

# SOČA

THE JEWEL OF

# SLOVENIA

**Story: Steve Brooks**

**Photos: Steve Brooks and Ute Heppke**

Nestled in the heart of the Julian Alps, the Soča Valley is one of the most stunning places we have seen in Europe. As a former Republic of Yugoslavia, Slovenia was the first to gain its independence and unlike its neighbours of Croatia and Bosnia, it had a rather smooth transition to independence.

We have been coming to kayak the Soča River since 2001. John Blake and myself were on an early spring kayaking road trip and with no water in southern Austria we realised that the Soča River was not too far away. John had no maps in his van and since this was before smartphones existed, we made a quick call to Ute.

Steve kayaking in the CotaHuasi Canyon



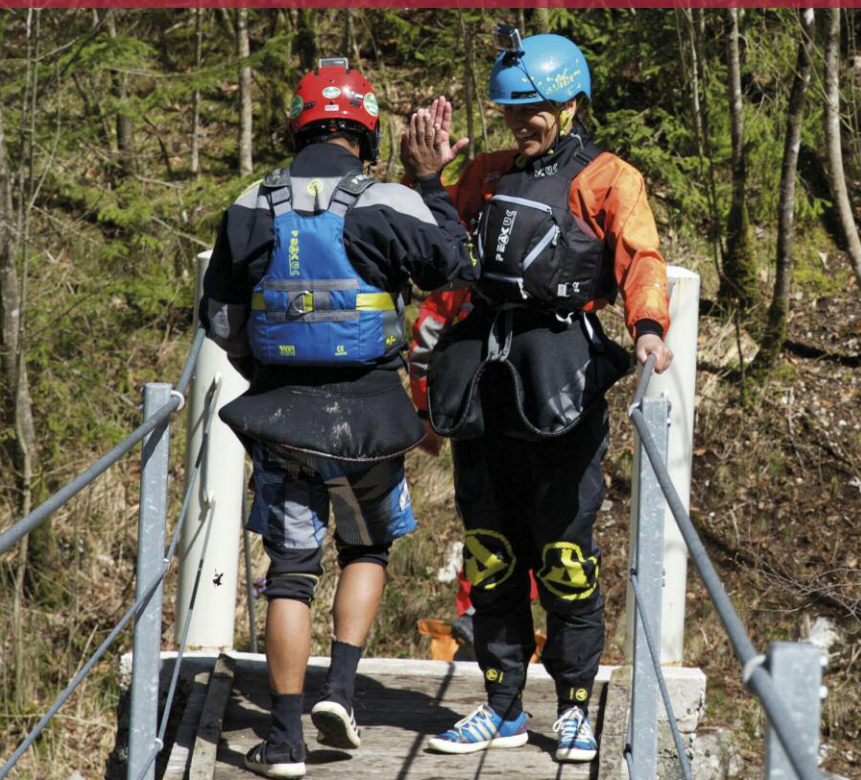
She did some research, checked out a few maps and with her directions we made our way to Slovenia. The Vršič pass was closed due to the amount of snow that had fallen throughout the Winter. So with a bit of back tracking, crossing a couple of borders as - our first visit to Slovenia was before it was part of the EU, we ended up trying to explain to Italian officials why two Brits were in a German registered van with a bunch of kayaks in the back looking for whitewater! After a few tense negotiations, the Italians let us through and we were now making our way over the Predil Pass and finally descending to the Soča Valley!

### EMERALD GREEN

Since then we have been to the Soča valley over 10 times and it still amazes us just how stunning the area is. The river is a crystal clear emerald green colour and is the home to the Marble trout fish, which you can actually see when you eddy out in certain sections of the river. The town of Bovec lies at the base of Mount Kanin and at a pleasant 453m above sea level the town has a great climate with plenty of bars, cafes and restaurants to hang out and watch the world go by.

When we first came to the Soča Valley, it was actually cheaper to go out and eat in a restaurant than buying food at the supermarket and try to cook on our small camping stove! Even though, since the adoption of the Euro, this has certainly changed, the food at the restaurants is still plentiful, extremely tasty and the local trout is very hard to beat!

There is now a pub in Bovec that is brewing its own Indian Pale Ale and makes a great excuse to avoid the gassy Euro style beer. If you are not into your beer, the local made firewater called Slivovich (or was we call it after drinking too much of it: 'Slip in a Ditch') is worth a try, or if you prefer coffee then this is still around the one Euro mark - you certainly cannot get a coffee for that price where we live in Austria!



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Since the days of the former Yugoslavia, the locals have maintained a tradition of trying to be self-reliant. Our Slovenian family that we always stay with have their own trout pools, sheep, chicken and with plenty of fruit trees and berry bushes scattered around their land, we are regularly given some of their fresh produce!

### THE CLASSROOM

The river itself has been called the classroom of European whitewater kayaking and we think this is the perfect description. The friendly colour of the river gives a sense of ease even if you are running the syphon canyon! With plenty of sections of different grades to choose from it gives every kayaker the opportunity to enjoy its rapids. Or by making multiple laps on your favourite section you can try different moves and lines. However, just do not take our word for it, come on a visit to this amazing valley and we are sure you will be impressed – we certainly were and still are!



### STEVE BROOKS:

Steve has lived in Austria now for over 20 years and from being a place to come and work seasonally on the river, to a base camp and finally making Austria his home! Steve's love for kayaking and adventure is infectious and this can especially be seen in the kayak school he set up eight years ago. Based out of the Arlberg Region in Western Austria, the school runs courses for beginners plus coaching and instructing kayakers through all the whitewater grades, including creeking and river running. In-between the kayaking season in Austria, Steve can be found kayaking and leading courses, adventure trips and expeditions in the Soča Valley, Indian Himalayas, Peru and Chile in South America. He speaks Austrian German like a local and is trying to work out if he speaks Peruvian, Chilean or Argentine Spanish. When he is not kayaking, he searches for that perfect powder run in the back country in his home mountains of St Anton am Arlberg or riding his Royal Enfield Bullet in search of undiscovered rivers in the Himalayas.

For more information check out: [www.gokayaking.at](http://www.gokayaking.at) and [www.gokayaking.at/blog](http://www.gokayaking.at/blog)

