

## HISTORY of BLED



The island in the middle of the lake has for centuries been a symbol of Bled, a destination which attracts visitors from all over the world. In ancient times, our ancestors worshipped Živa, the Slavic goddess of love and fertility, on the island. Later, Christian pilgrims frequented the island to praise St. Mary.



The town of Bled was first mentioned in writing a millennium ago on April 4 1004, when the German Emperor Henry II donated the land to Albuin, the Bishop of Brixen. The town prospered in the Middle Ages due to an influx of pilgrims. The first true tourists began to visit Bled in the 19th century to benefit from the healthy climate and thermal waters, the curative powers of which had been discovered by the Swiss doctor Arnold Rikli. Guesthouses and hotels sprang up to cater for the needs of visitors. The town, which was said to be the most beautiful thermal resort of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century, attracted many of the European aristocracy.



After World War II, Tito, the President of Yugoslavia, was a regular visitor to Bled and hosted many eminent statesmen at Vila Bled, which he had chosen as a residence.



Bled, which has been frequented by curious travellers for decades, provides thousands of opportunities for seekers of beauty, relaxation, inspiration, peace and sporting challenges.

### The First Inhabitants of Bled

The beginnings of the settlement of Bled remain unclear, although archeologists and historians are striving to define them in more detail, studying Late Iron Age findings (approximately 500 to 200 B.C.) from the Castle Hill, the lake shore below the cliff and the Island.

Definite, but infrequent, traces of human activity in Bled in the Stone Age have been identified. A more extensive settlement developed during the Iron Age, as this Alpine region was a source of iron. Celtic and Roman findings are rarer. Bled was settled to a greater extent by the Slavs.



### Slavic Era:

Settlement by the Slavs took place in two waves. The first of these was in the 7th century, followed by a second in the 9th and 10th centuries. The most likely Slavic settlements were in the places

which became the villages of Mlino, Želeče, Zagorice, Grad and Rečica in the late-medieval period. Archaeological findings from the first Slavic settlement illustrate the culture of the Slavic state of King Samo (632-658 A.D.) and the late antiquarian tradition, while the findings of the second Slavic settlement demonstrate the development of Bled up to the 10th century. Some of these remnants are on display at the Bled Castle museum.



### The Bishops of Brixen

Emperor Henry II, at the request of his wife Kunigunda, donated Bled and thirty neighbouring farms to Bishop Albuin of Brixen on April 10 1004. Bled Castle was also given to the Bishops seven years later. These events were a significant milestone in the history of Bled. On behalf of the Bishops, the land was administered by the Bishops' ministers and subsequently by feudal knights.



Major changes occurred in the tenure and the settlement of the area. In the middle of the 14th century the Bishops of Brixen ceased to directly administer their landholdings at Bled and leased them into the administration of the von Kreighs. Due to breaches in their rights and mishandling of the villeins, the peasantry joined a Slovenia-wide uprising in 1515. In 1558, Bled Castle was leased by a Protestant supporter, Herbert VII. von Auersperg. Leaseholders of the Castle were solely noblemen until the middle of the 18th century, however, subsequently, middle-class citizens also leased the Castle, but rarely as residents. After 800 years of Brixen ownership, Bled became state property by decree of the Vienna Court Commission in 1803. Between 1809 and 1813 it was part of the Illyrian Provinces of the Napoleonic Empire, whereafter it reverted to the Austrian Emperor, who returned it to the Bishops of Brixen one last time in 1838. The feudal system was abolished ten years later.



Bled underwent many changes in the second half of the 19th century. The typical villages of Gorenjska, which had been individual entities since the Middle Ages, began to merge, incomes decreased and Brixen sold their lands at Bled to the owner of the Jesenice iron works, Viktor Ruard. Thereby the long presence on our soil of the knights-bishops of Brixen in Tyrol ended.

## Arnold Rikli

The beginnings of intensive tourism date from 1855 when the Swiss doctor Arnold Rikli was among the first to recognise the value and advantages of Bled's climate and location, which gave it an extended bathing season. He founded a Natural Health Institute and introduced his own healing methods. If he were to attract visitors, he would need baths, footpaths and accommodation facilities.

Opposite what is today the Park Hotel, Rikli ordered the construction of a simple wooden bath in the Swiss style, together with his Health Institute, which comprised a 'practice', a kitchen, a dining room and administrative space in 1895. Huts were built below the chestnut park to accommodate his patients. Due to growing demand, a larger bath was constructed in 1899. His healing methods included bathing in both the lake and baths. For the latter, two sources of water were used, having temperatures of 10 and 15.6° C respectively. Additionally, sunbathing as well as warm and steam baths were recommended. Rikli also devised walking routes in Bled and the surrounding area with various degrees of difficulty, which were used separately by men and women. Areas were set aside in these places for bowling and skittles. Rikli established strict regimes for his patients, which had to be adhered to.

In total, Rikli spent 52 years in Bled. In this time, he was one of the best-known natural healers, using atmospheric remedies. His therapies were effective against many illnesses, including rheumatism, migraines, insomnia, hysteria, anaemia, circulatory disorders and weight problems. In addition to Rikli's patients there were growing numbers of visitors who wished to spend their holidays in a healthy and above all beautiful environment. After 1870, with the construction of the railway line between Tarvisio and Ljubljana, a railway station opened at Lesce, further adding to the numbers of visitors. Bled was awarded a gold medal at a major international exhibition of health resorts in Vienna in 1903, while in 1906 it was included on the list of important tourist destinations in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

## The Development of Tourism

Pilgrims who worshipped St. Mary on the island may be regarded as the first visitors to Bled. As well as performing their Christian duties, they marvelled at the beauty of the place and attracted more and more pilgrims by spreading word about it. In addition to ordinary people, Bled was also visited by the nobility. Janez Vajkard Valvasor, a local nobleman and polyhistor of Carniola, wrote his book *The Glory of the Duchy of Carniola* in 1689, in which, among other things, he describes the thermal springs of Bled. Weidmann, the administrator of the castle, due to an influx of visitors in search of health remedies whose needs he had to cater for, sought to fill in the thermal springs, but was not allowed to. People kept coming,



bathing and, as Valvasor states, were healed.

Subsequently, there was another serious threat to the development of Bled, posed by Ignac Novak, a later administrator of the castle. Between 1782 and 1787 he often suggested that the lake should be drained so that the clay from the lake bed could be used as a raw material for a brickworks, however, the Carniola Regional Assembly turned down Novak's proposal. In 1822, the springs were given a wooden cover. As the water was not especially warm (23°C), Bled was increasingly visited by those who did not care for its healing properties, but instead simply marvelled at the idyllic beauty of the area.

The eminent English naturalist Sir Humphrey Davy described Bled as 'the most beautiful place he had ever seen in Europe'. At the time of the Awakening of the National Consciousness, young and old flocked to Bled in search of the temple of the Slavic goddess Živa and the shadow of her beautiful priestess Bogomila.

Between the two World Wars, Bled remained the most cosmopolitan resort in Yugoslavia and the summer residence of the Karađorđević royal family. It was frequented by numerous domestic and foreign visitors. During summer months, it became the centre of political and diplomatic life.

After World War II, the tourist tradition was continued, and most of the infrastructure which had come into Slovenian ownership was renovated. As President Tito had a residence at Vila Bled, the area was visited by numerous domestic and foreign statesmen, politicians and figures from the world of culture.

Arnold Rikli is not forgotten. To mark the 50th anniversary of his work, his supporters constructed a monument on Straža, which remains visible today. The Bled Tourist Association erected a monument in the Health Park for the 125th anniversary of his work. His methods, complemented by modern therapeutic techniques, remain in use at the Golf Hotel.

