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## Slovakia

*A land of history, mystery, and some really great views!*

“No. Way.” My jaw drops as I take in the magnificent castle as it looms through the car windshield. Impossibly tall, the massive castle clings to the mountain just as it has for the past 500 years.



*Castle Orava perched on top a mountain and presiding over Orava valley below. Photo Credit: S. Bliss*

“The castle hasn’t been conquered since it was built,” the tour guide prattles as we climb the long, twisting road up to the enormous gates. It’s easy to believe her.

Castle Orava is only one of the many castles that dot Slovakia’s picturesque countryside, but it is perhaps one of the most impressive. Dating all the way back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, according to the brochure, the castle is built partially into the mountain. As I climb the slippery staircases worming their way along the outside of the peak and walk through the stone passages carved into the mountain, it’s easy to imagine the times in which the castle first took its place on the stone precipice. The brochures waste no time in informing me that Castle Orava is also known as the Fairytale Castle, as testified by the creepy dungeon and dramatic towers.



*Castle Trencin is spread out all across its mountain.  
Photo Credit: S. Bliss*

Another of my favorites is Castle Trencin. Like Castle Orava, Trencin was built at the top of a mountain. The rocky trail meanders its way up to it, and by the time I passed through the gate my legs were burning from the climb.



*Omar dug through the mountain to make this well and free his love Fatima. Photo Credit: S. Bliss*

Trencin is known for its mysterious well, surrounded by a legend that is an integral part of the area's folklore. The story states that a man named Omar was in love with a woman called Fatima, held captive inside the castle. The brochure says that to set her free, Omar spent three years digging a well through the stone for the castle lord in exchange for Fatima. Today, the well is considered lucky by the castle's visitors. Magic or not, I couldn't help dropping a coin or two in.

One of the best-preserved castles in Slovakia is Castle Boujnice. This too was built around the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the country has taken great pains to preserve and restore it. The castle features elegant stone staircases and a golden ceiling. Furniture, some of it having been built in the castle hundreds of years ago, fills the rooms,



*Castle Boujnice is a perfect replica of what is was like hundreds of years ago. Photo Credit: S. Bliss*

making it easy to imagine what it would be like to have been one of the castle's inhabitants.

The tour takes you deep into the bowels of the castle, where you can see the eerie crypt of the castle's last owner. The sight of his face carved into the top of the stone casket sent some serious chills up my spine!



*The golden ceiling of the castle's music room is what the castle is known for. Photo Credit: S. Bliss*

Once I'd satisfied my appetite for country castles, I drove into one of the most vibrant cities in Slovakia, Bratislava.

As Slovakia's capital, Bratislava is both the geographical and cultural center of the country. It used to be the center of Europe, too. Many trade routes crossed through it during medieval times and eleven Hungarian Kings have been crowned there.

Today, the city still maintains its historic charm in its cobblestone streets, spacious courtyards, and elegant buildings. Surprisingly, the population is young and full of energy and life. I walked though roadways lined with outdoor cafes and open-air markets, selling anything from souvenirs to fresh produce. Cars are seen only on the major roadways, since most of the city's inhabitants choose to walk whenever possible.

"Driving into...Bratislava is similar to entering any large city in the United States; however, the old sections of the city

are a reminder of a history much older than the United States. City walls, now occupied by small business, include sally ports used for both pedestrian walking and automobile passage.



*Walking through Bratislava's Old Town is a perfect way to absorb the culture. Photo Credit: S. Bliss*

One cannot lose sight of the deep roots of the city of Bratislava,” says frequent visitor Mark Bliss.



*Castle Bratislava is the center of Slovakia, both geographically and culturally. Photo Credit: S. Bliss*

One of the most fascinating parts of the city is the Old Town, or the historical center of Bratislava. The ancient town hall

still stands, and the streets are lined with old mansions and dotted with historic fountains and romantic courtyards.

As the sun began its descent, I began the long walk up to Castle Bratislava, the symbol Slovakia.

The castle was built on the already ancient site in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, where it was – and continues to be – the heart of the nation. Throughout history, the castle has been the site of 19 different coronations and the building itself exudes a sense of majesty and authority. The brochures and signs said that original castle burned down in 1811, but was rebuilt after World War II and now overlooks the city.

The grounds of the castle are spread over a vast area surrounding the enormous structure and are immaculately maintained all year round. You can walk up the edge of the precipice and see the entire city laid out in front of you. The view from the top of one of the castle’s four towers is

magnificent. One can see all the way to the edge of the city and the lush countryside beyond.

Although the castle no longer holds the government of Slovakia, it still is an emblem of the nation's culture, as can be



*The view from Bratislava Castle is magnificent.  
Photo Credit: S. Bliss*

seen by walking through the numerous museums now held inside the castle.

“The Slovaks love to tell of their history and share the culture that stretches back thousands of years...Slovakia represents a time capsule with highly modern cities and rural areas still operating with wagons in the shadows of castles hewn into the sides of 1000 foot cliffs. It is an

incredible country that is always fascinating to visit,” Mark Bliss stated.