

Central Slovakia



The green heart of a nature-oriented nation beats among the forested hills and cliffs of Central Slovakia. In the distance you can see the rocky High Tatras (Vysoké Tatry), but the lower-lying mountain ranges here – the Western Tatras, the Low Tatras, the Malá Fatra and Veľká Fatra – are more than 50% forested. The accessible national parks surrounding Vrátna Valley and Demänova Valley (Demänovská dolina), extensive trail systems and lower-than-alpine prices make this the locals' choice for outdoor recreation.

This region is the most steeped in Slovak culture and nationalism. Shepherd traditions are an everyday part of life in Liptov where you can buy fresh *bryndza* (a type of sheep's cheese) from roadside stands, while living folk villages, such as Čičmany and Vlkolínec, provide a peek into traditional life. In the 19th century, literary institutions in Martin sparked the fire for codification of the Slovak language, and the Slovak National Uprising was launched from Banská Bystrica in 1944.

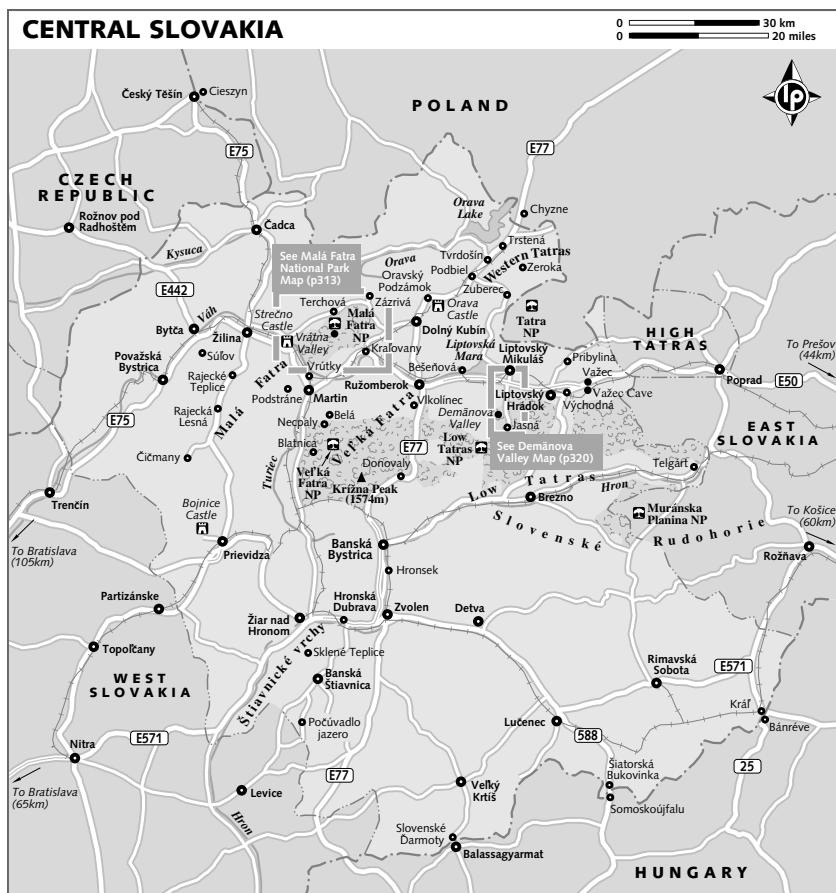
The Unesco-recognised ancient mining town of Banská Štiavnica is a gem, jam-packed with 15th-century buildings and museums. Drive along any river valley and you'll see the remains of medieval fortresses such as Strečno topping craggy cliffs. Further south in the region, Bojnice is the most fairy-tale romantic of the nation's castles, fully furnished and often decked out for theme tours. And those are only two of the numerous castles and ruins you'll see lining the craggy cliffs of the areas river valleys. You can even stay in one, in Liptov Castle.

Getting around this hilly region can take time, but you'll be rewarded with a more truly local experience than that in the capital city or the touristy Tatras.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Getting snap-happy photographing picturesque log houses in **Vlkolínec** (p322) and **Čičmany** (p312)
- Riding the cable car in the lovely **Malá Fatra National Park** (p312)
- Descending into a historical mine in the medieval town of **Banská Štiavnica** (p306)
- Revelling with the crowds at the ghoul and ghost festival in **Bojnice Castle** (p309)
- Eating fresh cheese dishes at a *salaš* (restaurant specialising in sheep's-cheese delicacies) in **Liptov** (p319)





Getting There & Away

Slovakia's main train line, connecting Bratislava and Košice, cuts across the top third of Central Slovakia, allowing direct connections to Žilina and Liptovský Mikuláš. Because of the undulating mountains (and therefore limited direct train routes), it's best to take the bus if you're going to the region's more southern towns around Banská Bystrica.

The nearest place for car rental is in Poprad (p327), but both Bratislava and Košice aren't exactly far away.

Getting Around

The region (and therefore the bus service) is divided administratively into two: the

county surrounding Žilina and the one around Banská Bystrica (Žilinský kraj and Banskobystrický kraj, respectively). Bus routes spur from the nearest large town hub, so getting between even seemingly close places might take a transfer or two – but it can be done. Having your own vehicle just makes things easier.

Central Slovakia is hilly and often mountainous, but distances aren't great. You could, for example, base yourself in Liptov and explore Malá Fatra National Park, Demänová Valley, Orava and Vlkolínec.

The mountains offer some scenic routes: the train from Banská Bystrica north to Martin, and the bus from Banská Bystrica to Liptovský Mikuláš are two examples.