

Introduction

The Upper Sava Valley is considered one of the most attractive tourist areas in Slovenia. Its picturesque nature, rich cultural heritage, and diverse range of activities throughout the year attract numerous visitors seeking both relaxation and active experiences. Because of its great popularity and the existing offer, designing a new tourism product presents an even greater challenge — one must create something truly original that stands out while still complementing what already exists.

For this reason, I first conducted a thorough review of the guided tours already offered in the Upper Sava Valley. Based on the analysis, I created a proposal for a new guided tour that is unique and different, while still incorporating all the essential and recognizable elements of the valley — natural beauty, cultural heritage, and the lifestyle of its inhabitants. Practically, I combined the existing products into a one-day trip suitable for both young people and families.

The foundation of my guided tour lies in the traditional activities that have marked this region — alpine dairy farming, charcoal burning, mountaineering, and others. These activities were not only ways of survival but also shaped a special lifestyle, values, habits, and the storytelling tradition of the locals. This is exactly what I wish to present to visitors — how natural features such as mountains, forests, and rivers influenced the lives of the people, something still reflected today through the rich folklore, fairy tales, and mythology of the Upper Sava Valley.

At the same time, my guided tour is also based on the tourism strategy of Kranjska Gora and the entire Upper Sava Valley. As part of the strategic planning process, an online survey was conducted involving both residents and providers of tourism services. Participants expressed a desire for Kranjska Gora in 2035 to be known for preserving balance among residents, tourists, nature, sports, agriculture, and craftsmanship. Values such as quality of life, coexistence, preserved and pristine nature, tidy villages, opportunities for young people, good transport and tourism infrastructure, and accessible services were highlighted. A strong desire to preserve tradition and local identity, while also following modern trends, was emphasized.

Therefore, the guided tour titled *In the Embrace of Fairy Tales, Mountains, and Tradition* focuses on discovering the entire Upper Sava Valley in a single day. The program includes a visit to the popular Kekec Land, but in a different way — making Kekec appealing even to us young people. The Julijana travel agency now offers an escape-room-style experience, with the entire Kekec Land functioning as the “room.” We would stop for refreshments at the Kosobrin Cabin, which offers excellent local food.

In the village of Rute, we visit a live demonstration of traditional charcoal burning as part of the Charcoalers’ Days, giving visitors insight into the former way of life in this part of Upper Carniola. The trip continues along the Triglav Fairy Tale Trails, where we get to know other fairy-tale characters said to have lived in the villages beneath Mount Triglav, while also walking through Dovje and Mojstrana. The final stop is the Slovenian Alpine Museum in Mojstrana, where visitors can learn about the importance and history of mountaineering in the Alpine region through a modern, interactive experience.

Location

The Upper Sava Valley is located in the far northwest of Slovenia, in the heart of the Julian Alps, right at the border with Austria and Italy. The valley lies entirely within the Municipality of Kranjska Gora, which is considered one of Slovenia’s most recognizable mountain destinations. The area is part of Triglav National Park, the country’s only national park, which protects numerous natural and cultural sites.

Geographically, the valley is a distinct alpine valley stretching along the upper course of the Sava Dolinka, one of the two headwaters of the Sava — Slovenia's longest river. To the south, the valley is surrounded by the Julian Alps, while to the north the Karawanks form the natural border with Austria. The best-known surrounding peaks include Triglav, Špik, Razor, Mojstrovka, and many others.

The Upper Sava Valley has historically served as a natural passage between the Alpine world and the Padan Plain, which gave it great strategic importance. Important trade routes and passes, such as the Vršič Pass — connecting Kranjska Gora with the Soča Valley — run through the area. Today, the valley is an important tourist center known for winter sports, hiking, cycling, cultural heritage, and its rich natural environment. Besides Kranjska Gora, the valley includes settlements such as Gozd Martuljek, Mojstrana, Rateče, Podkoren, and Belca. Due to its location, the valley is easily accessible and lies close to major transport routes.

Prehistory and Antiquity

The first traces of settlement in the Upper Sava Valley date back to prehistoric times. Archaeological finds from the areas of Rateče, Podkoren, and Mojstrana confirm human presence in the Bronze and Iron Ages. The valley held strategic importance as part of an important trade route across the Vršič Pass toward the interior of present-day Slovenia and further toward the Adriatic. During the Roman Empire, roads connecting Aquileia (now Aquileia in Italy) with the interior of Noricum and Pannonia crossed the region.

Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, the area was part of the Carinthian March, and later within the Duchy of Carniola. Life in these areas was closely connected to natural conditions — inhabitants were engaged in agriculture, forestry, livestock farming, and ironworking. In Mojstrana and its surroundings, ironworking was active due to the proximity of forests and water sources, which enabled the development of the iron industry. In the 14th century, the first permanent settlements began to form, including Kranjska Gora, which became the center of the area.

19th Century and the Development of Tourism

In the 19th century, the valley began developing as a tourist destination. The first visitors were mainly hikers, alpinists, and naturalists from Austria-Hungary exploring the peaks of the Julian Alps. In 1906, the railway connection between Jesenice and Villach opened, further encouraging tourism. Kranjska Gora increasingly became a hub for both winter and summer tourism.

20th Century to Today

During the First World War, the Upper Sava Valley served as an important support area for the Isonzo Front. The Russian Chapel under the Vršič Pass, built by Russian prisoners of war in memory of fallen comrades, is a well-known symbol. After the Second World War, winter tourism developed — ski resorts and hotels were built, making Kranjska Gora one of the most important Slovenian winter sports centers.

Today, the Upper Sava Valley combines natural and cultural heritage with modern tourism. Visitors are drawn to mountain villages, peaks, waterfalls, museums, and traditional events such as the Vitranc Cup and other sports and cultural events.

Livestock Farming and Pasture Culture

In the Upper Sava Valley, agricultural activity in the past was closely linked to various types of livestock, which played a crucial role in performing farm tasks, transport, and food production.

Farmers used horses that were medium-sized but very strong. Most farmers from areas such as Bela Peč, Podkoren, Rateče, and Kranjska Gora bought horses in Carinthia, while those from Dovje and Jesenice bred their own. Horses were essential for various farm tasks such as transport and assistance with heavy labor. They were fed hay, straw, and clover, and in summer they grazed near farmhouses.

Farmers also raised oxen, especially medium alpine breeds. Oxen were used for field work and for transporting charcoal, which was produced from wood and sold to mines and foundries. Some farmers also transported ore using ox carts.

Cows were an important part of livestock farming. Local farmers raised small alpine breeds used for milk and butter production. In winter, cows were fed hay and straw; in summer, they grazed on pastures. Milk and butter were sold, especially in Dovje and Jesenice, where butter was sold at the market.

Farmers also kept sheep and goats. Despite the decline of sheep farming due to the rise of cattle farming, sheep still played an important role. Sheep provided milk for cheese and wool for clothing. They grazed on mountain pastures in summer and were fed with dried leaves, straw, and hay in winter. Goats were raised mainly in Jesenice, providing milk and meat.

Shepherds such as goat and sheep masters played a key role in caring for livestock. Pasture rights often led to conflicts among farmers due to unclear ownership and boundaries.

Pigs were raised more rarely, mainly for meat. They were fed kitchen scraps, potatoes, and turnips and sometimes grazed in mountain pastures as well.

Agricultural practices were shaped by the mountainous environment — farmers grew grass for hay, with better quality in lowland meadows and poorer on high-altitude grasslands.

Forestry

The Upper Sava Valley, surrounded by the forests and mountains of the Karawanks and Julian Alps, has always been closely connected to forestry. Forests were one of the main natural resources for survival and economic development.

Wood was used for building houses, outbuildings, and churches, as well as for tools and heating. Forestry was linked with ironworking, since huge quantities of charcoal were needed to operate furnaces. Charcoal burning was therefore an essential activity.

Another significant practice was log driving — transporting logs by floating them down the Sava Dolinka River toward lowland areas. Log driving required great skill and was dangerous, particularly because of rapids and unpredictable water conditions.

As the demand for wood increased, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, the first forms of forest management emerged. Forest stewardships were introduced, and regulations established limits on logging — early forms of sustainable forestry. Forest wardens were also responsible for wildlife protection and maintaining forest paths.

Today, forestry traditions remain visible through local museums, forest educational trails, and events highlighting the importance of forests to the region.

Ironworking and Charcoal Production

In the 19th century, the Upper Sava Valley experienced significant economic activity. Many inhabitants supplemented their agricultural income with work in mining, smelting, and ironworks.

Farmers produced charcoal in mountain forests and sold it to local industrial plants. The most important industrial development was led by Leopold Ruard, who operated an iron smelting plant in Bela Peč in the early 19th century. The plant produced around 1,000 quintals of pig iron annually and employed 20 workers, with hundreds more involved in transporting ore and charcoal.

Another important ironworks operated in Valčarija, producing around 2,000 quintals of pig iron annually. Ruard also owned a steelworks and foundries in Jesenice. Transporting raw materials required thousands of wagonloads per year, employing hundreds of workers.

Other industries included a textile workshop in Jesenice employing around 60 workers and gypsum mills producing large quantities of plaster.

Many villages also had smaller mills and sawmills essential to everyday life.

Mountaineering

Surrounded by the Julian Alps, Karawanks, and Kamnik-Savinja Alps, the Upper Sava Valley began attracting early visitors in the 19th century — natural scientists, aristocrats, and adventurers.

Beginnings in the 19th Century

The first serious ascents of nearby peaks (Jalovec, Prisojnik, Razor, Mojstrovka) date to the 1860s and 1870s. The arrival of the railway in 1870 made the valley much more accessible, attracting visitors from major cities such as Vienna, Graz, and Ljubljana.

In 1892, the Slovenian Alpine Society (SPD) was founded, significantly contributing to trail marking, building huts, and developing mountain guiding.

Early 20th Century

Mountaineering became increasingly popular. Numerous mountain huts were built, such as the Krnica Hut (1901). Hiking was driven not only by recreation but also by cultural and national awareness.

Between the Wars and After WWII

During socialism, mountaineering became truly mass-based. Trails and huts were maintained or rebuilt, and large groups of visitors came from all over Yugoslavia. Multi-day hikes and school outings were common.

Modern Era — Hiking as Sustainable Tourism

Today, hiking is central to sustainable tourism in the Upper Sava Valley. More than 100 km of marked trails of varying difficulty are available. The Slovenian Alpine Museum plays an important role in education and heritage preservation.

Hiking contributes significantly to the local economy: accommodation providers, guides, shops, and restaurants all benefit. Traditional alpine stories and cuisine are integrated into tourist experiences.

Source:

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