



# » TRAVEL EUROPE

## MASQUERADE

# Pursued by visions of demons

Famed for its carnival masks, Ptuj is the face of Slovenian culture

CLAUDIA CAPOS  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

PTUJ, SLOVENIA—We spotted our first kurent while exploring the ancient nooks and crannies of Ptuj castle high atop a hill overlooking the Drava River. The mythical demon was fierce-looking, with long horns, a red serpentine tongue and a sheepskin-covered body. Not something you'd want to run into in a dark alley. Fortunately, this one was stuffed.

In olden times, superstitious peasants believed kurenti possessed magical powers to scare off evil spirits and chase away the winter.

While the legendary folklore has faded, kurenti still roam the streets of Ptuj.

Every February, during the Kurentovanje, or Kurent Festival, residents don carnival masks portraying kurenti, bears and wolves and parade through town. Their fascination with maskare has earned Slovenia's oldest city a reputation as the national centre of traditional masquerade.

This ancient Slavic pagan rite of spring and fertility heralds the start of the festival season, which fills statue-studded squares and tree-canopied parks with art, music, local food and wine and sporting events. Last year, Ptuj and several nearby cities were saluted as the 2012 European Capital of Culture.

Cradled in the northeastern corner of Slovenia within easy driving distance of Austria and Hungary, Ptuj (pronounced pitTOOee) has long been a crossroads of commerce, a wellspring of culture and a target of foreign conquest.

Settled in the Stone Age, the area succumbed to successive waves of invaders, the Celts, Romans, Huns, Slavs, Hungarians and French. It

was a bloody battleground in the 16th century during the Ottoman wars in Europe. After World War I, Ptuj was incorporated into the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, which merged into Yugoslavia.

Following the Axis Powers' invasion in 1941, the city was occupied by Nazi Germany until the end of World War II. Turbulent events in the 1980s and 1990s, including the death of strongman Josip Tito, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and Slovenia's declaration of independence, freed Ptuj from its troubled past. Slovenia joined the European Union in 2004.

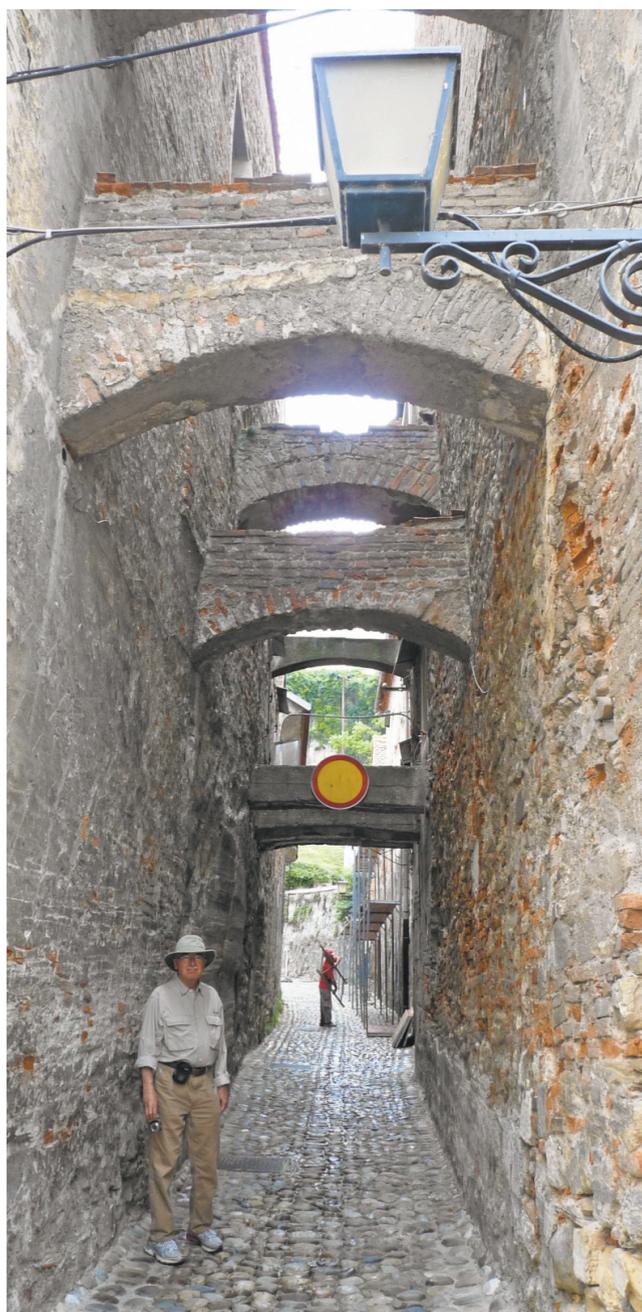
Few of these battle scars are visible today. On the morning, we arrive in Ptuj, bright sunshine glints off shop windows and caresses couples seated at an outdoor café. We park at the base of Ptuj castle and walk up the hill through the decorative stone entrance.

From the ramparts we command a view of red-tile-roofed houses, onion-domed churches and the town's signature clock tower, framed by the pale blue Drava River. The archbishops of Salzburg built the sturdy Medieval fortress in the 11th and 12th centuries and leased it to the Lords of Ptuj, who occupied it for 300 years.

The castle now houses the Ptuj Regional Museum, which transports visitors back through the centuries with its extensive collections of artwork, armaments, musical instruments and carnival masks.

A small doorway leads from the castle yard to a series of rickety wooden staircases cascading down to Ptuj's historical old town. For several hours, we wander through ancient stone-arched alleyways and serpentine streets lined with pastel-hued cafes and shops displaying Rogaska crystal and European fashions.

The gift store inside the town tower harbours a trove of Slovene souvenirs. In halting English, a lanky clerk proudly showed us intricately



Ptuj's historic old town is honeycombed with ancient stone-arched alleyways that lend an air of mystery to it. Top right, traditional kurent.

hand-painted goose and chicken eggs, jars of peanuts marinated in honey and bottled Slovenian wine.

We stop to admire the stained-glass windows in the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul and the religious art in the Minorite Monastery before we buy ice-cream cones and saunter down to the river.

When a sprinkle of rain becomes a downpour, we duck into the Mara-

thon Bar for cappuccino and toasted cheese-and-ham sandwiches. A raven-tressed woman near us shares a few historical facts: "This was once called Pig Street because artisans skinned pigs and made goods from the hides. Ptuj served as a commercial gateway to the area and charged a tax on merchants who passed through," she says.

Tanners plied their trade in the



## JUST THE FACTS

**ARRIVING** Ptuj is 138 km from Ljubljana's Brnik Airport. Air France, Air Canada, Austrian Airlines and Lufthansa offer connecting flights from Toronto to Ljubljana. Rental cars are available at the airport.

**DINING** Ribic Restaurant, Dravska ulica 9. Dine on fresh fish at sunset on the restaurant's outdoor riverside patio. Entrees are \$10 to \$30.

Amadeus Café Restaurant, Presernova ulica 36. The cozy café specializes in Styrian soups and chicken dishes and homemade pies. Entrees are \$5 to \$15.

**SLEEPING** Mitra Hotel, Presernova ulica 6. The hotel occupies an 18th-century house and features 29 rooms, three suites, a coffeehouse and a wine cellar. A double room with breakfast starts at \$128 in low season and \$140 in high season.

Once Hostel, Zagrebska 10. The 11-room family-run hostel offers comfortable accommodations. A double room with breakfast starts at \$63.

**DOING** Ptuj castle's elegant furnishings reflect the privileged lifestyle of the Lords of Ptuj. The historical collections of the Ptuj Regional Museum are among Slovenia's finest. Tickets are \$10 each. pok-muzej-ptuj.si

**WEBSURFING** ptuj.info, ptuj-tourism.si, slovenia.info

Swine Market, or Leather Quarter, from the Middle Ages until just after World War II.

As we sprint over rain-slicked cobblestones back toward the castle, a flute's lilting notes float through an open window. The music is a haunting reminder of the centuries-old heritage and traditions that have survived and flourished in Ptuj against overwhelming odds.

## ARTHUR FROMMER'S PICKS

# A social experiment, a city of masks . . . .

### STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN

Although Stockholm is replete with museums, art galleries, opera and theatre houses, seaside excursion boats and a Renaissance warship (the "Wasa") rescued from the depths, not to mention smorgasbord dining places, those aren't its chief attractions; its futuristic government policies, social security schemes, educational practices and social welfare protections are, whether you agree with them or not. Pester your friends for names and addresses of English-speaking Stockholm residents whom they know, mail invitations to those Stockholmers to dine with you at your expense, and you'll get a careful of comments about Swedish life, both pro and con, in the course of a fascinating evening. Then head to the Swedish Institute in the heart of Stockholm to pick up English-lan-

guage books and pamphlets on Sweden's social experiments, and you'll return home with new knowledge, widened horizons.

### OXFORD, ENGLAND

You'll be entranced by a day-trip to Oxford, which is easily reached by train from London. You can wander through the historic colleges of this hallowed university city, which is a place of "dreaming spires," to quote a much-repeated phrase. You can walk through its parks along Thames-side settings. But better than a day is a week of the "Oxford Experience" in the giant, medieval, Christ Church College built by Henry VIII: The Experience is a learning program for adults of all ages, who live for a week in a student residence flanking the "quad" (quadrangle) of the historic structure and take their meals (surpris-



In a moment of reflection: A masked reveller just off Saint Mark's Square during the Venetian Carnival in Venice. Take a tour and learn more.

ingly tasty) in the immense, vaulted "Harry Potter Dining Hall" featured in the popular films. You attend your choice of scores of classroom presentations on history, literature, politics or science, as

taught by an Oxford "don" (teaching master) in a July-August week that will remain brilliant in your memory. Get the details at "Oxford Experience" in any Internet search engine.

### ROME, FLORENCE, VENICE, ITALY

The operation in these cities of walking tours by Context Travel has added a new dimension of excitement and interest to the more familiar rewards of tourism. Unlike the well-meaning, but self-appointed "experts" who generally conduct such strolls, Context Travel's tour guides are almost always M.A.s, and occasionally Ph.D.s, in history, architecture and art, who lead small groups of never more than six in what can only be called "thematic seminars," wholly different in depth and profundity from standard motorcoach tours. Participants pursue such typical subjects as "Bernini and Borromini, Rivals in Art," "The Daily Life of Renaissance Florence," and "Casanova's Venice." While tours can cost as much as \$85 to \$90 per person, they last from three to four hours, much longer than the normal variety.

A "Context Tour" operated by dedicated scholars will long remain in your memory. Reserve in advance.

Arthur Frommer is the founder of the Frommer's Travel Guide book series.

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