

The chefs of Portoroz

Tomaz Bevcic and Janko Franetic are head chefs and partners at Rizibizi, Istria's most celebrated eatery. Their terrace restaurant has views out across the Gulf of Piran, the salt flats and the San Bernardino church, and they specialise in the distinctive Istrian cuisine – a melting pot of Italian, Austrian and Balkan flavours.

"From the restaurant you can see where a lot of our ingredients are grown or caught. We often point out the local fish farm to customers so they can see where their dinner came from. It helps them understand how fresh everything is in Istria."
Rizibizi is open Tuesday to Sunday.
rizibizi.si

The merchants of little Venice

Ten local enthusiasts tell us what they love most about the Slovenian coast – a place you've probably never heard of

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It's only 47km long, but even on Google Maps you'll have to zoom in until your eyes hurt before you can see the Istrian coast of Slovenia. It's wedged between the Italian seaport of Trieste to the north and the triangular peninsula of Croatia that points into the Adriatic to the south. It's as though when the mayors of both regions were taking a wine-induced snooze, the Slovenians crept up from behind and rolled out their beach towels.

The towns of Portoroz, Piran and Koper, once ruled by the Venetians, have a distinctly Italian feel. Piran and Koper look like miniature versions of Venice, with bell towers and portico squares, and the Portoroz salt pans are dissected by a pint-sized Grand Canal. The coastline and pebble beaches around the resorts are spectacular, too, but it's the people that really leave their indelible mark. ▶



The salt maker of Secovlje

Bojan Planinc works for Piranske Soline, located in the Secovlje Salina Nature Park. Like his forefathers, he still cultivates the salt by hand, without the use of machines.

“There is an old saying that Piran was built on salt, but it’s closer to the truth than most people realise. The Venetians came to produce it here as far back as the 13th century, and the method we use today remains the same. It’s done through a process of evaporation, and we constantly groom the salt with old-fashioned rakes – it’s different to how it’s produced in the rest of the Mediterranean. Like champagne or Parmigiano-Reggiano, salt from Piran is a trademarked product – you can tell the difference because of its sweet taste and rough texture. For me, Slovenia is the new face of the Adriatic coast.”
The Secovlje Salina Nature Park is open daily from 8am – 9pm. kpss.si

The Piran fish farmer

Dr Irena Fonda is a marine biologist and professional diver who runs the Fonda fish farm that floats at the southernmost point of Slovenia. She says the coast is home to the best sea bass in the Mediterranean.

“It was always my father’s dream to make a difference in Slovenia. Being a biologist and keen diver, he noticed a massive drop-off in the amount of fish off the coast – he couldn’t see the big shoals anymore, so was driven to do something about it. He had the idea to build underwater artificial reefs, so beneath the surface there are now 18km of rope, 2km of chains and 300 concrete blocks – an artificial reef and underwater sanctuary where the fish come to hide. There are 30 kinds of fish in the surrounding waters, and pods of dolphins and smaller sharks come into the protected area to mate. After his passing, I took over and we now run probably the smallest fish farm in Europe. We’re not concerned with mass production – it’s about helping the environment, while also giving something back. Coming out to the farm fills me with optimism for the future of our seas and oceans.”
The Fonda fish farm can be visited as part of a guided tour on a pontoon boat. Booking is essential. fonda.si



The Koper olive oil farmers

David Hvartin runs Oljarne Hvartin, a family-owned olive oil farm, with his wife Mateja. Every October, they work 15 hours a day, seven days a week, to get the best from the harvest.

“We still pick olives the traditional Istrian way with a *baliga* (a cotton shoulder bag), and there’s nowhere else I’d rather be than out among the olive groves. The season only lasts for around 45 days each year, so in autumn Koper experiences an olive oil frenzy. There are around 300 small producers – the combination of the sea air and sunshine makes the olives extremely fragrant. We might not have as many varieties as the Italians (600 types compared to Slovenia’s 19), but things on a much smaller scale always taste better. Most people have an olive bush in their gardens, so it’s not uncommon for families to bottle their own and put an honesty box outside their house to sell it. That’s what life is like here.” ▶
Oljarne Hvartin is open to visitors daily. oljarne-hvartin.si



The Da Ponte chocolatier

Danijel Sertic is the only dedicated chocolate-maker in Koper. He uses ingredients that grow in Istria, including olive oil, figs, lavender, salt flowers, apples and rosemary.

“I wanted to do something that Koper had never seen before and I had always dreamt of opening a shop in the immediate vicinity of the Da Ponte fountain, because it’s on the most beautiful square in the city and has an interesting history. In the past, this was the only source of water in Koper – today, it is the only source of chocolate. I guess this is how we are connected.”
Cokoladnica is open from Monday to Friday and on Saturday mornings. cokoladnicadaponte.si



The Istrian slow-food specialists

Darko Marsic runs Casa Del Sal, an agrotourism guesthouse and kitchen, with his sister-in-law Petra. He was born in the house and wouldn’t want to live anywhere else.

“Casa Del Sal has a rich history and character and it’s 200 years old – it was built in the 19th century for Venetian salt-pan workers. Today we run it as a homestead and restaurant – we grow our own organic fruit and vegetables in the garden and make homemade jams and olive oils. The local sea bass is great for marinating, and I like to make dishes typical of what the salt-pan workers used to eat – *polenta e baccala* (maize porridge with cod) and *brodet* (fish soup), washed down with a glass of our homemade wine, of course. I’m a food lover and all the dishes we prepare are zero-kilometre, so, really, what else do I need?”
Casa Del Sal is open for lunch and dinner, offering grape and olive harvesting in September and October. casadelsal.com

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The Koper wine maker

Tina Pavsic is a wine taster at Vinakoper, the largest producer in Slovenia. Although she loves a tittle, she prefers the cool of the vast sandstone wine cellar, populated by Slavonian oak barrels filled with some seven million litres of wine.

“Refosco and malvazija are the two main strains of grape grown in Istria – the first is a dark-skinned, ruby-coloured fruit, and the other makes a delightful white wine. It may not travel as far as the Italian or New World wines, but that’s because the average Slovenian consumes 36 litres of wine each year – around 70 per cent of our production. What can I say, we get quite patriotic about our wine – especially because you can buy it for as cheap as £1.50 a litre.”
Vinakoper offers daily guided tours. vinakoper.si