Wandering Off the Map

The Vipava Valley, an hour's drive from both Trieste and Ljubljana, is a natural haven for low-intensity pleasures.

By ROBERT DRAPER

The subject was the Bora — the ferocious northern wind that wreaks seasonal havoc on the western Slovenian region known as the Vipava Valley, where we had just arrived — and my friend expressed disappointment that we had just missed out on the chance to experience it. "It sounds so impressive," she said.

"Trust me — after a minute or two, you don't want any part of it," said our dining companion, Primoz Lavrencic, a young local winemaker who had agreed to guide us through our first day in the area. "The wind speeds can be close to 200 kilometers. You can't walk, and it's not a good idea to drive. Two winters ago, they closed the schools for two weeks, and all we could do was stay indoors."

With a wry smile, Mr. Lavrencic added: "Usually Americans ask, 'Why do you live here?' That's the normal question."

The answer, though, was right in front of us. We were having lunch at Majerija, one of Slovenia's foremost gastronomic temples, situated in a 300-year-old restored stone farmhouse on the outskirts of a wisp of a village called Slap. The chef and owner, Matej Tomazic, is an assiduous locavore — breads are baked, produce is grown, pigs are raised and cheeses are pasteurized on or near the premises — and every plate features a smart, light-handed take on the region's cuisine.

That meant a cod baccalà with cornbread chips and winter vegetables, mlinci (buckwheat pasta) in a broccoli sauce, a wild goat fillet with cranberries and ground coffee beans, and sturdy local cheeses accompanied by a zingy elderberry jam. This feast, according to the restaurant's website, reflected "the aroma of the Bora wind and the sun." For that matter, the savory white wine accompanying this meal was Mr. Lavrencic's, from his nearby winery, which is called Burja, the Slovenian term for the great indigenous wind. We started to get the message: Apparently there was something to love about the Bora, albeit from a respectable distance.

For years my friends in northeastern Italy had been urging me to pay the Vipava Valley a visit. Though a mere hour's drive from both Trieste and Ljubljana, the slender and sunny 30-mile-long rift wedged between three plateaus has the appearance of a forgotten territory. In fact, hang gliders and paragliders, mountain bikers and rock climbers have long gravitated to the Nanos and Trnovo peaks looming over the valley. Burja and several other Vipava wineries — specializing in bracing local white grapes like zelen and pinela — justly command a cult following. Majerija and, even more so, the magnificent castle restaurant Zemono (where plates are delivered amid puffs of smoke and other bursts of showmanship) are leading Slovenian destinations in their own right. The architecture and monuments of its towns reflect centuries of repeated conquest, beginning but by no means ending with the Romans; as one local told me, "My great-grandfather was a soldier for Austria, my grandfather was a soldier for Italy and my father was a soldier for Yugoslavia."

But the main draw, I found, is the region's drowsy, dream-stricken ethos. Relentlessly verdant and creased with numerous rivers and springs, the Vipava Valley is a natural haven for low-intensity pleasure seeking. Unless you came here sometime between December and February, you would have no reason to believe that a place of such serenity also doubles as an ill wind's seasonal punching bag.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATEJ LESKOVSEK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Top left, Primoz Lavrencic in his vineyard in the Vipava Valley. Top right, at Zemono, the chef Tomaz Kavcic serves a gin and tonic amid puffs of smoke. Center right and bottom, scenes in the village of Goce; center left, view of Goce. Center far right, Silva Cigoj, owner of a family "tourist farm," where the author stayed, cuts prosciutto (prsut) in front of the farmhouse restaurant in the village of Crnice.

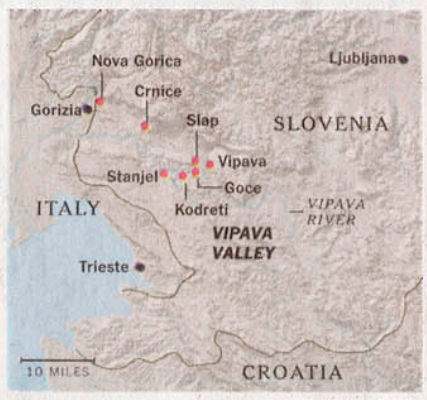
WITHOUT EXPERIENCING IT firsthand, here is what you need to know about the Bora and its redeeming virtues. First, what it does not kill it makes stronger. The stone villages of the Vipava Valley are gleaming testaments to resiliency, laid out with narrow streets to help resist the gusts, and white rocks (known as "golobica," or "little doves") line the rooftops to keep the tiles from blowing off. The region's produce — tomatoes, zucchini and other Mediterranean staples — is similarly tough, and restaurateurs like Mr. Tomazic at Majerija maintain that the Bora imparts them with a particular fragrance. Organic winemakers like Mr. Lavrencic of Burja say that the persistent wind makes it less necessary to employ pesticides in the vineyards. And I suppose we can also be grateful that, during the Battle of the Frigid River in A.D. 394 between the Christian Roman emperor Theodosius and the pagan usurper Eugenius — fought in what today is an industrial zone in the valley, Ajdovscina — a fierce Bora blast is said to have caused the pagans' arrows to reverse direction and ensure their defeat.

But perhaps the best reason to pay homage to the Bora is the region's prosciutto (called prsut here). In the 500-year-old village of Crnice, we stayed at a rustic and tidy farmhouse, Arkade Cigoj, whose friendly proprietress, Silva Cigoj, proudly gave us a tour of the meat locker. Hanging there were dozens of hams that had been cured largely by the exertions of the northerly wind. That evening we tried her prsut, made from the Cigoj farm's curly furred Mangalitsa pigs. Textured and aromatic, the meat rivaled the best Friulian prosciutto I've encountered and trounced the famed Parma version. (The pork tenderloin we had at dinner wasn't too shabby, either. I should also add that the family makes very good wine — and that as proof of this, a large photograph of Silva Cigoj's daughter, Maja, as the 2005 to 2006 Wine Queen of Slovenia hangs prominently in their restaurant.) Aside from a single restaurant in Ljubljana, Silva Cigoj told me, her farm doesn't sell its product anywhere outside of the Vipava Valley.

That sense of isolation, of contented smallness, pervades the region. (The lone exception — and one of which no sane visitor would want any part — is Nova Gorica, a hyper-industrial horror show of a city constructed as the post-World War II socialist answer to Gorizia on the Italian side of the border.) The valley's residents are as dug in as the Bora-resistant vegetation. "Here, no one asks you where you'll die or what you'll do," Miha Batic told me one afternoon while pouring me some of his family's prestigious (for the Vipava Valley, anyway) wine. When my friend asked Mr. Batic if his wife was also from around here, the winemaker walked over to the window and pointed to a yellow house on a nearby hill, separated from his family's estate only by an acre of the Batic sauvignon blanc vines, which, he added as a loving paean, "is probably why the wine from there tastes so good."

Even its most famous town, also named Vipava (population 1,500 or so), seems more like a sumptuous but seldom-utilized movie set than the vibrant commercial center it had once been under Hapsburg rule. The Vipava River, fed by a multitude of springs, rolls through town and under some of its houses, a quasi-Venetian spectacle without anything in the way of a tourist crush. You can have an espresso seated outdoors at one of the two gostilnas (the Slovenian version of an Italian osteria) abutting a tiny riverside park and be pleasantly flummoxed by your aloneness. Much of Vipava has a rich story to tell, from the handsome Baroque palace just off the main square constructed by the Austrian Lanthieri nobility to the plane trees planted two centuries ago as a tribute to Napoleon to the sundry farmhouses marked with ancient dates and outsize doors (so that all products and farm animals could be dragged inside during a Bora outbreak), but the tale goes largely unadvertised here. And so we ambled as the Vipava River did, asking questions when we felt like it, and otherwise succumbing to the post-Bora silence of the valley.

It doesn't take much trekking before you feel as if you've fallen completely off the map. Leaving Vipava, we found an undulating country road that cut through hills and vineyards before depositing us on the outskirts of a tomblike village named Kodreti. There we found a sleek guesthouse called Sorte, with modern rooms overlooking the craggy Karst plateau. From our balcony we could hear the churning of a creek, and nothing else. Though the Sorta family operates an impressive looking stonewalled restaurant in the building's basement, we had grown less intimidated by the serpentine thoroughfares and wanted to uncover as many culinary surprises as we could during our brief stay. On the outskirts of Nova Gorica we discovered Gostilna Zeja, an impeccable place that executed a lobster risotto to silken perfection. Even more eyebrow-raising — all the more so because had I not seen it described in a Slovenian publication I would never have known of its existence — was Pikol, a cabin restaurant improbably lurching on stilts over a small lake, just a couple of miles from Italy. Our elegant pasta and wild game dishes prompted stupefaction. "Why didn't anyone tell us about this place?" I sputtered.



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At least we had been tipped off about Goce, a 17th-century hamlet perched on a hill overlooking the valley in full. Goce had long been prosperous, a haven for priests and, reputedly, others who wished to avoid military service, with one byproduct being that residences occupy every square inch of the little village. We wandered down the slender Bora-conscious streets, and presently a middle-aged gentleman came out to greet us. He happened to be a winemaker. Would we like to visit his 550-year-old farmhouse, see his underground cellar and try his wine and perhaps a little wind-cured prsut?

My friend and I looked at each other and tacitly agreed: We were in absolutely no hurry, and so, of course, lead the way.

IF YOU GO

WHERE TO STAY

Tourist Farm Arkade Cigoj (Crnice 91, Crnice; 386-5-36-66-009, arkade-cigoj.com): a convivial farmhouse with basic, spacious rooms and a pleasant restaurant featuring homemade pastas, wines and the Cigoj family's outstanding prsut. Bed and breakfast for two, 70 euros, or about $93 at $1.33 to the euro.

Hisa Posebne Sorte (Kodreti 15, Stanjel; 386-5-7690-000, sorta.si): way off the beaten track, where quiet gets quieter, a sleek guesthouse with lovely countryside views and a posh family-run restaurant. Bed and breakfast for two, 80 euros.

WHERE TO EAT

Majerija (Slap 18, Vipava; 386-5-368-50-10, majerija.si): one of Slovenia's greatest restaurants, in a gorgeously renovated farmhouse, featuring modern (but not overly so) interpretations of regional carnivore-centric classics, with strictly local ingredients. Coming next year: on-premises guest rooms. Dinner for two without wine, about 100 euros.

Zemono Manor House (Pri Lojzetu, Vipava; 386-5-368-70-07, zemono.si): a legendary restaurant, beloved throughout the country and popular both for weddings and romantic dinners, with flamboyant dishes and service — and, oh yes, delicious riffs on Austrian-Slovenian-Italian staples. Dinner for two without wine, about 120 euros.

Pikol (Vipavska Cesta 94, Nova Gorica; 386-5-333-45-23, pikol.si): near the Italian border, a cabin on stilts but surprisingly elegant inside, featuring exquisite pasta dishes (like the local blecs with sausage and almonds) and wild game. Dinner for two without wine, about 90 euros.

Gostilna Zeja (Ozeljan 32 I, Sempas; 386-5-308-84-59): a raffish osteria with Italian-inflected dishes (including an exemplary lobster risotto) and an excellent Slovenian wine list. Dinner for two without wine, about 70 euros.