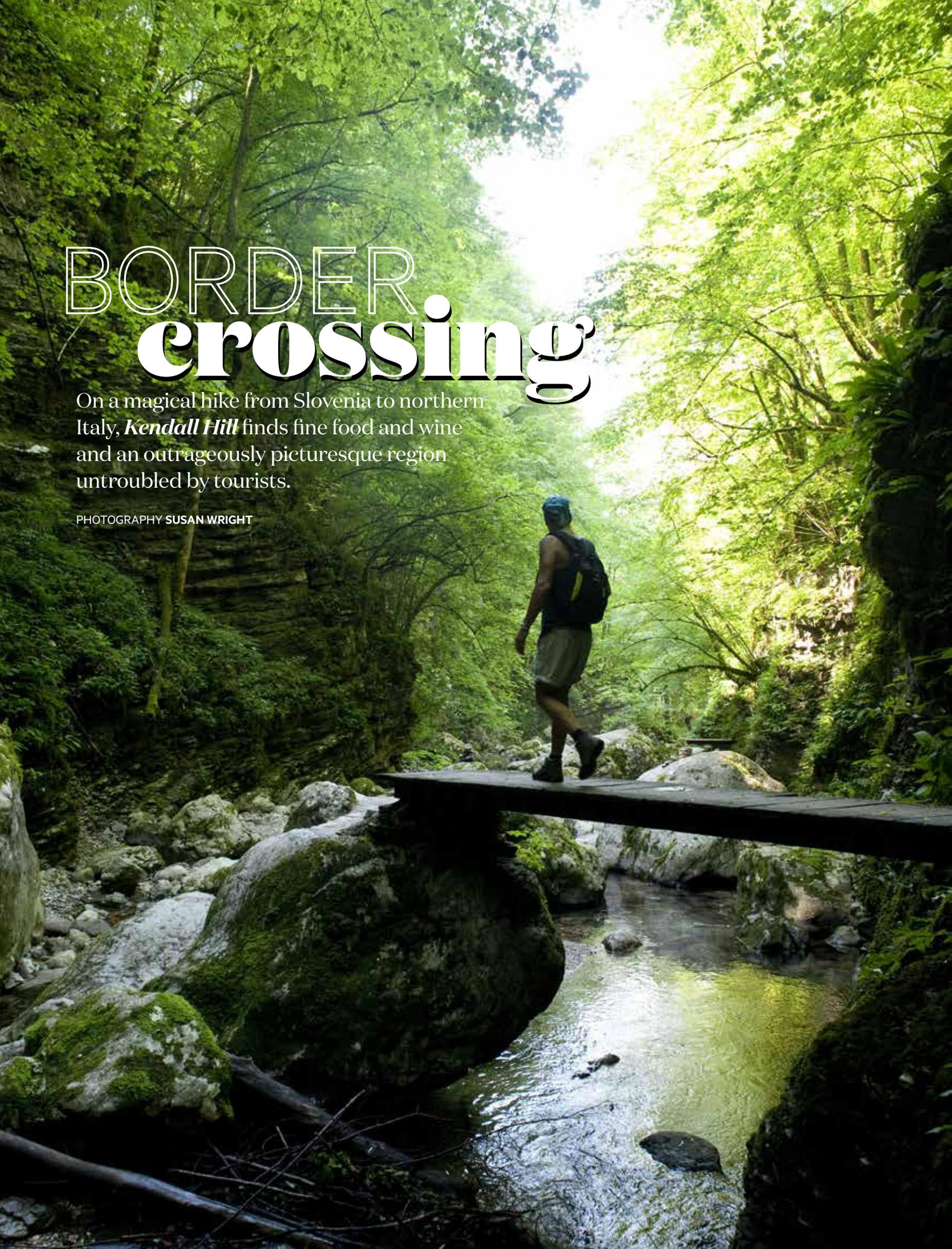


BORDER. crossing

On a magical hike from Slovenia to northern Italy, *Kendall Hill* finds fine food and wine and an outrageously picturesque region untroubled by tourists.

PHOTOGRAPHY SUSAN WRIGHT



FRONTIER TOWN

Piazza della Vittoria in the Italian town of Gorizia, on the border with Slovenia. Opposite: hiking to Kozjak Waterfall, near Kobarid.





On the motorway back to Venice a ferocious summer storm blows in suddenly from the Adriatic. The sky convulses with lightning and thunder; the gales and rain are so intense our wipers threaten to fly off. Hail clatters violently on roofs, doors, windscreens, forcing panicked drivers to pull sharply onto the shoulder and sit there, lights blinking madly, to wait out the onslaught.

And just like that, the spell is broken.

The days I've just spent hiking through Slovenia and Italy have been incredibly charmed. After the first outing I write in my notes "What a magical walk" – not realising then that every day will be as exhilarating. It's a week of perfumed wildflowers on hot June days, birdsong in beech forests, icy swims in turquoise rivers and daily feasting on the region's finest wines and food.

Such carefree decadence is bound to have an effect on the human spirit if left unchecked. And so it is that late one morning I find myself sprawled in long grass beneath a cherry tree, listening to church bells toll in the medieval villages that crown every hilltop, plucking sweet, sun-warmed fruit straight from the boughs above my head, and feeling as blithe and content as a child.

PICTURESQUE FRONT

Above: the UNESCO World Heritage-listed village of Cividale del Friuli in Italy in the foothills near Slovenia.

This is my first time with Hedonistic Hiking, the (mainly) Italian walking outfit launched in 2007 by Briton Jackie Parsons and her husband, Mick, who grew up in Wagga Wagga. Between May and November they lead tours in Italy, from Tuscany to Basilicata, each timed to coincide with the best season to visit – Siena for the Palio, Friuli for the wildflowers and the cherries. They return to Australia in summer to guide walks through the Victorian Alps, their second home.

The company's motto is "Food, Wine, Walking" and that, in that order, pretty much sums up the experience. Though they should change it to "Food, Wine, Walking; No Worries", because their tours are so well conceived and executed that guests never need fret about anything.

My new walking buddy, Katy Langdon, a Perth-based pediatrician, puts it best when I ask her why she chose Hedonistic over the many European walking companies. "We don't make any decisions on these holidays," she says. "We don't even look at itineraries each day. We just trust in Jackie. She has never let us down."

This is her third trip with Hedonistic Hiking. Repeat guests are the core of the business. A new walk launched in Basilicata was full before the itinerary was finalised. One woman booked four walking holidays last year.

"Our groups always tend to be fun," Parsons assures me early on. "I think these types of holidays attract lovely people. Hikers are sociable, friendly, interesting, and they look out for each other."

My co-walkers, all from Perth, prove her point: hospitable, smart, often hilarious. We all seem to share a finely tuned sense of hedonism, too, so the trip is pitch-perfect for us.

The nine-day journey starts in the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana, and ends among the Collio Hills of Friuli in neighbouring Italy, a route that offers ample mental, as well as physical, stimulation. Much of it traverses the Isonzo Front, the former borderlands of the Isonzo (Soča) River where Italian and Austro-Hungarian armies waged a dozen fierce battles in World War I. Ernest Hemingway based his novel *A Farewell to Arms* around this "picturesque front"; he is one of many ghosts we encounter, from both wars, as we step back in time.

I join Parsons and the group partway through at the Franja Partisan Hospital, a cluster of 13 wooden huts buried deep in the Pasica Gorge. Franja is the most famous of the 120 or so covert hospitals of the Slovenian resistance movement. Built in forests, ravines and caves, these makeshift medical centres cared for more than 15,000 war-wounded between 1943 and 1945.

The hospital is hidden in a stone ravine beside the Čerinščica River. It is reached via a white gravel path fringed with purple scabious and the cheery white umbels of Queen Anne's lace, a pretty walk that the patients never got to appreciate. They were blindfolded



and smuggled in on stretchers at night to prevent them ever revealing the hospital's location.

Explanatory signs at the complex tell Franja's story. In these basic huts perched above a rushing river doctors performed X-rays and major surgery to save the lives of 500 of the 578 men transported here. The partisan hospital came to signify "the solidarity and companionship in hardship between the local population, hospital staff and wounded soldiers of different nationalities".

It is named for Dr Franja Bojc Bidovec, a one-time political prisoner who managed the hospital from January 1944 until the end of the war.

There's a large portrait of her looking down from the wall at Gačnk v Logu, the pink-fronted inn where we gather afterwards for lunch. Dr Bidovec was married in this building; injured fighters were concealed here before being transferred to Franja in the night.

The inn's owner is Matjaž Peternel. He and his chef son, also called Matjaž, have spent hours preparing us a feast so generous it requires its own table.

Lunch begins with three soups – a traditional clear beef one, a dense medley of mushrooms gathered from nearby woods, and a seasonal wild-garlic soup that's antisocial but irresistible. Bread is served hot straight from the old pizza oven. There's octopus salad, asparagus from the garden, cheeses and salami made by a farmer who lives down the road. Peternel senior has also made his own salami. "This is professional," he smiles, pointing to the farmer's smallgoods. "And this is me."

To drink, a floral Tokaji from Goriška Brda, the Slovenian wine region that borders Friuli's Collio, and optional schnapps, made with August's blueberries.>



THE INN CROWD

Clockwise, from top left: Matjaž Peternel (left), owner of Gačnk v Logu, and his son, also Matjaž; Franja Partisan Hospital; a picnic of cheeses from Kobarid and börek with local cherries; Hedonistic Hiking's Jackie Parsons; Via Rastello in Gorizia.







SLAV LABOURS

Clockwise, from left: Kobarid Valley as seen from the Charnel House; a sign en route; Kozjak Waterfall, near Kobarid; picnicking in Soča Valley. Opposite: Church of the Sacred Heart, Dreznica, Slovenia.



To end, slices of classic Slovenian gibanica, with its painstaking layers of pastry, ricotta, fruits, nuts and poppy seeds. “It’s a classic of the Habsburg Empire,” says Isabelle Johnson, our resident gastro-guide (every Hedonistic Hiking trip has one). “You’ll find it deliciously rich.”

It’s a shade below 30 degrees in the mid-afternoon as we wave goodbye to the Matjažes and head along a country road sandwiched between forested hills tinted blue by the heat haze. Men fly-fish on the Idrijca River; sunbathers bask on its pebbly shores.

Barefaced alpine peaks soar to impressive heights as we near Kobarid. There’s Mount Vrata at 1,935 metres, and the anvil-shaped summit of the vowel-less Krn (pronounced Krun). We will get to know these mountains well in coming days.

Kobarid is a handsome Slovenian town of geranium-clad homes in a valley walled by the Julian Alps. The Italians know it as Caporetto, scene of the infamous Battle of Caporetto – a World War I military defeat so devastating for the Italian army that it’s still referred to today, a century later, as La Vergogna, The Shame.

It’s impossible to shut out the atrocities of war while walking on one of its bloodiest battlefields. Our first outing from Kobarid takes us to the Charnel House, a striking memorial to Italy’s fallen that was opened by Mussolini in 1938. The mortal remains of more than 7,000 soldiers are interred behind greenish serpentine walls encircling the 17th-century Church of St Anthony. Thousands of names are engraved in stone – soldato Decimo Amadori, soldato Toma Ampini – but other slabs are engraved simply with the stark words “Here lie 500 unknown soldiers”.

We continue upwards on a woodland trail towards Tonovcov Grad, the scant remains of an ancient Ostrogoth fortress. The path is idyllic – sunlight filtered through a feathery canopy of beech forest, blackberry flowers, cuckoos calling from on high, the rich, vegetal smells of the forest floor, the (alarmingly close) grunts of wild boar – but the real reward is the view from the top.

As we settle into front-row seats on lush grass and admire the panorama of lofty peaks plunging hundreds of metres to the valley floor, Parsons unfurls maps and locates us in space and time.

These were the “unredeemed” lands, she explains, the terre irredente that Italy fought to reclaim from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in World War I. Italy declared war on the Austrians in May 1915, caught them unawares, and captured Kobarid.

The Italians, known as Alpini, established themselves at Mount Krn to our left. The Austrians set up camp in the mountains to the right, and for 29 months the two armies fought each other and the elements. Avalanches buried thousands.

At the final assault, the Battle of Caporetto, German forces joined Austrian troops and together they fired more than 800 poison-gas shells that wiped out the



RIVER RUN

Above, from left: the Natisone River near Cividale del Friuli; balcony in Gorizia. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Soča River in the hills surrounding Kobarid; Hiša Franko restaurant; signpost near the Slovenian border; pasta parcels filled with burrata at La Subida; the town of Grado in Friuli; trekking near the Julian Alps on the border.

Alpini as efficiently as bug spray on insects. Then they bombarded the survivors for good measure. It was a massacre.

After our sobering history lesson we continue walking until lunch – a picnic prepared by Johnson, set among woodpiles beneath an ash tree on a hillside looking across to Mount Krn. We pile our plates with salads of ripe tomato and anchovies, of fennel, orange and rocket, and of lettuce with avocado and sunflower seeds. There are ricotta börek, spicy salami, rye bread and local cheeses bought from Kobarid. Plus local cherries and strawberries, and a strudel made with cloves and baked apple. We laze in the sun with glasses of traminer as Parsons reads passages from *A Farewell to Arms*, putting the beauty around us into literary context.

Aside from war, the other constant of our days is the Soča River, a sight that never fails to make me stop and stare at its impossible, hysterical blueness. If pushed I would say it's a cloudy turquoise colour; Hemingway, in his spare, precise way, described it as "blue like the sky".

I can't leave Kobarid without knowing what it feels like to bathe in a sky-blue river. I trot down the hill, over a stone bridge, down a rocky path to the shore, toss my things on the bank, then plunge in and scream.

It's like diving into liquid snow. My feet and calves go numb almost immediately. I can only keep my head submerged for seconds before the aching becomes unbearable. But I thaw easily on limestone rocks in the hot sun; the siren call of the Soča's blueness lures me back in again and again.

That evening Parsons and Johnson drive us a few minutes down the road to Hiša Franko, Frank's Place. This roadside inn run by chef Ana Ros and her husband, Valter Kramar, has a mill and stables, a cheese room and cellar, and served as a World War I hospital and a retreat for Hemingway while he worked on *A Farewell to Arms*.

If Michelin inspectors spent any time in Kobarid, this place would have a star. In a courtyard of potted maples and lavender we have lollipop appetisers of local Tolmin cheese baked on sticks and umami mouthfuls of celery cream, anchovy and wild garlic sauce. "This is one of the best restaurants in Slovenia," Johnson says as she fills our flutes from a magnum of Bjana brut. "They like to use all local ingredients and put it together in the most original ways."

The sit-down menu begins with beef tartare, oyster sauce and foamed bone marrow, paired with a flirty blend of chardonnay, pinela and rebula grapes from the nearby Vipava Valley. There is trout from the creek, all blackened skin and melting flesh, served with saltwort and mortadella mousse, and smoked lamb neck with burnt eggplant and pickled red onions. Dessert is fragrant mouthfuls of summer – smoked peach, elderflower meringue, honeycomb and sorbet.

Early next morning an off-duty school bus playing Italian hip-hop on the radio collects us from Kobarid and drops us halfway up a hill on the edge of alpine farmlands. "Let's go!" Parsons says brightly. "Mountains to climb – how exciting!" This is our Big Day, the one where we walk from Slovenia into Italy.

It begins gently, gorgeously, on a track lined with wild iris and forget-me-nots, shaded by beech and serenaded by a choir of blackbirds. We pass through a sheep gate into a meadow where limestone boulders lie strewn about like abandoned toys, and then turn left along a former military supply road.

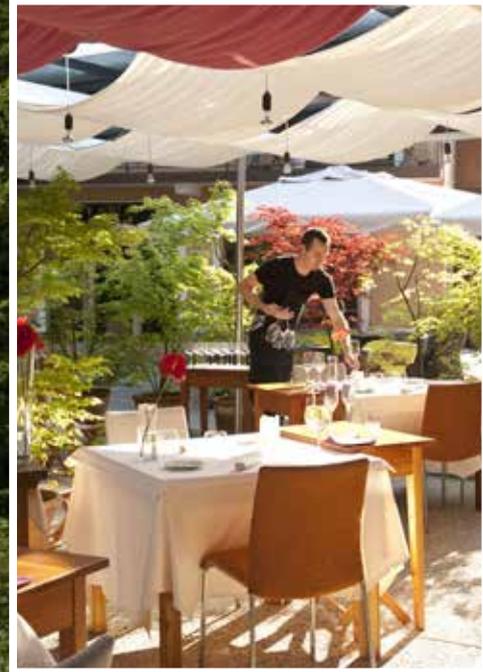
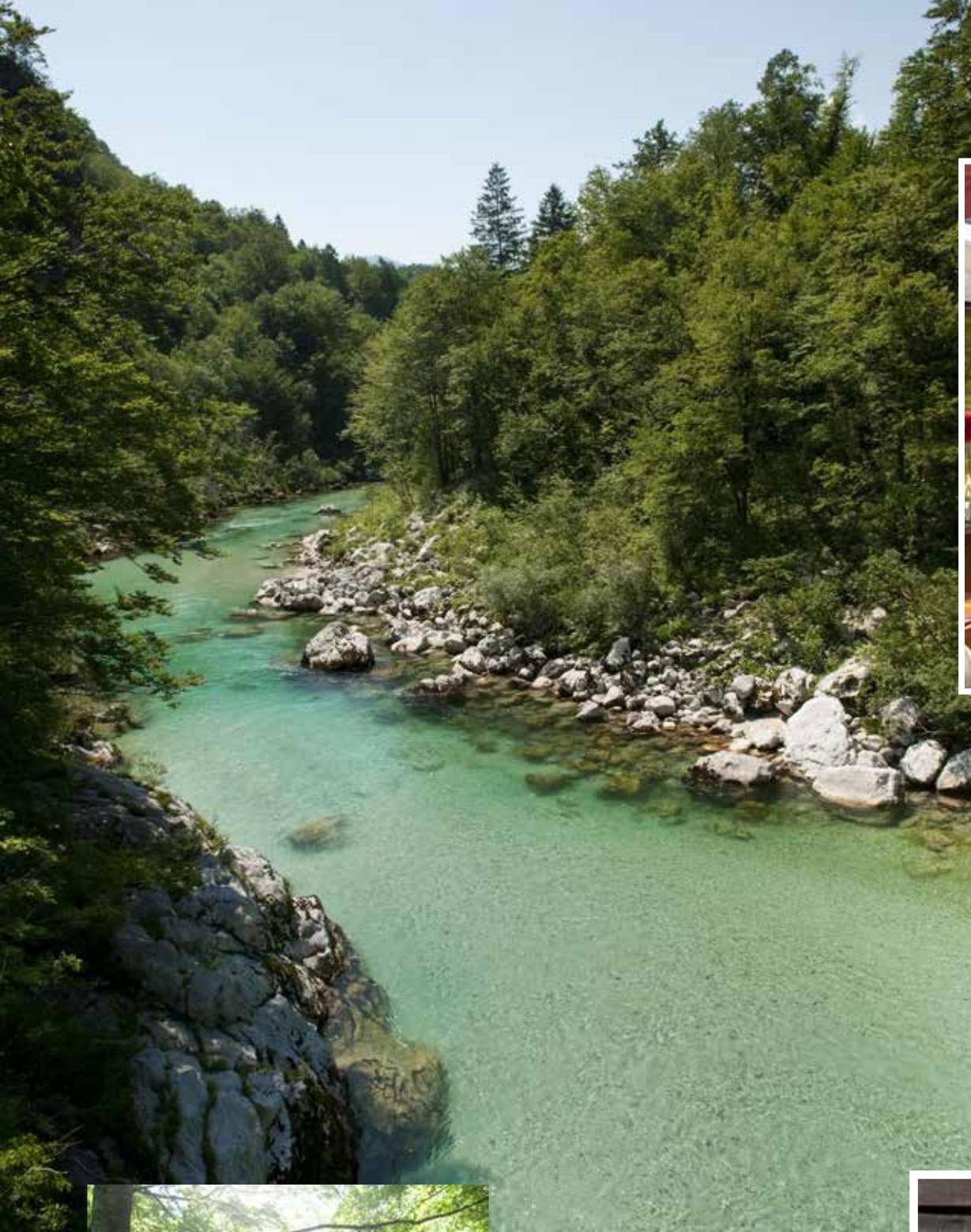
Just shy of 1,200 metres, we rest on a hillside of buttercups and pink orchids. Parsons points out a tiny chapel at the top of a faraway mountain. "That's Mount Matajur," she says. "That's where we're heading."

The chapel is in Italy. Slovenia is behind me. Austria is over there to the right. Here we are at the crossroads of central Europe.

The border crossing itself is unremarkable. A simple stake in the ground is all that separates Slovenia and Italy. "Benvenuti in Italia," beams Parsons. "We have got about 370 metres more of up."

It's peak wildflower season in the Julian Alps. The high mountain meadows, called planinas, brim with hot-pink salsify, yellow ranunculus, dusky red rock roses, purple rampions, gentian violet, candy-pink catchfly, asters, wild geranium, thyme, larkspur, anemone and more.

In surroundings this beautiful the hiking is never gruelling or unpleasant, and the altitude encourages a lightness of spirit. Picking our way across a rocky ledge on the flank of Mount Matajur, the chapel now >





firmly in our sights, Langdon and I start singing The Carpenters' "Top of the World" and then work our way through the ABC songbooks of our childhood until we reach the little alpini chapel atop the 1,642-metre Mount Matajur. It's an achievement definitely worth singing about.

Johnson is waiting for us in the overgrown garden of a stone house on the mountainside. Lunch, hiked in by her, is a surprisingly diverse smorgasbord of two salads, Slovenian salamis and prosciutto, two loaves of bread bought from Hiša Franko the night before, cheeses and a dip. As we eat amid the wildflowers, dainty cocoa-coloured butterflies park themselves on our heads, arms, backs and fronts. It's a ravishing picnic setting; an Impressionist painting come to life. *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe, avec des papillons.*

This is the apogee of our hike, but many more highlights await us. There are visits to remarkable UNESCO monuments, including the fourth-century Basilica of Aquileia. The wines and warm hospitality at the Primosic and Bjana vineyards, in the neighbouring wine regions of Collio (Italy) and Goriška Brda (Slovenia) where the indigenous rebula grape is king. Walking among hillside terraces, densely cultivated with vines and orchards in the Roman fashion, in a region so renowned for its fruits that villages are called Višnjevnik (sour cherry), Hruševlje (pear) and Figovica (fig).

What's remarkable about this corner of Europe is that it's so outrageously photogenic, so blessed with amazing produce, and yet there are so few tourists. We rarely meet any while walking and even in the villages they are rare. They must all be down the road in Venice.

Our last supper is at La Subida, a one-star restaurant and hotel where we dine in a glass-walled room cantilevered dramatically over 25 hectares of forest. The property has been in the Sirk family since the 1940s; today Tanja Gavagna, her chef-husband, Alessandro, and her brother, Mitja Sirk, run the show, which includes an osteria across the road, fabulous accommodation, and a vinegar factory that ages its aceto de uva for at least four years.

Alessandro has cooked here for almost two decades and his food, like La Subida itself, lends a modern twist to tradition. "You always have something that connects the dish to our area," says Mitja.

Connection is everything. We taste an aromatic Collio Friulano from a small estate called Branko that, Mitja says, pointing, "is exactly the second house on the right-hand side". Alessandro's exquisite menu includes tiny penne-like pasta in a white ragù of veal and green asparagus, and capriolo, local roe deer served rare and infused with thyme. It comes with summery tomatoes, pumpkin seeds and a classic Slovenian yellow polenta. To finish, a plate of cherries.

The warm night is perfumed by the citrus-honey scent of a flowering linden that towers over the courtyard. Locals gather beneath its spreading boughs to drink, eat and laugh together. The important things in life.

Once again Parsons and Johnson have set the perfect tone. A superb restaurant, fascinating wines, the company of new friends, warm hospitality. Add to that the satisfaction of knowing the body has done a good week's workout. The mind, too. And definitely the soul. 🍷



GETTING THERE

Etihad Airways and partner airline **Alitalia** fly daily from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth to Venice, via Abu Dhabi. etihad.com

WALKING THERE

Hedonistic Hiking leads all-inclusive, small-group tours, with a maximum of 16 people, in Italy from May-November and in the Victorian Alps in summer. The Italian tours visit regions as diverse as Piedmont, Tuscany and Abruzzo. Even the least challenging hikes have significant walking components, balanced with culture, people, restaurants, wineries and history.

The nine-day Slovenia and Friuli hike departs on 7 June and 26 September, and in June and October next year, and costs about \$4,345 per person twin share. hedonistichiking.com.au

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VINE LINES

Vineyards near Biljana in Brda, Slovenia. Opposite from left: the nave of the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta; chef Alessandro Gavagna and his wife, Tanja, at La Subida; the village of Cividale in Friuli.

