

Escape: Cover story

by MARK PALMER

TikTok's impact on travel is growing day by day - and not only among Gen Z. We hit the trending trail in charming Ljubljana and beyond

FOR many of us, tick tock is still the sound a trusty clock makes on the mantelpiece.

But, for billions more around the world, TikTok - strictly with capital Ts - is something radically different and now competes with Google as a search engine, especially among its Gen Z loyalists.

It may be unfortunate that one of the most popular social media platforms is Chinese-owned (and for a few hours last weekend was banned in America) - but there's no denying it's now an essential part of 21st century information-gathering. In

particular, its influence on where and how we travel is far-reaching. Launched in the UK just six years ago, it already has more than 150 million users in Europe alone.

Which helps explain why I'm here in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, embarking on something of an experiment: my every move is largely determined by some of the 110,000 short-form videos about the city and its nearby attractions that have been posted

on the TikTok site. I'm not a member of Gen Z, by the way. Not a Millennial, either; nor Generation X or Y, for that matter.

I'm a Baby Boomer who was brought up with maps rather than sat-navs, guide books rather than apps, and I'm innately suspicious of algorithms, never mind 'online content creators' and 'influencers' who can't go ten yards without taking a picture of themselves.

But if expectation in the run-up to a holiday is all-important - which it undoubtedly is - then typing your chosen destination into the TikTok app before you set off can whet the appetite, incite excitement - and may well be a factor in planning your itinerary.

Ljubljana (fiendishly difficult to spell) is a big hit with TikTok aficionados - and for good reason. The historic Old Town is exquisite, with the river Ljubljanica flowing through it and the 12th-century castle keeping watch high above.

It's a compact and orderly city. You can go everywhere on foot; it's safe, clean, uncrowded, good value.

The people are friendly and the whole confection - with its mix of secessionist buildings, baroque churches, Habsburg influences and turn of the 20th-century bridges - is wonderfully accessible, thanks largely to the decision of the mayor in 2007 to ban cars and buses from the centre of town.

At the time, this led to a rebellion from some shops and restaurants, but tourism took off from that moment onwards - and no one now complains.

Our hotel, Zlata Ladjica, is in a perfect position on the river, occupying a 15th-century building that has been restored beautifully.

ONE TikTok video appeals to my gluttony by focusing on the hotel's sumptuous breakfasts, while another enthuses about the spa, with its 'amazing' zero-gravity bed. Check me in - and both posts prove to be 100 per cent accurate.

As are the videos about a nearby restaurant called Gostilna Sokol, where we have our first lunch and gobble up traditional Slovenian dumplings with a meaty ragout.

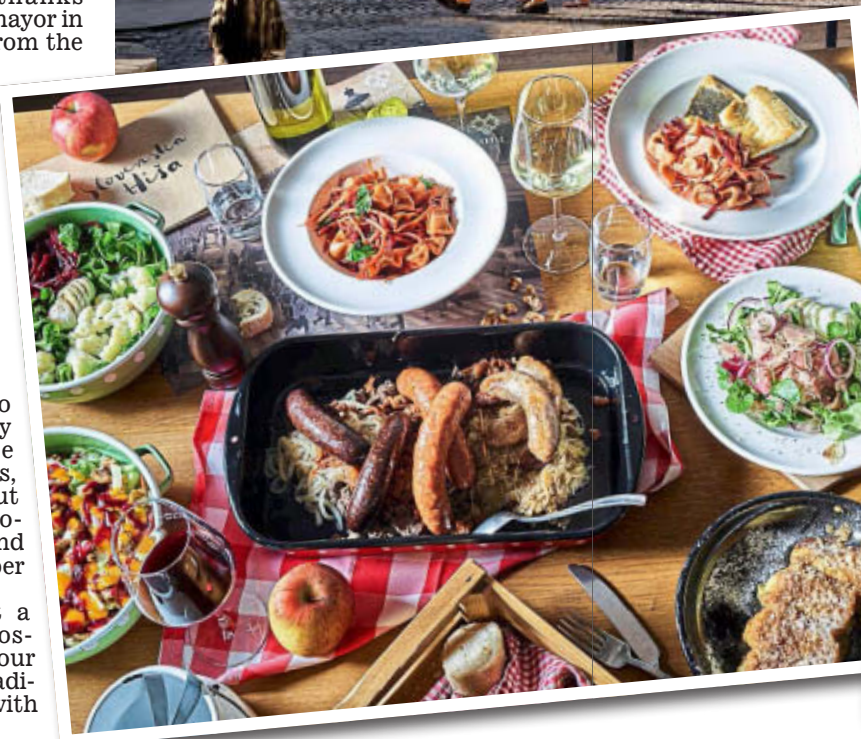
The menus at Sokol show pictures of all the dishes - just like they did in Wimpy Bars in the 1960s. One TikTok video of the restaurant has garnered more than 30,000 views, with 212 'likes'. At first, I'm not entirely sure how I register my 'like' but make that 213.

Then we go in search of Jozef Plecnik, the hero architect whose creations are everywhere in this small (fewer than 300,000 residents) but chic city.

Sadly, TikTok has little to say about this extraordinary man. Yet Ljubljana would be nothing like so beautiful, nothing like so inspiring, without his bold portfolio of work.

Plecnik died in 1957 and the house he built for himself is now a museum - but with a difference. Everything in it is exactly as it was the day he died, right down to the crockery in the kitchen, his sketches, crayons and spectacles in the study and his humble single bed.

But TikTok comes up trumps in the delicious form of Patisserie Yauya. 'The chocolate croissant spoke to me,' said one TikToker, with



In the pink: (anti-clockwise from top) the Church of the Annunciation, Figovec restaurant and a TikTok-er posts a recommendation

(and some overtly phallic) when lit up. Nearby Predjama Castle, built into a rock face at the end of a valley is predictably described by one TikTok post as 'super-cool' - which was true in the literal sense for those who lived there until the end of the Second World War, when, as now, it was open to the elements.

IT'S tricky to visit Slovenia - once a part of General Tito's Yugoslavia - without making the trek to Lake Bled, just over an hour away from Ljubljana, especially if TikTok is holding your hand.

The assortment of videos (one has been viewed 430,000 times) capture the beauty of this famous landmark rather better, in our case, than seeing it - due to torrential rain and low cloud. I'm sure the weather was much brighter the day President Trump

came here to meet his Slovenian wife Melania's parents in 2004.

Back in the capital, a video pops up on my feed. 'Here I am eating fried chicken at Figovec restaurant in Ljubljana,' says a pretty young blonde woman, before showing footage of inside the restaurant.

It looks authentic enough and so off we trot and it exceeds expectation, not least because of its affordable wines - and Slovenian wine is excellent. If the country were to produce enough of the stuff, you'd see it stacked high in UK wine shops.

Also popular on TikTok is Strelec restaurant, housed in one of the towers at the castle. 'Do you want to dine like a real count and countess,' trills one post. Sounds good to me, especially since it has a Michelin star and offers a five, seven or nine-course tasting menu.

We go for the five-course extravaganza, which somehow morphs to

seven once you factor in the 'chef's greetings' as it calls the *amuse bouches*.

One morning, we hire a private guide via the tourist office and it feels almost a betrayal of my new companion TikTok. But, born and raised in Ljubljana, she fills in plenty of gaps - the parts that TikTok does not seem to reach. We hear all about Slovenia's greatest romantic poet, France Preseren, whose statue stands in the beautiful square named after him, opposite the pink Church of the Annunciation, which was taken over by the Franciscans in 1784.

Beneath Preseren, who was an alcoholic and deeply unhappy but renowned as a genius, is a bronze of a naked woman, thought to be his muse. So incensed was one particular bishop that he ordered for two olive trees to be planted either side of the entrance so that members of his congregation were spared seeing the nude woman on leaving the church.

Overall, TikTok serves us well in Ljubljana. Yes, I would have liked more history and background about this charming city - but that's not what it's

all about. It's visual, immediate, breezy. I discuss this with a member of staff at the hotel, who suggests that I should post something myself, homing in perhaps on the great contribution made by architect Jozef Plecnik.

A good thought. There's an option to set your videos to music, too. I'm thinking Plecnik might appreciate something by Slovenia's most famous composer Hugo Wolf (1860-1903)... but, then, that might be a Baby Boomer intervention too far.

Even so, I suspect that legions of those of a certain age already check out TikTok postings before flying off somewhere new. It's more interesting than Tripadvisor. Those trusty clocks on the mantelpiece have competition.

TRAVEL FACTS

Hotel Zlata Ladjica has double rooms from £250 b&b (zlataladjica.com). EasyJet flies direct to Ljubljana up to seven days a week from £25.99 one-way. More information, visitljubljana.com and tiktok.com

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