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Slovenia Awaits

Professional angling guide Andy Buckley spends a week in Slovenia to sample the stunning rivers and superb fly fishing this country has to offer.

It doesn't matter whether you're into glamorous long-haul adventures or short weekend breaks, finding fresh angling opportunities is becoming more difficult. For the angler looking for a long weekend of fishing, central Europe and the Balkan nations offer some of the finest fly fishing on the planet, but the more widely

known waters are becoming increasingly expensive and heavily pressured.

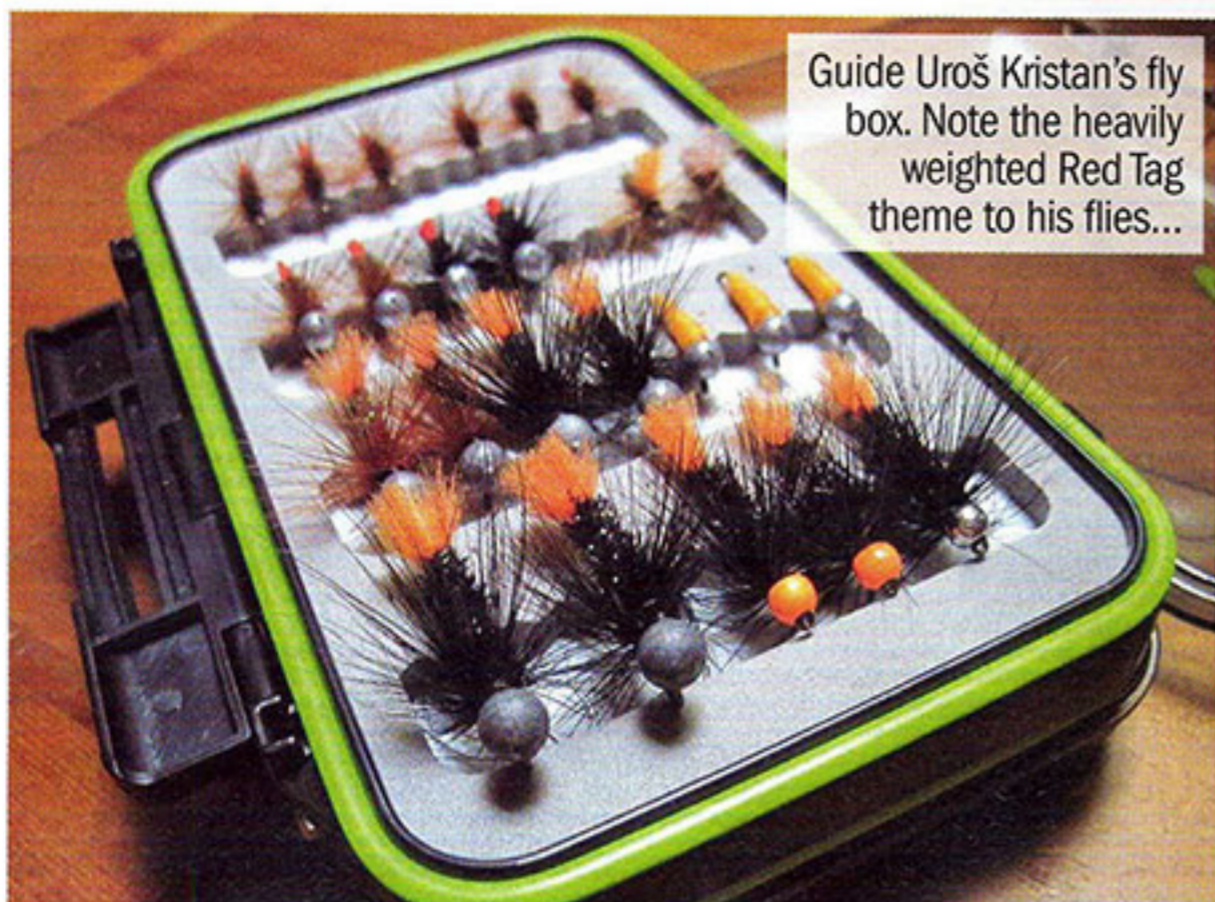
With quality fishing in such high demand the angler needs to look away from the crowds and think outside the box a little. Slovenia is certainly no secret to the game angler: rivers like the mighty Soca, Sava Bohinjka and Idrijca have long been

considered as world-class angling destinations but such recognition is attracting higher volumes of anglers.

For the adventurous flyfisher, though, this is excellent news as there are huge numbers of alternative river systems full of wild trout and grayling, which go unnoticed in the shadow of the more well-known waters.



The clear rivers of Slovenia are just a short flight away and this has made it a popular destination for the travelling fly angler.



Guide Uroš Kristan's fly box. Note the heavily weighted Red Tag theme to his flies...



... which the Bistra grayling seemed to like.

“ There is a wealth of information about Slovenian game angling. While it would be possible to make the journey alone I'd strongly recommend hiring a guide.”

Book A Guide

One such area is only 20 minutes from Slovenia's capital city, Ljubljana, so England youth team captain Will Robins and I hopped on a short flight to meet a world-renowned guide who had waxed lyrical about a district neither of us had heard of before. Travelling to Slovenia is a simple affair with regular flights departing from both London Stansted and Manchester and taking no more than a few hours.

Upon arrival we were met by Slovenian guide Uroš Kristan who was not only to be our mentor for the week but had offered to provide our transport for the duration of

our trip, negating the need for a hire car.

There is a wealth of information available about Slovenian game angling, and while it would be possible to make the journey alone I would strongly recommend hiring a guide. Many of the finest angling areas are very much off the beaten track and having gone through the ordeal of being lost on the side of a mountain on a previous trip, I can assure you that a little extra local knowledge will always equate to more time at the river and more fish on the bank.

Bistra First

Our transfer took us on a short

and scenic drive southwest of Ljubljana to our lodgings on the outskirts of Vrhnika. A small town rich in culture, its emblem is the Argo, the ship that Jason and his Argonauts sailed upon during their mythical mission to retrieve the Golden Fleece. Legend has it that it was at one of the springs of the Ljubljanica river that the Argonauts had to dismantle their vessel and carry it on their shoulders to the Adriatic Sea.

Vrhnika has 40,000 years of settlement history, including one of the oldest examples of a man-made wheel, which dates back some 5,000 years! A strikingly green and lush area, the many



The stunning Bistra River is well off the beaten track and, as you would expect, the fishing and scenery make up for the trek to fish it.

bridges around Vrhnika also hint to the huge number of angling opportunities in the area.

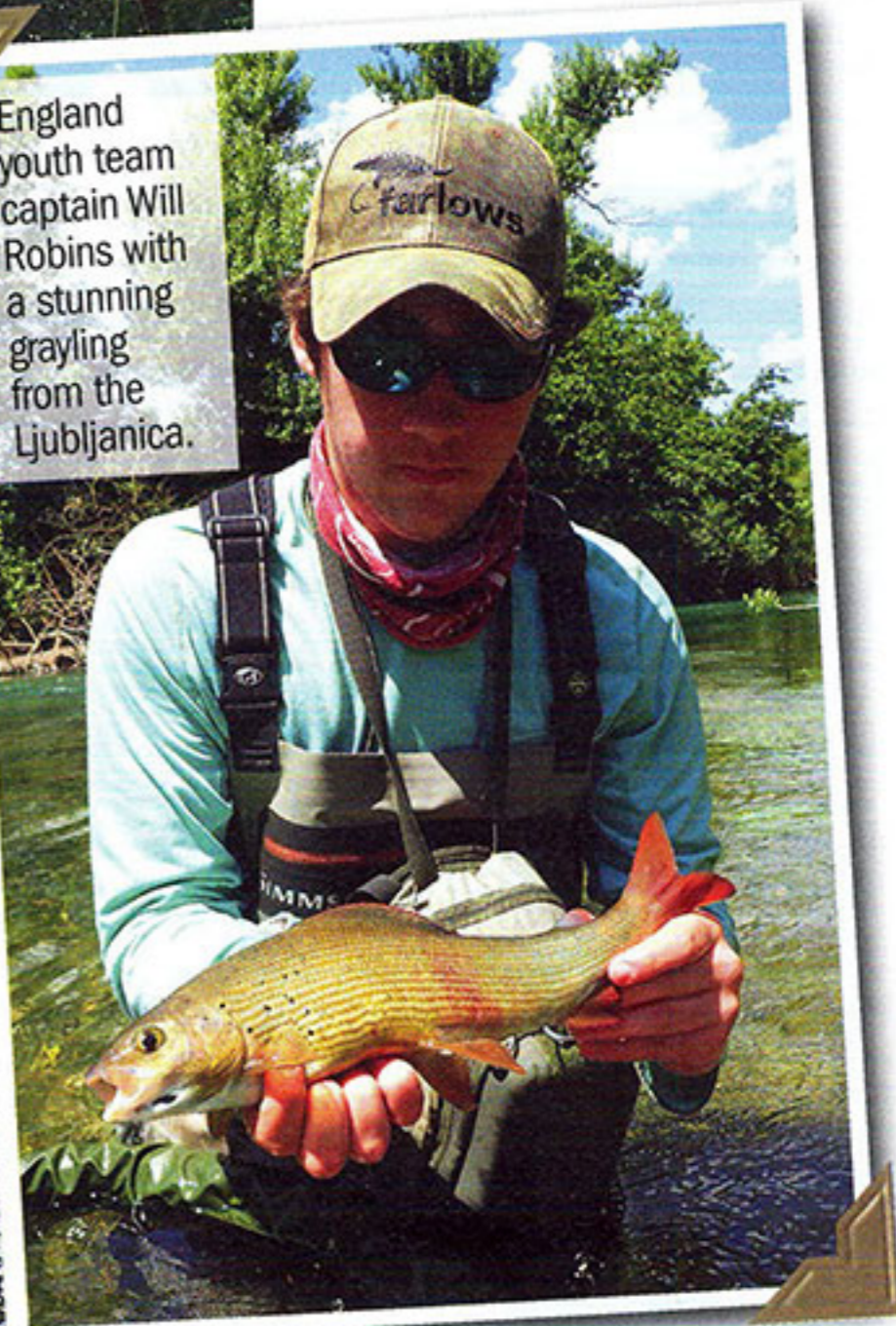
Standing in the grounds of a 13th century Carthusian monastery, our hotel was also only two minutes by foot from the tiny Bistra Spring, our first water of the trip. Rising abruptly from the earth in the centre of the monastery grounds, Will and I were sceptical of this unremarkable-looking piece of water, which was only a

A typical Bistra grayling. Fish to 40 centimetres are common on both dries and nymphs.





England youth team captain Will Robins with a stunning grayling from the Ljubljana.



few rod lengths wide and just 18 inches deep, but a 25cm grayling on the French leader settled our cynicism.

The fishing here got better as the day progressed, as we both caught a succession of wild brownies and grayling to over 40 centimetres on both nymphs and dries. At times it was hard to comprehend just how many large fish were holding in such a tiny stream. Uroš suggested that the heavy rainfall that fell prior to our trip had forced more fish than usual into the cold and rich waters of the spring.

Huge Chub

Half a mile from its source the Bistra Spring flows into the Bistra River proper. Bistra is the Slovenian word for 'clear' and for good reason; the water here runs pure and cool, which makes the perfect habitat for all kinds of flora and entomology. The Bistra is an overgrown and unfettered river; fishing here is technical, wild and done entirely by sight.

We caught a number of excellent grayling on weighted nymphs before stumbling across an enormous chub hidden underneath heavy foliage on the far bank. I pitched a number of casts towards the fish with an enormous streamer jig that our guide assured us would tempt the huge fish from its hiding place.

Uroš and Will acted as

my eyes from their elevated position and fed me information on the reaction of the fish to different drifts. After a dozen presentations, including a handful of false alarms, I got the call: "STRIKE!" My little 4-wt rod buckled over like spaghetti but after an attritional tug-of-war the net was slid under a magnificent fish of nearly 7lb, one of the largest our guide had ever seen in Slovenia.



Time for lunch. The food is just as good as the fishing!

Red Tags The Way

The next morning we travelled for 10 minutes across Vrhnika to fish one of the two springs that form the Ljubljana River. The Mala (small) and Velika (big) streams converge to form the main river but even before their juncture we found excellent numbers of big and beautifully marked grayling.

The shallows of the Velika spring produced many fish to 40 centimetres on small CDC red tag dries fished blind through tumbling riffles, while the deeper pools fished well with our guide's extra-heavy nymphs proving irresistible not only to the grayling but also some beautifully marked rainbow trout. The theme of red-tagged flies recurred throughout our trip and for the angler making the journey to Slovenia I would strongly suggest taking a selection of both CDC and hackled dry flies with bright tags.

Our guide's box was full of them in different guises and throughout our adventure it became more and more obvious that the little flash of colour makes a difference.

It's not just trout and grayling, as this huge chub took hold of Andy's streamer...



“ My little 4-wt rod buckled over like spaghetti but after an attritional tug-of-war the net was slid under a magnificent fish. ”

Clear-Water Stalking

Further downstream as the river broadened we found the most engaging sight fishing imaginable, stalking large grayling at close quarters beneath the tree branches of the near bank. By hiding behind the trees and using a mixture of improvised roll casts and archer-style presentations we were able to pitch our weighted flies far enough upstream to get them down among the fish.

There can be fewer more fascinating sights in fly fishing than watching a large grayling move towards and then inhale a well-presented nymph in crystal-clear water, a sight that Will and I saw a dozen times each in little over an hour.

After a long, heavy and appropriately boozy lunch away from the searing heat of the early afternoon we moved further downstream to the

main Ljubljanica River where, glancing over the bridge, we spotted a large Danube salmon. This European taimen is prevalent in the Ljubljanica and while we couldn't stir this fish from its torpor we were later shown pictures of specimens of over a metre in length by Marko Barisic, chairman of the Vrhnika angling club. Marko also informed us that we were the first non-nationals to fish the Bistra springs and river for 20 years as the club had only recently moved to offer day-ticket angling – a rare honour and a real privilege.

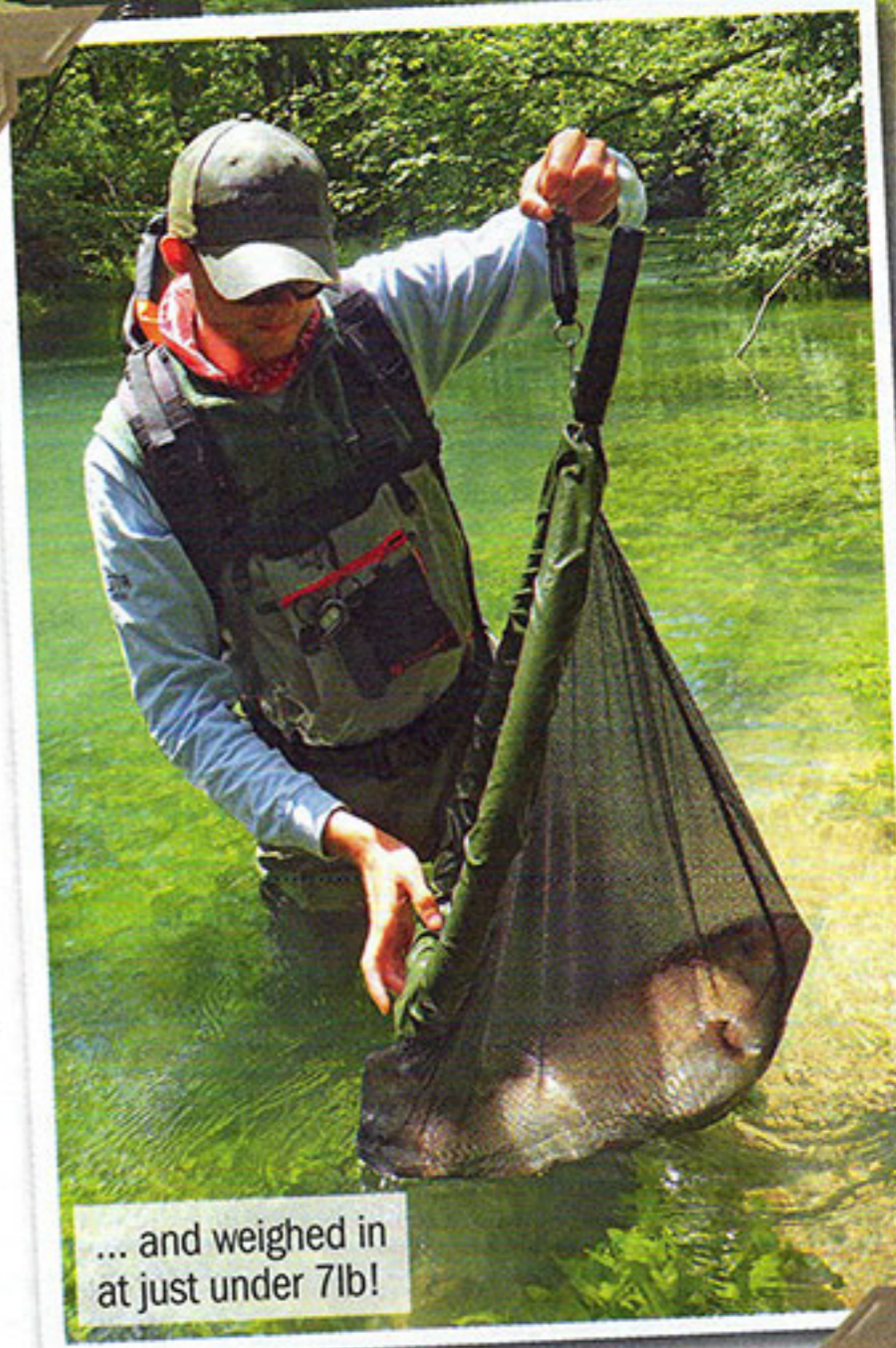
Cheaper Than Hampshire?

The waters around Vrhnika present the travelling angler with such a breadth and diversity of angling opportunities. From tiny spring creeks full of trout and grayling to swinging streamers to Danube salmon

and pike, it's all here and it's all so accessible.

With flights from London taking two hours, Vrhnika only minutes from the airport and day tickets (available online) costing as little as 25 euros it could be quicker and cheaper to take a fishing break in Slovenia than Hampshire!

With a few thousand years of history and culture, many scenic walkways and cycle paths and a wealth of wildlife for the whole family to enjoy, if you're on the lookout for a long weekend away far from the madding crowd then Vrhnika might just be the perfect place. ■



... and weighed in at just under 7lb!

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