



TRAVEL SLOVENIA

Two of a kind

Natasha Bazika falls for the unsung seaside towns of Piran and Portorož.

Slovenia's Riviera is a 46-kilometre slip of coastline, book-ended by Italy's Trieste and Croatia's Istrian Peninsula. It is easy to miss unless someone tells you it exists, and even then, arriving feels slightly improbable.

The road from Trieste narrows and twists through a cathedral of stone pines. For a while, it seems unlikely that the sea is anywhere nearby. Then the coastline comes into focus: pastel mansions appearing between the trees as the road slips into the seaside towns of Piran and Portorož, separated by just two kilometres of salt air.

The former is older and more photogenic, its Venetian good looks doing the cultural heavy lifting. But Portorož is more polished; a promenade town of spa appointments and yachts swaying in the

marina. It's anchored by grand hotels like the Kempinski Palace Portorož.

Opened in 1910 in the final years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it was one of the largest and most fashionable hotels on the Adriatic at the time. While it may no longer be the largest, it remains one of the loveliest, characterised by its 'Habsburger gelb' facade, a signature 19th-century shade of yellow somewhere between ochre and sunlight that signalled a connection to the crown. Inside, the atmosphere is distinctly Viennese, defined by grand lobbies and gilded details.

To understand the polish of Portorož, you have to look at its geology. Benedictine monks settled here in the 13th century, naming it Portorož, or 'Port of Roses'. Salt

harvested from the Sečovlje salt pans to the south was traded across the Mediterranean, funding the Venetian palaces of Piran and, later, the grand hotels of Portorož. Even now, workers harvest the salt by hand, a defiantly slow-motion industry in a town of luxury cars and casinos.

Today, that legacy plays out in the salt rooms and luxury hotels along a promenade of beach clubs and long jetties. We stop at Piranske Soline, a salt shop opposite the hotel, to taste dark chocolate sharpened with fleur de sel.

The plan is to return to the hotel for dinner. Restaurant Sophia, named for Sophia Loren, who brought *la dolce vita* to the town in the 1950s, is one of the town's few Michelin-starred addresses and comes

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Need to know

Stay Kempinski Palace Portorož from \$250 a night.
Dine Restaurant Sophia, five-course seafood and meat menu from \$160, vegan menu \$105.
Spa Thalasso Spa Lepa Vida, an open-air spa in the Secovlje Salina Nature Park, offers mud wraps, brine baths and massages. From \$40 (Open only in summer).

well recommended. But across the road, my husband and I come across a street festival celebrating 140 years of tourism in Portorož, a coincidence so neatly timed it feels scripted.

The main event is a fashion show, a parade of resortwear tracing a century of beach style, from silhouettes of the 1920s to today. We meander between the stalls, hosted by local mainstays like the Kempinski, offering sparkling wine and cheeseboards. It is here that I discover *krofi*, traditional fried doughnut balls sometimes drizzled with chocolate or pistachio sauce. The local consensus is the best in town are to be found at Cafe Central, which last year scooped an "innovation" prize for its Rosalina *krofi*, a confection made with roses, red fruit and white chocolate.

We head to Piran the next morning. While you can walk the coastal path in 40 minutes, rain makes the eight-minute drive more appealing.

Tartini Square, a grand marble oval, functions as Piran's living room. It is named for the violinist Giuseppe Tartini, who was born in Piran in 1692 and composed one of the most technically demanding violin pieces ever written, *The Devil's Trill* sonata. A statue of the composer was erected in 1896 to mark the bicentenary of his birth, and now stands at the centre of the plaza, which was the town's harbour before it was filled in during the late 19th century.

Without cars, the square belongs to the locals. Girls rollerblade over polished Istrian stone and a woman snaps laundry between green-shuttered windows.

Piran, built on a narrow peninsula, is bleached by sea salt with buildings stacked up the hillside. We climb the 15th-century walls to see the town so tightly packed that the sea presses in from every side, the opposite of the open promenade in Portorož. Italy is a smudge of light to the west, and Croatia is a dark ridge to the south. In between sits this improbable slip of coastline, which has spent centuries perfecting a vibe that is half grand empire, half salt-crusted fishing village. **L&L**

Main: Tartini Square is the beating heart of Piran. Below: Kempinski Palace Portorož was once one of the largest hotels on the Adriatic.



Below: Poolside at the Mondrian Gold Coast. PHOTO: JUSTIN NICHOLAS



Electrifying arrivals

The wonders of a long, scenic drive hit differently during a fuel crisis, which is why three Beckons properties (previously Baillie Lodges) have partnered with Polestar Australia to offer transfers by electric vehicle. Guests at Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island, The Louise in the Barossa Valley and Silky Oaks Lodge in the Daintree can now be chauffeured to and from the airport or into town in the quiet luxury of a fully electric Polestar 3.

Cruise mode

The world's first hydrogen-powered cruise ship has celebrated its "float out", touching water for the first time at the Fincantieri shipyard in Ancona, Italy last month. Viking Libra is a Scandi-chic small ship that will accommodate 998 guests across 499 all-veranda cabins when it is delivered in November. Running partially on liquefied hydrogen and fuel cells, it will be capable of operating with zero emissions, which Viking chief executive Torstein Hagen says is part of the luxury cruise line's raison d'être.

"From the beginning, our approach to ship design has focused on reducing fuel consumption," he says.

The ship will spend its inaugural 2026-2027 season in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe. Itineraries include a new eight-day Amalfi Coast, Africa & Iberia sailing, from \$4045 a person (by "Africa", Viking means a stop in the Tunisian port city of Tunis). **L&L**

TRAVEL CONCIERGE

Best foot forward

Anna McCooe explores savvy getaways for fuel-crunched times.

This month at the *Life & Leisure* travel concierge desk, the challenge is more existential than ever. Instead of where to go and what to do, the question during a global fuel crisis is whether you should travel at all. Our answer is yes, naturally, but with a future-proofing caveat to head out cautiously and with consideration. Because if we learnt anything from past crises, it's that travel – and the wellbeing that comes with it – is not discretionary.

A sure path ahead
In 2026 certainty might be the new luxury. It's a rarity Australian Walking Holidays is trading on by offering locked-in departures for many of its small-group hikes this winter. "In uncertain times it is nice to know some things remain guaranteed," says Phil Wyndham, the group's general manager.

Wyndham is acknowledging an uncomfortable truth: just because a tour is booked, doesn't mean it's going ahead. "But travellers are looking for reassurance and the ability to book with confidence," says Wyndham.

Confirmed departures include NSW's Snowy Alpine Walk, Tasmania's Flinders Island and the Larapinta Trail, in the country's red centre. On many of these trips, the company is also offering a \$0 deposit to give guests the chance to secure a spot while they put the rest of their plans in place.

Join the club

Just as the prospect of a design-led city staycation starts to feel even more appropriate, Ennismore, the lifestyle arm of French hotel giant Accor, has launched its membership program in Australia.



HOTEL ITALY

Meet me in Venice

An eminent family establishment has had a five-star glow-up, writes Lee Tulloch.

Even in Venice, it's rare to find a family-owned hotel that has survived for five generations. It's even rarer for that stay to have a spa with a hammam and jacuzzi, a presidential suite and a rooftop bar for all-day drinking. But Hotel Gabrielli, which reopened last year after a five-year restoration project, encompasses such modern-day amenities while still blending in among the historic buildings along Riva degli Schiavoni, overlooking the city's lagoon.

The story of the family hotel begins in 1856, when Andreas Perkhofner, a soldier in the army of the reigning Habsburg empire, opened a courtyard restaurant on the site of a 14th-century palazzo. He served schnitzel and strudel for the influx of Austrians who had arrived in the city, and advertised his restaurant in the German and Czech newspapers.

Over the years, the Perkhofners acquired more buildings along the Riva degli Schiavoni and Riva Ca' di Dio, combining them to create the Hotel Gabrielli Sandwirth, named after the noble Gabrielli family who owned the original palazzo. Its guests included luminaries such as Sigmund Freud and Franz Kafka, who wrote love letters to his fiancée Felice Bauer from his room.

With its distinctive Moorish quadrifora windows, the hotel became a feature of the promenade as recognisable as the grand Hotel Danieli, several doors closer to Piazza San Marco. Gabrielli's terracotta pink facade and lobby even featured in Nicolas Roeg's celebrated 1973 film *Don't Look Now*, where the grieving couple played by Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland stay.

Today, the hotel is owned by sisters Francesca and Johanna Perkhofner, who embarked on an ambitious restoration project after the site was flooded in 2019. Italy's Starhotels Group took over the management in 2022, adding the hotel to its Collezione portfolio.

Much of the Gabrielli, which is an amalgamation of seven historic buildings



(four used for the hotel and three housing luxury apartments), is strictly heritage listed, so the restoration of the original parquet floors, marble cladding, ornate beams, Istrian stone columns and Murano chandeliers was a meticulous undertaking.

The room count has been reduced from 105 to 66, elevating the four-star hotel to five.

To reflect the changing moods of the lagoon outside, Milanese designer Andrea Auletta has swathed the hotel's communal spaces in jewel green, teal and sage-coloured fabrics by Rubelli and Fortuny, and given the interior a soft glamour that doesn't undermine the intimacy of a much-loved family-run hotel.

"It's a new age, and we want to welcome new and modern guests," says Francesca, who was born in the hotel. "It's a very elegant and grand hotel, but it's not pretentious or snobbish." She adds: "It's discreet towards the guests, [as well as] beautiful with the views and the light."

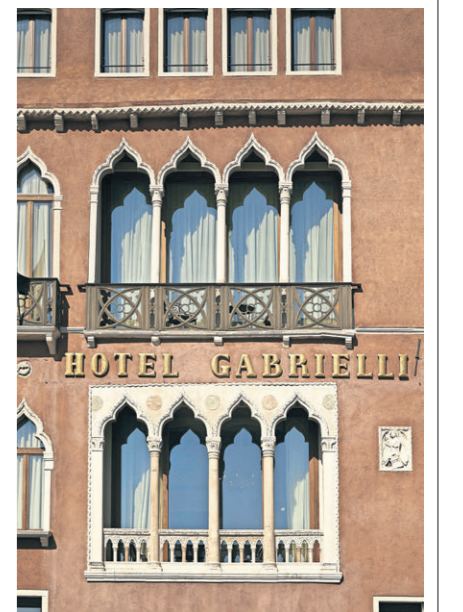
Francesca's strong emotional connection

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Need to know

Rates From \$1180 a night for a Prestige room.

Clockwise from main: The hotel overlooks the San Marco basin; Hotel Gabrielli's facade was featured in Nicolas Roeg's celebrated 1973 film *Don't Look Now*; The Felice al Gabrielli restaurant; The decor of the Lagoon View suites leans traditional opulent; a palette of jewel-tone greens can be found throughout the hotel.



windows framed in sweeping grey-green taffeta curtains. I can see all the way from the Lido to the campanile on Piazza San Marco. Kafka's room, I discover, was the one next door. I can understand how the views inspired love letters, especially the sunsets that blaze across the sky and gild the water.

A large mirror by the bed reflects the lagoon and, even in December, the room shimmers with light. The decor is sumptuous, with a curvaceous, fringed grey velvet sofa, timber floors and headboards cut in Gothic Venetian shapes. The Lagoon View Suite below mine, which has an open-air, colonnaded terrace, is the one to book.

For an even more splendid outlook, Hotel Gabrielli's rooftop terrace has 360-degree views and is open to the public for all-day dining and drinks. If that's not elevated enough, the rambling, 85-square-metre Presidential Suite has a private terrace.

The hotel's spa is small at 100 square metres but equipped with a jacuzzi, Turkish bath, sauna and a multisensory shower; and there is an adjoining fitness area. These amenities are available for guests to use without booking treatments.

The hotel's restaurant, Felice al Gabrielli (named after Kafka's aforementioned lover), is run by executive chef Mirko Pistorello, who prioritises local supply chains for ingredients. The wine cellar and tasting room, too, showcase Italy and the Veneto region's notable wines and liqueurs. Meals are also served in the Great Court, an atrium dotted with potted palms. For breakfast, there's a buffet and an à la carte menu, including an exceptional array of house-baked cakes and breads.

The adjoining K Lounge Bar is another nod to Kafka. The cocktails here are intriguing and the drinks menu makes for a fun read. One eucalyptus-infused vodka concoction is named Fantasma, after the ghost "known for scaring passersby on the Via Garibaldi".

K Lounge spills onto an outdoor terrace that serves traditional dishes such as *gancia di vitello* (slow-cooked veal). Most tourists don't come this far, so it's pleasant sitting under green umbrellas watching the *vaporetto* (water buses) churn by.

I wonder what soldier Andreas might think of his little inn now. Under the guidance of his descendants, it has transformed into one of Venice's loveliest hotels. **L&L**

The writer was a guest of Hotel Gabrielli.