

The Sun-Herald

Traveller

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2024



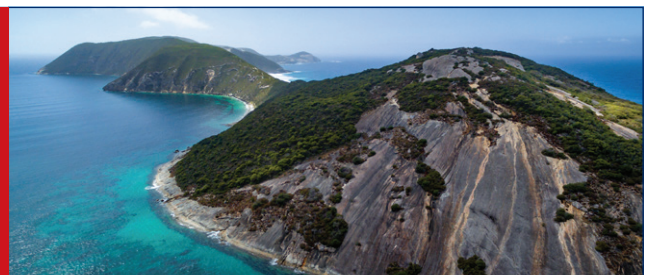
THE EUROPE EDITION

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On a precipice 100 metres from the Vogel cable car station in Slovenia's Triglav National Park is a large wooden heart, strategically placed to capture views of the Julian Alps and the snowcapped Mount Triglav, standing at 2864 metres. Etched into the base of the heart is the resort's motto: *Kot v pravljici*, "Like a fairy tale", a phrase that seems so apt in this soft, dappled light under a brooding spring sky.

Our tour group, however, has largely ignored this majestic view; their eyes are instead fixed firmly downwards, enthusing over pops of yellow, purple and white lining the gravel trail. Here in the Slovenian alps, it's wildflower season, and for this group of 20-odd Australian and New Zealand gardeners, that's something to tickle their fancy.

I'm on a Botanica World Discoveries tour of the Italian Lakes, Slovenia and the Croatian Islands, exploring formal gardens and arboretums, as well as places of incomparable natural beauty where the artistry of Mother Nature is inspiration for travellers with a green thumb.

Founded in 2000 by Judy Vanrenen and now part of the APT stable, Botanica visits the world's best public and private gardens, with the horticultural theme adding another dimension to destinations already rich in culture and history. Each trip is



Julie Miller discovers incomparable natural beauty on a tour of European gardens that will leave you green with envy.

accompanied by a botanical guide to impart their knowledge and passion for plants, while the groups of less than 30 are bonded by a common love of nature and gardens, what philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon called "the purest of human pleasures".

Here in the alpine meadows of Slovenia, yellow ranunculus, wild thyme, delicate purple alpine clematis and feathery ajuga are the stars of the show; and while we search in vain for the legendary edelweiss, these tiny, hardy blossoms, cascading over rocky ledges or hidden among nodding grasses, are cause for great joy.

"I love seeing the plants we are so careful to nurture at home growing wild in craggy places without any hand to help it along - for me, that is such a thrill," says Talei Kenyon, our botanical expert for the 15-day tour.

Part of Melbourne's Diggers Club team for 18 years and now a director of the Diggers Foundation, Kenyon has

accompanied international Botanica tours since 2003, sharing her extensive knowledge about garden history and horticulture.

At the start of our tour we visit the formal gardens of Italy's gorgeous Lake District, an area that attracted socialites long before George Clooney fired up his Nespresso machine on the shores of Lake Como. Inspired by classical ideals, the High Italianate garden is marked by axis and symmetry, incorporating fountains and pools, manicured hedges, pruned shrubs and rows of scented herbs.

"Gardening is really about trying to put nature in some order because order equals beauty in terms of these historical places," Kenyon tells us as we wander, agog, through the high baroque tiers of Isola Bella, one of three islands on Lake Maggiore established by the Borromean family during the Renaissance as a symbol of their status.

Over-the-top, Bella is an architectural riot of terracing, obelisks, grottoes and statuary,

designed to resemble a galleon from the water; whereas sister island Isola Madre is a gentler, albeit equally voluptuous nod to opulence, a rambling parkland studded with rare botanical and exotic bird species, including dazzling white peacocks.

At Villa Carlotta, adjacent to the paparazzi-luring Grand Hotel Tremezzo on Lake Como, we climb a grand staircase to five mirrored levels, fragrant curved pergolas of lemon trees opening to a theatre of greenery, towering rhododendrons and azaleas colourful in early spring. Meanwhile, across the lake at Bellagio, the gracious Villa Melzi is a stunning expression of neoclassical elegance, its parklands studded with Japanese maples, cedars and an avenue of pollarded plane trees to create a natural shady umbrella along the lakeside.

While these grand gardens are showstoppers, the Italians also have a knack of creating green spaces in urban heartlands, exemplified by Giardino Giusti, a Renaissance treasure hidden behind ancient facades in Verona.

"Green really is the colour of Italy, and there's every shade of green in here," Kenyon says as we make our way along an avenue of cypresses, past a box-hedge maze to an upper portico boasting views across red-tiled roofs to the charismatic city so beloved by Shakespeare.



Clockwise from main: Giusti Garden, Verona, Italy; viewpoint at Mount Vogel, Slovenia; Plitvice Lakes, Croatia; Villa Carlotta, Lake Como, Italy; cruising on the MV Lady Eleganza; view over Sibenik Town, Croatia. Photos: iStock, Alamy

Our accommodation in Italy is as opulent as the gardens we visit, from the old-world grandeur of the waterfront Regina Palace Hotel in Stresa, to the mid-city elegance of the Hotel Due Torri in the heart of Verona; while on the sparkling shores of Lake Bled in Slovenia, the elegant Grand Hotel Toplice gazes out to the century-old Bled Castle perched on a bluff 130 metres above the opposite shoreline.

While most meals are included on this tour, we are left to our own devices during a handful of lunches and dinners, exploring city streets at whim to satisfy individual culinary tastes. The included meals take place at carefully selected restaurants that provide an authentic local experience, with three-course set menus catering to dietary restrictions and inclusive of at least one glass of wine.

But it's during the exploration of our third country on the itinerary that a real feeling of exclusivity kicks in. After admiring the tranquil green countryside of conservation-minded Slovenia, we head to the northern Croatian port of Opatija to board our home for the next eight nights, MV Lady Eleganza.

A custom-built luxury yacht accommodating 36 guests, Lady Eleganza is small enough to dock at coastal villages that larger cruise ships can't access, but spacious enough to luxuriate on, with a dedicated

dining and bar area, a hot tub and multiple lounge areas spread over three decks.

With short sails during daylight hours, and docking overnight as we island hop southbound, life onboard Lady Eleganza is relaxed and convivial, with all meals provided including Croatian specialties spicing up an excellent selection of salads, hot meals and vegetarian options, and an open bar for sunset aperitifs.

Once in port, passengers are free to disembark to explore the towns, from the lively party playground of Opatija – where sun-kissed, clothing-optional Europeans pose in doof-doof beach clubs or sprawl on colourful towels laid out on pebble beaches – to charming enclaves such as the 16th century village of Baska on the island of Krk, an impromptu off-itinerary visit due to port availability.

Here, I join local families strolling the waterfront at twilight, gelato in hand, soaking up the atmosphere of dockside bars and seafood restaurants before retreating to my floating pleasure palace.

Between ports, Captain Neno obliges our requests for dips in the crystal-clear Adriatic, pulling into secluded rocky coves where the balmy, salty waters provide the perfect antidote to a late spring heatwave. Scheduled stops include the ancient, fortified cities of Zadar, Sibenik and Hvar,

where we disembark for city tours or our much-anticipated garden and nature excursions.

At the World Heritage-listed Plitvice Lakes National Park, a series of cascades tumble through mossy travertine terraces, interconnecting 16 turquoise lakes; while in Sibenik, recreated as Braavos in *Game of Thrones*, we pause for a moment of reflection in the Convent Garden of St Lawrence, medicinal herb beds a faithful recreation of monastic gardens from medieval times.

While the solid rock fortifications of Croatia's coastline seem at odds with greenery, there's always a blaze of bougainvillea, a verdant backyard veggie patch, fields of waving lavender or an ancient botanical collection, such as the romantic Trsteno Arboretum near Dubrovnik, to remind us of the importance of cultivation in European tradition.

Even ancient city walls play host to unlikely botanical survivors, caper bushes, sprouting from cracks and loaded with the tiny, tart berries that play such a pivotal role in Dalmatian cuisine. It's a reminder of just how forgiving and generous nature can be, providing the simplest of pleasures while fulfilling the most basic human needs. **T**

The writer was a guest of Botanica World Discoveries.



THE DETAILS

The 15-day Gardens of the Italian Lakes, Slovenia and Croatian Islands cruise is priced from \$15,495 a person, travelling from Milan to Dubrovnik and including an eight-night cruise on board the MV Lady Eleganza. Next departure is June 10, 2025. See botanica.travel

FLY

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