



## THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

When I first announced that I was moving to Slovakia to teach English, I heard lots of comments such as, “You’re going where? To Czechoslovakia?” and “Oh, I had a grandmother who was from Slovenia.” After I had patiently explained the location of Slovakia in Central Europe, the next question I often heard was “Why have you chosen to go there?” But the better question is “Why not?”

Slovakia is at the geographic center of Europe, and at the crossroads of European history and culture. It has seen Magyars, Turks, Nazis, and communists, and yet it has retained its identity: as a deeply religious, traditionally rural, proudly Slavic nation.

Slovakia has a population of 5.3 million, a number that most Slovaks consider to be woefully small. I’m always quick to remind them that Norway has a population of 4.4 million and has been able to successfully distinguish itself from other neighboring Scandinavian countries. Slovakia is distinguishing itself from other Slavic countries by highlighting its unique history, culture and language.

Slovakia and the other former Soviet satellite countries are no longer considered “Eastern Europe.” Slovakia and many of its neighbors such as Poland, the

Czech Republic, and Hungary are often called “Central Europe.” In fact, most Slovaks consider Slovakia to be the very center or “heart” of Europe. Several other countries also claim to be the center of Europe, however; depending on how geographic boundaries are defined.

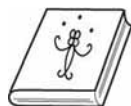


NOTE

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Both adjective forms of “Slovak” and “Slovakian” are used. However, “Slovak” is more common. For example, “Slovak people” or “Slovak language.”

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NOTE

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The country name “Slovakia” is the shortened form of the more formal “Slovak Republic.” Both terms are used equally.

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## THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Slovakia is 49,035 sq. km, or 8,921 sq. mi, and is comprised of a mostly rural environment. About 45 percent of the population lives in villages of fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, and 14 percent in villages of fewer than 1,000. The largest cities are the nation’s capital of Bratislava with a population of approximately 447,000; Košice (‘ko-shee-tse), located in east Slovakia at 242,000; and Prešov (‘pre-sho), also located in east Slovakia at 94,000. Its neighboring countries are Austria to the west, the Czech Republic to the northwest, Poland to the north, Ukraine to the east, and Hungary to the south.

Depending on the area you travel through in Slovakia, you will see three kinds of topography: flat-lands, rolling hills, and mountains. In the south, the land is more consistently flat as it tapers down to the Danube river basin. Although agriculture is an important component throughout the entire country, the greatest variety of produce is grown in

the fertile south. In the north, by contrast, it is hard to miss the impressive Tatra Mountains, which are by far the most distinguishable land feature in Slovakia.

Mountainous terrain is a major part of the nation's geography. Almost half of the country is taken up by the Carpathian arc; ranges include the High and Low Tatras, Small Fatra, and Big Fatra, the Slovak Ore Mountains, and the smaller ranges of the Lesser Carpathians and White Carpathians. The Slovak connection to nature is a direct result of these dramatic and beautiful mountains that stand as a national symbol. Three mountains are featured on the coat of arms and national flag, and are understood to represent the Matra, Fatra, and Tatra Mountains. The Matras are located in Hungary—Slovakia was once a part of Hungary—whereas the Fatra and Tatra ranges are in Slovakia. The Tatra Mountains, the nation's highest, are particularly important and mentioned in the first line of the Slovak National Anthem, "Lightning flashes over the Tatra, thunder pounds wildly."



*Wheat fields in the Nitra region*

Slovaks often take trips to the mountains to ski in the winter, stay at cottages through Christmas and the New Year, and hike in the spring and summer. They are immensely proud of *Gerlachovský štít* – or Gerlach’s Peak—the highest peak in the Tatra Mountain Range and the highest point in Slovakia at 2,655 meters high, 8,711 feet. Slovaks are also very proud that the mountains play host to a varied number of international tourists from nearby: Czechs, Hungarians, Germans, and Poles, as well as increasingly more Ukrainians and Russians.

Slovaks overwhelmingly identify with the mountains. This tie to nature is also reflected by the fact that Slovaks have a surprising knowledge of horticulture. The names of trees and many kinds of plants, flowers and mushrooms are common knowledge. A foreigner coming to Slovakia probably won’t need to know the difference between a *dub* – oak and a *buk* – beech tree—two common trees found in Slovakia, but it is good to know that the *lipa* – linden—is the national tree.

Slovakia contains vast forest areas that are ideal for hiking. There are also thousands of caves, some of which have national protection status and have been designated World Heritage Sites with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which is an organization dedicated to the preservation and restoration of sites of historic or natural significance. A large number of natural springs can also be found throughout the country, many of which are thermal and contain high mineral content. Because of their chemical and physical properties, the waters from these springs have healing effects, contributing over hundreds of years to the steady interest in spa culture for treatment of various kinds of ailments.

Decades of environmental degradation under communist governments had left many parts of Central and Eastern Europe in poor condition. Since that time, the Slovak government has made progress in environmental areas, though reform has not come as quickly as some would like. Overall, awareness about the environment has increased, and meeting environmental requirements set by the European Union (EU) is a priority.

## THE ECONOMY

Slovakia has made most of the difficult transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, with privatization nearly complete. Currently, Slovakia is in the midst of an ambitious economic reform process intended to encourage rapid growth in productivity, increase the lagging employment rate, and raise the per-capita income levels to be economically in line with more advanced EU nations.<sup>1</sup> The kinds of reforms that have been implemented include the following:

- comprehensive tax reform of personal and income tax, and on value-added tax (VAT)
- massive cuts to previously generous welfare benefits for the long-term unemployed
- increasing the retirement age and making pension benefits dependent on work and contribution history

Reforms such as these and an improved business environment are some of the main reasons for a sharp increase in foreign direct investment (FDI), particularly from the automobile industry. Another reason for the growth spurt may be Slovakia's accession into the EU and other western organizations like NATO and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which also serve to

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1. Policy Report of the OECD "Economic Survey of the Slovak Republic, 2005", p. 1

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assure potential investors that Slovakia is politically and economically stable. Additionally, Slovakia attracts new investors for a number of reasons<sup>1</sup>:

- an inexpensive and skilled labor force
- geographic location close to western European markets
- reasonably developed infrastructure, particularly in the western portion of the country



*The National Bank of Slovakia (NBS)*

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1. According to Zdenko Štefanides, senior analyst with VÚB Bank, as cited in the Slovak Spectator 9/6/2004

The Bratislava region continues to see the overwhelming majority of foreign investment with its developed infrastructure and more qualified workforce. However, this strong investment in the capital further widens the gap between the wealthier western part of the country and the poorer, less developed east. The government is trying to address this disparity by offering more incentives to investors if they go to other regions, such as offering longer tax breaks, but so far this approach has only been partly successful.

Unemployment figures in the year 2006 clearly demonstrate this division between the eastern and western regions of the country. In Bratislava, unemployment remained below five percent in 2006, whereas, according to the OECD, unemployment for all of Slovakia stood at 13.5 percent in 2006.

Slovakia's future includes the following challenges:

- develop ways in which to increase employment
- meet the necessary requirements to adopt the euro currency in 2009
- continue reforms to cut waste and make the government more effective

While Slovaks know the path to economic stability won't come easily, generally the people are willing to make sacrifices for a brighter future. This doesn't mean their patience is limitless. Slovaks want to see the results of reform in the near term, and depending on how these successes develop, sentiment can change accordingly. This was demonstrated in the last general election in June 2006, when the ruling coalition that had implemented many reforms was ousted from power.

## THE LANGUAGE

Slovaks have their own language. The Slovak language has its roots in Proto-Slavic, which played an important role in all Slavic languages, such as Russian or Ukrainian. Slovak, like Czech and Polish, belongs to the branch of Western Slavic languages. Is it possible for a person who speaks Slovak to understand someone speaking Polish? Well, yes and no. It's possible to get the gist of things, but the details will remain sketchy.

It is, however, possible for Czechs and Slovaks to understand one another, as their languages are more similar. The mutual intelligibility of Czech and Slovak was mainly advanced when the nations were united under Czechoslovakia. Such a union made TV programs, radio, films, books, and other materials of both languages widely available. The exchange wasn't exactly balanced, however, as the majority of compositions, from official government documents to film and literature, was produced only in Czech. This has worked to the benefit of Slovaks—a lifetime of exposure to the Czech language, from cartoons to university textbooks, has allowed for many Slovaks to develop Czech language skills to near native-speaker levels. The ability of Czechs and Slovaks to understand each other's language is likely to change, however. Young Czechs and Slovaks (born after 1993) will not have the same exposure and, therefore, the ability to communicate in each other's language may be significantly reduced.

There are other languages spoken in Slovakia, though they aren't as common. In north east Slovakia, closest to the the Ukrainian border, Rusyn (an Eastern-Slavic language closer to Ukrainian and Belarusian) is spoken. Additionally, along the northern border with Poland, it's possible to hear Polish spoken. Hungarian is spoken in many of the villages and smaller towns in the south and along the south east border. Slovaks of Hungarian descent make up the largest

ethnic minority in the country, at approximately ten percent. This population is sizable enough that the issue of whether the Hungarian language should be spoken in schools or used for public and administrative purposes is still a topic of debate.



*A village sign in both Slovak and Hungarian*

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, English has become a popular language to study for many students. English and German are the languages most often taught to Slovak K-12 students. University students also have foreign language requirements and many opt to study English. People in their 40s or older, who grew up under communist rule, had few opportunities to study English, and instead studied and spoke Russian. When visiting a Slovak family at home, it is common for the teenage son or daughter to serve as the translator between his or her parents and visiting English-speaking guests. Despite many Slovaks' ability to speak two or three languages, quickly finding an English translator to help out in a jam can prove difficult. English isn't as common

as in other western countries like Germany or Sweden, where almost everyone speaks ‘a little’ English. If you need an English speaker’s help, look for people who look like university students or young professionals.

If you have never studied a Slavic language before, you might find learning Slovak a real challenge. Don’t let this put you off. It is rewarding to know a few basic phrases when starting out. Even if you are traveling with someone who can translate everything for you, the locals appreciate the personal effort you make to communicate. Slovaks themselves consider their language to be difficult, so they value any effort from a foreigner trying to speak in Slovak.

To give you some idea of the major differences that exist between the Slavic family of languages and English, consider the following examples: first, nouns change form depending on their grammatical relation to other words in the sentence. Notice how the word *káva* (coffee) changes in the sentences below:

**Table 1: Language differences between Slovak and English**

I don’t want coffee.	Nechcem <i>kávu</i> .
I drink milk with coffee.	Pijem mlieko s <i>kávou</i> .
Add sugar to the coffee.	Pridaj cukor do <i>kávy</i> .

Second, verbs indicate grammatical person by changing form. For example, notice the endings on the following conjugated verb:

hovoriť - to speak			
hovorím	I speak	hovoríme	we speak
hovoríš	you speak	hovoríte	you speak
hovori	he/she speaks	hovoria	they speak

For anyone who is planning to stay for an extended period of time, learning the language is advisable—the more you know, the more you feel a part of things. And the Slovaks have a great expression, *Kolko rečí vieš, toľkokrát si človekom*, which translated literally means: “The more languages you know, the more times you are a human being.” Put another way, the more languages you speak, the better able you are to see things from different cultural perspectives.

If you aren’t going to live in a larger city that has institutions that teach Slovak, a personal tutor is an excellent alternative. There are many teachers and educated individuals capable of teaching Slovak and would appreciate the experience of teaching an English speaker their language.

Here are a few names and addresses of institutions that teach Slovak to foreigners:

**Table 2: Slovak language study for foreigners**

Akadémia vzdelávania (37 locations throughout Slovakia) Centrum jazykov Gorkého 10 815 17 Bratislava +421 (0)2 5441 0225 www.aveducation.sk	ACE- Assured Communication in English Nerudova 14 040 01 Košice +421 (0)55 622 7981 www.ace-sro.sk
Caledonian School Obchodná 35 811 07 Bratislava +421 (0)2 5293 2645 www.caledonainschool.sk	Canadian Bilingual Institute Obchodná 43-49 811 06 Bratislava +421 (0)2 5292 2384 www.cbi.sk
Comenius University Institute for Languages Šoltésovej 4 811 08 Bratislava +421 (0)2 5557 7333 www.uniba.sk/ujop	

Find a more extensive list of schools in *The Slovak Spectator's* “Book of Lists,” a resource guide containing the contact information for companies and organizations operating in Slovakia. Information ranges from a listing of Internet service providers and consulting firms to moving companies and language schools. The Internet version of this resource is called the “Green Pages” and is located at [www.greenpages.sk](http://www.greenpages.sk).



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See Appendix C for basic words and expressions in Slovak.

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