

Feature: Venice, Soca river, Bled  
Author: Yana Ptashkina, SAGA Institute  
Photo: SAGA Institute and hotels  
Title: Green fields about a city adrift

Arriving to this majestic city, it's a climax on the spot. Yes I was told, the best way to enter it is aboard a water craft navigating into its bowels from the blue Adriatic waters. Arriving to Venezia is spectacular no matter the timing. Mine was late night, almost midnight. Amidst Bienalle in the works, canals and streets were deserted and an entrance to my overnight accommodation quite well hidden away. Behind the corner, in a narrow alley, in a dead end. But when the door opened, I knew instantly, I was there. Another five star hotel?

This piece of living art opened its doors not long ago, only in 2009, but already captured the imagination of trend setting people all over the world. Even Johnny Deep and his crew thought it was the place to stay for two months while filming a movie. A palace on the Grand Canal boasts only 16 rooms and 6 suites while the premise is laid out with no less than 189 custom made back lit mirrors. Such was the wish of its designer. Palazzina Grassi is the only hotel in Italy designed by Phillippe Starck and quickly upon arrival one understands the value of this custom blueprint property. With two entries, none of which disclose any name of the hotel, one feels at a very private residence, a former nobleman's villa. While leaving the pictures to tell more than words, one notes the low light atmosphere, with Venetian glass design and modern touches to make sure a stay is comfortable as well.

Due to a late arrival, waking up wasn't accomplished quite in a timely fashion. Nevertheless, breakfast is served whenever and wherever in the hotel. So this is goodbye to "you've missed your breakfast Sir, it's 10:01 o'clock". After breakfast, I just got lost in the many streets and canals that the floating city has to offer. Nonetheless, time always runs to quick and I made sure I wasn't late for an evening Prosecco at the Palazzetto Pisani. Nicolo Bortolato, the general manager of this exquisite property invited me for a sunset from the terrace. And this place has history, in nobility. The last Doge of Venice presided in this villa and just recently it was transformed into a hotel with just a few rooms. The biggest one that of the late Doge of course. Needless to say, this is a well-kept secret and usually people who are looking for a lot of privacy stay here. If I told you who slept here, I would have to be terminated.

Saying goodbye to Palazzetto and hello to the newest and most chic right on the St. Mark's Square, the newly reopened Restaurant Ai Quadri for dinner. This has been one of the most publicized refurbishments in the past year and immediately upon walking into the top floor space, one is relieved. It hasn't been turned into another Le Calandre, that of the Alajmo family, but all the authenticity has been preserved to impose a proud heritage of a landmark more than 200 years in existence. Brothers Raffaele and Massimiliano, the latter being the youngest 3 star Michelin chef at the upper mentioned Le Calandre, have turned this place into a light shining venue that it deserves. On the lower floor Caffè Quadri changes menus by the time of day, as for the restaurant, menus are well established and focused with plates incorporating Venetian flavors and bringing them to life of the guest tastes. I do of course encourage you to reserve well in advance and of course to arrive on time.

As the road started to take tight turns and air was getting thinner and thinner, the surroundings grew into the greenest of green. Venice was far behind and I was about to enter into an oasis of nature, a mere 100km from where the gondolas reside. This was the valley of Soca river. But before I could reach the valley and its emerald green river, a day turned into an afternoon and an electric gate on top of a mountain mysteriously opened. It was heaven. Although on this occasion with a case sensitive capital H. Or as it's called in the tiny but beautiful country of Slovenia, "Nebesa". Almost a thousand meters above sea level is a selection of individual four houses with terraces and breathtaking views all inclusive either for those who take a shorter road to the valley and incidentally stumble upon here, or for those who plan ahead and envision a relaxing few days. For the doors are open to everyone. An award winning architectural design is ideal for a two person sharing, while a larger common manor is, besides hosting a sauna, swimming pool,

dinning, gym and a kitchen, full of local gourmet delicacies. Homemade jams, mountain cheeses, salami, a leg of prosciutto, dried apples, wines, anything you desire. And it's all included in the price. This is just another way of making you feel as free as you can be, without having to think about everyday city routines. As the property is being perched over an overhang, enjoy your morning Sport Musli on the terrace, while below you can spot the deer feasting on the grass. It's beyond lovely and adorable; it's being connected with nature. While scoping at the valley and all it has to offer from the top is one thing, a 15 minute drive reveals much more. As for an example one of the best restaurants in the region, called Casa Franko.

Even in the colder months, sitting on the terrace is inviting as it's all surrounded by glass while fine cloths hang from above. It's never empty here, but even with all tables taken, Valter will find a place for you somehow. A subtle blend of elegant and familial is what wins your heart before sitting down. But it's the food that completely wins you over and addicts the senses for years to come. I guess it's Ana in the kitchen and her bespoke magic she never tires from. Just a quick glance at the menu reveals a dilemma on the horizon... "Asparagus, white and green. In tempura. Silene chlorifolia and black truffle foam, bacon powder". Imagine the impulses in your brain while consuming letters and words, entry after entry, somehow selecting the meals becomes your most challenging task. Or you can, just like me, leave it to the recommendation of the staff while a degustation feast unfolds before your eyes. A variety of local wines of highest quality that come with this ritual are chosen precisely enough to merge seamlessly with the portions on the plates. However, you will not be shorted of your dignity having to leave on all four due to the abundance of food. I could say, the portions are just right. And this is what rounds off this experience so well, to leave you with enough force back in Heaven to peek at the starlit sky just before you jaunt into your bed. Besides, you will want to enjoy a light breakfast, by the way you prepare it yourself, just because of the curvy road ahead should you decide to spice the day up with some activities. Mind you, a rafting for example. Only to be considered among the ten best in the world. A chance you don't want to pass up for nothing. Welcome to the true gem of the region. River Soca.

Not more than a week ahead of the traditional eco drift, Goran Kavc was full into preparations to help keep this class I. river clean as he received it from his ancestors. For sure, you can drink water right from the river. Yet Goran, the head of Soca Rafting, an authority adrenaline company for river activities, took his time to ease me of all my fears. Riding with me is their number one guide, with "only" 7 thousand runs in the past 20 years. The water temperature was at around 11 degrees Celsius which is why we all received full protective and thermal clothing. Because, as I later discovered, you never know when an instructor will splash you on the run. With green water underneath and a canyon surrounding you for the next 2 hours, you don't feel just close to nature, you feel like being one with it. Like feeding strawberries to Bambi. Before the major currents we stopped on the shore to divide the rowing signals between us and off we went. Water splashes while heart beat doubling in time, but never as much getting close to fear. After completing the run, we walked up the stream for a hundred meters and let ourselves go into the current. Cold but sweet, especially with the last summer rays gazing at us. Next time we promised ourselves for a treat of canyoning. Which is quite the opposite of what I found to be a very attractive activity on the other side of the Julian Alps at a pristine lake of Bled.

If Bled were set somewhere in France or Italy, it would have gained its world fame more than a century ago. But here in Slovenia, it seems like it's only waking up from a winter sleep. Remember a setting out of the Oceans Twelve, on the coast of Lago di Como. If Steven Soderbergh knew of lake Bled, he would have without a doubt changed the location for this. Imagine a medieval castle high up on a cliff above glacier blue water. An ellipse form of a lake not more than 3 kilometers across and a small island with a church in the middle of it. Leading to a church on top are 99 steps. A perfect exercise for a newlywed husband to prove the lady chose well. As for in Hollywood, a groom carries a bride into the bedroom, whilst here, to the top of the stairs. And set in the third part of this triangle is a monumental hotel Toplice. Covered in green leaves, with its balconies so close to the shore they're almost above the waterline and tiny wooden boats parked front of the terrace. If Venice has its gondoliers, Bled has its Pletnars. Let this escapade begin.

It doesn't mean that if I never visited Bled and the luxury renowned Toplice hotel, which stood here in one form or another for over 150 years, that none of the world socialites have. Arthur Miller, Vivian Leigh, Paul

McCartney just to name a few. I wouldn't even be surprised if Elisabeth Taylor and Richard Burton stayed here while being guests of President Tito. But unlike in Ischia where the turbulent couple had a fight and Richard found all his clothes in the sea below the Regina Isabella, here they might have gone along just great and thus the story never making it to the headlines.

Two things among others are remarkable for Toplice. First, that its founder in 1931 was obviously a very courageous woman, to base its hotel business on thermal water underneath the hotel with a temperature of mere 22 degrees. Second, the contents of the pool are emptied every evening and fresh thermal water being poured in all night, making it one of the cleanest freshest swimming pool experiences on the planet. That aside, open the doors of your room to the balcony and hold your breath. Four stories high in a suite with almost 10 meters of terrace space and a view extraordinaire. The castle and the island at the tip of your hands. And Pletna boats slowly moving along the surface as if they were toys. For Alenka Bester, one of the hotel executives, managing the image of this property has been like a dream come true. And I do understand her. She was quite sad I couldn't try the virtues of her chef in the swanky hotel restaurant, as I've booked dinner in the most renowned spot with a jetsetter name. But the foxy lady left a message at the concierge that a petite pleiad of appetizers is awaiting to nourish my senses just before dinner. And so did my last evening start.

A short walk from Toplice and an entry to the restaurant I've heard so much about. Topolino. By the look of the interior, even if it could shout, one would never tell this being a domicile of a maestro cook who keeps the hungry alive. Almost like the local Robin Hood and Marianne, they are Zoran and Anita, the couple that make it all happen. The Grande Dame is dressed to kill and I almost get an impression she has to like me in order I am admitted to the restaurant. I am as if chaperoned to the diner and offered to choose among the three tables. With the whole room kept for me. We quickly establish common women ground and the menu is set forth in a blink of an eye. Champagne for starters, then Zoran brings each dish personally to the table and explains the whereabouts. He is a complete contrary to Anita. Very calm and his eyes are alive when he speaks about the food he's just prepared. I could hardly say there is great experimentation with his approach, but it's all very much based on reinventing the local food with local suppliers and all natural ingredients. Making it a strong and passionate expression of whatever might cross the table in form of spinach or chocolate. Or combined. It comes as a dazzling surprise in these modern times that Zoran isn't troubled to portray food as it once was. Tasteful and true.

Not so long ago, Bled celebrated its 800 years of existence. A glimpse at the stars from my balcony that evening and they seem the same and as plentiful as from anywhere else in the northern hemisphere. One easily notes that nature was generous to this region. With much given, little taken. But only 200 kilometers away, people built a city out of the sea with their bare hands. With little given, but much taken. If only some would learn.