

VENTURE

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RISE & CLIMB
Sunrise summiting
in Slovenia



“Navigating the rocks before sun-up requires all of our attention as we weave through deep caverns that appear to plunge indefinitely into the undulating bedrock”

Aaron Rolph, adventurer

Even after doing it thousands of times, a sunrise wake-up never gets easier. It’s 4am when my alarm goes off and I poke my nose out of our overnight accommodation. Precariously positioned over a clifftop more than 2,000m above sea level, the Bivak pod is a compact, unmanned refuge that’s little more than a glorified tin can, but here, on the stark, rocky side of Grintovec mountain in the Kamnik-Savinja Alps of northern Slovenia, it gives off vibes of an alien monolith. We arrived the previous afternoon, having blindly navigated our way through a whiteout, where scattered light makes it dangerously impossible to see the terrain. Conditions have cleared, though, and I’m met by a dark sky gleaming with stars in every direction. The sunrise summit is on.

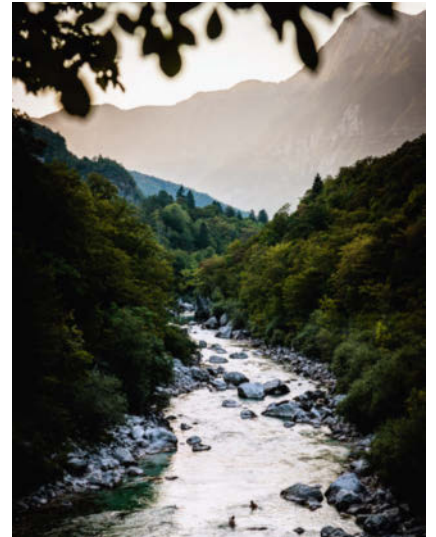
This is day three of a Slovenian long-weekend adventure, having hiked, hitched and ridden the odd train to cross Europe’s green heart. I’m lucky enough to call adventure – skiing, biking and paddling to some of the world’s wildest spots – my full-time profession. This trip, although closer than some of my other excursions to my home in Chamonix, France, is still an expedition in the truest sense. Joining me on it are adventurer and model Jess Clark and ex-pro rugby player turned ultrarunner Lewis Robling, whom I first met in Sri Lanka earlier this year.

Slovenia is perfect for this sort of short trip. A patchwork of lush green forests, rolling hills and vineyards, the small Balkan nation may be similar in size to Wales, but it rivals its immediate





Clockwise from below left: Jess Clark and Lewis Robling approach refuge Bivak Pavla Kemperla; kicking back at Lake Bled; a cold dip in the fast-flowing River Soča



this time of year. Continuing east, the medieval town of Bled in the foothills of the Julian Alps offered an afternoon of good food, its cobbled streets soundtracked by traditional live music.

The small town also shares its name with the vivid blue lake upon which it lies. Rising majestically out of Lake Bled on a small island, the Pilgrimage Church of the Assumption of Maria presents an iconic image that has become synonymous with Slovenia, and while no longer a 'hidden gem', it does live up to the hype. Even a wet night of wild camping above its vivid blue waters couldn't dampen our spirits. Catching a glimpse of the first rays of golden sunshine forming a perfect ribbon around the silhouetted island was well worth the soggy sleeping bag. After returning to its shore early for a quiet swim, it was time to pack up our kit and head into the big mountains.

Near the Austrian border, in the shadows of the Kamnik-Savinja Alps' tallest peaks, the only way is up. Aiming to summit at first light, we've got our sights set on Skuta – the third highest in the range, topping out at 2,532m. After brewing some fresh coffee through yesterday's worn socks – I'd forgotten to bring any sort of press – we throw on our head torches and hit the trail.

Navigating the rocks before sun-up requires all of our attention as we weave through deep caverns that appear to plunge indefinitely into the undulating bedrock. This isn't somewhere you want to take a wrong step, and the route becomes progressively more technical as you progress.

neighbours – Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia – when it comes to adventure. Boasting more than 350 2,000m-plus summits, the ranges of the Julian Alps, the Kamnik-Savinja Alps and the Karawanks make the former Yugoslavian state a mountaineering playground.

We arrived by train into Triglav National Park, around 65km west of our current location, and spent two days sampling its effortlessly dramatic landscapes. The 880sq-km park's crystal-clear waterfalls, gorges and plunge pools provided welcome spots to escape the sweltering July heat – 37°C days are not unusual at

High command

Explore Slovenia's sierras

The Kamnik-Savinja Alps in northern Slovenia have 28 2,000m-plus peaks with countless mountain huts, or bivaks, allowing for multi-day trips; karnik-savinja-alps.com



VENTURE Travel



Clockwise from top left: taking the first plunge; Aaron Rolph at the amazing Slap Kozjak waterfall; first light over Lake Bled; Clark and Robling navigate the limestone outcrops

Looking up at the peak, it's now blue hour, which occurs just before the sun has crept over the horizon – my favourite time of day. I can see the first rays of light kissing the highest peaks and casting shadows, which only makes the impressive landscape grander. Leading towards the ridge, I take care to avoid knocking loose rocks down the gully into the team below. Eventually, we take those final summit footsteps.

The views open up and there are mountains as far as the eye can see, the pale limestone peaks emerging from forests at times giving the appearance of snowcaps. At this altitude, the air is refreshingly cool and contrasts with the gentle warmth of the sun. We pause and

take it all in, independently enjoying these special moments of solitude while also sharing the experience without a single word spoken. Alas, we can't stay here for ever, and after a while we head down the impossibly steep east face, which demands our fullest attention.

Completing the arduous descent is celebrated in true Slovenian style – a refreshing river dip – before we make the short trip to the country's capital city.

Slovenia's ranges are a playground for mountaineers

Jagged edge

Essential kit for peak performance

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The go-anywhere-do-anything bag you can trust, whatever the destination

Knog Bilby 400 Headlamp

Easy to charge, comfortable on your head, and lasts more than 105 hours on low-power

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Super-absorbent and available in loads of designs, this towel is practical and stylish

Arc'teryx Nuclei FL Jacket

A lightweight, fully insulated and packable layer that feels cosy anywhere

Fatmap

A 3D-map navigation app with useful overlays and real-time GPS tracking



With a population of less than 300,000 in an area little more than 160sq-km in size, Ljubljana is small but vibrant in history and rich in varied architecture, shaped by a range of cultures since the Middle Ages. But, tired and hungry, all we can focus on are the numerous restaurants, bars and ice-cream opportunities. After a big day in the mountains, we've earned it.

Aaron Rolph is an outdoor photographer and adventure athlete who broke the Guinness World Record for cycling the most countries (14) in seven days. He's also the founder of the British Adventure Collective, which works to inspire others to experience the outdoors; britishadventurecollective.com