Eastern Europe is waiting to be explored. ■



Planning

GETTING THERE Sky Europe fly direct from Stanstead to Bratislava, but Vienna or Budapest are only 1-2 hours away. If you have the time, a more interesting and environmentally minded way would be to travel by train across Europe, stopping off along the way.

WHEN TO GO Summer is the hiking season in the high mountains, though spring and autumn would provide more scenic colours.

HEALTH No particular hazards, though it is safer to drink bottled water. EU nationals should carry an E111 form, available from post offices, for reciprocal medical care. Take adequate clothing, a first-aid kit and plenty of food and water when hiking.

VISAS Not needed by nationals of EU countries or citizens of Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

WHERE TO STAY Average prices for single occupancy are £2 at a campsite, £5 for hostels and mountain huts, £12 for a more comfortable B&B and £20 upwards for a hotel.

GETTING AROUND Trains are efficient on main routes, but buses are more frequent and convenient for smaller destinations – both are very cheap.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Lonely Planet: Czech and Slovak Republics, April 2004, ISBN 1 74104046 9, £14.99. Online, start with www.slovakiatourism.sk. Stanford's in the UK sells hiking maps, but they are cheaper in Slovakia. Also useful is a 1:400,000 scale roadmap showing castles, mansions and ruins, with brief historical information on the more significant structures.