



## Sights at Lake Bled

Bled doesn't have many sights, but there are plenty of rewarding and pleasant activities.

### ▲▲▲Walk Around the Lake

Strolling the 3.5 miles around the lake is enjoyable, peaceful, and scenic. At a leisurely pace, it takes about an hour and a half...not counting stops to snap photos of the ever-changing view. On the way, you'll pass some great villas, mostly from the beginning of the 19th century. The most significant one was a former residence of Marshal Tito—today the Hotel Vila Bled, a fine place to stop for a coffee and pretend Tito invited you over for a visit (described next). For the more adventurous,



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Before leaving the castle, climb the stairs up to the wooden **defensive gallery** for the best views in town of the mountains east of Bled. The biggest one is called Stol ("Chair"). In the foreground, you can see the steeple marking the town of Podhom; just to the left, the folds in the hills hide the dramatic Vintgar Gorge (see page 653).

On your way out, look under the stairs to see if they've reopened the **herbal gallery** (a gift shop of traditional-meets-modern herbal brandies, cosmetics, and perfumes).

(1508-1586), a Slovenian cross between Martin Luther and Johannes Gutenberg. In Trubar's time, Slovene was considered a crude peasants' language—not just unworthy of print, but actually illegal to print. So this Reformer went to Germany and, in 1550—using presses like this one—wrote and printed the first two books in the Slovene language: *Abecedarium* (an alphabet primer to teach illiterate Slovenes how to read) and *Catechismus* (a simplified version of the New Testament). Trubar smuggled his printed books back to Slovenia (hidden in barrels of playing cards) and, en route to Ljubljana, was briefly given refuge in this castle. (Trubar is still much-revered today, appearing on the Slovenian €1 coin.) Up the stairs is an exhibition in English about early printing methods and the importance of moveable type for advancing the Protestant Reformation, whose goal was to get the Word of God more easily into the hands of everyday people. You'll also see one of those first Trubar books—notice it was printed in Tübingen, Germany, an early enclave of the Reformation.

Just past the printing press is the castle's oldest tower—from the 11th century—and a **café terrace** offering pricey drinks with grand views (€2-4 coffee or beer, €6-8 cocktails).

Continue past the café and begin climbing the stairs up to grander and grander **views** over the lake. Reaching the terrace at the very top, you'll find the best vistas; the restaurant; a tiny chapel with 3-D frescoes that make it seem much bigger than it is (next to the museum entrance); a small shop selling iron items that are still forged the traditional way; and the well-presented castle **museum**, which strains to make the story of Bled, the castle, and the surrounding region of Carniola interesting. The ground floor has exhibits about geology, prehistoric artifacts, ironworking, and the seasonal life cycle of the region, while the upstairs has a cool 3-D model of the surrounding mountains, smaller models illustrating the growth of the building, more prehistory, and exhibits on the development of tourism at Lake Bled (including its many fine vacation villas). While video screens and some English information are helpful, there's only so much to say.

When you're done up here, head down the stairs between the museum and restaurant (passing WCs). Coming back down into the lower courtyard, turn left down the ramp to find the **wine cellar** (*grajska klet de Adami*), where you can pay a hefty €14-17 to bottle and cork your own souvenir bottle of wine (you're paying for the experience more than the wine). Slovenian wines are well-explained by one of two guys (both, coincidentally, named Andrej) who dress as monks, since winemaking was a monastic responsibility in the Middle Ages. Both the printing press and the wine cellar may close earlier than the castle grounds (generally at 19:00 in summer).

hiking paths lead up into the hills surrounding the lake (ask TI for details and maps; or hike to—and through—Vintgar Gorge, described on page 653).

#### ▲Tito's Vila Bled

Before World War II, this villa on Lake Bled was the summer residence for the Yugoslav royal family. When Tito ran Yugoslavia, the part-Slovene communist leader took over the place and had it renovated using plans from the architect Jože Plečnik. During his heyday, Tito entertained international guests here (big shots from the communist and non-aligned world, from Indira Gandhi to Nikita Khrushchev to Kim Il Sung to Raúl Castro). Since 1984, it's been a classy hotel and restaurant, offering guests grand Lake Bled views and James Bond ambience. The garden surrounding the villa is filled with exotic trees, brought here by Tito's guests from distant lands.

The terrace has a restaurant that welcomes visitors to drop in for a meal, a piece of cake, or just a cup of coffee (reservations smart if you're dining; likely closed Nov-mid-April). Tito fans might want to splurge for an overnight (standard Db-€195, tel. 04/575-3710, [www.vila-bled.si](http://www.vila-bled.si)). But even if you're not a guest here, the hotel's staff is generally tolerant of curious tourists poking around the public areas inside.

From the marbled lobby, head upstairs. This is where Tito sympathizers have a nostalgic opportunity to send an email from his



desk, sip tea in his lounge, and gawk at his **Socialist Realist wall murals**. Those murals, decorating the upper walls of a vast ballroom on the second floor, are a fascinating peek at the propaganda of the time. Follow the rousing story of the origins of postwar Yugoslavia, starting on

the upper left as you enter: First you see the Nazi destruction of Belgrade in 1941, a dark moment that inspired the South Slavs to band together to fight these foreign occupiers. See Tito raising his ragtag army, then leading them into pivotal battles in Bosnia-Herzegovina (notice the minaret and the destroyed bridge over the Neretva River), followed by a winter spent enduring hardship. At the end of this long wall, Tito's victorious Partisans crush the final vestiges of the Nazis; in the upper-right corner, the spring blossoms represent a promising future for the people of Yugoslavia. The large panel at the end of the room trumpets the idealized postwar world that Tito envisioned: proud workers from all walks of life coming together for the betterment of Yugoslavia. In the shadow of a mighty factory—a symbol of heavy industry, which communists

embraced as the way of the future—notice that the ironworker and the farmer are holding hands in unity. The room's focal point is the mother hoisting a young child with one arm, and the flag of the nascent Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia with the other.

**Getting There:** The villa is a 20-minute lakeside walk from the town of Bled at Cesta Svobode 26 (it's the big, white villa with the long staircase at the southern end of the lake, just beyond the village of Mlino). You can also ask your *pletna* gondolier to drop you off here after visiting the island. Those hiking around the lake will pass the gate leading up through Tito's garden to the restaurant and lobby.

### ▲▲The Island (Blejski Otok)

Bled's little island—capped by a super-cute church—nudges the lake's quaintness level over the top. Locals call it simply "The Island" (*Otok*). While it's pretty to look at from afar, it's also fun to visit.



The island has long been a sacred site with a romantic twist. On summer Saturdays, a steady procession of brides and grooms, cheered on by their

entourages, heads for the island. Ninety-nine steps lead from the island's dock up to the Church of the Assumption on top. It's tradition for the groom to carry—or try to carry—his bride up these steps. About four out of five are successful (proving themselves "fit for marriage"). During the communist era, the church was closed, and weddings were outlawed here. But the tradition re-emerged—illegally—even before the regime ended, with a clandestine ceremony in 1989.

**Cost and Hours:** Free to visit island, church—€6, ticket includes tower climb, daily May–Sept 9:00–19:00, April and Oct 9:00–18:00, Nov–March 9:00–16:00.

**Getting There:** The most romantic route to the island is to cruise on one of the distinctive *pletna* boats (€12/person round-trip, includes 30-minute stay on the island; catch one at several spots around the lake—most convenient from in front of Grand Hotel Toplice or just below Hotel Park, might have to wait for more passengers to fill the boat; boats generally run from dawn, last boat leaves one hour before church closes; replaced by enclosed electric boats in winter—unless the lake freezes, in which case there are no boats; mobile 031-316-575). Other places to catch a *pletna* include the village of Mlino, partway around the lake; the bottom of the grand staircase leading up to Vila Bled (it's a shorter trip from here, but the same cost); and at the campground. For more on these characteristic little vessels, see the "Pletna Boats" sidebar. Note that



to bask in the sweeping panoramas over Lake Bled and the surrounding mountainscapes.

**Cost and Hours:** €9, daily May–Oct 8:00–20:00, Nov–April 9:00–18:00, tel. 04/572-9782, [www.blejski-grad.si](http://www.blejski-grad.si).

**Getting There:** To really earn those views, you can **hike** up the steep hill (20–30 minutes). The handiest trails are behind big St. Martin's Church: Walk past the front door of the church with the lake at your back, and look left after the first set of houses for the *Grad* signs marking the steepest route (follow the wooden stakes all the way up the steep switch-

back steps); or, for a longer but less steep route, continue past the church on the same street about five minutes, bearing uphill (left) at the fork, and find the *Grad 1* sign just after the Pension Bledec hostel on the left. Once you're on this second trail, don't take the sharp-left uphill turn at the fork (instead, continue straight up, around the back of the hill). If you'd rather skip the hike, you can take the morning **tourist bus** (see "Getting Around Lake Bled," earlier), your **rental car**, a **taxi** (around €10), or—if you're wealthy and romantic—a **horse and buggy** (€40, €10 extra for driver to wait 30 minutes and bring you back down). However, all of these options take you only to the parking lot, from which it's still a steep and slippery-when-wet five-minute hike up to the castle itself.

**Eating:** The **restaurant** at the castle is fairly expensive, but your restaurant reservation gets you into the castle grounds for free (international cuisine and some local specialties, €12–16 pastas, €20–25 main courses, €20 fixed-price meal, daily in summer 10:00–22:00, less off-season, tel. 04/579-4424). Better yet, bring your own **picnic** to munch along the wall with million-dollar views over Lake Bled (buy sandwiches at the Mercator grocery store in the commercial center before you ascend—see page 650).

**Visiting the Castle:** After buying your ticket, go through the gate and huff the rest of the way up to the outer courtyard. We'll tour the castle clockwise, starting from here. As the castle is continually being spruced up, some details may be different than described.

Turning left at the entrance, you'll pass WCs, then the door to Mojster Janez's working replica of a **printing press** (*grajska tiskarna/manufaktura*) from Gutenberg's time. You can pay €2–25 for your own custom-made souvenir certificate using this very old technology. While this may seem like a tourist gimmick, there's actually some interesting history here. As in many lands, the printing press was a critical tool in the evolution of Slovenia's culture. Look above the press for a life-size mannequin of Primož Trubar

### Pletna Boats

The *pletna* is an important symbol of Lake Bled. In addition to providing a pleasant way to reach the island, these boats also carry on a tradition dating back for generations. In the 17th century, Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa granted the villagers from Mlino—the little town along the lakefront just beyond Bled—special permission



to ferry visitors to the island. (Since Mlino had very limited access to farmland, the people needed another source of income.) Mlino residents built their *pletnas* by hand, using a special design passed down from father to son for centuries—like the equally iconic gondolas of Venice. Eventually, this imperial decree and family tradition evolved into a modern union of *pletna* oarsmen, which continues to this day.

Today *pletna* boats are still hand-built according to that same centuries-old design. There's no keel, so the skilled oarsmen work hard to steer the flat-bottomed boat with each



stroke—boats piloted by an inexperienced oarsman can slide around on very windy days, especially when empty. There are 21 official *pletnas* on Lake Bled, all belonging to the same union. The gondoliers dump all of their earnings into one fund, give a cut to the tourist board, and divide the rest evenly amongst themselves. Occasionally a new family tries to break into the cartel, underselling his competitors with a “black market” boat that looks the same as the official ones. While some see this as a

violation of a centuries-old tradition, others view it as good old capitalism. Either way, competition is fierce.

the church (around the right side), then follow the path around the island's perimeter back to where your *pletna* boat awaits.

#### ▲ Bled Castle (Blejski Grad)

Bled's cliff-hanging castle, dating in one form or another from 1,000 years ago, was the seat of the Austrian Bishops of Brixen, who controlled Bled in the Middle Ages. Today it's merely a fine tourist attraction with a little history and lots of big views. The various sights at the castle—a decent history museum, a frescoed chapel, an old-fashioned printing press, and a wine cellar—are more cute than interesting, but the real reason to come up here is

*pletna* boatmen stick close to the 30-minute waiting time on the island—which can go very fast. For more time, you can **rent your own boat** and row to the island (see Boating listing, later). It's even possible to **swim**, especially from the end of the lake nearest the island (see “Swimming” listing, later), but you're not allowed into the church in your swimsuit. Guess you'll just have to go in naked.

**Visiting the Island:** At the top of the stairs, the **Potičnica café** sells *potica*, the Slovenian nut-roll cake that's traditional at Christmastime but delicious any day of the year. The attached **souvenir shop** is the best in Bled, well-stocked with a variety of high-quality Slovenian gifts, trinkets, and keepsakes.

Upstairs in the same building is the worthwhile but easy-to-miss **art gallery**, which displays changing exhibits as well as a wonderful permanent exhibit commemorating Slovenia's membership in the EU. Local sculptor Ladina Kurbor has created finely detailed clay figurines clad in the traditional national costume from each of the European Union member nations. The attached room houses figurines wearing traditional dress from various parts of Slovenia (identified on the map and explained by the posted descriptions).

The island's main attraction is the **church**. An eighth-century Slavic pagan temple dedicated to the goddess of love and fertility once stood here; the current Baroque version (with Venetian flair—the bell tower is separate from the main church) is the fifth to occupy this spot. Go inside and find the rope for the church bell, hanging in the middle of the aisle just before the altar. A local superstition claims that if you can get this bell to ring three times with one big pull of the rope, your dreams will come true. Worth a try.

If you're waiting for a herd of tourists to ring out their wishes, pass the time looking around the area in front of the



altar. When the church was being renovated in the 1970s, workers dug up several medieval graves (you can see one through the glass under the bell rope). They also discovered Gothic frescoes on either side of the altar, including, above the door on the right, an unusual ecclesiastical theme: the *bris* (Jewish circumcision ritual) of Christ.

Your ticket also includes the **bell tower**. At 91 steps, it's a shorter climb than the one up from the boat dock. Up top, you'll find a restored pendulum mechanism from 1890 and fine lake views that are marred by a mesh covering that makes it impossible to snap a clear picture.

To descend by a different route, walk down the trail behind

