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BRATISLAVA

“IN YOUR SPORRAN”

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About this guide

This series of downloadable NATA Mini “In Your Sporran” Guides has been designed specifically to save the hassle of printing out reams of NATA web pages in order to make sure you don’t miss something whilst wandering the back streets of your chosen destination.

This guide has been compiled almost exclusively by me (Paul Allison), and is based entirely on personal experiences and opinions. Please do not prejudice anything on my say so – not only am I quite warped, but many places were only visited once, and therefore may have been having a particularly good or bad day.

This guide is not intended to replace more traditional sources of information, such as the excellent Lonely Planet guide books or the indispensable “In Your Pocket” guides available local in many Eastern European cities (as well as the downloadable versions from www.inyourpocket.com, which have inspired this very guide). Instead, the idea is to supplement these more detailed, better researched and more balanced guides with my own ramblings.

These guides originally came about as people were forever asking for pub tips and the like for places I’ve been to – I soon grew tired of typing out the same emails every few weeks and opted instead to keep the information on the web on the NATA Online site.

All opinions expressed in this guide are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Netley Abbey Tartan Army.

- For more information about NATA (the Netley Abbey Tartan Army), including photos and diary accounts of many trips abroad with Scotland, as well as much more travel information and guides), please visit www.netleyabbeytartanarmy.com
- For more information on me, please visit www.paulallison.co.uk



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Introduction

Slovakia is often overlooked for short breaks – which is all the more reason to go NOW, before it gets over-run like Prague. This picturesque and friendly capital on the banks of the Danube is within easy reach, and definitely has enough going for it to enable you to while away a pleasant couple of days there.

Although Bratislava does have its own airport (Stefanik on the outskirts of town) with an increasing number of budget flights (Sky Europe in addition to the Ryanair/Easyjet duopoly), many travellers come through Vienna, which is an hour away by regular bus. It's also possible to sail along the Danube from either Budapest or Vienna during the summer months. Unfortunately, increased accessibility is a double-edged sword - our second visit found the place to be almost full of English stag parties, with the knock-on effect that the locals seemed a lot less friendly and tolerant than the just 16 months previously (when people were genuinely amazed we wanted to visit as tourists).

Culturally, Slovakia is very similar to the Czech Republic, and the two languages are nearly interchangeable. As with Prague – a few polite phrases really does go a very long way. Czech beer is widespread, along with some good Slovak brands like Zlaty Bazant, but the Slovaks also love their wine – you can see the vineyards on the slopes within the city if you look towards the large monument.

Things to see and do

There are plenty of things to do, but the tourist infrastructure only seems to build up steam in the summer months, unlike near neighbours Prague or Budapest. There also isn't the same range of sights and activities, but that's to be expected in a much smaller city. Don't let any of that put you off, mind – if you find yourself with inordinate amounts of time, there's always the chance to take in the nearby Lake resort, or even nip up to Brno or across to Vienna for a day or two. The Slovakian countryside further east is renowned for spectacular mountain scenery, and everyone seems very proud of it.



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- **Bratislava Castle** – The one thing you cannot miss when in Bratislava is the Castle, built on a hill overlooking the Old Town and the Danube. It's not the most striking (an "upturned bedstead" is one description), but the views from the grounds are well worth the climb. It's also relatively free from the tourist paraphernalia that engulfs the likes of Buda's castle district – there were just two tasteful shops open when we were there.
- **Novy Most (the big bridge)** – This massive suspension bridge – famous amongst architects and engineers for its innovative design – looms over the Danube below the castle. Apparently, its construction led to the bulldozing of the entire Jewish quarter, and the resulting motorway cuts the castle area off from the Old Town. The pedestrian walkways and cycle paths run underneath the level for cars, and are easily accessible from the roundabout below the northern (Old Town) side of the bridge. There is a café (see below) at the top of the "Starship Enterprise" structure on the bridge's tower, with a very fast (and relatively expensive) lift to whisk you to the top - this was all refurbished in the past year!
- **The Old Town** – The Old Town is very walkable (most of it is pedestrianised), and doesn't suffer from the same level of congestion as somewhere like Prague. The main square is home to the old, and very low key, town hall, as well as a bench with a statue of a "listening" French soldier (there's another quirky statue called "Cumil" of a workman peeking out of a manhole cover). The Town Hall Square is also the starting point for a circular tour of the town in an old open-top minibus, which gives a great introduction to the different sights and buildings around the old town. There's also dozens of bars and cafés that open up onto the cobbled streets in pleasant weather.
- **Football** – Bratislava boasts three teams: Slovan Bratislava, Inter Slovanafn (named after their petrol company sponsors) and FC Artmedia (formerly known as Petržalka, after the soviet-era southern suburbs). Slovan and Inter play a mere stones throw from each other in the north of the city, whilst Artmedia play on the edge of the sprawling housing estate south of the Danube. Slovan are far and away the best supported team historically, and are to Slovakia what Dinamo Zagreb are to Croatia. Unfortunately,



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such associations also translate into a sizeable extremist support, as England found out in their Euro 2004 qualifier in October 2002.

Inter were the team we went along to see, and found the entrance one block further up the main road than Slovan's ground. The small club shop knocked out dodgy shirts at around £6.50 a throw, and badges the size of hubcaps for 80p. Surprisingly, the wooden-trimmed clubhouse only seemed to attract "tourist" fans – ourselves and some visiting Germans. The ground has benches all round, but we opted for "posh" seats, under cover and out of the sun. The highlight of the game, a dull 0-0 draw, was Miss Slovakia being introduced to the players before kick-off (closely followed by the sight of the players running out to the strains of YMCA on the tannoy!).

FC Petralka were very poorly supported, and may play their home matches on a Sunday morning in a bid to attract extra fans (a la Tranmere playing on Friday nights). However, in their new guise as "Artmedia Bratislava", they are the new big cheeses, following a massive cash injection into what was traditionally Bratislava's third team. Their smartened up stadium is just south of Stary Most and only a 20 minute walk from the Old Town or the Novy Most, but is floodlight-less (so they play their European games at Slovan's ground). They do boast a football pizzeria, but we didn't have time to pop in.

What we would have done (if it had been summer!)

As mentioned above, the tourist industry seems geared up for the summer season, when the Austrian coach parties and Danube cruises are in full swing.

- **Danube cruise** – there are several options, including the 2 hour trip to Vienna and the 6 hour cruise to Budapest, as well as local excursions to see castle ruins and the like.
- **Wine bars** – there are several highly regarded wine cellars in the old town, however, like a lot of things, they were shut for the Easter weekend.



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Places to drink

Plenty of options in the Old Town, and along the shopping street of Obchodna. Unfortunately not all of the names were particularly memorable!

- **Hradna Vinaren** - On the hill facing the old town, on the edge of the Castle grounds, is a wine bar and restaurant. We had food on the terrace, washed down with Slovakian red wine from Bratislava's own vineyard – the food was okay, but it was the view that made it worthwhile.
- **KGB** - Although the initials stand for the Gourmet Club of Bratislava (or "Beer Guzzlers Club" depending on which book you believe), this cellar bar along Obchodna does have it's fair share of Communist era paraphernalia. Great choice of beer, and decent food too, make this a place not only worth seeking out, but settling into. Nearest thing to a "rock bar" we found, although they did play O-Zone's Dragostea, much to the disdain of the headbanging locals.
- **Pub near old brew house** - Although the famous old Malthouse pub (whose exact name I can't remember) was closed, possibly for good (although Moulin Rouge strip club in the same building seemed to be doing a roaring trade), there is an ample alternative slightly closer to the Hotel Kyiv on the same street (Cukrova). Very friendly service, good food, and a healthy number of mullets on show (they even played "Achy Breaky Heart" on the stereo!), we sat by a wall of Pilsner Urquell bottles. Definitely worth the walk past the Kyiv.
- **Cafe De Zwaan** - On Panska. In April 2004, this place boasted a superb beer selection, with Kriek (sour cherry beer) on tap – a vibrant, but relatively expensive, bar is very popular with young Slovaks, and well worth a visit. Come August 2005, the beer choice was very poor, and overall standards vastly reduced.



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- **Slang** – this large pub/cafe (previously known by the name of its main beer: Keit) with loads of nooks and crannies is on Hviezdoslavov Nam, directly opposite the Radisson Hotel. It seemed to be an evening favourite of ex-pats (judging by the number of English accents we heard), but was a pretty good pub nonetheless. For some unknown reason, they didn't want to pay any attention to the Germans we were drinking with when it came to getting served. Summer months sees the focus switching to pavement cafe mode, although the Slang Toast is a good brunch suggestion.
- **Pivnice U Kozla** - Just along from the Norton Club on Panska, this underground bunker was very reminiscent of similar bars in Prague. Offering cheap beer and surly service, it's just my kind of place. [Reports in October 2005 from a reliable source suggest this may now be a Knights Templar restaurant! Or maybe he found the wrong door?]
- **Norton Club** - A bizarre pub/room named after one of the luminaries of the Nottingham Tartan Army (or a bike, possibly?). Not much else to say, apart from there seemed to be a lot of open space in this place. Minimalist
- **Street of pubs** - One street behind the cathedral (Venturska) is a pretty full of bars and restaurants, all of which look much of a muchness, and all offering outside terrace seating from where you can watch the world go by.
- **Cafe in square by Town Hall** - Tucked just out of the way, in a courtyard slightly south of the Old Town Hall clock, this pretty little café is a good choice for a coffee, a beer or a wine. The small courtyard outside must be very alluring in the summer. Watch out for the Gents – it's built on some stairs outside by the courtyard.
- **Turkish place** - A very stylish and sophisticated Turkish themed bar just off the Old Town Square. Very relaxing, and very popular. Recommended.



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- **Cafe Kastellan** - An absolute top pub! Never mind the strange characters, and the fact that the toilet is next door in another building, this small but extremely friendly place is ideally located for both the Castle and the Ibis hotel. Although the sign on the door suggests an early closure, this did seem to be just that (a suggestion!) – this pub is very popular with locals, and the landlord seems happy to stay open as long as he has a happy crowd. Of course, I might have been gate-crashing someone's birthday?
- **Stanley's Pub** - A weird pub, set into a old town terrace facing a bust intersection – it's done it's best to recreate an English style pub, but with only a handful of tables, it's got a definite size disadvantage! Very friendly service, but more strange people than most (namely a grown man on roller skates and a woman with a fluffy condom hat) – good for people watching. You'll need to ask for the toilet key.
- **Techno Cafe** - A few doors down from KGB, and a real favourite hang-out for the local ned contingent (along with a cellar bar/club right round the corner in the alley) – don't bother, just stay in KGB.
- **UFO Cafe** - Pretentious, shiny cafe/bar/club on top of the bridge tower. Stupid prices, stuck-up service, beautiful people... all the things that would attract one particular NATA member! Only worth it for the view and the comedy "ice bucket" urinals. We were there during the day, so can't speak for the nightclub, but based on experience I'd be in no rush to find out for myself!
- **Charlie Centrum** - Once a Bratislava institution, opposite the Hotel Kyiv, which allegedly used to sport it's own crocodile pit (although the source of that story may have been a bit excitable!), and named in almost every guidebook. It seems to have changed hands now, but we didn't venture in to check.

Was this guide useful? Please let me know:
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