

Diverse Interests Draw People to Slovakia's Beautiful Landscapes and Rich History

Beautiful weather, lively wine festivals, and an unusually bountiful apple, plum and grape harvest set the stage for last September's Slovakia Heritage Tour. The 2012 tour group was an interesting and amiable combination of people tracing their family roots, and others, with no Slovak heritage, drawn to the history, culture and mountains of Slovakia.

"I was surprised as inquiries came in for the 2012 tour to realize that people with no Slovak heritage were drawn to this small, relaxed-pace tour as a way to immerse themselves in Slovakia's fascinating history," said tour organizer, Judith Northup-Bennett. "The bigger tour operators skirt Slovakia and don't go into the heartland. People like the balance of delving into history, experiencing the Slavic culture, meeting people, and having time for short hikes through the dramatic landscape."

At the tour's first stop in Nitra, Carolyn Gantner asked the grounds keeper at St. Emeram's Basilica a few questions only to discover that the seminary that her great-uncle attended was just down the hill. She remembers, as a child, receiving news about Father Josef who was a parish priest in what is now western Slovakia. In Kosice, she also began to unravel the history of her Hungarian-speaking grandfather with the help of a photo of him taken in Kassa which she learned was the Hungarian name for Kosice.

Juan Meza, of Mexican-American heritage, saw the tour as a way to explore another part of Europe. He had spent time in France and Spain, but "knew nothing about Slovakia." "As Americans, we see everything from a Western European perspective, but there's so much more to this history when you add an Eastern European perspective," Juan explained. "The tour had a nice pace, going from the earliest Roman times in Nitra through the medieval to the many invasions, Hungarian control, and the Soviet Era. Peter Blazicek, our guide, was great on giving us a complete picture."

Ruth and Sam Knowles came to Slovakia with no family roots but left with new family ties. Their daughter had married into a Slovak family from Sabinov and they wanted to understand the Slovak culture that their new granddaughter would grow up with. They bravely agreed to spend an afternoon in Sabinov with their daughter's mother-in-law's brother, who spoke no English. "They were nervous when I dropped them off and thought the pick-up time we set gave them too much time," said Judith Northup-Bennett. "When I called to pick them up, they begged to stay longer. When I finally picked them up, they had their last "Na Zdravie!" and marveled at how at home they felt in this town with their new family. Since returning, Ruth has been telling people, "I'm half Slovak since I've had pirohy and slivovica in the old country."



Carolyn Gantner stands in front of the seminary in Nitra where her Uncle studied to be a priest.

Ruth Knowles and Don Goulden buy lace from a villager's window



The tour group at the top of the mining heap, overlooking Spania Dolina village.



Ruth Knowles samples the new wine Burciak at the Modra Wine Festival.

Another tour member with no Slovakian ancestry, Donald Goulden came with his own expertise of the history and culture of the entire Eastern European region. Long a student of Slavic history, culture and languages, he was a great resource for the group. He said he usually travels alone and doesn't do large group tours. "But this small group tour worked for me," he explained. "The itinerary took me to the places I wanted to go, and included enough free time for me to explore." After the tour he spent a week traveling by bus and train to other parts of Slovakia.

Another heritage traveler, Pat Snider, summed up what Slovakia has to offer. She has traveled to a few other Eastern European countries but had never visited the birth country of her grandparents. "You're offering something very unique with travel off-the-beaten track," she said. She was pleased that Slovakia offered comfortable accommodations and interesting sites, but was less touristy than other countries. She hopes to return to spend more time in the Tatry Mountains and to go further east to visit the Ruthenian region of her grandparents.

For the first time, the Slovakia Heritage tour included a day trip to Budapest, Hungary, which for centuries ruled Slovakia as part of the upper region of the Kingdom of Hungary. Taking advantage of the beautiful weather, the tour also included a few short hikes, tailored to individual ability, in the former mining village of Spania Dolina and in the Tatry Mountains.

Next year's Slovakia Heritage Tour (September 5 - 15, 2013) will add another day to the tour, because of the enthusiasm of this year's group for exploring both the spectacular natural areas of Slovakia and the lovely, historic towns and small cities.

"People were taken with the beautiful countryside and suggested we add a few more easy or moderate hikes to the tour. They also wanted to spend more time walking the narrow streets and experiencing all that the charming towns like Banska Bystrica, Bardejov and Presov have to offer. It's like stepping back in time," explained Northup-Bennett. The 2013 tour will add a day in the spectacular Pieniny region and a night in Bardejov.

For more information on the 11day/10 night tour contact: Judith Northup-Bennett, 978-544-5144, connectionswork4u@hotmail.com or visit our web site <http://slovakiaheritage.com>.

