

Episode 103: Slovakia

Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about their recent trip to Slovakia. They discuss Slovakia's natural beauty as well as its cities and castles and how it's a fairly undiscovered country.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you from Slovakia, which is one half of the former Czechoslovakia along with Czechia, or the Czech Republic, that we talked about previously. And we've been here for nearly two weeks, and it's a small country but we've found that it has quite a lot to offer.

Wendy: It does, yeah, and lots of surprises. To be honest, I didn't really know very much about Slovakia. Umm, I knew that Bratislava was the capital, but before we came here I would have struggled to name any other place in Slovakia.

Nick: Yeah, and actually we met someone from Slovakia a few months ago and we said to her, 'You know, we're coming to Slovakia. What are some of the things that we should do there?' And the funny thing was, that she said, 'Well, you can go to Prague and you can go to Budapest and you can go to Vienna,' and she started naming all these cities that were actually outside Slovakia, and we said, 'No, we want to know what's in Slovakia, because we want to visit it and see what it's all about¹.' Umm, but, yeah, eventually we were able to find quite a few things to do here.

Wendy: Yeah, and there have been some really amazing sites, both natural and historical and, uhh, you know, we've been in cities and we've been out in the countryside, and we've found lots of really great places to explore.

Nick: Definitely. So we started, having come from the Czech Republic, we started in the High Tatras, which are the mountains of Slovakia. And apparently these are quite well known, you know, within this region, and there are visitors who came from the Czech Republic, there are visitors who come from Poland. This is what locals have told us. Umm, and so it is high season, it's August, so there were quite a lot of people up there, but still not really many international tourists. We didn't hear a lot of English or other languages that we're familiar with.

¹ what it's all about: what it's like, what it has to offer

Wendy: No. I mean to me it seemed like everyone was local, uhh, but I can't really distinguish² between the Slavic languages. You know, I can't tell if someone is speaking Polish or Slovak or Czech. So probably a lot of them were from neighbouring countries, uhh, but to me they all seemed like, you know, local tourists. And, yeah, very little English spoken.

Nick: And the High Tatras were beautiful. Umm, because it's the middle of summer there was no snow. But we saw pictures on the walls of restaurants and hotels and things, which showed in the winter where it was all just completely blanketed³ in snow and it looked really beautiful. But it was also really nice in summer to see these rocky mountains. Umm, there were also a lot of lakes nearby, and they were shimmering⁴, you have reflections of the mountains and the trees and things in the lake. And so we did two days of hiking and that was really great, probably the highlight of Slovakia for us?

Wendy: Yeah, I'd say, yeah, that was probably the biggest highlight. I really love the mountains. That's the biggest thing that I miss about living in Switzerland. We've talked about how we lived in Switzerland for six years and we did lots of hiking in the Alps there and as much as I love Portugal, umm, that is the main thing - really the only thing, I'd say - that I miss about Switzerland is being able to hike in really high mountains.

Nick: Yeah, the Tatras is not as high as the Swiss Alps.

Wendy: No.

Nick: But it's still kind of like a mini Switzerland with the lakes. And there were cable cars that we could take and then hike up on higher ground. And that was definitely worth spending a few days there, for sure.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And then the other place, in terms of natural sites, is the area we're in right now, which is kind of the last place that we're visiting before we have to leave. And it's called, if I can say this properly, Slovenský raj, which means Slovak Paradise. And it's a national park, and it's quite different from the mountains. Although it's funny because we can actually see the High Tatras from where we are now. Umm, and so that's kind of one ecosystem in one direction and then here nearby where we are, there's a completely different kind of natural ecosystem. And so it's an area where there are some hills, it's very forested with a lot of pine trees. There are lots of little rivers and streams and gorges. Umm, in winter or in other times of the year, there are a lot of waterfalls, although there's not very much water at all at the moment.

² distinguish: differentiate, tell the difference

³ blanketed: covered as if with a blanket

⁴ shimmering: shining and/or reflecting

Wendy: No, we're in a drought⁵ right now, throughout all of central Europe. So normally I think there would be waterfalls, even at this time of year, but it's particularly dry this year.

Nick: And so it's a completely different type of landscape but it's also beautiful in its own way. Another thing that makes it interesting is that when you're hiking in this area as we've done the last couple of days, there are a lot of ladders, umm, that you have to climb up. And some of them are kind of vertical ladders; others are sort of horizontal ladders. Because you're hiking a lot on the river bed itself and as we said, right now there's not really that much water, but you can see how these, uhh, ladders go above where the water would be, umm, you know, if the water was flowing. And that's been fun, we've been kind of scrambling⁶ on these ladders to try to get from place to place.

Wendy: Yeah, it's different from your typical hike. Uhh, it's a ... it adds a different element to it. When you're climbing all these ladders, it makes it kind of like an obstacle course⁷, you know, where you have to jump around these things. And a lot of times there's chains to hold on to and pull yourself up, umm, to help you get around. So, it's a little bit scary. If you're afraid of heights, then I probably wouldn't recommend it, uhh, but it's a lot of fun. And there are even kids doing it. I mean, we saw really young kids who were probably about four or five years old, who were holding onto these chains and climbing up these rocks too, so lots of families do it and it's a lot of fun.

Nick: Yeah, and there are also a lot fewer tourists in this area than there were in the High Tatras. Although we were told that at this time of year there are many, many tourists, and maybe we just got lucky, in particular yesterday, because we went in the afternoon to this particular gorge. And we were told by, uhh, somebody here that sometimes you can have to wait for up to an hour to climb one of the ladders. And that certainly didn't happen to us yesterday. We only saw, I think, five or six people, uhh, the whole time that we were in this gorge for two hours.

Wendy: Yeah, I think most people go in the morning, which we would normally do too, and anyway we hadn't actually planned to do that hike on that particular day, and it was kind of a last-minute decision. And so we did it in the afternoon and got a much later start than we normally would do for a hike, but I think that worked in our favour and it meant that we had it almost to ourselves, which was great.

Nick: Yep. And apart from the nature, there are also a lot of castles in Slovakia, which is great. And one in particular, called the Spiš Castle, which I think is the

⁵ drought: extended period with no rain

⁶ scrambling: climbing using hands and feet

⁷ obstacle course: an area, usually for children or military training, where participants have to climb over things and negotiate other hurdles that block the path

most famous castle in the country and certainly the best of the ones that we've seen.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. And it was a really ... it's one of the best castles that I've ever seen, to be honest. I was really, really impressed with it.

Nick: So it's on this kind of rocky outcrop, it's quite isolated. There is a village that's near it but it's not ... the village doesn't come right up to the castle walls or anything. So it's, you probably have to walk for 10 minutes, umm, so nearly a kilometre, let's say, from the edge of the village to get to the castle. So you just can kind of see it, there are fields that surround it, and you just kind of look up at it and you see a huge sky and everything. And so it's just really set in a beautiful way. Uhh, and then you go up to it and you can walk on the ramparts and there are towers and, you know, parts of it are crumbling⁸. And then when you get up there you can climb up on the towers and then you have a great view over the villages that are nearby and the surrounding landscapes and everything as well.

Wendy: Yeah, and, uhh, a lot of castles in this area are more like palaces. You know, so it's like a really fancy kind of residential building with, you know, where you can go inside and tour it and you'll see lots of period furniture, uhh, but this was not like that. This was much more rustic and some of it ... some parts were kind of falling apart, you know, and you had these old stone walls, which I think we probably ... both of us prefer. I know you prefer that kind of castle.

Nick: Definitely. Yeah, so it's a medieval castle, it dates from the 12th century. And then, for example, in Bratislava, the capital, there's a castle there but it's much more like this palace style with Renaissance and Baroque, umm, features to it and things like that. So it's a different type of experience. Uhh, so Bratislava is the capital, and we did find that there were some foreign tourists there and we didn't really see any more or less anywhere else in the country, but certainly in Bratislava there are some people who go. We were there on a weekend and so I think some other Europeans come for the weekend.

Wendy: Yeah, because it's only about an hour away from Vienna, so you can easily do it just as a day trip from there. Uhh, you can get there also from Budapest or from Prague as we mentioned before. So, yeah, it was definitely the most touristy part of the country, I would say. But the rest of it was really undiscovered and I'm glad that we discovered it.

Nick: Yep, and so what were some of your other highlights then?

Wendy: Umm, other highlights? Well, I really enjoyed a town called Košice, which is in the far east of the country. And, so it's the second largest city, actually, in Slovakia, umm, after Bratislava. And it has a really beautiful main square. It's quite

⁸ crumbling: falling apart (often used for buildings but also cookies!)

an elongated⁹ square. It's almost like a street. And, uhh, lots of beautiful architecture and some great food and, uhh, just felt really like a real, lived-in city. There weren't many tourists at all there and so we just got to see people going about their daily lives and just, you know, enjoy the life in this small city.

Nick: Yeah, so that was emblematic¹⁰ I think of the whole time that we had here in Slovakia, that it's kind of an undiscovered country. And we didn't know much about it, and now we know a lot more about it. And I think we're glad that we came here, umm, before it gets discovered by everybody else.

⁹ elongated: much longer than it is wide

¹⁰ emblematic: symbolic, typical

Comprehension Questions

1. What was unusual about hiking in the Slovak Paradise national park compared with regular hiking?
2. Why was Spiš Castle different from other castles in the region?
3. Apart from the architecture, what did Wendy like about Košice, Slovakia's second largest city?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. They bought an old farm house in the countryside. The building was _____ so they had to spend quite a lot of time and effort to fix it up.
2. In springtime, the fields are _____ with flowers of all different colours. It's a very beautiful sight.
3. People in cities might be happy when it doesn't rain, but a long _____ really affects farmers and agricultural production in the countryside.
4. The boy injured himself while trying to climb a wall as part of an _____. He fell and broke his arm.
5. This latest incident is _____ of his entire presidency, which has gone from one disaster to another right from the start.
6. The proboscis monkey, which lives in Malaysia and Indonesia, has a very _____ nose. Indonesians like to call it the 'Dutch Monkey' because they think its nose is similar in form to the noses of their former colonial rulers.
7. Because they're identical twins, it can be hard for some people to _____ between them. But their parents and close friends don't have much trouble.
8. He criticised yoga for years without even trying it, but today he is finally going to attend a class to see _____.
9. When they go to the beach, their kids love walking on the sand and _____ over the rocks.
10. When it rains in Rome, there are often _____ puddles next to the Colosseum and you can see the reflection of the amphitheatre in the water.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever been to Slovakia? If so, did you like it? If not, would you like to go? Why or why not?
2. Do you think you would enjoy climbing up ladders as part of hiking in the Slovak Paradise national park? Why or why not?
3. Do you prefer ruined stone castles like Spiš Castle or prettier palace-style castles like Prague or Bratislava Castle? Why?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. You have to climb up and across ladders as you're hiking through the gorges.
2. It was a ruined stone castle rather than a palace-style residence castle.
3. She liked that there weren't many tourists there and she could watch the daily lives of the people who live there.

Exercises

1. crumbling
2. blanketed
3. drought
4. obstacle course
5. emblematic
6. elongated
7. distinguish
8. what it's all about
9. scrambling
10. shimmering