

An aerial photograph of Bled Castle in Slovenia. The castle, a large stone structure with multiple towers and red-tiled roofs, is perched on a steep, forested cliffside overlooking the turquoise waters of Lake Bled. In the distance, a small island with a church is visible in the lake. The surrounding landscape is lush green with dense forests and rolling hills under a clear sky.

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Bled Strategic Forum - 20 Years

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EDITORIAL



Photo: Bruno Toič

MORE THAN JUST AN EVENT

This issue focuses mostly on the Bled Strategic Forum. What prompted it was a vision of Slovenia as a hub of knowledge exceeding political and regional frameworks. Fruitful, at times even contentious discussions throughout the years, paired with remarkable speakers, paved the way for excellent cooperation and regional development. That is why you will surely enjoy reading the statements and reflections of the Slovenian political and business representatives whose important contributions made the Forum into what it is today.

The Bled Strategic Forum remains the formative environment of outlooks on Europe, security, solidarity, green economy and tourism. The Forum is not just a reflection of Slovenia. Rather, it has become a platform of shared ideas, visions and the exchange of good practice.

This can be observed in the very environment where the Forum takes place. Bled, with its fairy-tale like scenery, magnificent castle and lush forests symbolises the beauty of Slovenia's nature – it is a country that respects nature and considers it a part of its identity.

Slovenia is not only the geographical beating heart of Europe. It is also a culturally rich country merging various traditions, languages, and artistic expressions. Its diversity encompassing all fields impresses every visitor. Open, kind and hospitable people contribute to the Forum's success as well.

The Bled Strategic Forum is more than a political and strategic event – it is the embodiment of Slovenia in all its magnitude. Time and again the Forum has showcased a vision – an invitation to the world: let us build an active, authentic, peaceful and green future together.

Tanja Glogovčan Belančič, Editor-in-Chief



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Photo: zoltangabor/depositphotos.com

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Looking Back, Moving Forward

TEXT BY PETER GRK, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE BLED STRATEGIC FORUM

When I think of the Bled Strategic Forum my first associations are wisdom, perseverance, responsibility and democracy. Allow me, dear readers, to quickly explain.

In global terms, Slovenia is an extremely small country with very limited economic and political power and limited ability to influence important geostrategic and geopolitical shifts in the global community.

Wisdom

The key question back in 2006, when Slovenia was concluding its successful OSCE Chairmanship and preparing for the EU Presidency (in 2008), was how Slovenia, as a small country, could positively and effectively capitalise on the two Chairmanships and strengthen its soft power in the international community. And this is where wisdom comes in.

The wisdom that at that time political decision-makers and some individuals in civil society recognised the value of such strategic events and platforms across Europe and the world (the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Munich Security Conference, etc.) and the importance and excellence of Bled as a congress centre and tourist attraction that offers a sufficiently intimate

and constructive atmosphere for even the most difficult regional and global conversations.

As we like to say...the rest is history.

In 2006, the Bled Strategic Forum was born, initially a small, boutique Forum with a relatively small number of participants, but one that exuded potential for growth and development.

Perseverance

From around 300 participants at the first Forum in 2006, there were 2,500 participants in 2024 from over 90 countries. Incredible as these numbers may seem now, they did not come about on their own, and behind them are human stories, triumphs and defeats, and above all the perseverance of all those who have worked over the years to prepare the Forum and have not given up, despite all the difficulties and obstacles. And these have not been few. From the lack of

funds to the lack of infrastructure and sometimes the public's lack of understanding that what happens in Bled every year at the end of August is important for Slovenia, its foreign policy, relevant and has an added value in positioning our country in global economic, political and security corridors. It is important that these things are not forgotten and that inspiration is drawn from them for further development of the Bled Strategic Forum trademark.

Responsibility

With globalisation and the increasing interconnectedness of the international community, problems, issues and challenges suddenly became global and could no longer be solved locally. Issues such as migration, cyber security,

the fight against climate change, the future of democracy and the development of new technological tools require broader reflection and suddenly the responsibility of all of us has become much more pronounced and strengthened.

The responsibility to try, each in our own way, each with our own instruments and mechanisms, to understand the new reality in which we live and to offer certain ideas, reflections and proposals on how to move forward, so that as a global community we can live in solidarity with one another.

Democracy

One of the most important key elements of the Bled Strategic Forum is that every voice, supported

by a clear argument, counts and it makes sense to be heard. Discussions where the interlocutors agree on everything are not only boring, but very rarely or never lead to some long-term solutions to multifaceted and almost always extremely complex challenges.

In this context, inclusiveness and transparency of discussions is crucial for the Bled Strategic Forum.

We would like to see political elites, business people, culture professionals, representatives of civil society and young people at the same table, because we believe that only through a broad dialogue can we arrive at meaningful ideas and proposals.

From here...to eternity...

The 20th edition is, of course, not only a time for reflection, but also a time to look forward. Although the Bled Strategic Forum has established itself as one of the most important strategic events in Europe, our ambitions go even further. In recent years, the Bled Strategic Forum trademark has also started to develop as a year-round platform that builds and promotes key foreign policy content for Slovenia, Europe and the wider international community, both through events and debates in Slovenia and in cooperation with our international partners abroad. At the same time, we would like the Bled Strategic Forum to strengthen its analytical capacity and thus further consolidate its mission as one of the key tools of soft power of Slovenian foreign policy.



Dimitrij Rupel was one of the key initiators of the establishment of the Bled Strategic Forum, which promotes open dialogue, regional cooperation, and stability in Southeast Europe. The forum was designed as a platform for discussions on the future of the region. Photo: Bled Strategic Forum archive



Slovenian Prime Minister Robert Golob hosted Regional Leaders at the Bled Strategic Forum 2022: Strengthening Cooperation in Times of Uncertainty. Photo: Nebojša Tejić/STA

IN FOCUS



The 20th anniversary edition will be held under the title "A Runaway World." The conference will mark the 20th jubilee of the Forum and will focus on Europe's role in a new global order. Photo: Marko Arandjelovic

REFLECTIONS OF FORUM CONTRIBUTORS

Two decades of connecting the region and the world

The Bled Strategic Forum is the leading international geopolitical conference in South-Eastern Europe, organised by Slovenia since 2006. The Bled Strategic Forum aims to stimulate discussions on current global challenges, to strengthen dialogue between political decision-makers, business leaders, academics and civil society, and to contribute to the formulation of responses to security, economic and sustainability challenges, as well as to the establishment of global partnerships. We have collected some of the statements made by those who have been significantly involved in the establishment and development of the Bled Strategic Forum over the years and throughout its history.



Photo: UKOM archive

Robert Golob – Prime Minister of the Republic of Slovenia (2022–)

Over the past 20 years, the Bled Strategic Forum has evolved into one of the most important and largest strategic platforms in Central and Southeast Europe, attracting more than 2,000 visitors to Bled from all over the world every year.

However, the strength of the Bled Strategic Forum lies not only in its numbers, prominent guests and discussions, but in its ability to connect people, bring together different opinions and, above all, create a space for open, respectful discussion, which ultimately leads to interesting proposals and ideas. This is the greatest strength of the forum, and I would like to say a few words about it.

The global community has found itself in a new geostrategic reality, where the old world is dying while the new one has not yet emerged. Throughout history, situations like this have always been marked by instability, crises and major conflicts.

It is important to correctly interpret the signs of the times and avoid repeating mistakes. We see that multilateralism and international

law are just a dead letter on the paper, violated and trampled by certain actors in the international arena, and there is not sufficient consolidated political will to put the world back on track towards restoring the respect for the fundamental principles of international law. We keep creating new tensions, while still not having eased the old ones.

The world is veering off course before our very eyes, and it is high time we responded actively, using all the tools and mechanisms at our disposal. One of these is the Bled Strategic Forum, which can contribute its share to dialogue and cooperation. Every year, it offers a platform for discussion of some of the most pressing global challenges, both current and future. In doing so, it remains mindful of its place within the European and broader transatlantic space.

The Forum has provided Slovenia with an opportunity to actively promote its ideas, while at the same time gaining a space where it can listen and hear other important global players – from heads of state, business leaders and representatives of civil society – thereby expanding its formal and informal influence beyond its borders. Slovenia is not a large country, but it is recognised in the international community as an active supporter of peace and an advocate for minorities, and in the EU as a persistent supporter of enlargement, which is the only path to lasting stability in Europe. It is also through the Bled Strategic Forum that Slovenia is successful in its efforts. We believe that Europe, as our broader homeland, is the cornerstone of peace, our shared freedom and security, and, without any doubt, our common values. Chief among these are public healthcare, public education and a solidarity-based pension system.

I hope that this year, at the forum, we will also strive to move the world toward solidarity, sustainability, the respect for fundamental principles of international relations and international law, and the respect for human rights.

Some thoughts and ideas are repeated at each year's forum. First, because the search for solutions requires persistence. And second, because those who start wars and cause suffering often turn a deaf ear and a blind eye. As Albert Einstein once said: "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving".

We move, therefore we are!
Good luck, Bled Strategic Forum!



Photo: Mateja Potočnik Jordovič

Nataša Pirc Musar – President of the Republic of Slovenia (2022–)

Slovenia is a responsible and credible member of the international community, pursuing good neighbourly relations, strengthening bilateral relations and upholding international agreements. All our actions are based on the desire to strengthen human rights and freedoms, democracy, the rule of law, international peace and security, and sustainable development. We are concerned about current developments and negative trends in the international environment, including the emergence of new actors, new technologies and new challenges. The growing fragmentation of the world, along with ongoing and new global crises, is giving rise to new conflicts and diminishing security. In facing these challenges, Slovenia remains steadfast in its values and goals. However, the efforts of the state and state authorities alone are not sufficient to achieve these goals – we need dialogue with partners from other countries and international organisations, businesses and non-governmental organisations.

For the past twenty years, the Bled Strategic Forum has been our most important annual event, helping us to achieve these goals. In the beautiful setting of an Alpine lake, we gather from all corners of the world to openly discuss global and regional challenges. Naturally, not everyone shares the same views, as we are driven by different motivations and interests. Nevertheless, when we meet in Bled at the end of summer each year, it is through respectful dialogue and reflection – leading us to a deeper understanding of one another – that we lay the foundations for further decisions. Since its establishment, the Bled Strategic Forum has struck the right balance between addressing global issues – both at the global level and specifically in Europe – and focusing on regional issues and the region's unique perspectives on global developments. The Bled Strategic Forum and its role in shaping policy have been recognised by opinion leaders and statespersons from around the world. I firmly believe that anyone wishing to understand Central Europe and the Western Balkans should attend the Bled Strategic Forum.

The Bled Strategic Forum must, and will, continue in the future. There is no need for it to compete with similar forums in Europe or the world. Nor is there a need to expand in numbers or limit the range of topics. The Bled Strategic Forum must remain an open platform for opinion leaders and decision-makers from various fields to meet and engage in sincere and well-intentioned dialogue on key challenges facing the world, Europe and the region. I therefore hope that the Bled Strategic Forum will continue its mission of dialogue and the pursuit of common solutions for a better tomorrow.



Photo: UKOM archive

Tanja Fajon – Minister of Foreign and European Affairs (2022 -)

I became getting familiar with the Bled Strategic Forum during my time as a Member of the European Parliament, long before assuming the role of its official host as Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia. It has always marked the end of summer and the beginning of a new foreign policy season. I still clearly remember taking an active part in launching the Young Bled Strategic Forum exactly ten years ago. The Bled Strategic Forum has been – and continues to be – one of the most important regional and international platforms for discussing current global issues.

The Bled Strategic Forum places Slovenia at the heart of strategic deliberations, where views from a wide variety of socio-political contexts converge. The forum broadens our horizons and enhances our country's reputation through a thoughtful and inclusive approach to global politics. This has been consistently acknowledged by both foreign and domestic participants.

I extend my sincere congratulations to the Bled Strategic Forum on its twentieth anniversary. I hope that it will help Slovenia to continue to bring together individuals from around the world, fostering openness to diverse perspectives, active substantive discussions, and the global nature of participants, including young voices. The Bled Strategic Forum is a testament to Slovenia's soft power – an achievement we can rightly take pride in. Lake Bled, with its historical symbolism of peace and natural beauty, confers on the forum a unique status of prestige and calm reflection, which encourages participants to return to Bled and the Bled Strategic forum again and again.



Photo: Nebojša Tejić/STA

Borut Pahor – Prime Minister of the Republic of Slovenia (2008–2012), President of the Republic of Slovenia (2012–2022)

After gaining independence and joining the EU and NATO, Slovenia positioned itself geopolitically and strategically as a country of the Western world. In a remarkably short and intense period of historic change following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Slovenians succeeded in realising the May Declaration, read out by Tone Pavček in Kongresni trg in 1989. Shortly after these exceptional achievements, Slovenian politicians began considering both the venue and purpose of bringing Europe and the wider world together in Slovenia. It was then Foreign Minister, in the government of Prime Minister Janša, who proposed

the idea of holding a conference in Bled – and he could not have chosen a better time or place.

Over time, the Bled Strategic Forum established itself as a respectable venue for meetings of statesmen, political decision-makers and experts. The appeal of its annual meetings has varied – from hosting a wide variety of distinguished guests and holding lively debates to more lacklustre meetings with few notable speakers or moments. The Bled Strategic Forum has also continuously grappled with the question of its own identity. On the one hand, quite understandably, it aspires to establish itself as a global forum for world leaders and influential figures, serving as a Central European counterpart to Davos. On the other hand, reality keeps pushing it back into a position where, without serious competition, it serves as an exclusive annual meeting place for the region and for all those involved in South-East Europe, in one way or another.

However, this is not a problem specific to the Bled Strategic Forum. It reflects a deeper question – that of Slovenia's identity as an independent country and where it sees itself belonging. Of course, as already noted, Slovenia is first and foremost Western country in geopolitical terms. More specifically, in this context, it is at once a Central European, Mediterranean and a Balkan country. Understandably, it has long harboured certain reservations and concerns about the latter association. Although I understand these concerns, I believe that Slovenia – if it chooses – could outgrow such prejudices, and the Bled Strategic Forum alongside it. In my view, however, this is unlikely to happen in the near future, if ever. Whatever the case, the Bled Strategic Forum will always strive to enhance its global relevance and appeal, rather than settling for the role of a purely regional conference centre.

Whatever its future may hold, the Bled Strategic Forum deserves our full respect on this important anniversary. Its legacy provides a strong foundation for those who will shape its future structure and ambitions. And whether fortunately or unfortunately, it will never run out of topics for discussion. I wish the Bled Strategic Forum every success.





Photo: UKOM archive

Alenka Bratušek – Prime Minister of the Republic of Slovenia (2013–2014)

The Bled Strategic Forum is one of Slovenia's key gateways in terms of both foreign policy and general government. The Forum is a hub between the political, economic and civil areas of society. As such, it is the ideal venue to hold inclusive and in-depth discussions about the major present and future challenges.

In addition, I find it particularly important that the Forum's reputation has increased over the years and has become one of the most important strategic platforms not only in the South-East and Central Europe, but elsewhere as well. This proves that in the new geostrategic reality, it is not only the size of a country that matters, but it is primarily the ideas and opinions that the country contributes to the international community. Despite Slovenia's relatively modest size, the Bled Strategic Forum gives it an opportunity to play a more significant and relevant role in shaping the new international geostrategic reality than it otherwise could.

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Bled Strategic Forum, it is my sincere wish that the Forum will gain even greater momentum and play an even more important role in the promotion of Slovenia and its ideas over the next 20 years.

All the best, Bled Strategic Forum.



Photo: Bled Strategic Forum archive

Anže Logar – Minister of Foreign Affairs (2020–2022)

The Bled Strategic Forum has repeatedly demonstrated its value in shaping public dialogue on foreign policy matters – this is its greatest added value. Its lively atmosphere, occasional unconventionality, and, above all, its role as a platform for leading international figures to share the stage make it unique.

The Bled Strategic Forum is a brand we must continue to develop. I was reminded of this when I took part as a panellist in Globsec, as a speaker at the European Forum Alpbach and at the Warsaw Security Forum.

At the Munich Security Conference, the moderator approached me personally and proudly mentioned that he would also be moderating the presidential debate at the Bled Strategic Forum. With its wide

array of international guests, unexpected developments, and at times heated debates sparked by provocative questions, the Bled Strategic Forum presents both a real challenge to each chief diplomat and a stage offering the audience an exceptional repertoire of perspectives from international opinion leaders, experts and political figures.



Photo: Bled Strategic Forum archive

Karl Erjavec – Minister of Foreign Affairs (2012–2018)

Over the years, the Bled Strategic Forum has established itself as the leading international political and economic event in the region. My aspiration was for the Bled Strategic Forum to gain wider recognition. As minister, my goal was to raise it from a purely political forum and become a platform where not only politicians, but also businesspeople, representatives of international organisations and others could come together. This new approach opened the door to discussions on topics that appealed not only to politicians but also to others – this made the forum even more attractive and sparked wider interest. We no longer focused solely on the Western Balkans, but broadened the discussion to include global issues. I believe that this goal has been achieved.

At my first Bled Strategic Forum in 2012, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, we selected the theme "Europe and the reshaped global order". It is interesting that that theme remains relevant to this day. Even now, we continue to ask ourselves about Europe's position in this reshaped global order, where the centres of power are shifting from north to south and from west to east.

I will remember the Bled Strategic Forum as an event that demands a high level of professionalism from all those responsible for running it, both in terms of content and organisation. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone for their valuable contribution during my time as Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Bled Strategic Forum is, and will remain Slovenia's foremost high-level international event.

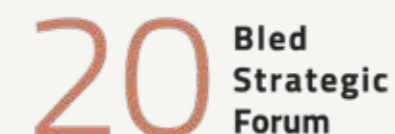




Photo: Bled Strategic Forum archive

Dimitrij Rupel – Minister of Foreign Affairs (1990-1993), (1997-2000), (2000-2008)

The first thing that comes to mind are the words once uttered by Tony Blair when he was “pressed for answers”: “That was then; this is now.” Then – 20 years ago – while rowing on Lake Bled with the then Prime Minister Janez Janša, we came up with an idea, developed it and pursued our aspirations. As we recalled the numerous European foreign policy meetings – such as in Davos, Munich, Wachau (where, in 2004, I had the honour of receiving the Dr Alois Mock Europe Prize), as well as in Poland and the Czech Republic – we both agreed that Bled was the perfect location for a similar event in Slovenia. And that the ideal time would be the end of August, just before the end of the summer holidays and before the autumn responsibilities begin in earnest. Looking back, that time seems almost romantic compared to today.

Two years earlier, Slovenia had achieved its two main state goals: membership in NATO and the EU. It was only natural that the next step would be to strengthen our national identity and sovereignty, and to enter the Euro-Atlantic diplomatic arena and others beyond. In 2005, Slovenia chaired the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, while the minister’s travels and consultations extended as far as the European eastern and southern neighbouring countries under the European Neighbourhood Policy – from the Western Balkans to the countries of the so-called “flower revolutions” (Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan) and the “frozen conflicts” (Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria and others).

In autumn 2021, I had the task of “softening” (moderating) a panel of “former leaders” (Elmar Brok, Mikuláš Dzurinda, Andreas Kohl, Ana Palacio, Lojze Peterle, Jacques Rupnik, Mirek Topolánek). At the outset, I summarised its themes with the first four letteres of the alphabet – A, B, C, D – for Afghanistan, the Balkans, COVID-19 and democracy. Given the dramatic changes experienced by many at the end of the Cold War, the discussion was interesting also in terms of documentary value and as personal testimonies. Some speakers continued themes from the earlier panel – migration, EU enlargement – while others highlighted Brussels’ lack of understanding for the problems faced by former communist countries.

Despite everything, the diplomatic atmosphere in Bled then was more relaxed than it is this year. This year, we hold our breath as we witness the fading smile of history, the one we knew from the end of the Cold War. From our bookshelves, we take down books on crises, as well as those on democracy, independence, mutual understanding and tolerance.



Photo: Bled Strategic Forum archive

Miro Cerar – Prime Minister (2014–2018), Minister of Foreign Affairs (2018–2020)

During my time of running the Government and later as Minister of Foreign Affairs, I experienced and helped shape each Bled Strategic Forum as both an important and visible opportunity for Slovenia’s international promotion and an opportunity for many formal and informal meetings with foreign statespersons, diplomats, business leaders, intellectuals and others. The Bled Strategic Forum has always been excellently organised, and over its twenty years of existence, has established itself as a high-profile international forum for exchanging views on the most pressing regional and global challenges facing countries and humanity as a whole.

At the forum, I had the opportunity to meet – both formally and informally – with many senior European officials, prime ministers and ministers from EU Member States and the Western Balkans, as well as with influential figures from the other parts of the world. I still remember the delight of a group of Polish tourists on Bled Island when Donald Tusk and I encountered them shortly after he had dutifully rung the church bell. At that time, Edi Rama was already telling jokes, Jean-Claude Juncker and European Commissioners were praising Slovenia’s breakthrough in emerging from the crisis, and Josep Borrell expressed his affection for Slovenia. Xavier Bettel, if I mention him too, fell in love with blejska kremšnita (the Bled cream cake) and reminisced about it for years after our meeting in Bled.

By that time, the Bled Strategic Forum was already a highly regarded and well-attended international platform for addressing current political, economic and other topics, with Slovenian state officials, diplomats and experts consistently playing a key role. At every forum, I took the opportunity to promote the geostrategic and other importance of integrating the Western Balkan partners into the European Union.





IN FOCUS

Young Bled Strategic Forum participants.

THE EVOLUTION OF YOUNG BLED STRATEGIC FORUM

An open stage, a safe space, a sounding board

TEXT BY MAGDALENA RAKOVEC, HEAD OF YOUNG BLED STRATEGIC FORUM
AND MIHA TRSTENJAK, YOUNG BLED STRATEGIC FORUM PROGRAMME DIRECTOR
PHOTO BY YOUNG BLED STRATEGIC FORUM ARCHIVE

The first Young Bled Strategic Forum, or Young Bled Strategic Forum for short, was held in 2011. Conceived as a one-day side event, its aim was to bring together students and young professionals from diplomatic, academic and think-tank circles across Europe and particularly the Mediterranean. Since then, the Young Bled Strategic Forum event has evolved into a self-standing, three-day international conference that brings together 45 young leaders from around the globe – a conference that is independent from, yet inextricably interwoven with the Bled Strategic Forum.

Evolution has been one of the Young BSF's defining features. Each edition experiments with new formats and ideas while building on previous experience, reflecting the event's youthful, flexible ethos and drive for continuous improvement. Yet the mission endures: to provide a participant-driven platform where bright and motivated young minds meet, exchange ideas on the most pressing global challenges and find inspiration to improve their communities. We see young people as drivers of change and want to support them in their aspirations.

beyond the traditional fields of political science, economics and law, as long as they can demonstrate tangible output in their respective fields. In addition to regional, gender and disciplinary diversity, two further principles shape our choices: cultivating a breadth of opinions and perspectives, and giving preference to people who have previously had limited access to events like this. Together, these criteria are designed to pierce the bubble that can surround such events and create the best possible conditions for mutual learning and professional growth.

Who is the Young Bled Strategic Forum for?

The Young Bled Strategic Forum participants are chosen through an open call that attracts an ever-growing number of applicants each year, thanks in large part to word-of-mouth from alumni. As a conference with a growing prioritisation of empowerment through mutual learning, we have made a conscious effort to include candidates

Learning from our past and from others

By developing a clearer understanding of our goals, our audience and our guiding principles, we have begun introducing changes that set us apart – not only from our earlier iterations but also from other similar events. There is no scarcity of prominent youth conferences within the broadly defined field of world politics, some



Participant-driven programme empowering youth to co-create learning experiences.

with years, others with decades of tradition. Trying to outgrow or outshine them is not always achievable, nor is it necessarily in line with our stated goal of mutual learning. Instead, we have decided to prioritise quality through practicality above all else.

In recent years, we have moved away from mid-sized panel discussions towards workshops and one-on-one discussions that prioritise depth and applicability of knowledge.

We have also turned to Young Bled Strategic Forum participants for expertise and initiative, giving them the opportunity to co-create and facilitate learning experiences (which is what we mean when we say that the Young Bled Strategic Forum is participant-driven). When working with partners, we encourage them to articulate their goals and

methods in the clearest terms possible while also giving them ample time and space to deliver an experience as close to their vision as possible. We have also made a conscious effort to onboard more Slovenian partners and experts, understanding that—as a public diplomacy tool—the Young Bled Strategic Forum has the power and responsibility to showcase the best of both established and up-and-coming Slovenian expertise.

Sometimes, the pursuit of quality through practicality requires making difficult choices. It means rejecting strong candidates to ensure that the 45 who make the cut have the best possible experience. It can mean hosting lower-level operatives instead of high-level representatives, because it is the operatives who possess the kind of ground-level insights and cutting-edge applied expertise most relevant to our stated aim. Another difficult decision we had to make was to leave Ljubljana and move to Pokljuka, which lends itself better to enabling focused work.

We also loosened up the dress code, figuring no one would really mind seeing people in shorts, T-shirts and sandals if this meant more openness, fresher ideas and ultimately better insights.

Finally, after much deliberation, we decided to expand our focus from a regional to a global conference, foregoing some of the depth that comes with a regional focus in exchange for the breadth of knowledge, perspective and experience that span the globe.

The Bled Strategic Forum and the Young Bled Strategic Forum: Independent yet inseparable

While the Young Bled Strategic Forum functions as a standalone conference, it remains inextricably woven into the fabric of the Bled Strategic Forum. Each year, the programme is shaped so that it meaningfully supplements the theme of the main event. Young Bled Strategic Forum participants

take the stage in Bled Strategic Forum panel discussions relevant to their areas of expertise, where they provide a much-needed operational perspective. We have also launched what we call “Young Bled Strategic Forum-powered” discussions, which take place on Monday and Tuesday at the main event and are open to all Bled Strategic Forum attendees. These take the form of one-on-one, in-depth conversations where relevant Bled Strategic Forum guests have the opportunity to expound on their ideas and engage critically with the audience.

This also fits well with the Bled Strategic Forum’s transition from a once-a-year event to a fully-fledged platform. Platforms derive their value in large part from striking the right balance between the applicability of knowledge and the allure of the people who share it. Our hope for Young Bled Strategic Forum is that it helps achieve this balance by offering an open stage, a safe space and a sounding board where people are free to develop their ideas in detail, discuss them earnestly with others, and ultimately get a better sense of the ideas’ salience as well as their limits.



Young Bled Strategic Forum offers an environment where social problems can be broken down to their most basic building blocks around which tailored solutions can then be designed.



IN FOCUS

Bled is a popular destination for business meetings and events in Slovenia, known for its stunning scenery and well-equipped conference facilities. Photo: Mitja Kobal/www.slovenia.info

ALLIANCE FOR THE FUTURE

Mayor Anton Mežan and Janez Škrabec on Bled Strategic Forum's Meaning

TEXT BY PETRA PREŠEREN GOLOB

Bled is not only known for its breath-taking natural beauty but also as a meeting point of ideas and discussions about the key challenges of today's world. It is the home of the Bled Strategic Forum. The company Riko is one of the long-time partners of the Bled Strategic Forum and has been supporting it from its inception.

The Municipality of Bled has hosted the Bled Strategic Forum since its beginning in 2006, which placed the municipality on the world map as the venue of one of the leading international conferences in the region. To mark this important anniversary, the Mayor of Bled, Anton Mežan, shared his thoughts about the significance of the forum for the municipality.

Slovenia's greatest poet, Dr France Prešeren, wrote in his poem The Baptism at the Savica: *"Carniola does not have a prettier scene than this one: it is truly heaven's twin."*

This "scene" is ideal for active leisure, it offers opportunities for relaxation or romantic moments and is a source of inspiration and motivation in and of itself.

It's no surprise that many organisers want to hold various events in Bled. Of course we are proud of this, especially when the positive reputation of these events spreads around the world.

Bled Strategic Forum as an opportunity for Bled – cooperation and respect

My predecessor already worked closely with the Bled Strategic Forum organisers throughout his time in office. In the last few years, since I was elected Mayor of Bled, our cooperation has undergone several positive changes drawing on past experience. All with the aim of increasing the satisfaction of both our guests and residents. Minimising disruption, ensuring a spirit of hospitality and mutual respect, and conveying the event's core messages – to me, these are the foundations of a successful and fulfilling experience for all involved.

As mayor, I am aware that such events are an excellent opportunity to promote our municipality and enhance its reputation, and that the experience of our guests must reflect this.

Nevertheless, residents must not be unduly burdened by traffic disruption. That's why the organisers of the forum and the municipality ensure that road traffic conditions remain as smooth as possible, as far as possible given the security requirements of such a high-level event.



Anton Mežan: "For the local environment, hosting one of the most visible foreign-policy events in Slovenia is an honour and a responsibility." Photo: Rok Mučič

Together for Bled's prestige

Strength lies in cooperation. Over the twenty years of working together, the Bled Strategic Forum organisers and the Municipality of Bled have built excellent foundations for the future. And I do not mean only the municipality as an

institution alone. Cooperation with various local stakeholders creates the final mosaic – the overall image and reputation of both the Bled Strategic Forum and Bled itself. Organising the Bled Strategic Forum, which is a high-level event in every respect, requires knowledge and experience. This project could not have been carried out in Bled without respect for our natural and cultural heritage and the awareness that it is not hosted solely by the mayor, but by all its residents. The organisers are well aware of this. They have shown they have the knowledge and ability to deliver.

On the twentieth anniversary of our partnership, I thank the organisers for their trust and sincerely congratulate them for their excellent work.

I wish all participants a pleasant stay, fruitful discussions and plenty of inspiration.

A Partnership from the Very Beginning

Riko is not only one of Slovenia's leading businesses, present in many international markets, it is also a company with a vision. It is distinguished by its ability to understand and adapt to rapidly changing modern societies. Janez Škrabec, Director of Riko, shared with us a few thoughts on the significance of Riko in today's world.

To empower ourselves to operate and think ahead in such a world, we need broader insight that enables us to better understand this social multidimensionality. This is not possible in a vacuum, but in a space that encourages in-depth reflections, wider insights, open views, the exchange of ideas, meanings, and, above all, where a culture of dialogue and cooperation is strengthened.

And the Bled Strategic Forum is exactly that – a space of wider insight, strategic reflections and meaningful integrations at the highest level.

In an unstable business environment, global solutions must be found

As a company that designs and delivers comprehensive technological solutions in the international arena, we are aware of the importance of understanding the times and identifying the circumstances in which we operate. This is why Riko has been supporting the purpose, mission and goals of the Bled Strategic Forum for years. Not only because of the carefully chosen subjects and content, which always include the most topical social challenges, dilemmas and issues, but also because the Bled Strategic Forum provides an excellent environment for meeting the best thinkers, social and political strategists, scientists, statespersons, humanists and business people. These connections not only strengthen diplomatic ties, encourage new strategic partnerships and increase visibility of all participants, but also open doors to new economic cooperation opportunities.

Bled Strategic Forum generates new creative spaces

The Bled Strategic Forum has developed from a regional forum into an internationally relevant platform, which today successfully integrates strategic topics, geopolitical concerns and economic visions. It maintains its regional anchorage, but has been adding the global horizon, and also followers, with increasing ambition. It puts the multidisciplinary approach firmly on a pedestal, as it seeks connections between politics, civil society, academia and diplomacy.

And what is the most valuable: it gives younger generations an opportunity to develop and assert their social voice.

In two decades, the Bled Strategic Forum has established itself as one of the most important strategic platforms in the international arena. I offer my sincere congratulations to all who at the end of every summer for twenty years have been placing Slovenia at the centre of key debates, visions and integrations of the wider region and the world.



Janez Škrabec: "The Bled Strategic Forum provides a framework that allows the business sector to better understand the chosen markets, increases partner synergies and enhances the reputation and business legitimacy of participating companies." Photo: Personal archive



President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and Prime Minister of the Republic of Slovenia Robert Golob.
Photo: Bor Slana/STA

GLITTER DIPLOMACY

Bled is where the world meets

TEXT BY PETRA PREŠEREN GOLOB

From kings to queens, presidents, statesmen, film and music stars. For more than a century, Bled has been a meeting point for political, diplomatic and social life.

It is a destination for big names and big conversations. Surrounded by picturesque nature, it offers a place where political ties are more easily forged and conversations take on a friendly tone.

From red carpets to diplomacy on roller skates

Diplomacy in Bled moves from the halls with long tables and serious faces and piles of papers to the lakeside.

The elegant shoes and high heels can be replaced by rollerblades or roller skates.

In 2019, Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid on rollerblades and Slovenian President Borut Pahor on roller skates set off along the shore of Lake Bled in a rhythm of cooperation. Three years later, the atmosphere was no less relaxed and sporty when Hungarian President Katalin Novák and Slovenian President Borut Pahor set the pace of the meeting by running around Lake Bled.



Then President of the Republic of Slovenia Borut Pahor and President of the Republic of Estonia Kersti Kaljulaid roller skating.
Photo: Personal archive



Prince Charles on pletna boat. Photo: Blaž Samec

Enchanting beauty of Bled impresses also foreign statesmen

In 2020, the view of Lake Bled enchanted the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who met with Prime Minister Janez Janša and Foreign Minister Anže Logar at Villa Bled. It was the first visit by a US Secretary of State to Slovenia in 23 years. And Pompeo said at the time, "You are winning! It's really beautiful here."

In 1998, King Charles III, then Prince Charles of Wales, noted that Slovenia was one of the most undiscovered secrets in Europe. Together with his host, then President Milan Kučan, he took a pletna boat to the island of Bled, where, as tradition dictates, he also pulled the rope of the wishing bell. What he wished for remains a secret.

His brother, Prince Edward, visited Bled 15 years later. He and his wife Sophie enjoyed a lunch of Slovenian delicacies such as porcini mushrooms, trout and viljamovka pear brandy. They then enjoyed the view from Bled Castle, and were shown the ancient printing process in the castle's printing house.

Cream cake for the First Lady

When US President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin met at Brdo pri Kranju in 2001, the US First Lady Laura Bush visited Bled. In the company of Štefka Kučan, wife of President Milan Kučan, she saw the beauty of this Slovenian jewel. They also had lunch in Bled, including a cream cake.



Prince Akishin of Japan and Princess Kiko. Photo: Municipality of Bled archive

The Japanese cherry tree as a symbol of friendship

Bled's nature and cuisine also impressed Japan's Prince Akishin and Princess Kiko. They visited Bled in 2013 to mark the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Slovenia and Japan. They walked around Bled Island, where the Princess picked up a fir cone as a souvenir, and visited an exhibition of underwater photographs taken by divers in the lake, as the Prince is a great expert on catfish. As a lasting memory of their visit, they planted a Japanese cherry tree in the park near the Bled Municipality building. Still today, the tree symbolically connects Japan and Slovenia.

When the world meets at Lake Bled

High-level visits, which strengthen political dialogue

and trust between countries, are a Bled staple. Among others, King Harald V and Queen Sonja of Norway, King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofía of Spain, Prince Nikolaus of Liechtenstein and his wife, Meira Kumar, the Speaker of the Lower House of the Parliament of India, Han Changfu, Minister of Agriculture of the People's Republic of China, and many others have visited this corner of the Alps.

A place where shared values transcend borders and time

In Bled, the bridges of the future are truly built on the foundations of the past. There is a statue of Mihajlo Pupin, an outstanding scientist and an surprising ally of Slovenia. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, his diplomatic skills helped Slovenia to retain part of the territory on which

Bled is today. As a token of gratitude, the statue was unveiled in 2015 by Slovenian President Borut Pahor and Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić.

Bled is not only a diplomatic window to the world, it is also a place where Slovenian politics symbolically shows its gratitude for the efforts made to strengthen international relations.

In 2017, at Villa Zlatorog, President Borut Pahor awarded the Golden Order of Merit to Federica

Mogherini for her significant contribution to deepening Slovenian-Italian cooperation, both bilaterally and internationally.

Where politics takes on a friendlier tone

Certainly, a relaxed conversation overlooking unspoilt nature and a picturesque lake does not resolve all political misunderstandings or solve all diplomatic challenging issues - but who says it is not worth a try? The surroundings alone make the conversation more friendly. The world comes here not just to visit, but to pause for a moment and perhaps find a common language.

When the stars shine over the lake

And if you believe Bled attracts only politicians and princes - think again. In 2005, the legendary Beatle Paul McCartney and his then wife Heather Mills McCartney visited Bled. They stayed overnight at Villa Bled, and McCartney sang a farewell song for the hotel staff.

In 2014, Bled hosted an international film festival, which was also attended by American actor Armand Assante, a member of the Bled Film Festival Committee. Bled is also more than a perfect location for a film shot that says more than a thousand words.

Where the artists create

Bled is also a meeting point for artists who have built their summer residences at the location. Among them were the writer and sculptor Tone Svetina, the master of poetic forms Boris A. Novak, one of the most prominent Slovenian contemporary painters Metka Krašovec, the painter and illustrator Melita Vovk and the painter Ejti Štih. The first Slovenian female sculptor, Karla Bulovec Mrak, was Bled native, and Oton Župančič also holidayed and worked in Velika Zaka. As an interesting fact, Villa Sončnica was the holiday home of the mayor of Ljubljana, Ivan Hribar.



Then Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša and United States Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo met at Bled in 2020. Photo: UKOM archive



American actor Armand Assante at Bled Film Festival. Photo: Nebojša Tejić/STA



IN FOCUS

The iconic church on a tiny island. Photo: Jošt Gantar/www.slovenia.info

THERE IS NO PLACE LIKE BLEĐ

Legends, history and natural beauty

TEXT BY TANJA GLOGOVČAN BELANČIĆ

Many consider Bled to be the most beautiful Slovenian town. Surrounded by mountains and highlands, and particularly the small island centred in Lake Bled, give it an unmistakably magic feel. Its picturesque landscape, tranquil nature and rich cultural heritage attracts many visitors from all over the world who want to experience this fairytale setting.

Lake Bled lies in the centre of Bled basin. It formed in a tectonic depression that was later hollowed out by the Bohinj Glacier. As the glacier receded, it left behind the island, and the basin gradually filled with water. The resulting lake measures 2.12 km in length, up to 1.3 km in width and is up to 30.6 m deep – making it popular with divers.

The oldest castle in Slovenia

On a rocky plateau overlooking the lake stands Bled Castle, first mentioned in 1011 when the German King Henry II gifted it to Bishop Albuin of Brixen. The castle was never a permanent residence of bishops, but was managed by ministeriales and stewards. Tenants, such as the Kreigh, Thurn and Auersperg families, left a significant cultural mark on it.

After the 1511 earthquake, the castle was renovated by Herbard von Auersperg, who later became an important Reformation era Protestant figure.

Following nationalisation in 1803 and after having passed through the hands of various owners, the Bled Castle was bought in 1918 by hotelier Ivan Kenda, who wanted to convert it into a hotel. After a fire in 1947, the castle underwent reconstruction led by the architect Tone Bitenc. The museum section of the castle was renovated in 2008.

The naturopath who advocated the use of sunshine therapy

In the 19th century, Swiss naturopath Arnold Rikli put Bled on the map of Europe as a jewel among health spa destinations. He believed that the healthiest way to live was in harmony with nature. Sunshine, fresh air, cold water and exercise were at the basis of his philosophy. He encouraged sunbathing, swimming in the lake, vegetarianism, barefoot walking and sleeping outdoors, which was quite revolutionary at the time. He built baths, well-ventilated huts, a dining room and villas, and laid out a network of footpaths through the surrounding hills – many of which are used today as recreational and walking trails.

Rikli's reputation attracted many famous figures: Emperor Franz Joseph, Prince Philip of Coburg, Hungarian writer Mór Jókai, even Gustav Mahler, who sought inspiration in the peace of the forests surrounding Bled.

Bled became a place where the spirit of the times, art, science, and the healing power of nature converged.

Today, locals still recall how Rikli used to run barefoot towards Straža hill before sunrise every morning, with a stick in his hand, welcoming the new day with hands raised in a greeting gesture. Reportedly, he could stop the rain with the power of his mind, and that one summer evening he made the sky open with a single scream, just so that a patient could catch a few rays of sunlight. It may be fact or fiction, but Rikli's spirit still lingers over the lake like a silent energy that beckons visitors to breathe deeply and reconnect with nature.

A place of legends, faith and quiet hope

Bled Island is associated with a legend, which recounts how a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary once stood on a meadow in the middle of the lake. As there was no fence around it, cattle often wandered inside. Suddenly there was a voice from heaven, "Build a fence around the church! If you don't build it, I will." With culture, music and unforgettable experiences.

As people remained indifferent, the church found itself surrounded by water one morning, and that is how Lake Bled was created.

Another of the popular legends is about a bell and a widow who had a bell cast in memory

of her deceased husband. During its transport across the lake, the bell was caught in a storm and sank to the bottom together with the crew. The widow retired as a nun to a monastery in Rome, where the Pope made her a gift of a new bell that still rings at the island church. On clear nights, one can still hear the mournful sound of the sunken bell. If you want a wish to come true, just ring the wishing bell.

Bavant, a mountain guide, is said to have fought a Turk in a duel. Once bullets were fired, the two men were still standing; their bullets reportedly colliding in mid-air.

Stories about ice making tell of workers who cut blocks of ice with a saw. A man from Ljubljana warned them to switch places, convinced that someone was still beneath the ice, holding the other end of the saw.

Before World War II, the Karadjordjević family brought Icelandic horses – Fjord horses – to Slovenia. One of these horses ended up with the partisans, biting several of them before they tried to cook it in a cauldron.

In winter, townsfolk went skating on the lake, while ladies rode in armchairs mounted on metal blades that were pushed around the frozen lake's surface – one of these chairs even belonged to the local parish.

When the sun kisses Mount Triglav

The panoramic view of Bled against the backdrop of Mount Triglav, the Pokljuka Plateau forests and the lake surface create an image of paradise that seduces the heart and soothes the spirit. The sky here seems endless and serene, the mountains form the mighty massif of the Julian Alps where nature reveals itself in all its grandeur. The landscape is varied, soft and wild at the same time, and all this is gently reflected in Lake Bled



Experience Bled like in the past while driving in the traditional carriage. Photo: Jošt Gantar/www.slovenia.info



Bled has the largest golf course in Slovenia. It is renowned as one of the most beautiful in Europe. Photo: Aleš Fevžer/www.slovenia.info

like in a magic mirror that keeps the secrets of eternity.

The Bled Island, sitting amid the silvery waters of the lake, tells its story of silence and wishes.

The chime of the bell resonates love thoughts that caress the soul like a gentle breeze. Swans

glide past amorous gazes, and mists transform into a veil of dreams with the morning light. Every moment here is like a whisper of eternity, where time stops and love finds its home. The air of Bled is scented with legends, footsteps resound on the lakefront promenade like soft rhymes of a poem, and a spark of magic shines in the eyes, whispering the words: you are welcome here.



Slovenia is a very diverse country in terms of landscape, gastronomy, culture and dialects. Its picturesqueness and diversity make it an excellent film location for Slovenian and foreign film productions. Photo: Katarina Karlovšek



Legend has it that the Bled Island was created by fairies who punished the locals for not fencing off the church. Water inundated the meadows, creating Lake Bled with an island in the middle, topped by a church. Photo: Jurišič/www.slovenia.info



CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Bled Castle is the oldest castle in Slovenia; it was first mentioned in historical records in 1011. The castle sits on a steep cliff overlooking the lake and offers a superb view of the surroundings. Photo: Srečo Zupan archive

THE BLEED PLETNA BOAT

An elegant boat that captivates with its charm

TEXT BY TANJA GLOGOVČAN BELANČIČ

Just as Venice is known for its gondolas, Bled is known for its pletnas – elegant, handcrafted wooden boats that have been plying the waters of picturesque Lake Bled for more than four centuries.

These unique boats are not just a way to reach the island church, they are also a living symbol of tradition, local identity and cultural heritage of the Gorenjska region. The pletna is not just a boat, it is the soul of Bled.

The pletna was first mentioned in 1590, when locals began building special boats for transporting pilgrims to Bled Island.

The island was an important pilgrimage site, so the trip to the island was not just a practical necessity, but an act of faith. That is why Empress Maria Theresa granted the villagers of Mlino the right to provide transport, and in return they were required to transport passengers to the island free of charge.

This right has been preserved over the centuries and remains part of the local identity – the villagers of Mlino still believe that the water belongs to them. While the villages on the opposite side of the lake at the foot of the castle rock were granted the privilege to transport passengers by carriage, the pletna boatmen became the masters of the water.

The origins of the modern pletna

Although boats have crisscrossed Lake Bled for centuries, the first pletna in its today's recognisable form was crafted in 1902. Men from three local families built it using the model salt ship and thoroughly remodelled it. They added a distinctive pointed bow, a raised stern, long benches, armrests and a curved canvas roof. This design enabled safe and comfortable navigation even for a larger number of passengers.

Today's pletnas are up to 8 metres long and handcrafted from Slovenian wood.

Each pletna is unique and is made by craftsmen rather than industrially, which ensures the preservation of the knowledge and handcraft tradition.

A pletna can carry up to 20 passengers and is propelled by an oarsman standing in the centre of the boat and using two special oars in a traditional technique known as the stehrudder (a standing rudder).



A major turning point in pletna design occurred in 1902, when the boat took on the elegant shape it has today. Much of the credit for this goes to family Zupan, who helped construct the first modern pletna. Photo: Srečo Zupan archive

A vocation from the heart

Pletna boatmanship is not just work – it is a calling. Many pletna rowers learn their skills in childhood, often taking up the oars shortly after turning the age of 12 years and spending the next decades gliding along the lake’s waters every day. Some of them say that water becomes their second skin.

Work on the lake is not easy – a pletna rower must be strong, skilful, patient and courteous.

In the past, many rowers also had farms, but the work in the fields was mostly done by farmhands or family members. A pletna rower had to completely dedicate himself to life on water, as he did not merely row a boat, but had the task of preserving tradition and the role of a trustworthy person in the eyes of passengers.

Stories and anecdotes from the lake

One of the often-told stories is of a rower who rowed his pletna to the island at five every morning – not to carry visitors, but to greet the sunrise from the island. He believed that sun shone differently when he would be the first to greet it in silence. “That was my dialogue with the lake”, he added.

Another anecdote, full of humour and symbolism, relates to a Japanese couple’s wedding on Bled Island. The newlyweds wanted to travel to the island with an authentic as possible pletna, and the rower donned the Slovenian national costume for this occasion. During the trip, a duck suddenly leapt out of the boat straight into the bride’s lap. “That’s a sign of good luck!” exclaimed the rower, and the couple sent him a postcard a full ten years later.



You can sail to Bled Island every day of the year in a pletna boat. Photo: Srečo Zupan archive

Pletna rowers also recall how, during the war, they had to pretend to be transporting wood or fishing gear, even though in reality they were secretly transporting people or post. The pletna was often a silent accomplice in acts of bravery.

Once pilgrims, now tourists

If pletnas used to carry only locals and pilgrims in the past, today they carry visitors from all around the world. Bled Island, topped by the famous church and its wishing bell, beckons tourists who board the boats not only for the sake of the view, but for the experience. Once on a boat and when the oars hit the water, it feels as if you have transcended into another, slower, quieter and more sensual, dimension.

The pletna is not only part of Bled's tourist offer – it is a symbol of culture heritage, protected by the status of intangible cultural heritage.



Pletna is a traditional wooden boat typical of Bled, which ferries tourists to the island. It resembles a Venetian gondola, but is propelled by oars in a particular manner – it is rowed by an oarsman who stands on the stern. Photo: Aleš Fevžer/www.slovenia.info

Every hand-built boat, every standing rower and every narrated sentence about the past is an invaluable asset.

With love

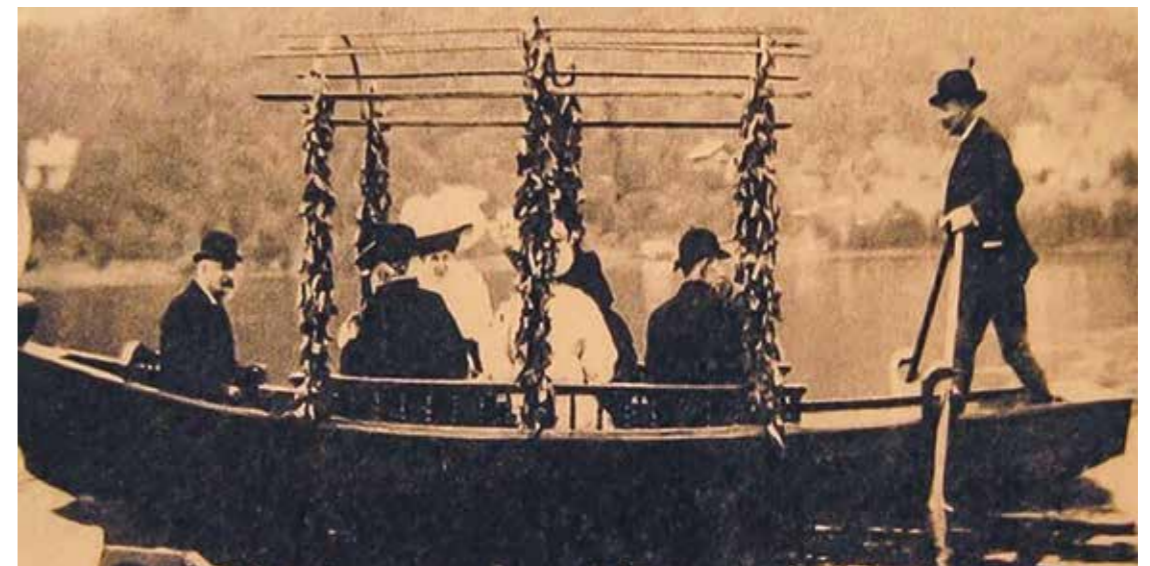
The Bled Lake would not be what it is without pletnas. This quiet boat, gliding across the mirror-like waters, carries more than just tourists – it carries centuries of history, effort, skills and local pride.

At a time when technology is increasingly overwhelming the world, the pletna is a symbol of the human touch, respect for nature and sustainable tourism.

If asked what his pletna means to him, a rower would probably shrug his shoulders and reply: “It is my home. It is my path. My grandfather and my great-grandfather were rowers, now it is my turn. And my son will follow my footsteps, if he is wise.”



Pletna boats, traditional wooden vessels on Lake Bled, have a history rooted in the 12th century, initially serving as a means of transporting construction materials to the island. Photo: Srečo Zupan archive



Over time, they evolved into passenger transport, particularly for pilgrims visiting the church on Bled Island. The profession of pletna oarsman has been passed down through generations, with specific families granted the right to operate the boats. Photo: Srečo Zupan archive

GASTRONOMY



Bled is not only a destination where you can enjoy many natural beauties, but it will also impress you with excellent local dishes.
Photo: Ciril Jazbec/www.slovenia.info

FLAVOURS OF BLED

A culinary journey around the Alpine gem

TEXT BY ŠPELA VOVK

When we close our eyes and think of Bled, most of us picture a picturesque lake with a small island at its centre, a charming church reached by 99 stone steps, and a cliffside castle that has watched over the landscape for centuries like a vigilant guardian of time. But Bled is much more than a postcard-perfect view.

It is also a place where flavours awaken memories, where tradition meets innovation, and where every meal becomes a true adventure. Join us on a culinary journey around this Alpine gem – into the world of Bled’s flavours.

From postcards to flavours

Over the past decade, Bled has firmly established itself on Slovenia’s – and the world’s – culinary map as a destination celebrated not only for its breathtaking natural beauty but also for its exceptional gastronomy. This culinary reputation goes beyond the traditional dishes of the Gorenjska region, drawing inspiration from the natural riches of the surroundings, cultural heritage and contemporary culinary trends. Local chefs, restaurateurs and producers work closely together to craft the unique flavour of Bled – one that satisfies even the most discerning gourmets, while remaining firmly rooted in the local soil.

From Alpine pastures to the lakeside table

At its core, Bled’s cuisine is simple, yet richly flavourful.

It celebrates natural, seasonal ingredients – often sourced just around the corner.

Cheeses from the nearby Alpine pastures, herbs from mountain meadows, potatoes from local fields, fish from Lake Bled and meat from local farmers form the backbone of the menus offered by restaurants and guesthouses in the town and its surrounding area.

Traditional dishes, such as buckwheat mash (žganci) with sour milk, grilled sausages, potatoes cooked in sauerkraut water, sauerkraut and bean soup (jota), barley stew (ričet) and homemade sausages, are staples on many menus. Yet these dishes are far more than simple “rustic fare” – in

the skilful hands of modern chefs, these heritage recipes are lovingly reimagined with care, precision and contemporary techniques. With each meal, you experience a harmonious blend of tradition's enduring spirit and the vibrant creativity of today.

Modern cuisine with the heart of Bled

In recent years, Bled has undergone a true culinary renaissance. Alongside its many traditional restaurants, a new wave of modern eateries has been emerging, infusing their menus with bold creativity, imagination and international influences. Chefs honour local ingredients while reinventing them in exciting new ways. Buckwheat mash, for example, is transformed into a delicate risotto with herbs and local trout. Beef tongue is elevated, served with smoked potato purée and fermented vegetables. Some restaurants have taken innovation even further by embracing foraging,

fermentation and a zero-waste philosophy. They not only select the finest ingredients but also prioritise sustainability. This approach goes beyond a culinary trend – it reflects a profound respect for nature and a strong commitment to environmental responsibility.

Stories captured in flavour

Bled's cuisine is truly distinguished by the stories it tells. Every dish, every ingredient, has its own origin, its own path, and its own people.

When we sit down at the table, we don't just taste the food – we also experience the surroundings, tradition, and the dedication of those who put their effort and knowledge into every bite.

Take milk, for example: it tells the story of

shepherds who walk miles every day to graze their cows on high mountain pastures. Honey in the dessert is not only a sweet ingredient – it reflects the year-round work of local beekeepers tending their beehives. And a glass of homemade cider takes us to the old orchards on the edge of the village where apple trees have flourished for decades.

The Bled cream cake – a dessert that has become a symbol

No visit to Bled is complete without tasting its iconic cream cake. This sweet queen of desserts, made in the Hotel Park pastry kitchen since 1953, has become a symbol of the town of Bled and one of Slovenia's most recognisable treats. A crispy layer of puff pastry, rich vanilla custard, delicate whipped cream, another pastry layer, and a dusting of icing sugar on top – a simple yet perfect combination.

To date, more than 15 million cream cakes have been baked in Bled, a testament of its enduring popularity.

While many pastry shops have attempted to recreate the recipe, there is only one original Bled "kremšnita". When visiting Bled, enjoying a cream cake on a terrace overlooking the lake is an absolute must. The view and the taste combine to create an unforgettable experience.

Bled through the seasons – always different, always delicious

Bled is not only a summer postcard – it is a destination for all seasons, especially when it comes to its culinary delights.

Each part of the year brings fresh ingredients, new inspiration and unique stories.



Gorenjska delights with sausage, žganci with sour milk, cheeses like mohant and tolmin - traditional Alpine flavors rich in heritage and local ingredients. Photo: Mitja Kobal/www.slovenia.info



Bled cream slice is a famous Slovenian dessert with crispy puff pastry, smooth vanilla custard, whipped cream, and sugar on top. It's a sweet symbol of Lake Bled's culinary tradition. Photo: Jošt Gantar/www.slovenia.info

Spring offers fresh vegetables, dandelion, spring onion, asparagus, wild herbs and the first mushrooms. Summer is the season of blueberries, raspberries, herbal teas, light dishes and fresh fish. Autumn brings the rich flavours of mushrooms, pumpkins, chestnuts, apples, pears and wild game. Winter warms the body and soul with hearty soups, cured pork products and sausages (koline), sauerkraut, turnips and homemade sausages.

Each season also features a variety of culinary events.

Among the most notable are the “Bled Days of Flavours” (Blejski dnevi okusov), where local restaurateurs craft special menus based on seasonal ingredients and local stories. Visitors have the opportunity to taste the most authentic expression of Bled – one shaped by nature, tradition and creativity.

Farms and local providers – the heart of Bled’s cuisine

For a truly authentic culinary experience in Bled, visiting a restaurant alone isn’t enough – the real charm lies in visiting farms and smaller local producers who warmly open their doors to visitors. On these farms, you can see how cheese is made, taste freshly baked bread, savour homemade fruit jams or enjoy a friendly chat with the hospitable locals over a glass of homemade brandy.

Such visits are not just a culinary delight but also a cultural experience. You gain insight into a way of life still closely connected to the natural rhythm of the seasons, and meet people who have preserved their ancestors’ heritage despite today’s fast pace. This is more than sightseeing – it is a genuine experience.

Bled flavours as part of a sustainable future

Bled’s cuisine is not only growing in quality but also in awareness. The focus is on sustainable practices, strong connections with local communities, and responsible management of natural resources.

Restaurateurs are increasingly attentive to the origin of ingredients, waste reduction, sustainable packaging, and collaboration with local producers.

This is not just a trend – it is a necessity. Through its offer, Bled has shown that a culinary experience can be crafted that combines superb cuisine with sustainability and genuine local spirit.

Bled – where flavours meet the view

Bled is a place where nature and culture intertwine at every step. But for those who look deeper and appreciate finer tastes, Bled is also a place where the view meets the flavour. Where it’s not only what you see but also what you taste that matters. And where every dish, every bite and every conversation at the table becomes an unforgettable experience.

Next time you visit Bled, remember – the true magic begins the moment you take your seat at the table. This is where tradition meets creativity and where every single flavour invites you to experience Bled with your heart, soul and all your senses.



Bled’s hotels craft local cuisine with seasonal menus, giving guests an authentic culinary experience of the Gorenjska region. Photo: Žiga Zupan/www.slovenia.info



The Original Bled Cream Cake

The original recipe for the Bled cream cake (Blejska kremšnita), as prepared at the Hotel Park patisserie in Bled since 1953, remains partially a well-kept secret - especially when it comes to the exact ratios and precise methods. The man behind this iconic dessert was Ištvan Lukačević, a master pastry chef from Vojvodina, who worked at the hotel after the Second World War.

But we have good news: we've created a recipe that very faithfully recreates this beloved dessert in your own kitchen.

Homemade Bled Cream Cake

INGREDIENTS (serves approx. 12)

Puff pastry:

- 500 g ready-made puff pastry (frozen is fine)

Vanilla custard:

- 1 litre full-fat milk
- 8 egg yolks
- 250 g sugar
- 2 sachets of vanilla sugar or 1 vanilla pod
- 120 g plain flour or cornflour (Maizena)
- 60 g butter

Whipped cream layer:

- 500 ml double cream
- 2-3 tbsp icing sugar (to taste)

To finish:

- Icing sugar for dusting

METHOD

1. Preparing the puff pastry:

- Roll out the pastry thinly and cut to the size of your baking tin (e.g. 25 x 35 cm).
- Place it on a baking tray and prick all over with a fork to prevent excessive puffing.
- Bake at 200°C (fan 180°C) for about 15 minutes, or until golden brown and crisp.
- Once cooled, cut into squares (typically 12), which will be used as the top layer of the dessert.

2. Making the vanilla custard:

- Bring 800 ml of the milk to the boil with the vanilla (if using a pod, split it and scrape the seeds into the milk).
- Meanwhile, whisk together the egg yolks, sugar, and flour (or cornflour) with the remaining 200 ml of milk to form a smooth mixture.
- Gradually pour the yolk mixture into the boiling milk, whisking constantly. Cook gently over medium heat until the custard thickens to a dense cream consistency.
- Remove from the heat, stir in the butter, and mix until fully incorporated.

3. Assembling the cake:

- Pour the warm custard into your baking tin and allow it to cool completely (refrigeration is recommended).
- Meanwhile, whip the cream with icing sugar until stiff peaks form.
- Spread the whipped cream evenly over the cooled custard.
- Carefully place the pre-cut squares of baked puff pastry on top.

4. Chilling and serving:

- Chill the assembled dessert thoroughly - ideally for at least 6 to 8 hours - to ensure clean slicing.
- Before serving, dust generously with icing sugar.

TIPS FOR THE PERFECT BLEED CREAM CAKE

- Use full-fat milk and real butter for a rich and authentic custard.
- For a more stable whipped cream, you may add a tablespoon of mascarpone or a stabiliser such as cream fix.
- For the most authentic experience, serve your slice as a square, with a fork—and if possible, with a view of Lake Bled.



ECOLOGY

Water bottles can be refilled at numerous public drinking fountains – there's no need to buy a new one. Photo: Maja Pancur

EXPLORE, RESPECT, PROTECT

Tourism That Listens to Nature

TEXT BY TANJA GLOGOVČAN BELANČIČ

Bled – one of Slovenia's most recognisable tourist destinations – has long been considered a symbol of natural beauty, hospitality and cultural heritage. However, in recent years, it has frequently faced challenges arising from the high number of tourists. Bled is therefore increasingly becoming a model of environmentally conscious tourism.

Efforts are being made to reduce waste, prevent new waste from being generated and promote a circular economy.

The goal is not only to recycle, but above all to reduce resource consumption and reuse materials in an environmentally friendly way.

Bled – an example of good practice

In 2018, the Municipality of Bled joined the Zero Waste Europe network as the first tourism-focused municipality in Slovenia. In cooperation with the environmentalist organisation Ecologists Without Borders and other partners, practical measures have been implemented, such as waste separation, reduction of single-use plastics, raising awareness among locals and tourists, and green public procurement.

This also means that tourist service providers, restaurants and hotels have introduced stricter waste separation standards, thereby increasing the volume of recycled and reused materials.

The use of reusable bottles, local tap water and packaging-free products is encouraged. The Municipality of Bled organises numerous workshops, exhibitions, info points and events that educate people about the importance of waste reduction. When procuring goods or services, the Municipality of Bled prioritises environmentally sustainable offers.

Thanks to this approach, Bled has become not only a cleaner environment but also a well-known sustainable tourist destination.

Linking progress and health

In joining the Zero Waste movement, Bled and other Slovenian municipalities have united in a network of municipalities to share good practices and explore possible solutions to environmental issues.

With its popularity and influence, Bled demonstrates

how even the busiest tourist destinations can adopt an environmentally responsible strategy.

Bled inspires not only other Slovenian municipalities, but also European and global destinations dealing with the impact of mass tourism and climate change.



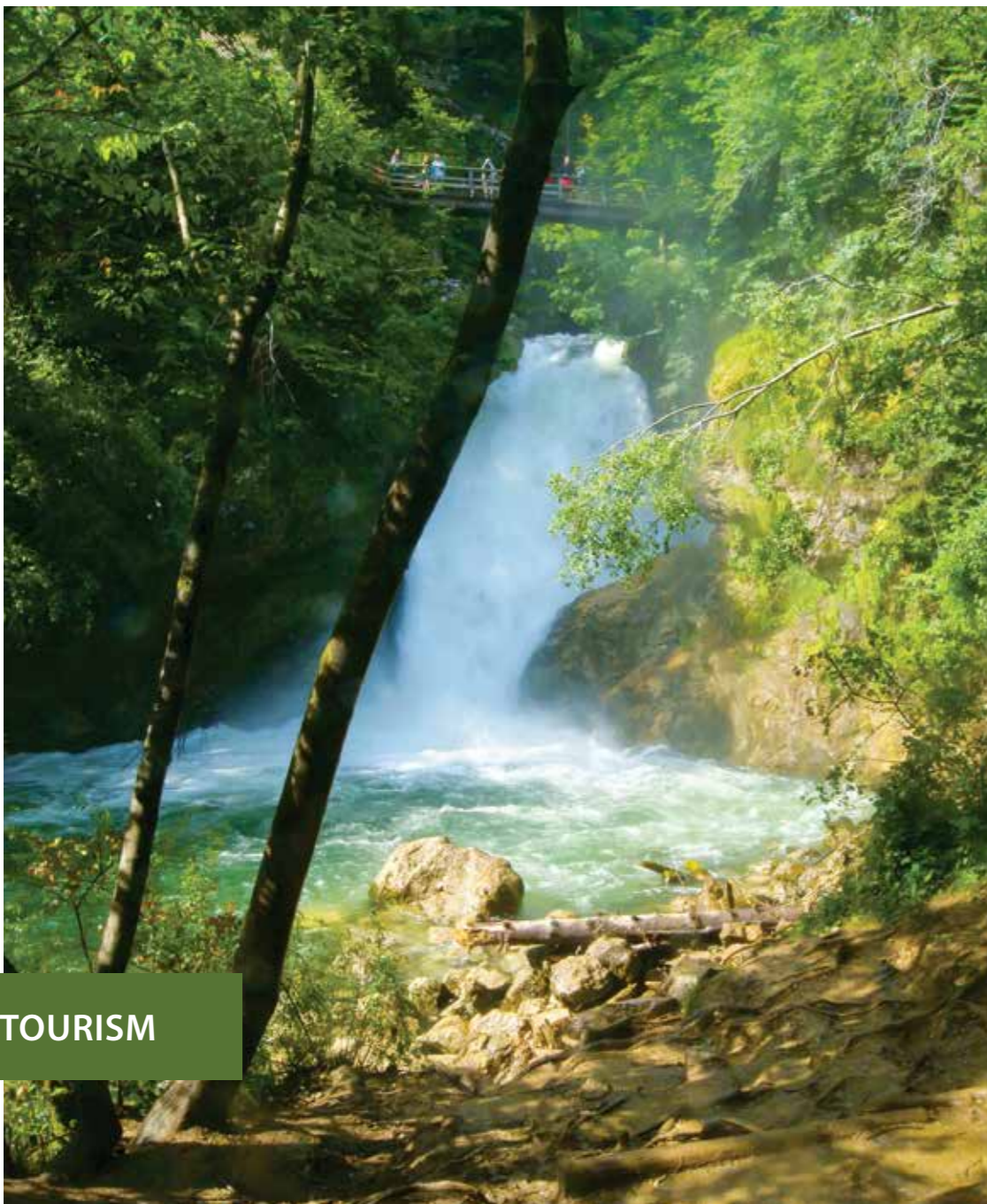
Bled Garden Village is a fully eco-friendly resort built on creative ideas, offering eco-conscious guests a self-sufficient stay. Photo: Ciril Jazbec/www.slovenia.info



There are around 40 charging stations for electric vehicles in Bled. Photo: Maja Pancur



Tourists can use the bike sharing service or explore one of the countless scenic trails. Photo: Maja Pancur



TOURISM

Nature had the wild Vintgar Gorge to itself for more than 10,000 years – since the end of the last ice age. Today the gorge is the gateway to the Triglav National Park. Photo: coradazzir/depositphotos.com

VINTGAR GORGE

Between the roar of the water and the silence of the rocks

TEXT BY TANJA GLOGOVČAN BELANČIĆ

A few minutes after crossing the wooden bridge and entering the cool shelter of the Vintgar Gorge, one feels as if the everyday worries were left behind. Just a stone's throw from Bled, the gorge opens the natural gateway to the Triglav National Park. There, where the Radovna river flows untamed between 100-metre-high cliffs, there is no place for the noise of civilisation, but only for the sound of water, writing its story in the limestone rock for millennia.

The gorge is not just an opportunity to walk in nature, but to descend into its heart. It is 1.6 kilometres long, up to 250 metres deep, with a wooden path that follows the course of the river. The mysterious green gorge was only discovered in February 1891, when by chance, at an unusually low water level, the mayor of Gorje, Jakob Žumer, and the cartographer, Benedikt Lergetporer, made their way through the almost impassable gorge. Impressed by the fierceness of nature, they soon helped to open the gorge to visitors. Today, thousands follow in their footsteps every day.

The path through the Vintgar Gorge is thoughtfully built and many wooden bridges and galleries certainly add to its charm.

Just before the end of the gorge, there is another amazing natural feature: the 13-metre Šum waterfall, the highest river waterfall in Slovenia. There, the water is not only refreshing, but also enchanting by its pristine power.

But the wonders there don't end with the water. The gorge boasts more than 600 species of plants, 23 of them protected. One of the most interesting discoveries is the yew tree, once almost extinct, but preserved in the shelter of the gorge.

The Vintgar Gorge is located in the heart of the Julian Alps Biosphere Reserve, protected by UNESCO.

The Triglav National Park, the oldest and only one of its kind in Slovenia, encompasses 4% of the country's most protected natural environment.



More than 600 species of plants can be found along the 1,600-metre path through the gorge. Photo: mpaniti/depositphotos.com

The Radovna river also rises below Mount Triglav, forming a natural monument that has been protected for more than a century by local people with great dedication.

A route that creates memories

A visit to Vintgar Gorge is not a quick stop, but an experience. It is not only a recreational experience for the elderly, but also for the youngest, who discover the secrets of the gorge together with the hero Oskar - the dipper bird.

The power of nature and the power of human care for it are intertwined in the gorge. The bridges, paths and viewpoints are managed and maintained by the Gorje Tourist Society, which, since the beginning, has ensured that the visit keeps balance with nature. The railway bridge over the gorge is also part of this story, a stone giant from 1905, designed by the architect Robert Schonhofer, rising 33 metres above the Radovna river, is the largest stone arch bridge in Slovenia.

A Sanctuary of Nature

When Anton Aškerc enthusiastically described the swift Radovna river, steep cliffs of the gorge and beautiful waterfalls in his poem Vintgar, he did not just describe a gorge, but also captured its spirit.

In his verses, the Vintgar Gorge is not just a natural landmark, but a sanctuary of nature, a place where man feels his smallness and at the same time the greatness of creation.

Even today, when we step onto the wooden bridges and look into the emerald pools below us, we are overwhelmed by the same feelings: admiration, respect and a silent inner exclamation. The Vintgar Gorge is a journey into oneself, a walk in nature that speaks without words.

We don't have to go far to find greatness, sometimes it's right beside us, in the whisper of the water, in the play of light on the rocks, in the moment when we stand still and just watch.



The path leads along sturdy wooden bridges anchored in the living rock. Photo: MaticStojs/depositphotos.com



SPORTS

Bled is the cradle of Slovenian rowing. Photo: Mitja Kobal/www.slovenia.info

BLED IN MOTION

Slovenia's Heart that Beats for Sports

TEXT BY POLONA PREŠEREN

Bled has long been considered one of Slovenia's most beautiful and recognisable destinations. It is a symbol of natural beauty, tourism and culture, but it is also a place with an exceptional sporting tradition, deeply rooted in the everyday life of the locals and marked by the success of top athletes.

Did you know that the best Slovenian hockey player, Anže Kopitar, has his base in Bled when he's not playing in the NHL? And Olympic gold medallist Iztok Čop. Sara Isakovič, Olympic medallist, is just a stone's throw from Lake Bled. These are just a few of the outstanding Slovenian sports names in a place famous for its many world-class sports events.

Sport and sports activities in Bled are not only part of the tourist offer, but also a way of life for local people.

In the summer months, the lake is an ideal venue for rowing, swimming, triathlon, golfing and hiking, while in the winter months, the surrounding area offers opportunities for cross-country skiing, ice-skating and winter hikes.

The cradle of Slovenian rowing

Bled is synonymous with rowing, as Lake Bled has been one of the best and most picturesque venues for the sport for decades.

Bled and its excellent rowing centre have hosted the European and World Rowing Championships on several occasions.

Bled is also home to many great rowers, including Miloš Janša, Jani Klemenčič, Denis Žvegelj and Iztok Čop, who is considered the best Slovenian rower. Čop and Denis Žvegelj won the first Olympic medal for independent Slovenia at the Barcelona Olympics winning the third place. Čop and Luka Špik went on to win a gold medal in Sydney in 2000 and a silver medal in Athens four years later. Čop is now also a sports ambassador for Bled and is actively involved in the development of the sports infrastructure.

Town of hockey champions

Bled is not only home to rowing sport, it is also an important centre for Slovenian hockey.

It is the base of the Slovenian national hockey team, including a modern hockey hall that allows



Anže Kopitar, NHL star and the LA Kings captain, organises the Hockey Academy for young ice hockey players at Bled. Photo: Matej Mišič

all the selections, from the younger selections to the members, to train.

Bled is home to Tomaž Razingar, former captain of the Slovenian national team, and Anže Kopitar, NHL star and captain of the LA King, one of the best Slovenian athletes of all time. Every year, the two organise the Hockey Academy in Bled, which attracts young hockey players from all over the world, even China. The Academy is not only a sports camp, but also an opportunity to develop values such as teamwork, dedication and perseverance. In recent years, the hockey camp has become a recognisable story of Slovenian sport with an international reputation.

Cyclists, mountaineers and skiers

Bled and its surroundings offer excellent opportunities for cycling, both recreational and professional. Bled is also home to Tadej Valjavec, a former professional cyclist and participant in the Tour de France, who today passes on his knowledge and experience to young people.

Bled is also home to many mountaineers and alpine and Nordic skiers, such as alpine skier Špela Pretnar and cross-country skiers Matej Soklič and Katja Višnar, who have achieved several World Cup top finishes in their careers.

Recreation for all

In addition to being home of professional athletes, Bled is also a paradise for recreationists and sports enthusiasts. The circular path around the lake, numerous jogging and hiking trails, cycling links and the well-maintained sports infrastructure attract active visitors from all over Slovenia and abroad. Traditional events such as the night run around the lake, triathlon competitions, rowing regattas and hockey tournaments prove that Bled is a lively sports centre throughout the year. Bled has a beautiful golf course with mountain views that attracts golf enthusiasts from near and far.

The Municipality of Bled and local organisations have been

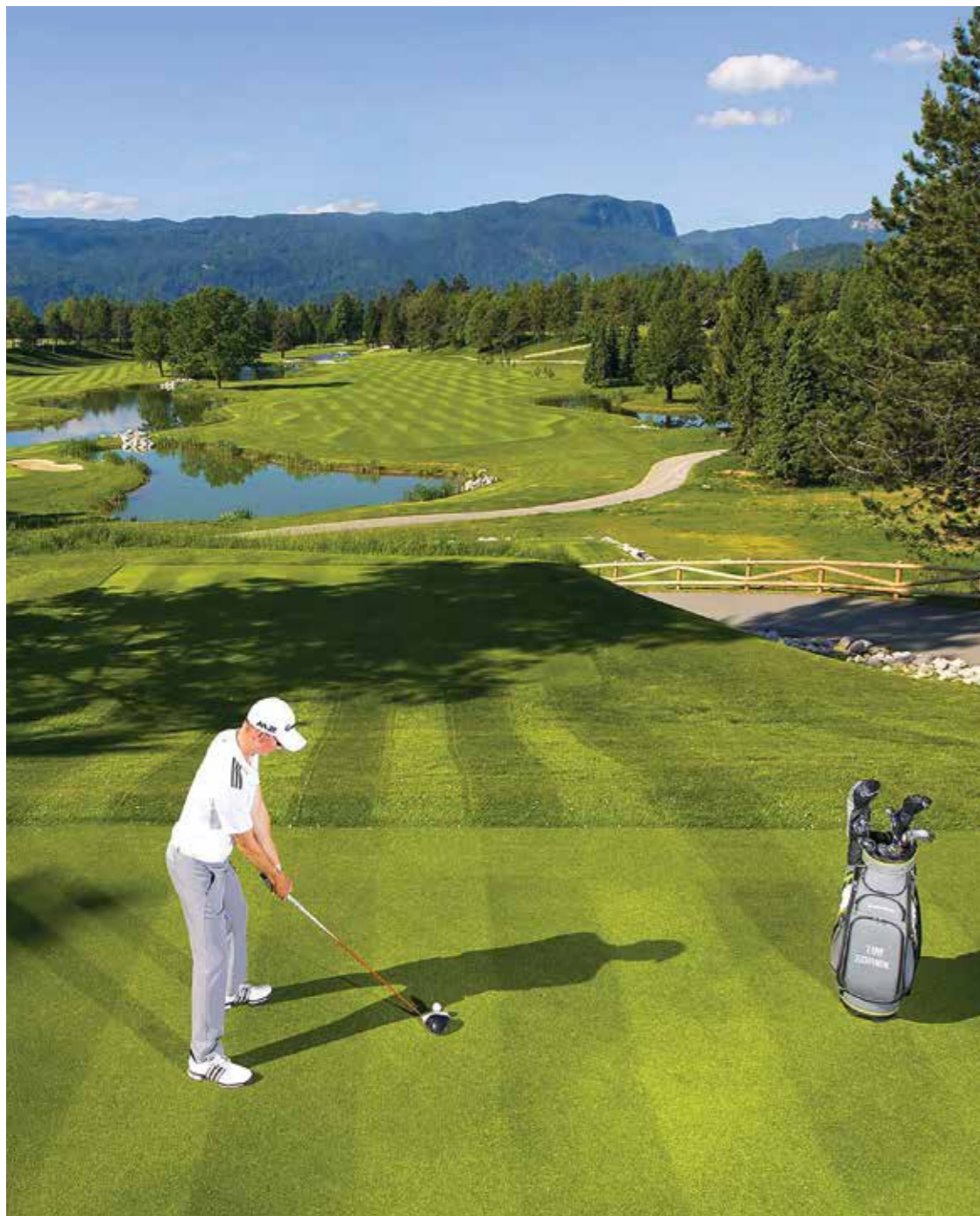
investing in the development of sport for many years.

A new sports hall has been opened, sports parks have been renovated, cycle paths are being built and new infrastructure for an active lifestyle is being built. Special attention is paid to young people, both in school sport and in sports clubs, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the sports culture in the municipality.

In Bled, sport is part of everyday life and the natural rhythm of the town for both professional and recreational athletes. Sport in Bled brings people together, connects generations and promotes a healthy lifestyle. In this way, Bled remains an example of how a small community can create big stories, even in the world of sport.



Sporting tradition is deeply rooted in the everyday life of Bled. Photo: Matej Mišič



Bled is every golfer's dream location. Photo: Aleš Fevžer/www.slovenia.info



The Lake

*All day's hours that rush across the sky
Are reflected in this water's eye,
It's where every sunrise dips its tail,
It's where every star inscribes its trail.*

*Whatever's true one in the lake can see:
The mountain, island, church spire, and the tree,
Clouds and birds, the fugitives of height,
Find in its depths a mirrored sight.*

*And the lake plays with the flash of light,
Shifting glints and shadows; to one's sight
An everlasting wonder; gazing there,
The magic of its dreams with it we share ...*

Oton Župančič



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