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TRAVEL

THE PLAIN DEALER



Spis Castle, built in the 1200s by the Hungarian Kingdom to repel invaders, rises some 2,000 feet above the surrounding plains in northeast Slovakia. Today it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS TOGNERI | SPECIAL TO THE PLAIN DEALER

OLD WORLD ROOTS

A traveler finds his heritage at a Big Fat Slovak Wedding; a second goes home as a tourist

SLOVAKIA

STEPHEN P. SMOLKA
Special to The Plain Dealer

KOSICE, SLOVAKIA — I am the product of two Greater Clevelanders, a Slovak father from the West Side and an Irish mother from Euclid.

My mother's kitchen was an assembly line of Irish soda bread each St. Patrick's Day, and my Euclid relatives still turn every family occasion into a celebration of all things Irish.

But until recently, I did not know much about my Slovak side, as there were no Slovak celebrations in our house, no secret *halusky* recipes.

Then, my world changed on a trip to Slovakia for my brother's wedding. As a Peace Corps volunteer in Slovakia, my brother fell in love with a lovely young woman and an entire country.

My childhood image of this former Eastern Bloc land was a heavy-browed, stone-faced mountain of a man in a fur cap, standing cold and gray behind the Iron Curtain. The reality I found was quite different.

I found a country rich in history, with magnificent castle ruins, spectacular mountains and picturesque villages. I found one of Europe's last, best bargains, where hotel rooms can be had for less than \$30, restaurant entrees for about \$3.

And, thanks to a Big Fat Slovak Wedding, I found a part of myself.

SEE SLOVAKIA | K8



A church and clock tower anchor the central square in Banská Bystrica, a town in central Slovakia that served as the hub of the Slovak National Uprising in World War II.

'Something is lost . . . in the melting pot of the United States when cultures fuse and traditions fade.'

Stephen P. Smolka,
former Cleveland,
after tracing his roots in Slovakia

SLOVAKIA

FROM K1

Finding his heritage at a family wedding

Cleveland and Slovaks have been connected since the waning days of the Austro-Hungarian empire before World War I. The empire was flexing its considerable muscle through "Magyarization," a nationalistic movement that effectively required Slovaks in the east to abandon their roots and become Hungarian. Thousands fled instead. Nearly half a million immigrated to the United States between 1899 and 1915.

Many ended up in the coal mines and steel mills of Pennsylvania; others pushed farther west to manufacturing jobs in Cleveland, where roots are still firmly planted. The 2000 U.S. Census counts more than 600,000 Americans of Slovak descent, roughly half of them live in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

St. Cyril and Methodius Church in Lakewood continues to offer a Mass in Slovak one Sunday each month. St. Wendelin, my father's Slovak parish as a child, celebrated its 100th anniversary in October.

During the Communists' control of Czechoslovakia, my father's return to his family's land would have been about as welcome as Art Modell at a Browns game. Not only is Dad an American (strike one), but also he was a longtime professor of government (strike two) in Washington, D.C. (strike three.)

Times have changed. Slovakia, a nation of 5 million people that separated peacefully from the Czech Republic in 1993, seems eager to shed its isolationist past and welcome Western business and tourism.

Roughly the size of West Virginia and bordered by Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Ukraine and Hungary, Slovakia is scheduled to join the European Union later this year. Proposed changes in the tax laws are de-

signed to boost foreign investment, and U.S. Steel already has a profitable operation in Kosice, the second-largest city.

Although American tourism by and large hasn't yet discovered Slovakia, American television has. The satellite television in my hotel offered "Baywatch" dubbed in German and "Ally McBealova."

Rugged beauty, a Gothic castle

My Slovak initiation took place in the Spis region in the north-east, which, as best our spotty genealogy records can attest, is the home of my father's forebears.

The hulking ruin of Spis Castle is a stunning vestige of a medieval Hungarian state. The Gothic castle, which crowns a hill nearly 2,000 feet above the surrounding plains, was built in the 1200s by the Hungarian Kingdom to repel invading Tatars and others eager to get at gold and silver buried in the region's fertile mountains. The castle's interior was destroyed by fire in 1780 and neglected for nearly 200 years. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it has been renovated. The highlight of a visit (about \$2) is a claustrophobic climb to the top of the castle tower.

A rocky spine of granite that rises abruptly to more than 8,000 feet along Slovakia's northern fringe, the High Tatras form the backbone of Slovak tourism. Glacial lakes, dense pine forests and world-class skiing attract some 5 million visitors annually.

I spent one morning in gorgeous Slovak Paradise National Park, where hiking trails snake alongside roaring waterfalls.

About an hour's drive to the north along a serpentine, two-lane ribbon of road is Pieniny National Park, the starting point for raft trips down the Dunajec River, a boundary between Slovakia and Poland.

A one-hour guided trip down the river (about \$10) was tame enough for both my father and my 2-year-old son.



CHRIST TOGNERI | SPECIAL TO THE PLAIN DEALER

Overlooking the main square in Banska Bystrica, central Slovakia, a former mining city of 85,000 that served as the hub of the Slovak National Uprising in World War II.

Going underground where partisans hid

Slovakia's beauty is not limited to land above ground. The country is home to hundreds of caves, where stalactites, pools and sheets of ice create an otherworldly sensation.

I learned this visiting the Dobsinska Ice Cave at the southern tip of Slovak Paradise National Park. Created between 7,000 and 9,000 years ago, the cave houses the remnants of a glacial past. A guided tour in Slovak (about \$3, more if you take a camera) offers little insight to English speakers such as myself, but stunning ice formations speak for themselves.

Slovakia's caves also hold a place in the country's military history. During the Slovak National Uprising, in which Slovaks revolted against their own Nazi

puppet state during World War II, partisans used the caves to cache military supplies.

Banska Bystrica, a former mining city of 85,000 in the center of the country, served as the hub of the movement.

The Slovak National Uprising Museum, two blocks from the main square, honors that effort, and a park across the street displays World War II artillery. In the center of the square, a black marble obelisk honoring the Red Army — with an engraving in Russian — still stands as a reminder of Slovakia's recent past. Now, though, capitalism is in full swing, with shops, street vendors and private banks all plying their wares along the square.

The town square, anchored at the eastern end by a 16th-century clock tower, has a pedestrian thoroughfare lined by stately buildings, shops and outdoor cafes.

Enjoying a traditional wedding

Any traveler worth his passport can appreciate the snow-capped grandeur of the High Tatras. It was through a Slovak wedding, though, that I came to appreciate my heritage.

I saw how the *borovicka*, a sharp juniper brandy, flows like honey when Slovaks have reason to celebrate. I saw how Slovaks value family, how the bride and the groom formally ask the parents to bless the marriage an hour beforehand.

And I saw how no one leaves a Slovak wedding hungry. I saw how a Slovak bride disappears during the reception, only to reappear at midnight in a *troj*, a colorful traditional outfit that signifies her transformation from a Slovak bride into a wife.

As I watched Magda, my brother's new wife, dancing in

DETAILS

Slovakia

Getting there: There are plenty of options for reaching Slovakia, none of them particularly easy. We flew Scandinavian Airlines to Prague, then Sky Europe (www.skyeurope.com), a low-cost central European carrier, from Prague and Kosice. Our round-trip fare during the peak summer season was about \$950 per person; costs drop sharply if you go off-peak. Sky Europe also serves Bratislava, Slovakia's capital, from London and Paris. Czech Airlines flies out of New York and serves both Kosice and Bratislava. Another option is flying to Vienna and then taking a bus to Bratislava (about an hour, depending on border traffic). Within Slovakia, train and bus travel is well-organized and cheap.

What you need: A valid U.S. passport, but a visa is not required for visits of up to 30 days. A phrase book is essential if you (or people in your travel party) don't speak Slovak. Staff at tourist areas in Bratislava and the High Tatras might speak English, but don't expect to hear or see much English in smaller towns.

When to go: The high season for tourism is in July and August, though the ski season from December to March draws big crowds to ski resorts, where all-day lift tickets can be had for about \$15. For pleasant weather and off-peak prices, try mid- to late spring.

Guidebooks: Most guidebooks group the Czech Republic and Slovakia together and devote the lion's share to the Czech Republic, particularly Prague. Still, the Lonely Planet's "Czech and Slovak Republics" is informative. "Spectacular Slovakia," an annual guidebook published by the Slovak Spectator, an English-language newspaper in Bratislava, can be purchased for \$5 plus shipping on the paper's Web site, www.slovakia.org/tourism. For more information: To reach the Slovak Republic Embassy in Washington, go to www.slovakembassy-us.org. Or call the Slovak Republic consulate office in New York at 212-286-8434. Other helpful Web sites: The Slovak Tourist Board at www.sacr.sk; the Slovak Spectator at www.slovakiaspectator.sk and the nonprofit www.slovakia.org/tourism.

her *troj* to the tunes of a traditional Slovak folk band. I envied a culture so pure. Something is lost, I realized, in the melting pot of the United States, when cultures fuse and traditions fade.

I didn't wear a *troj* that night, but I was transformed just the same. For the first time in my life, I felt Slovak.

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