

SLOVENIA – Advice from Fulbright Alumni

The following are extracts from Fulbright Grantee Reports and are not meant to reflect the views of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), its cooperating agencies, or the U.S. Embassy.

Topics covered below include:

- Cultural notes
- Personal Interactions and Language
- Social Life
- Housing
- Banking
- Street Life
- Transportation
- Websites and other helpful resources

Cultural notes

Our experience suggested that the people of Slovenia are active and love to be outside, as we witnessed daily in our walks in the city park and on the wonderful trails in the vineyards and other areas surrounding Maribor. Many of our trips to other parts of Slovenia confirmed that this was true throughout the country as well. The people of Slovenia also seem to be family-oriented, which was also evident as they walked together as families in the parks and around the cities and towns. We also observed that the people of Slovenia tend to be reserved and rather private until you make the effort to reach out to them, and then they are friendly, generous, hospitable, and engaging. They often struck us as being pleased and even touched that we had chosen to be in their country to work and live.

Personal Interactions and Language

My wife joined the Slovenia International Ladies Association (SILA). She heard about a lot of interesting things to do in Ljubljana (and outside of Ljubljana) from this group. SILA also does its own day trips...our family went on one of these to visit a bee farm and monastery near Nova Gorica, which was a fantastic experience.

Learn and use a bit of their language. Slovenians appreciate this enormously, as their culture and their language was oppressed for 700 years and currently still they are forced to learn other languages to communicate with the world.

From what we noted during our visits to Ljubljana, it seemed that language was more of an issue in Maribor and in the smaller towns throughout the country. We found that many store clerks, postal workers, and so on would indicate to us that they could not speak English. Often, however, we would then get by fine, suggesting that they were only shy about or lacking confidence in their English. We learned that if we would compliment them on their English, they would smile, relax, and feel much more comfortable in communicating with us.

In Maribor, we did need help from one of the staff at the law school when we went to get our Temporary Residence Permit and then our Tax Identification Number. At both of these locations it was helpful to have her with us to communicate and complete the necessary forms. Both matters went smoothly with her help. Later, when I went to pick up my Slovenian health insurance card, it would have helped to have her along again, as it took quite a while to find the proper office and someone there who was willing and able to speak English. My impression from my fellow Fulbrighters in Ljubljana was that these matters were easier to deal with there than in Maribor (although they were not that difficult in Maribor either).

University Life

The culture of academics at the university was somewhat different than I am used to as a faculty member at a U.S. law school, where true lectures are rare and classes are more participatory in format. Classes in Slovenia are taught in two-hour lectures, and it was a challenge for me to get the students to ask questions of me and to respond to my questions of them. The students were generally polite and respectful, however, and quite willing to chat outside of the classroom, and most were attentive during my lectures. On the other hand, class attendance and preparation do not seem to be priorities among a higher proportion of students than I would expect or allow in my classes at my home institution.

Social Life

We probably had a little different experience than most Fulbrighters, as we brought along our three-year-old daughter and our two-year-old twins. While this had its challenges, it also allowed us to experience what families do in Ljubljana and to meet and engage with people that we likely would not have developed relationships with otherwise. Slovenians love kids and that really made our experience there special. Having three small children forced us to get out of our apartment, so we did what everyone else there does: we walked, went to parks, sat at cafes, bought our groceries at the open market, and hung out in Preseren Square with ice cream cones watching street performers. And in all of those places, we met people because of our children. We became very good friends with a server named Mijo at a cafe along the river; we visited Mijo nearly every day and it was the highlight of the day for our kids. We also befriended many of the vendors at the market, who spoiled our kids with treats. Having kids with us also got us to experience the emergency room...our daughter broke her collarbone in Ljubljana and needed stitches during our visit to Belgrade. What we found in both places is that people were incredibly willing to help us and that medical care is very good.

Housing

In Ljubljana, I think it makes sense to live in the city center. There are a lot of events that go on near city hall and in Preseren Square, and we stumbled on many of these just by being there. We learned a lot about the history and culture of Slovenia through these events. Living in the city center (particularly in the old city/pedestrian zone where we lived) also forces you to walk everywhere and observe the architecture, the people, etc. It was a little more expensive to live in the old city, but in my opinion it was well worth it.

Try Apartmaji Sobe, an apartment management company that specializes in shorter-term rentals. We had trouble finding a landlord willing to rent to us for only five months (this is a common issue) and this ended up being our only option. They have a lot of apartments for rent, were incredibly helpful and responsive to any issues we had, and their apartments come with everything you need (pillows, sheets, dish towels, etc.). The apartment we rented from them was very nice and in a perfect location right next to city hall.

When moving over, contact Mitja at Apartmaji Sobe to get from the Ljubljana airport to your apartment or hotel. For forty-eight euros, he will bring a van large enough to fit you and all of your luggage (this is much cheaper than other options). Plus, he is a very nice guy. You don't have to be renting from Apartmaji Sobe to hire Mitja's service.

With the help of our contacts in the law school in Maribor we first reserved an apartment in the Visiting Faculty and Graduate Student Dormitory (it is really a building of small apartments), while several people in the law school kept their eyes open for a better apartment for us. Before we left the U.S., we were contacted by a person with a furnished and equipped apartment that she was interested in renting to us for the period of our stay. The Dean of the law school knew her and had kindly made the connection for us. The owner emailed us photographs of the apartment and answered our questions about it, and we agreed to rent the apartment before we left the U.S. We then released our reservation at the university facility. The apartment contained a living room, kitchen, bath, large bedroom, and a study (with a sofa that opened to a double bed), with private parking for our car, for 550 EUR, about \$770, per month plus utilities). My impression is that most Fulbrighters in Slovenia have similar stories about how things just seem to work out for housing by working through their contacts at the university.

Banking

Get a Capital One credit card. Most credit cards charge an international transaction fee of up to 3%, and this adds up. If you live in the Ljubljana City Center, get a bank account at the KBM/Nova Bank across from city hall. It will be the most pleasant banking experience you will ever have.

As suggested at the orientation, we did bring a substantial amount of cash in Euros from the U.S. to allow us to deal with our initial rent payments and so on. Some might not feel comfortable carrying 1,000 EUR as we did, but it did work for us in getting started here. We also found that our ATM card from our credit union in the U.S. worked just fine for our cash needs, with only a 1% international charge for each withdrawal and no separate charges at all as in the U.S. Our Visa card also worked fine in nearly every setting. On a couple occasions, however, we did run into difficulty because it was not the chip-type credit card (it has the magnetic strip used in the U.S. - most vendors in Europe have equipment to deal with both types of cards) that is prevalent in Europe. Fortunately, each time we had the cash on hand to pay the bills. As for our Visa card, before we left the U.S., we did change our Capital One card over to their Venture Card, which has no international charges for each transaction overseas as some cards do and has higher mileage awards for charges made. This seemed to work very well for us. We did open a bank account in Maribor because it was needed to receive the housing stipend from the government of Slovenia. Our original plan was to have funds from our U.S. credit union account wired to this account. As it turned out, however, our use of our Visa card and ATM withdrawals from our U.S. account were working so well that we never did that wire transfer. In the end, the only funds placed in our Maribor account, therefore, were those from the Slovenian government (as predicted at the summer orientation, these were not deposited until May, near the end of our stay).

Street Life

Find out about the big events and be sure to take part in them. Some of our best experiences there were going to Ptuj to see the opening parade for Kurentovanje and attending the celebration of twenty years of independence.

Transportation

A great option for people coming to visit you is a shared van service like MNJ Transfer, which charges nine euros for a ride from the airport to any part of Ljubljana.

In Maribor, a small city by U.S. standards but Slovenia's second largest, nearly everything we needed or wanted to do was in easy walking distance from our apartment, which was only two blocks from the city center and four blocks from the Law Faculty's building. We had leased a car for our stay, making our longer travel very easy, but we hardly used it within Maribor. We enjoyed the urban, yet safe and friendly living environment in Maribor.

We chose to lease a car through Renault, and this worked very well for us in the type of travel we like to do. We like to get out into the country, and public transportation is not always as available or as flexible as we would like. The car allowed us to travel extensively in Slovenia and elsewhere on our own schedule, including many day trips that would have had to be overnight stays had we used public transportation. We also purchased a GPS with European maps loaded before we left the U.S., and it performed beautifully in cities and in the country alike, wherever we went. We became very dependent on it.

Websites and other helpful resources

<http://longterm.apartmaji.si/en/nastanitve.php>

<http://www.sila.si/>

<http://www.visitljubljana.si/en/events/>

<http://www.ljubljana.info/>

<http://www.inyourpocket.com/slovenia/ljubljana/concerts-culture-events-entertainment>

<http://www.slovenia-life.com/ljubljana/articles/?name=expats>

<http://eventful.com/ljubljana/events>

For language issues, Google Translate, of course, but also books like Teach Yourself Slovene as well as Slovene Dictionary and Phrasebook, both available through Amazon.com. For travel information, the Lonely Planet book on Slovenia is good. For long-term car leases, we used www.ideamerge.com. For weather information throughout Europe, we used www.wunderground.com. For hotel reservations, we used www.booking.com.