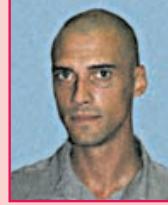


I've been asked

to weigh in on Ljubljana's nightlife. Well, it's vigorous. From Wednesday to Sunday morning, you can take your pick of live music, DJs of both the pop and underground persuasions, convivial spirits, and a lion's share of bar chatter.



Here's my dilemma: "How do I know I can trust you, the reader, with my privileged information?" What if you and 12 of your friends go to my favorite bar and I can't get a seat? Then, what if you tell all your friends about it, it gets branded as "tourist friendly" and the prices go up? And most importantly, what if you simply aren't worthy of the arcana I've amassed from my time here?

No offense, I just don't know you. And as they'll tell you in no uncertain terms, neither do the Ljubljjanans.

One of my favorite Slovene verbal distinctions is the active difference between friend and colleague (*prijatelj* and *kolega*). I was first apprised of this at Lido Bar in Levstikov trg. I get such a kick out of hearing my editor, whom I've known for 7 months and visited in his apartment, refer to me as *kolega*. In American English, colleague is a nice way of saying "I can't stand that person." For us, anyone that we hold just a jot of like for becomes a friend.

Meeting people abroad is easy. For me. This is my favorite American quality. We may be fat, and we may vote Republican, but we are a friendly, happy, "Howdy, Stranger" group.

Texas, the state where I grew up, is named after a Native American word for "friendship." When I was in school, I invited two German tourists I met on the street to my house. My grandmother liked them so much they stayed for 3 days.

Last night, at Daktari next to the Puppet Theatre, I was asked what New Yorkers were like. I said "They're insanely friendly." When I "moved" into my Manhattan apartment, the old lady next door came over with a store-bought cake for me. She just wanted to check out how I lived, but the cake was a nice touch. I trotted her around the place. I showed her my table and my clock radio; that was all I owned. A few days later, she stopped by with a screwdriver and a pair of needle-nosed pliers. Insane. Friendly.

Ljubljjanans, conversely, are sane and friendlyish. They're not unfriendly. They just take a while to warm up...like a diesel engine. One night, I was at Time Art Cafe in Bežigrad, conversing with an American music producer living here. A Slovenian friend later pulled me aside and asked "What do you think of this American? I ask you, because he is one of your people and I trust your opinion." My eyes nearly popped out of my head. This display of open trust is like the Ljubljjanan equivalent of saying "Embrace me, brother."

This national disposition of coolness toward outsiders leads to jaw-dropping examples of people being outgoing...by proxy. The other night I sat quietly in a cafe when a strange guy came over and said "My friend would like to talk to you." This request stank of a Mafia set-up, but the fellow assured me his friend was a cute girl. And he was right.

The one area where Slovenians show no bashfulness is in offering strangers a puff of their joints. In the proud traditions of such liberal societies as Amsterdam and Brooklyn, Ljubljana pulls no punches in using reefer as a novel social lubricant. One night, outside Gromki in Metelkova Mesto, I saw a group of Slovenians go from stand-offish to belting out "La Bamba" with a group of Turkish actors, courtesy of a Jamaican burrito.

Another icebreaker in the Slovenian's repertoire is a game of Tarok. This game has so many rules and point qualifiers that it feels like the game is being invented as it's played. It's a pity that dealing cards is forbidden in all of Ljubljana's bars. I have compensated for my loss of this gaming element by picking up darts and playing with the regulars at Fabrka on Poljanska cesta. Or banging out a game of pinball at Lepa Žoga near Hala Tivoli. If all else fails, I can always do su-do-ku from one of the Novice's lying around at Tombstone (Eipprova ulica).

So, dear reader, I'm sorry I spent so much space rambling about myself at the expense of Ljubljana's nightlife. If you have any questions, I can field them at Hombre between 2 and 7 am. (That's in Vič, so take a cab.) ■