



discovering SLOVENIA

Nestled beneath the Alps, just to the east of Italy, is the small nation of Slovenia. Google it, and you'll swoon over postcard-pretty images of snowy peaks, lakeside villages, and lush countryside. It is the sort of pastoral paradise that fuels farmgirl fantasies, and we just happen know a native who grew up on a Slovenian farm and now guides American travel groups on adventurous tours of her homeland.

And, as it happens, she lives just down the road from MaryJanesFarm in Pullman, Washington.

Meet Mateja Loncar, owner of Mateja Travel. Mateja (pronounced MAH-tay-yah) moved to the United States in 2013 with her husband, a professor at Pullman's Washington State University.

Eager to put her master's and doctoral degrees in Kinesiology to work in her new community, Mateja began coaching youth sports in Pullman. The wide expanses of Washington welcomed her to pursue her favorite free time activities as well—biking, hiking, running, swimming, skiing, and playing tennis. Still, she found herself feeling homesick and longing for an even greater challenge. Combining her

love of athleticism and travel, Mateja launched a business organizing "active holidays" for American travelers. Her signature expeditions include lots of physical adventure as well as indulgent rest stops at some of Slovenia's most bountiful organic farmsteads.

We were lucky to catch up with Mateja before she set out for the summer in Slovenia, and she was thrilled to share a glimpse of her country with us. To kick off the conversation, we asked Mateja what makes Slovenia a special travel destination?

"Slovenia is a small country with a big heart," Mateja told us. "This tiny nation borders four countries: Austria, Hungary, Croatia, and Italy. In fact, you will rarely find yourself too far away from a border crossing. Slovenia

offers amazing diversity in culinary, cultural, social, and historic customs. It is one of the world's most eco-friendly destinations, as well as one of the world's safest."

Compared to the sprawling rural landscape of the Pacific Northwest here in the U.S., Mateja describes Slovenia as a marvelous microcosm of land and people. "Slovenia has a population of 2 million, yet is 10 times smaller than Idaho or Washington. A country the size of New Jersey thus combines urban and rural settings with many small villages that range in size from a handful of homesteads to a few hundred houses—while also yielding 58 percent of its area to forests. Slovenia is a very green country!"

Mateja was born in a village with 11

homesteads at the foot of the Alps. Her family grew their own food and raised calves, pigs, and poultry on a small farm only 25 miles from Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana.

"Farms and fields in Slovenia are much smaller and integrated into villages rather than the vast, almost endless fields I see in the Northwest, let alone the Great Plains."

Today, Slovenia is still home to many small farms. "Some of them are 'tourist farms,' meaning they provide accommodation and organic farm-to-table food. Some even offer guests the opportunity to assist in everyday chores, or simply enjoy the fresh air, honest food, and clean water," Mateja explained.

Two of Mateja's guided trips, the Back to Nature Dynamo and Active Lounging tours, offer opportunities to stay at different farms throughout the country, such as the stunning Šenk's Homestead in Jezersko (enjoy a virtual visit to this fabulously picturesque farm at Senkovadomacija.si/en).

With organic farming flourishing in her homeland, we asked Mateja if Slovenians engage in public farmers'



markets like ours in the U.S., and the scene sounds quite familiar: "Many towns in Slovenia offer open markets, which operate either every day or just on weekends. Farmers and artisans sell their produce and products there. Some operate year-round, while others are seasonal. Even Ljubljana, the capital, has a prominent market where farmers and florists from the surrounding region sell their crops," she described. "Fun fact: Since 2009, a network of automatic milk dispensers has been operating around the country. Farmers from local dairy farms sell their (continued)



boathouse/Slovenia.info/en, farm photos/Senkovadomacija.si/en



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fresh, raw, organic milk at 'milk ATMs,' so if I crave fresh milk at any hour of the day, I can go to the dispenser and refill my bottle!"

According to Mateja, the Slovenian government actively supports organic farming by providing financial and educational support to existing organic farms, as well as farms that want to switch to organic farming.

In fact, from 2006 through 2016, the number of **organic farms** in Slovenia (a country the size of New Jersey) grew from 1,867 to 3,518.

"On a related interesting note, the capital, Ljubljana, was awarded the Official European Green Capital Award in 2016, and Slovenia was chosen by *National Geographic* as a leader in sustainable tourism the following year," Mateja said. "I like to think this respect for the environment is one of the reasons the government supports organic farming and related initiatives. They try to keep Slovenia and its natural resources as clean as possible. Did you know Slovenia

has made access to drinking water a constitutional right? The amendment to the constitution was passed in 2016 in an effort to protect water resources from excessive exploitation."

These descriptions of her homeland make it sound positively utopian, and it's easy to see why Mateja would not only want to return year after year, but to share it with fellow travelers.

"Despite its small size, Slovenia has a very diverse landscape that spans from the Alps with gorgeous rivers and lakes, to the rolling hills and vineyards of Styria, to the remnants of the ancient Pannonian Sea and natural springs in the fertile Pannonian Plain, to the Karst Plateau with its numerous caves, to

the Slovenian coast, with beautiful medieval towns. You can reach any of these regions within a two-hour drive," Mateja shared with pride. "Each of these regions hosts a road-running event—a marathon or half-marathon—which allows visitors to see and experience all those beautiful sights as participants, volunteers, or even just spectators. For those who prefer hiking, there are perhaps even more options to enjoy scenic views while filling your lungs with fresh, pure Slovenian air."

Ready to lace up your boots and book a flight? Learn more about Mateja's unique travel agency or sign up for one of her exciting tours at Mateja-Travel.com.

photos/Slovenia.info/en



W^WOOOFing

TAKE A VACATION, SAVE THE PLANET



Nearly 22 years ago, a young woman called me and asked to shadow me at my Idaho farm and learn what I know. Turns out, that was the beginning of a movement—a migration of hearts and hands back toward the land. Over the years, since the "hayday" of my Pay Dirt Farm School (a non-profit learning program on my farm), I've witnessed our culture regaining roots with greater momentum. We're listening to the deep pastoral voice within each of us that longs to till soil and tend animals, to grow with our own hands the food that feeds our families. Perhaps best of all, if we don't understand exactly how to heed this voice, then we're eager to learn from those who do.

Everyone should know how to build a house, plant a fence post, grow food from seeds, milk a cow, and market their products and skills. Hands-on apprenticeship and farmstay programs around the globe are feeding people more than just food. They feed competence—and hope.

One of the best resources available for finding a farmstay or apprenticeship is World Wide Opportunities on

girl in flower field and hands photos/WWOOF.net

Organic Farms (WWOOF), an organization offering opportunities for people interested in learning about sustainable agriculture through volunteer experience. WWOOF matches volunteers with hundreds of organic farms in the U.S., including Hawaii and the Virgin Islands. If you're game for going abroad, the International WWOOF Association can connect you with opportunities around the globe. Some farm hosts encourage entire families to volunteer, so children can come along, too.

As a WWOOF volunteer, you get to travel dirt-cheap to an organic farm, where you work for room and board. Duties and schedules vary, but you will typically put in six-hour days with at least one day off per week. Whether you're milking goats, weeding gardens, creating an alternative energy system, or building a barn, you're guaranteed to find diverse hands-on learning opportunities. Most hosts are simple, self-sustaining family farms, so accommodations tend to be rustic, meals are fresh-off-the-farm, and the atmosphere is all about homegrown hospitality.

"Volunteers need to think about where in the world they would like to WWOOF and join the relevant national WWOOF group," shares Amanda Pearson, International Development Coordinator for the Federation of WWOOF Organisations. "A one-year membership of around \$40 gives you unlimited access to our list of hosts in a particular country. Thereafter, the rest is up to you. WWOOFing is very flexible/adaptable and suits the independent traveler."

So, if your idea of travel adventure includes working hard and getting dirty, WWOOFing might just be your ticket. For more information and to start an amazing journey back to the land, visit WWOOF.net.

