



We Heart Slovenia

Our 'Slovenian Ambassadors', Dave and Matt return to Slovenia to chip away at the huge number of untouched trails they missed last time.

Words and Photos by Dave Anderson



Everyone loves a bit of dapple

When the email arrives with the invitation to tour Slovenia there can be only one outcome: that much is inevitable. There will be no discussion about who will be going, no democratic decision can be entertained, Matt and myself have already started packing. If you read our earlier article (Issue 29 - Ed) you will have realised that a wet Easter week of riding in Tolmin did little to dampen our enthusiasm for the quality riding experiences that Slovenia has to offer.

Let the masses head out to the Alps. When it comes to mountain biking, Slovenia is Europe's best-kept secret. Brothers and sisters we have seen the light, we know that the country is a mountain biker's paradise, and we've been chomping at the bit to get back there ever since. Lets be honest here, let's make this clear from the start, we 'heart' Slovenia; now read on and learn why you should too.

Every day another location, every day another adventure. The logo on the back of Marko's motorhome spells out exactly what we can expect and we know we aren't going to be let down. From being picked up at the airport we've been whisked straight across the country to Jamnica on the Austrian border, stopping only to savour the legendary doughnuts of Trojane. I'm normally averse to travelling for riding but Slovenia is just the right size at 20,000 square kilometres to make any trip a doddle, at its widest it's only 300 kilometres across. It's a small country but what it lacks in surface area it more than makes up for with a seemingly endless supply of mountains.

By some quirk of geology Slovenia has enough mountains to almost be considered greedy. Enough mountains to keep anyone into outdoor sports grinning with the possibilities that they promise. Lovely limestone mountains. Mountains with trees growing on them. Trees that only give up their hold on the mountain's flanks above

2000m. The country boasts 60% woodland cover, and hidden within those trees are networks of hunting trails and footpaths that will offer you the best days of riding you've ever had. Ever.

First stop Dixieland.

We've headed out to Jamnica to stay at Koros, a tourist farm that is the capital of 'Dixieland'; an extensive network of trails that litter the surrounding hills. Arriving after dark, we're welcomed with good food and cold beer and spend the night getting an insight into Dixie's involvement in developing the surrounding area into a bike park. The plans involve subtle additions here and there, building linking trails to open up more possibilities of loops and routes, all developed with the support of other local farmers who see the potential benefits of sharing trails with others.

Both the temperature and view in the morning are breathtaking. A week previously the temperature had been in the 30s Centigrade, today it's struggling to gain double figures; it seems we've shared our arrival with the onset of autumn. Opposite the farm on the panorama of hills that face us you can see the fresh snow dusting the tops of the peaks. But at least it's dry and having left monsoon Britain behind we're happy. Today is a good day, we're being treated; the plan is to cram two/three days worth of singletrack into a single day. Bikes are loaded into the BikeNomad T5 van for the first of the day's uplifts.

We're being guided today by Dixie's son Anej. After our easy start to the day letting the van do the hard work of getting us to the top of the first climb he's keen for us to stretch and warm up before riding. And so, high up in a forest, while both Slovenians slip straight into a familiar routine of pre-ride stretching, two self conscious English blokes offer their own strange interpretation of the same ritual. It's not pretty.

Suitably warmed up we head off and it becomes immediately



Matt still reckons "It'll go..."



Yet another warm welcome

obvious why a guide is needed here when we take an unassuming faint hint of loam through moss and needles that turns out to be the first trail. It's a sinuous line through the trees, slaloming between them, undulating on a carpet of wild strawberry and the skeletal stems of bilberry. The trails aren't overly technical but seem to have naturally evolved to be ridden at speed. We're flying down, zigging and zagging, the loam offering just enough traction to allow the subconscious to take over the controls. The smell of pine needles is subtly combined with the familiar autumnal mushroomy scent on the cold air. As we emerge from the first section Anej points out the almost invisible electric fence that blocks our route. Local knowledge here is invaluable.

Two more trails of more of the same bring us back to the farm we started from and we're still only halfway down the first hill. We head down a trail that is work in progress that will offer a straight out of the door blast down into the valley below. Meeting up with the van we load up before heading up the next hill for more, and more, and then more.

Time blurs as trails blur one into the next, very little fireroad is

And so, high up in a forest, while both Slovenians slip straight into a familiar routine of pre-ride stretching, two self conscious English blokes offer their own strange interpretation of the same ritual. It's not pretty.



Bike? Yep. Helmet? Yep. Head Torch? Eh? Riding the old lead mines.

We're riding through a tight tunnel of hazel and shrubbery, it's tight, it's rooty and it's fast with fantastic dappled sunlight; a stunning trail and well worth the effort to get to the start of it.

needed to connect one to the next. Each trail has that Star Wars Ewok/speeder bike chase feel going on. We climb and descend on singletrack, in woodland and through meadows. The riding is punctuated occasionally by the appearance of the van, the cue that another hill is beckoning. Anej always keen to show us one more favourite trail and us always happy to share. After a conversation about trail names he promises to show us his own 'Valley of Death', which turns out to be the most scenic ridge trail I think I've ever ridden.

By late afternoon, I'm scenically overloaded. The riding has been superb but I'm starting to feel it in my legs now. As we meet up with the van for what we think is the last time we are invited to indulge ourselves in one last special treat. We're handed the head torches we're going to need for the 5km journey through the mountain we've just ridden on. There's something strangely calming about riding through the old lead mine despite its otherworldly feel. Stopping a several points along the way Anej tells the history of where we're riding through and his family connection with the mine. It's a special opportunity and a unique finish to the day.

Next stop Maribor.

After a second evening of Koros hospitality we head over to Maribor early the next morning. Less than two hours by road and linked to Dixieland by a series of trails, the riding here has a distinctly different feel to it. Having parked up at the ski resort we head out across the

city to start our day's riding on and in the hills that are home to vineyards, orchards and small farms.

The morning's ride begins with a climb through the vineyards to a monument that overlooks the city, from here it is possible to survey the hills that surround Maribor; all of them linked by trails. It's obvious that there's a multitude of riding here offering everything from short sharp blasts to all day epics. We're in lower foothills today and the woodlands have a different feel to them. Dominated by beech and hazel there are similarities with the North Downs and in places a more urban feel. The riding is a mix of undulating fireroad and singletrack until we climb out of the woods and see the target for the morning's ride, a church that sits at the top of the next hill. There's a choice of steady road climb or steep off-road, I have the casting vote, we go off-road. It's steep alright, even the generally unlimited traction on offer from my Patriot66 has given up a third of the way into it which is just as well as my legs have too. Head down and pushing up, I'm kindly reminded repeatedly of the rideable option by Matt for the remainder of the climb. Next time we'll know better.

Slovenian scrumping and scary seconds.

There's a hint of bonking near the top so I take the opportunity to grab some wind-fallen apples as we climb through the final orchard before the start of the descent. The apples give just enough energy to get the most out of another great trail that follows the ridgeline





We want... a shrubbery!

Five minutes of the descent brings us to a cabin where we manage to load up on full fat Coke, the sugar hit is instant and welcome; just what we need for the whooping descent ahead of us.

of hills all the way down back into the city. The trail remains largely enclosed all along its length. We're riding through a tight tunnel of hazel and shrubbery, it's tight, it's rooty and it's fast with fantastic dappled sunlight. A stunning trail and well worth the effort to get to the start of it.

Mid-afternoon we're heading back towards the lift station. We're later than was intended so will have to forsake the planned climb for lift pass assistance instead. A late lunch awaits us at the top of the lift and we're ready to eat; which is just as well because when the third course of food arrives, we're already panicking about how we'll manage the pudding. I'm not sure if we'd have managed even two courses without a riding appetite.

Stuffed to the gills and with apple strudel cunningly hidden in our Camelbaks we're glad that we have the option of using the lift passes and making the most of the freeride park and numerous trails that all drop off the mountain to converge on the bottom lift station. There's enough here to cater to every level of competence including the UCI World Cup downhill course. We ride trails fast and on the edge of control, there's some sketchy post lunch handling going on and more than one crash.

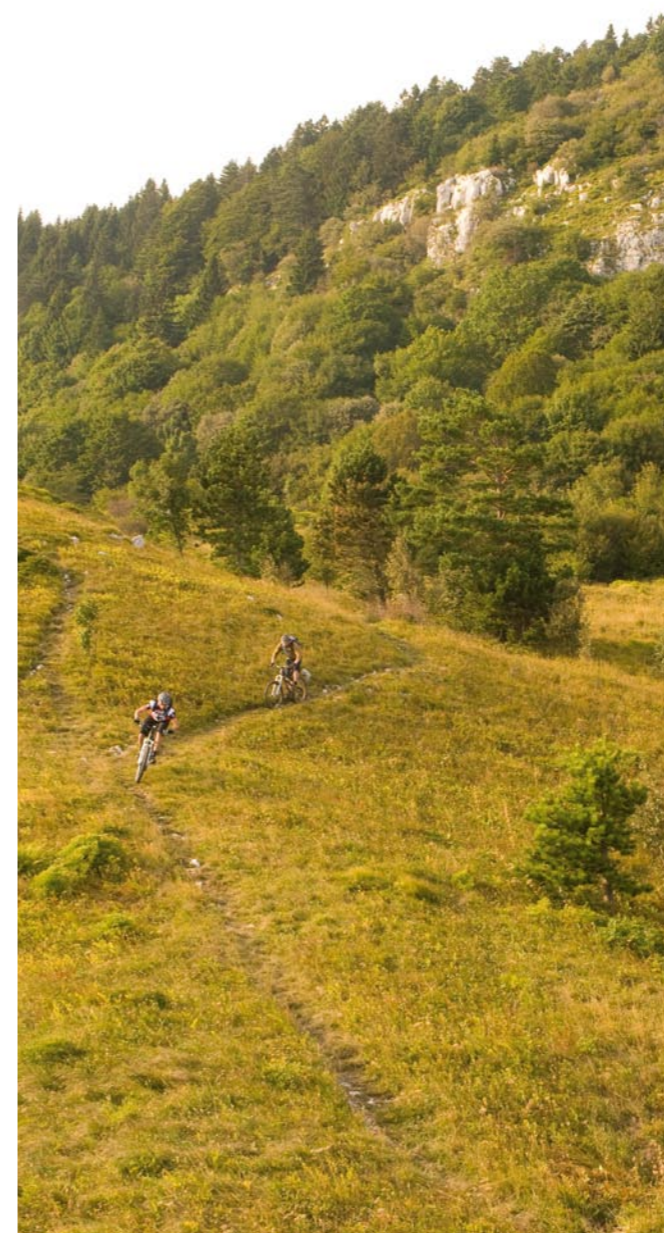
By the time we're finished, the city's populace have begun their after-work walk and run up and down the ski slope. It's good to be in a country with such a love of the outdoors and commitment to exercise. We don't feel at all guilty sitting and drinking Lasko, cooled from the campervan's fridge. Oh no.

Destination Ajdovscina

The beauty of Slovenia's size and position is that it's easy to head to where the good weather is. Our next destination is Ajdovscina; situated over on the west side of the country on the edge of the Karst area. High winds have put paid to Marko's original plan of a high clifftop exposed traverse but Plan B sounds a belter option too. With Andrej, editor of Mountainbike Slovenia, we're going to be following the path of a First World War road before heading off the front of the mountainside to descend for an hour-plus back into town.

If our first two days with uplift can be equated to fast food riding, then today is better compared to the slow cook concept. There's quality up in them—there hills but we're going to spend some time getting to it. The climb starts straight off on the outskirts of town, we heading up on a degraded track which, for the most part, is double and singletrack. Once more we're climbing completely enclosed with in the trees. As we get higher when I stop the silence is absolute, no hint of man, just nature. There's occasional rustling off the trail that might be wild boar, their droppings are everywhere and the side of the trail is dug up and uprooted in places.

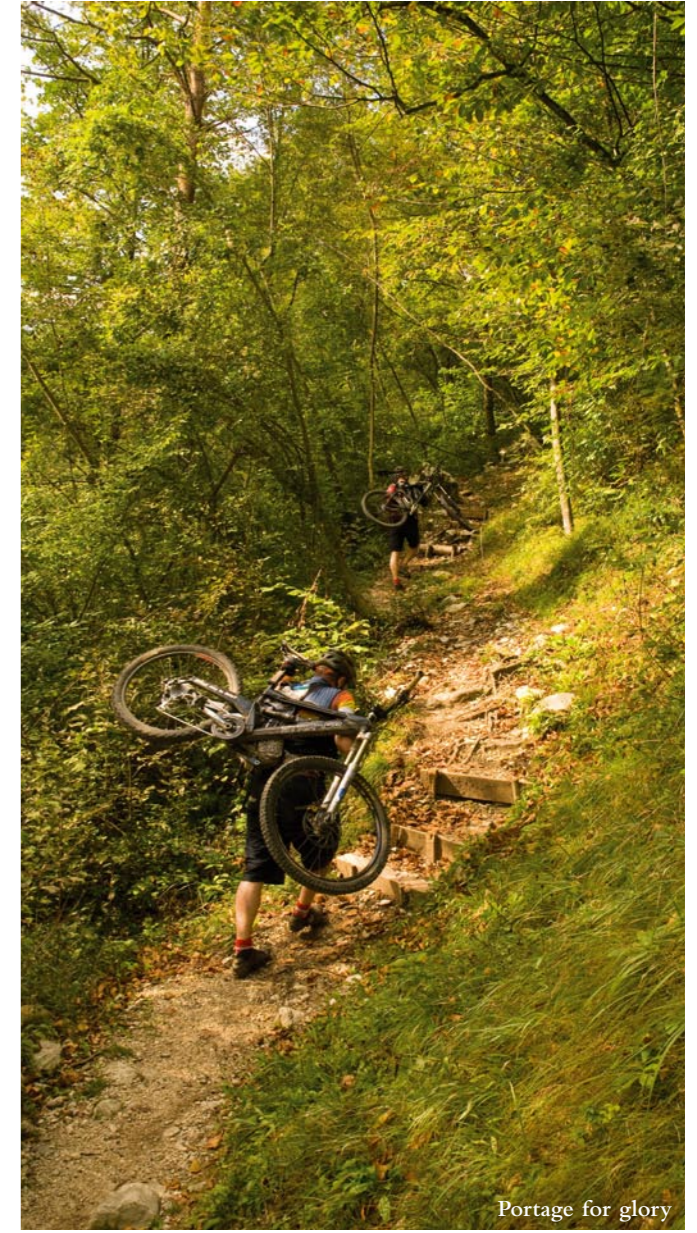
Two hours in and we're still climbing. A Yorkshire Dale-like track of dry limestone, but with Mediterranean flowers bordering it. It's a pleasant gradient, steady-away. I'm sitting and spinning an easy gear knowing that there's still a fair amount to do but also trying to keep something in my legs for tomorrow. This isn't like home, standing and honking will not have enough impact to make it worth the effort. It's



pure Zen riding; let the body get into its groove then let the mind wander, occasionally shifting in the saddle for comfort. I'm grateful for the shelter of the trees, a headwind would have killed me.

Stopping for a snack break two thirds up, it's impressive to look down and back to where we set off from. By the time we've finished climbing we'll have climbed more than the height of Ben Nevis, but here we'll still feel warm if slightly empty. The last bit of the climb is on singletrack and once more it closes in until we top out at the ruins of a long gone radio station. Five minutes of the descent brings us to a cabin where we manage to load up on full fat Coke, the sugar hit is instant and welcome. Just what we need for the whooping descent ahead of us. The full descent is long and varied; it offers everything from woody swooping loveliness to rocky tech sections. When we meet hikers coming the other way there is no antagonism just shouts of "good luck" as we pass. We regroup regularly and I take the opportunity to let my legs relax. Two thirds down there's an unpleasant incident with a thick bramble across the trail, too fast to avoid it, it catches me and leaves me cut and bleeding.

Saddles down and freewheeling the last couple of kilometres back into town we're left grinning once more by the quality of the trails. Another location, another good day. It's late by the time we've eaten and driven to the campsite we're spending the evening on. But despite this we're invited into the wine cellar for an impromptu wine tasting session. The cellar has a heady atmosphere thanks to the two-



Portage for glory

day-old cask fermenting in the corner, there's Merlot, white wine and schnapps to sample and a plate of cheeses and prosciutto to nibble on. Eventually we stumble off to bed, tired but happy.

A Schnapps-over?

We start the last day of riding in the kitchen of the family who own the campsite, once more on the receiving end of Slovenian hospitality. We're loading up on stovetop-brewed strong coffee, when the father comes in with a small bottle of homebrewed schnapps. Several toasts later we're heading for Tolmin, warmed by an internal glow.

As soon as we start riding however, it's not the glow of the alcohol that's making itself felt. We've another long climb ahead of us, I'm already in granny gear, my legs feel dead and I've got schnapps burps. If I squint into the morning sun I can just make out the white of the building that is our destination on the far mountainside. It looks a long way off and by the end of the climb nearly four hours later I'm well aware it was. Three hours in we stop by an alpine meadow and I inhale more food than I've ever eaten on a ride before. The next hour of off-road climbing I take very steadily, I'm definitely in survival mode today.

At the top I feel quite good, I've energy left in my legs and although I've reached my climbing limit I know I've got enough to cope with whatever else I face on the ride. And for the first time in the week I know exactly where we're going. We're off to



ride a trail that quickly became a favourite last time we were here. Despite approaching the start of the descent from a different side of the mountain we're confident of our trail knowledge and sense of direction.

We ride our last descent of the trip fast and confidently. We had ridden it enough to remember what's coming up and the result of that knowledge is noticeable. The long series of switchbacks come fast, steep and furious at first before they relax and spread out on the lower slopes, allowing more speed to build up in between each one. It's strange that despite being in another country being on this trail right now has that feeling of being at home.

Too quickly it's over. If I had the energy I'd quite happily head back up for a second go but I'm happy to head to 'our' bar instead for the traditional pizza and beer. There's a tinge of regret that this has been our last ride; it's gone too quick. A sure sign of a successful trip.

Our last proper campsite is the best one yet. Nestled alongside the

Soca river and surrounded by mountains we're in the good company of Italian and German kayakers. The night is spent chatting about all the places we've haven't managed to get to and the rides they offer. Marko has provided a constant narration as we've travelled pointing out routes and describing the community of mountain bike advocates that are out there discovering new trails and sharing them. There's something special happening here in Slovenia, it's out there on every hillside and in every woodland that you see.

There are trails here for everyone. No matter what type of riding you prefer Slovenia will have something to offer, and someone to guide you. You will not become immune to the natural beauty of the countryside nor to the great hospitality on offer. Sometimes you have to work to get that reward but I promise you it will be worth it and within minutes of the descent starting the climb will already be forgotten.

Did I mention we're already planning to get back there? ☺

Go Heart Slovenia

Dave and Matt travelled with and were guided by:

Marko Perpar, Mobile Adventures Biking.
info@mtbslovenija.info
www.mobile-adventures.net

It's a great way to get a flavour of Slovenia and the riding it has to offer. Marko has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the hills of Slovenia restaurants bars small vineyards in fact all things important for a holiday. We'd say that the holiday we were on was for fitter riders; the climbs are big! Marko assures that holidays can be tailored to individual needs. Sitting in the back of the camper as you're transported to your next riding destination has got to be the way to travel.

Mountain Bike Nomad
www.bikenomad.com

Dixie and Anej provide hotel based (which seems

a rather lacklustre way of describing their beautiful mountaintop farm) riding holidays which seems to be a labour of love as much as a business.

Andrej
www.mtb.si
 Slovenia's MTB website of choice, run by a very strong climber!

Matej Obu
www.pohorje.org
 Matej is all things Maribor when it comes to mountain biking and knows how to kill with kindness when it comes to food!

Places to Stay
 Apart from our nights with Dixie we stayed at campsites throughout Slovenia. Here are our favourites.

Pouletov Camp, Vrhpolje
www.vipavska-dolina.si/vizitka.php?id=365
 This is a perfect campsite! A small family-run affair, beautifully situated in an orchard with its own vineyard! Schnapps for breakfast as well.

Lazar
www.lazar.si
 A big multinational camp set by the bluest river in the world, On-site bar with savory pancakes and jaw-dropping views all round.

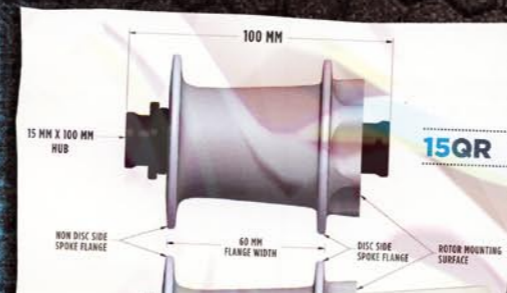
Ljubljana Resort
www.ljubljanaresort.si
 A huge campsite with everything you need. It's not particularly endearing in itself, though there's certainly nothing wrong with it but it does have incredibly easy access to Ljubljana and its nightspots, museums bars restaurants. A perfect way to end a holiday.

FOX RACING SHOX



SAY GOODBYE TO ROAD PARTS ON YOUR MOUNTAIN BIKE. FOX AND SHIMANO DEVELOPED THE ALL-NEW 15QR SYSTEM TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF CROSS COUNTRY AND ALL - MOUNTAIN RIDERS EVERYWHERE.

THE TOOL FREE 15QR THRU AXLE MAKES FOR FAST WHEEL CHANGES AND INCREASED STIFFNESS TO WEIGHT RATIO. THE 15QR OFFERS A LIGHTER SYSTEM WEIGHT THAN A 20MM THRU AXLE AND GREATER STIFFNESS THAN A STANDARD 9MM OPEN DROPOUT.



The all-new Shimano & Fox developed 15QR

THIS MAY BE THE PERFECT 'BRITISH' FORK! READY TO ATTACK THE HARDEST SINGLETRACK IN THE WORLD AND STILL ABLE TO CONTROL A XC-RACE-LIKE CLIMB BACK UP...

6 INCHES - 150MM TRAVEL, JUST 4.3 LBS, 150-130 AND 110MM TRAVEL SETTINGS USING THE NEW, LIGHTER, MORE PROGRESSIVE TALAS 3 SYSTEM AND THE ROCKIN', NEW QR15 - AMAZINGLY STIFF, AMAZINGLY LIGHT.

A 24HR RACE ON THE SAME FORK? WHY NOT? THE NEW 32 JUST MAY BE ENOUGH FOR ANYTHING - WHEREVER YOU RIDE...

THE TALAS 3 SYSTEM IS ALSO AVAILABLE IN 140 TRAVEL, 'NORMAL' QR FLAVOUR...

Wherever you ride.

WELCOME TO THE NEW WORLD ORDER.

