

HIKING THE EASTERN ALPS

Featuring the Italian Dolomites & the Austrian and Slovenian Alps

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Ljubljana, Slovenia

Welcome to Slovenia!

Ljubljana, one of Europe's smallest capital cities, is nestled in a basin between the Alps and the Karst (a cave-rich area). Where an ancient Roman city called Emona once stood, Slovenia's economic and political heart is now a beautifully green and wonderfully walkable town, with car traffic restricted in the central district. This allows for worry-free strolling along the leafy banks of the Ljubljanica River and perhaps a glimpse of the city's 16th century castle looming high on a hill to the east. Our three-country alpine tour begins and ends in this place that was once under Habsburg rule as well as a part of former Yugoslavia.

Overnight in Ljubljana.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Ljubljana - Skocjan Caves - Predjama Castle, Slovenia - Trieste, Italy

Before our journey focuses on the mountainous marvels of the Eastern Alps, we begin the adventure today with a fascinating exploration of the Karst Plateau, a region of southwestern Slovenia known for its incredible caves. In fact the term "karst topography" which describes many of our planet's cavern-rich regions, comes from this area of Slovenia. Our first stop this morning brings us to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Skocjan Caves, a subterranean wonderland where the Reka River churns its way through soluble limestone. A two-hour guided walk will show off several special features of Skocjan, including numerous dripstone formations, waterfalls, and natural bridges. An hour-long above-ground walk will further show off the interesting characteristics of this karst region.

In the afternoon, our cave theme continues as we visit the picture perfect Predjama Castle, a Renaissance beauty that is one of the most dramatically-set buildings you will see. This Slovenian landmark was built in the gaping mouth of a cavern half-way up a 123-meter cliff! Your entrance fee to this castle includes an audio guide which you can use during our hour-long exploration in this one-of-a-kind attraction. Crossing the border from Slovenia into Italy, our day concludes in Trieste, once the most important seaport of the Habsburg Monarchy, where we spend the first of two nights along the Adriatic before ascending the mighty Alps!

Walk summary: 3-4 hours of mostly guided walking, with about 250 meters (800 feet) of elevation gain/loss throughout the day. Distance of 6-7 km for the day. Terrain is generally on maintained stone path but with numerous stairs in both Skocjan Caves and Predjama Castle.

Overnight in Trieste.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Activities in Trieste

From 1380 to World War I, Trieste was under Habsburg rule and provided a gateway to the world for all of central Europe. An Italian city now, Trieste is almost entirely surrounded by Slovenia and has long been a unique mixture of cultures, including Italian, Austrian-German, Croatian, and Greek. As the jewel in the Austro-Hungarian Empire's crown, Trieste encouraged diversity and was very eager to attract wealthy immigrants. Some of the city's wealth will be on display during our morning cliffside walk at Passeggiata Rilke and on a stroll among the gardens of Miramere Castle.

Following a break for lunch, enjoy an early afternoon two-hour guided city walk that promises to show off several of Trieste's main highlights, including the remains of a Roman theatre, built between the 1st and 2nd centuries AD and which still host occasional concerts. Take in the grand views of Piazza dell'Unita d'Italia, an elegant Austro-Hungarian designed square that is Italy's largest sea-facing plaza. Walk along the Adriatic waterfront, down the city's big pier, and savor some of Trieste's interesting marketplaces. When our guided tour is complete, the rest of the afternoon and evening will be free for you to explore more of the city's treasures.

Walk Summary: About 4 hours of walking, first along undulating seaside path with about 200 meters (650 ft) elevation gain/loss, then in flat

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gardens, and concluding on city sidewalks. Distance of about 7-8 km for the day. Terrain may be rocky in places and undulating on our morning cliffside walk but mostly flat and on paved or natural surfaces for the rest of the day.

Overnight in Trieste.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Trieste - Bolzano - Selva Gardena (Dolomites)

Leaving our seaside location in Trieste this morning, we spend the morning driving across the Veneto region of Italy and begin our ascent of the magnificent Dolomites, a must-see mountain range we will call home for the next four days of fabulous hikes and activities.

Our first alpine adventure comes at Lago di Carezza, where a short uphill hike brings us to a brilliantly coloured lake surrounded by forest and mountains, an appropriate introduction to this intoxicating region. In the mid-afternoon, we make a stop in the delightful town of Bolzano, the capital city of the province of South Tyrol, ironically located in northern Italy. While its medieval city center is certainly worth a look, with Gothic and Romanesque churches on display, our primary reason for visiting Bolzano goes back further in history than these two houses of worship. We're here to see Otzi the Iceman, the oldest known natural human mummy, who is housed in the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology. Dating back to around 3400 BC, this Copper Age gentleman was found mummified in 1991 in the Otztal Alps on the border between Austria and Italy. While there is much debate about Otzi's life and what ultimately led to his demise over 5,000 years ago, there is no doubt that our stay in Bolzano will be much shorter than his!

Our final resting place for the next four nights will be just a short drive up the road in the splendid Val Gardena, a tri-lingual set of villages that speak Italian, German, and Ladin. There's a strong chance you will fall in love with this wonderful valley nestled between remarkable Dolomites peaks!

Walk Summary: About 2-3 hours of walking, with the first 2 hours at Lago di Carezza involving about 275 meters (900 ft) elevation gain/loss, followed by relatively flat walking in Bolzano. Distance of about 4-5 km (2.5-3 mi) for the day. Terrain is on natural path and is a bit steep at first but evens out after the initial climb to Lago di Carezza, while the walking in Bolzano is on city sidewalks.

Overnight in Selva Gardena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Activities from Selva Gardena (Dolomites)

The three villages of Val Gardena each go by two names (one Italian and one German), bearing witness to the mixed history of this mountainous region. While we will see Ortisei (St. Ulrich) and Santa Cristina (St. Christina) during our time in the valley, this morning we will enjoy a hike in Selva Gardena (Wolkenstein), the highest of the three villages. Exploring part of the town on foot, we also venture into a lovely side valley that is full of great picture-taking opportunities, including at an idyllically placed little chapel dedicated to St. Sylvester, who is the patron saint of cows! A series of wood-sculpted Stations of the Cross also adorns the trail with the medieval 13th century ruins of Wolkenstein Castle looming high above.

This afternoon, enjoy some free time exploring the beauty of Selva Gardena, where many shops await or where the lure of loftier views may tempt you to take a ski lift or gondola to a magical mountain viewpoint above the valley. Tomorrow we will use some of these lifts to access higher scenic trails that promise more jaw-dropping beauty.

We may offer an optional afternoon trip to a local wood carving shop. The Val Gardena is legendary for this rich tradition, dating back to the beginnings of the 17th century. As the winter seasons were long and cold, the locals decided to look for a useful and reasonable activity, selling in the summer their carefully produced wintertime creations. These high quality works of art are something you may want to consider taking home as a reminder of your time in this venerable valley!

Walk Summary: About 3-3.5 hours of walking at altitude (about 5,000 feet or 1650 meters above sea level), with about 215m/700 ft of elevation gain/loss throughout the walk. Distance of about 9km/5.5 mi during the day. Terrain is a mix of paved surfaces and natural paths with a couple of steep sections.

Overnight in Selva Gardena.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Activities from Selva Gardena (Dolomites)

Today it's time to let the gravity-defying technology of Val Gardena's ski lifts and gondolas give us a boost as we access a couple of spectacular hiking trails on both sides of the valley. In the morning, we ascend to over 2150 meters/7,000 ft and begin our hike in the direction of Sassolungo (translated as "long rock"), a magnificent massif that seems to erupt skyward from the forests below. Hiking mostly downhill along our route, there are a few rocky footing challenges that require you to direct your gaze downward as opposed to the stellar Dolomites views all around you. Plenty of sit-and-stare opportunities abound along this awesome alpine trail. At the conclusion of the walk, a series of chairlifts bring you back to the cute little village of Santa Cristina, where lunch can be enjoyed.

A second helping of Dolomites delights is on the menu this afternoon, as we begin our walk with a gondola ride from the village of Ortisei (St. Ulrich). Once at the top station, passing log flumes and perhaps some local cows, we savour splendid views of Odlia, Gran Fermeda, and Pitla Fermada as well as more distant views of Sassolungo, where we walked in the morning. The fresh mountain air and non-stop vistas make this an incredibly memorable and photogenic hike. About halfway into our hike, the trail begins to descend more consistently, and at times steeply, through a forested area with an occasional creek as your companion. Once at the Furnes lift station, you can either descend back to the valley floor, or consider taking the lift even higher to Seceda for even more million-dollar views before your return to Val Gardena for the remainder of the day.

Walk Summary: About 6 hours of nature hiking at higher elevation over the course of both walks, with about 200m/650 ft of elevation gain and 600m/2,000 ft of elevation loss over the course of both hikes. The shorter and easier of these hikes is in the morning if you decide to do only one of the walks. Distance is about 13km/8 mi over the course of both walks, with the first hike being the shorter one at about 5km/3 mi. Terrain is on natural (usually crushed rock) path, with some grassy trail, occasional areas of more challenging rockiness, and some steepness at times.

Overnight in Selva Gardena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Activities from Selva Gardena (Dolomites)

We journey to a different region of the Dolomites this morning on a drive to the little town of Canazei. Our featured walk at Viel del Plan Marmolada incorporates a two-stage cable car ride and puts us on a path that was historically used by local flour and bread merchants to get from one valley to another. With decent weather, this trail promises to show off some eye-popping mountain views, including the likes of Pordoi, Catinnacio, Sassolungo, Sella Towers, and Marmolada, which is the highest mountain in the Dolomites, at nearly 3340m/11,000 ft above sea level.

Be on the lookout for marmots, crows, and perhaps an occasional deer as we savor the splendor of Viel del Plan Marmolada, which is a mostly level one-way walk that transitions to a steady downhill finish at Lake Fedaia, a stunning jewel that you may recognize from the movie "The Italian Job." After our mountain meanderings, we return to Val Gardena on a scenic drive around the Sella Towers, enjoying a few picture stops along the way. Once back in Selva Gardena, relish one final evening in this splendid valley before we make our way to Austria tomorrow! Due to the full day today and travel day tomorrow, we leave dinner on your own account back in town.

Walk Summary: About 3 hours of nature hiking at higher elevation (2400 meters/7,800 ft above sea level) over the course of the walk, with easy up and downs on most of the trail, with a steady descent and about 300 meters/1,000 ft of elevation loss on the finish to the lake. Distance is about 9.5 km/6 mi over the course of the hike. Terrain is on natural (usually crushed rock) path, with some occasional areas of more challenging rockiness, and some wood and natural steps going down.

Overnight in Selva Gardena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

Day 8 Selva Gardena, Italy - Innsbruck, Austria

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Tyrol is an historical region in the Alps that straddles the border between Italy and Austria, once part of both the Holy Roman Empire as well as the Austro-Hungarian Empire from the 12th century until the end of World War I. While remaining in the Italian region of South Tyrol this morning, one last brilliant Dolomites walk is on the menu, an easy circumnavigation of Lago di Braies. Considered one of Italy's most beautiful lakes, the bright turquoise blue colour will enchant you as you pass an atmospheric wooden boathouse and countless mesmerizing mountain vistas.

In the afternoon, we cross the border into Austria and the region of North Tyrol, on our way to Innsbruck, a two-time host of the Winter Olympics (1964 and 1976) but also an outstanding summer hiking destination. Before settling in to our hotel for the first of a two-night stay, we explore a hidden valley and one of the prettiest places in the area on a short hike to Kemater Alm. This out-and-back walk, while shrouded in forest canopy for much of the way, yields a big reward when you emerge at the destination to find lush green meadows with lots of cows and impressive mountains surrounding a little farmer's village.

Walk Summary: About 3-4 hours of nature hiking at over the course of both walks, with about 330m/1,100 ft of elevation gain and loss over the course of both hikes, most of which is on the Kemater Alm hike. Distance is about 8-9 km/5 mi over the course of both walks, with the Lago di Braies hike being the longer one at about 5km/3 mi. Terrain is on natural rocky and earthen path, with occasional areas of more challenging rockiness, and some steepness at times, especially on the Kemater Alm hike.

Overnight in Innsbruck.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Activities from Innsbruck

A hearty dose of hiking is in store for you on our first full day in the outdoor wonderland of Innsbruck, starting with a morning walk that puts the "gorge" in gorgeous! Wolfsklamm takes us on an adventurous journey through a narrow canyon alongside a raging river to an old pilgrimage site. While the first half of this hike is steadily uphill, the dramatic scenery and waterfall wows should be well worth the effort, with St. Georgen Monastery and the little chapel of Maria Tax as additional highlights.

After a lunch break, the afternoon holds more lofty and expansive views than our morning gorge walk. Using a set of chairlifts, we ascend to Tulfelalm and follow a broad forest road on the Zirbenweg Trail. This mostly level walk offers outstanding panoramic views of the Inntal Valley lying below and the Karwendel mountain range. A few side trails offer bonus hiking up to nearby peaks, but eventually our foot journey concludes at Patscherkofelhaus, where we take a relaxing cable car ride down to the village of Igls. Returning to Innsbruck for one last evening, you may have time to catch a glimpse of the city's late-medieval Altstadt (Old Town), watched over by a grand Habsburg place and baroque cathedral.

Due to the fullness of our day and early start tomorrow, we'll not include an evening meal today.

Walk Summary: About 6-7 hours of nature hiking for the day, with about 425 meters/1,400 ft of elevation gain and loss over the course of both hikes, most of which is on the Wolfsklamm hike. Distance is about 12 km/7.5 mi over the course of both walks, with the Zirbenweg hike being the longer one at about 8.5km/5 mi. Terrain is on wooden walkways, natural rocky and earthen path, with stairs and occasional areas of more challenging rockiness, and some steepness at times, especially on the Wolfsklamm hike.

Overnight in Innsbruck.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

Day 10 Innsbruck - Kitzbuhel - Zell am See

Departing Innsbruck this morning on an eastern drive to Zell am See, we stop first for a walk in the little medieval town of Kitzbuhel, renowned for its winter sports and downhill skiing legends as well as terrific hiking opportunities in the warmer months. With another assist from a cable car lift, we breathe in the refreshing alpine air on a terrific walk looking down on the Blixen Valley and the surrounding Alps, before descending by cable car to town for a lunch break.

An hour down the road, we arrive at the twin villages of Zell am See and Kaprun, which make up the heart of a truly adventurous and picturesque section of the Austrian mountains. Our afternoon hike is a relatively easy affair, featuring lovely views down to an emerald green lake called Klammssee and a visit to the little family farm of Scheckenreith. This traditional Austrian farm offers some of the tastiest homemade products to drink and eat, such as fresh, cold buttermilk, cakes, cheese, and bacon. After bidding farewell to the farmer's family,

the trail continues down to Klammsee, where you can dip your toes in the water and look for several special amphibious species who call this place home. Finishing our day in Zell am See, we check in to our hotel and enjoy dinner together.

Walk Summary: About 4-5 hours of nature hiking for the day, with about 450m/1,500 feet of elevation gain and loss over the course of both hikes, evenly distributed on both hikes. Distance is about 11 km/7 mi over the course of both walks, with the Kitzbuhel hike being the slightly longer one. Terrain is on natural path and pavement, with some steepness at times.

Overnight in Zell am See.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Activities from Zell am See

The village of Kaprun has deep roots, going back to the 10th century, when it was first mentioned as a settlement in the Duchy of Bavaria. Its name is derived from the Celtic term for "whitewater," and true to form is blessed with aquatic resources, including two reservoirs and a hydroelectric plant. Our morning walk starts and finishes in Kaprun and takes us on a fabulous loop trail around and above this pretty mountain village, offering stunning views of the surrounding peaks, Zeller Lake, and the town below. Encounter emerald forests, gurgling streams, and quaint farm scenes along with moments of serene silence, before arriving back in Kaprun for a much-deserved lunch break.

In the afternoon, we set our sights incredibly high as we ascend by gondola to over 3000 meters (10,000 feet) above sea level to the massive Kitzsteinhorn, where a variety of terrific high alpine activities are available for you to enjoy. Consider stepping onto the Top of Salzburg viewing platform, where the views will be literally and metaphorically breathtaking, showing off the glaciated peaks of the Hohe Tauern National Park and Austria's highest peak, the Grossglockner. A glacial education is also available in the Ice Arena below the peak, along with guided tours by national park rangers. Also, a variety of easy to intermediate hiking trails are scattered throughout the area and can be easily accessed by the mountain lifts, just in case you didn't get enough exercise on the morning hike! We wrap up this marvelous day back in the town of Zell am See.

Walk Summary: About 3-4 hours of alpine walking in the morning with about 215m/700 feet of elevation gain/loss. Additional hiking available in the afternoon on our Kitzsteinhorn excursion. Distance of about 9-10 km/6 mi for the day. Terrain is mostly natural path with some pavement.

Overnight in Zell am See.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Zell am See, Austria - Lake Bled, Slovenia

This morning we bid a fond farewell to Austria, departing Zell am See for a southerly drive through the mountains, bound for a return to Slovenia. Arriving into Lake Bled after a few hours on the road, we take a moment to enjoy lunch in this delightful setting, nestled within view of the Julian Alps. If you've ever seen a brochure for Slovenia, there is a strong chance that it featured Lake Bled, with its distinctive small island and a 17th century baroque church thrusting out of its waters.

This iconic lake provides an awesome opportunity to take a scenic afternoon walk on a very pleasant and easy path that encircles it, offering fantastic vistas of the island, the church, and the castle, which is built upon a dramatic 300-foot rock. Lake Bled was formed from the waters released when the Bohinj Glacier melted and filled this natural basin that was formed by the glacier. Interestingly enough, there are no tributaries that feed the lake. Rather, it receives its clean water from a number of natural springs. These unique thermal springs led to the development of the area as a spa resort for the European elites. Finishing our walk in the mid-afternoon, you should have time to explore the town and lakeside on your own. It is possible to reach the small island in the middle of the lake using a gondola-style boat called a "pletna." Once on the island there is a small but rewarding climb up to the Chapel of St. Maria. According to local legend, a husband will be guaranteed a happy marriage if he can carry his new bride up the punishing 99 steps from the dock into the church.

Walk Summary: About 2-2.5 hours of relatively easy lakeside walking today. Distance of about 7 km/4 mi for the day. Terrain is mostly flat on a combination of natural path and paved walkways.

Overnight in Lake Bled.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Lake Bled - Vintgar Gorge - Ljubljana

This morning we travel a short distance from Lake Bled into the lush green Radovna Valley, where its namesake river has carved the dramatic 500-foot (150 meters) deep Vintgar Gorge, in the eastern portion of Triglav National Park. Our trail follows a wooden walkway through this beautiful gorge, beside thundering rapids and past the Sum Waterfall. Notice the many erosive features along the way as this powerful torrent of water has done its sculpting work over countless millennia. Continuing upwards, a pretty viewpoint at Katarina Church offers views back to the Bled Castle before you complete the loop hike and descend to the gorge parking lot.

Following a break for lunch, a one-hour drive brings us back to the place where our journey began, Ljubljana. There should be enough time this afternoon to enjoy a final easy stroll through the city, taking in a few of the Slovenian capital's many highlights, including the castle, town hall, national theatre, and university among others. In the evening, we gather to celebrate one last dinner together, sharing memories from our favourite alpine walks of the adventure.

Walk Summary: About 3-4 hours of both nature and city walking throughout the day with about 180m/600 feet of elevation gain/loss for the day, mostly at Vintgar Gorge. Distance of about 11 km/7mi for the day. Terrain is a mix of elevated wooden boardwalk, natural path, and paved roads and sidewalk.

Overnight in Ljubljana.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Ljubljana

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast