



SLOVENIA

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Slovenia is a small country - about the same size as Wales - with a remarkable variety of habitats. The highest point is in the Julian Alps - Mount Triglav, at 2863 metres. River valleys run mainly SE towards the Danube, reaching the Pannonian plain just before exiting Slovenia. This part still has areas of wet grassland and floodplain woodland. The dinaric karst region has a variety of meadows, hillsides and forests, and is rich in orchids and butterflies. The Mediterranean coastline stretches for only 46km between Italy and Croatia, but has its own attractions for the naturalist. With 179 confirmed species, Slovenia is a perfect destination for anyone interested in butterflies. This is one of the main reasons that I have visited Slovenia 37 times, since my friends in Ljubljana first invited me in 1980.

There have been changes in the landscape in recent years. Woodland is encroaching on the grassland, as the meadows are left unmown by an increasingly urban population, and extensive grazing is hardly practised. Forests account for 60% of the surface area - and rising.

Visiting Slovenia

Slovenia gained its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, after a fairly bloodless secession. In 2004, it became a member state of the European Union. The currency is the Euro, and the second language is English. Cheap flights to Slovenia and neighbouring countries (e.g. daily Easy Jet service from London-Standed to Ljubljana) are available.

Butterflies

1. Mountains

The optimal time to visit the Julian Alps is in July and early August. I generally stay at the tourist centre of Kranjska Gora, which has spectacular views of the peaks and some gentle walks in the valley.

The best place to see alpine butterflies is Vršič pass (1611m) - if you can negotiate the 25 hairpin bends on the way up. Just before the pass is a locality for Asian Fritillary (*Euphydryas intermedia*), by a small stream below a mountain hut.

A circular walk from the top of the pass should produce most of the mountain ringlets (*Erebia manto*, *E epiphron*, *E pharte*, *E gorge*, *E pronoe*, *E stirus*, *E oeme* and *E pandrose*). You are in the heart of the Triglav national park; so nets should not be used. Descending the south side of Vrsic, you will reach the Trenta valley and the source of the river Soča - a good spot for Stygian Ringlet (*Erebia styx*).



Hungarian glider (*Neptis rivularis*)
photo Ivan Esenko



Asian fritillary (*Euphydryas intermedia*)

If you want to get higher, there is a narrow road - the last turning before the Italian border at Predel - which zig-zags up to 2100 m just below a pass south of Mount Mangart (2679m). Look out for Shepherd's Fritillary (*Boloria pales*), Alpine Argus (*Albulina orbitulus*) and Alpine Heath (*Coenonympha gardetta*) as well as alpine skippers (*Pyrgus* spp.).

Another popular centre to stay is at Lake Bohinj on the south-eastern side of the Triglav massif, where there are a number of hotels and camp sites. A good walk is north from Stara Fužina up the Voje valley to the Mostniški waterfalls. The meadows have fritillaries (*Argynnis* spp.), blues, skippers (*Pyrgus* spp.) and Clouded Apollo (*Parnassius mnemosyne*). A path, uphill to the east of the falls, leads through the woods to the Uskovnica meadows (1400m). Here you can see the mountain ringlets, *Erebia manto* and *E epiphron*, as well as the larger Erebias - *E aethiops*, *E euryale* and, the commonest, *E ligea*.



The Karawanken mountains and the Kamnisko-Savinjske Alps form the border with Austria and are less accessible. Rudi Verovnik recently discovered localities there for Thor's Fritillary (*Clossiana thore*), previously thought to be extinct in Slovenia.

2. Northern hills

To the south-east of the Julian Alps - almost as far as the capital Ljubljana - stretches a series of hills, typically between 700 and 1000 metres. This is excellent butterfly country, but you may be disappointed if the meadows have recently been cut. From this point of view, June might be the best month.

An area I know well is around the village of Trebija, about 35km SW of Kranj. This has been a good place for Purple Emperor (*Apatura iris*), Hungarian Glider (*Neptis rivularis*) - look for its foodplant, the graceful fronds of goatsbeard spiraea - and I have seen the Poplar Admiral (*Limenitis populus*), down from the tree tops on a track. In the riverside meadows you may find Chequered Skipper (*Carterocephalus palaemon*), Scarce Fritillary (*Euphydryas maturna*), Turquoise Blue (*Polyommatus dorylas*) and Purple-edged Copper (*Lycaena hippothoe*). Up on the Ermanovec Ridge (1000m), you can see for miles across the hills. Here, Large Blues (*Maculinea arion*) are frequent, the Scarce Copper (*Lycaena virgaureae*) may be seen in hundreds in some years, and there is a colony of Marsh Fritillaries (*Euphydryas aurinia*). Look out for the Dryad (*Minois dryas*), Woodland Brown (*Lopinga achine*) and Woodland Grayling (*Hipparchia fagi*) here.

3. Karst

The Dinaric limestone karst covers a large area of Slovenia, running SE into Croatia. It supports the richest grasslands for wild flowers and butterflies. Many of the hills are wooded. The highest is Snežnik (1797m), and the surrounding grasslands in the vicinity of Ilirska Bistrica are well worth a visit for butterflies. Typical fritillaries of the karst are Twin-spot (*Brenthis hecate*), Assmann's (*Mellicta britomartis*), Nickerl's (*M aurelia*) and Marsh (*E aurinia*). Amongst the skippers found here are the colourful Large Chequered Skipper (*Heteropterus morpheus*) - with its characteristic bouncy flight - Safflower Skipper (*Pyrgus carthami*) and Marbled Skipper (*Carcharodus lavatherae*), which was discovered in this area in 2006 by Tristan Lafranchis, author of the European Field Guide.



Large Chequered Skipper Karst hills near Ilirska Bistrica (*Heteropterus morpheus*)



For an interesting and scenic perspective on the karst, it would be worth following the karst ridge, from Sinji Vrh, above Ajdovščina in the west, for Apollo (*Parnassius apollo*), Lesser Spotted Fritillary (*Melitaea trivia*) and Chequered Blue (*Scolitantides orion*), to Nanos mountain - a well-known butterfly locality - south east to Črnotiče, nearer the coast, where there are more open steppe grasslands with Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus armoricanus*), False Grayling (*Arethusana arethusa*) and Great Sooty Satyr (*Satyrus ferula*), and on to Sočerga near the Croatian border, where I have seen Provencal Short-tailed Blue (*Cupido alcetas*) and there is a chance of Osiris Blue (*Cupido osiris*).

4. Eastern Slovenia

River valleys dominate this region - Krka, Sava, Drava and Mura. The Common Glider (*Neptis sappho*) is characteristic, and there are still a many localities for Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*), Scarce Large Blue (*Phengaris telejus*) and Dusky Large Blue (*P nausithous*), especially in the NE corner of the country.

5. Coastal area

The Mediterranean coast and its hinterland is a surprisingly productive area for butterflies. The dominant geology is flysch - or mudstone - which supports a different variety of plants and their associated butterflies from the limestone further inland. Coastal species which occur here include Southern Small White (*Pieris manni*), Lulworth Skipper (*Thymelicus acteon*), Southern Comma (*Polygonia egea*), and the recently-arrived Geranium Bronze (*Cacyreus marshalli*).

The hills which rise rapidly behind the coast to some 270 metres, provide a rich habitat for butterflies such as Iolas Blue (*Iolana iolas*), Escher's Blue (*Polyommatus escheri*), Amanda's Blue (*P amanda*), Nettle-tree Butterfly (*Libythea celtis*) and, most notably, the False Ringlet (*Coenonympha oedippus*). Once thought to be restricted to lowland marshes, and endangered throughout Europe, it flies here in areas of *Brachypodium* grassland and scrub, but these are increasingly becoming overgrown.



False ringlet (*Coenonympha oedippus*)



A view of Strunjan looking towards Italy

I usually stay with friends in Piran, an old Venetian town of narrow alleyways on a peninsula opposite Croatia. For better access by car and for walks, I suggest the next two villages along the coast to the east. The Hotel Barbara at Fiesa is modern and efficient, and you can walk along the undercliff to Piran for an evening meal. At Strunjan, I recommend the Salinera hotel and apartments, overlooking salt lagoons. Here you can enjoy a glass of wine on the balcony as the sun sets to the sound of Nightingales and Scops Owl.

Hotels and apartments: all those mentioned above can be found by a Google search.



Otherwise, try www.slovenia.info .

There are very good 1:75,000 maps of Slovenia, published by Kartografija. It is probably best to buy them once you get there.

Butterfly Atlas: in 2012, the long-awaited *Atlas of Butterflies of Slovenia* was published. Rudi Verovnik is the lead author, together with Franc Rebeusek and Matjaz Jez. Each species has a detailed distribution map, photograph and descriptive text with an English summary (edited by me). It is a hefty tome of 456 pages (A4).

The Atlas can be purchased from Pemberley Books. Hardback £55.

<http://www.pemberleybooks.com/product/atlas-of-butterflies-lepidoptera-rhopalocera-of-slovenia/25068/>

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