



Slovakia

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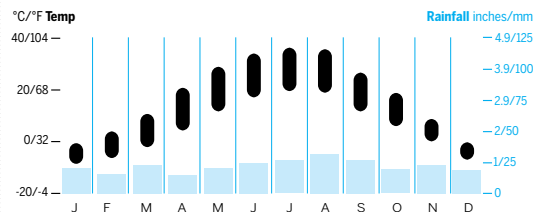
Why Go?

Right in the heart of Europe, Slovakia is a land of castles and mountains, occasionally interrupted by concrete sprawl. More than two decades after Czechoslovakia's break-up, Slovakia has emerged as a self-assured, independent nation. Capital city Bratislava draws the most visitors, thanks to its excellent nightlife, resplendent old town and sheer ease of access from around Europe. Beyond Bratislava are countless gingerbread-style villages, a clear sign that modern Slovakia still reveres its folk traditions.

Slovakia shines brightest for lovers of the outdoors. The High Tatras are heavenly for walking or winter sports, and national parks like Slovenský Raj sparkle with waterfalls. Castles worthy of a Disney princess perch on hills, and quaint churches speckle the less-discovered east around friendly second city Košice. Within a long weekend in this small country, you can hike or ski epic mountains, blink in astonishment at socialist-era oddities and clink glasses in cellar restaurants.

When to Go

Bratislava



Jun & Jul Cultural festivals amp up, and all hiking trails are open.

Sep & Oct Fewer crowds but clement walking weather, plus festivals galore.

Late Dec–Feb Christmas markets twinkle in Bratislava, skiers flock to Poprad and High Tatras.

BRATISLAVA

02 / POP 5.45 MILLION

Bratislava doesn't provoke admiring swoons; it intrigues. In the midst of Slovakia's capital, a flying saucer hovers above forest-fringed riverbanks. Its castle presides over a pastel-hued old town, but a concrete jungle looms behind. Despite the march of modernism, Bratislava is green. It banks the Danube River, by the Austrian border, and its hilly parks are threaded with hiking and biking trails. The Male Karpaty (Small Carpathians) roll north, with vineyards in their lowlands.

No wonder Bratislava feels like a frenetic mix of wild and urban, classic and contemporary: it became capital of newly independent Slovakia only in 1993. Bratislava preserved spires and squares from its 18th-century heyday, but now socialist-era monuments (and an eyebrow-raising cast of statues) have joined the party. Speaking of which, Bratislava's nightlife is crowd-pleasing whether you prefer beer halls, rooftop cocktails or stag-party mayhem. In a city this exciting, who needs postcard pretty?

History

First inhabited by Slavs during the 6th century, the earliest mention of Bratislava and its castle was in AD 907. By the 12th century Bratislava (then called Poszony in Hungarian or Pressburg in German) was a large city in greater Hungary. King Matthias Corvinus founded a university here, Academia Istropolitana. Many of the imposing baroque palaces you see date to the reign of Austro-Hungarian empress Maria Theresa (1740–80), when the city flourished. From the 16th-century Turkish occupation of Budapest to the mid-1800s, the Hungarian parliament met locally and monarchs were crowned in St Martin's Cathedral.

'Bratislava' was officially born as the second city of a Czechoslovakian state after WWI and became capital of the new nation of Slovakia in 1993.

Sights

★ Bratislava Castle

CASTLE

(www.snm.sk; grounds free, museum adult/student €7/4; ☀ grounds 9am-9pm, museum 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) Square, a brilliant shade of white and flanked by four stocky towers, bold Bratislava Castle looks as though it has been transplanted straight from a children's picturebook. The fortification's history dates to the 9th century, though today's incarnation is a 1960s rebuild in Renaissance style; the castle had lain in ruins after a fire in 1811. Exhibitions feature a picture gallery, model reconstruction of the castle and Middle Ages history.

Hlavné Námestie

SQUARE

The nucleus for Bratislava's history, annual festivals and cheerful cafe culture is Hlavné nám (Main Sq). **Roland Fountain** (Hlavné nám), at the square's heart, is thought to have been built in 1572 as a public water supply. Flanking the northeast side of the square is the 14th-century **Old Town Hall** (www.muzeum.bratislava.sk; Primaciálne nám 3; adult/child €6/3; ☀ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 11am-6pm Sat & Sun), home to the Municipal Museum.

★ St Martin's Cathedral

CHURCH

(Dóm sv Martina; http://dom.fara.sk; cnr Kapitulská & Staromestská; ☀ 9-11.30am & 1-6pm Mon-Sat, 1.30-4pm Sun May-Sep, until 4pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr) The crown at the top of St Martin's Cathedral is 300kg of real gold. By comparison, its interior is rather modest, though 19 royal coronations have been held within its 14th-century walls.

ITINERARIES

Three Days

Spend three days in **Bratislava**. It's enough to enjoy the main sights – Bratislava Castle, Hlavné nám, Soviet oddities – and take excursions to **Devín Castle** and **Danubiana Meulensteen Art Museum**.

One Week

After three days in **Bratislava** and its surrounds, venture east to **Starý Smokovec** for two glorious days of hiking. Press on to dramatic **Spiš Castle**, then spend a final day or two in culture-packed **Košice**.