



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia social briefing:
Tradition of Autumn Festivals in Slovakia
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Tradition of Autumn Festivals in Slovakia

Slovakia is a country where there is something going on all the time. Each season of the year has its own specialties. Autumn in Slovakia is traditionally accompanied by wine festivals or similar events symbolising the end of the harvest and gratefulness for the crop. Celebrations of such kind have a long history in Slovakia, dating back hundreds of years. Surely, they look different now from what they used to look like in the past, but their popularity remains intact.

Slovakia is famous worldwide for its spectacular wines, many of which have also been awarded at international contests or expos. Thanks to favourable natural conditions, there are regions in Slovakia where lovely sorts of wine are grown. Slovakia is a relatively small country, and natural conditions allow for wine to be grown in six traditionally recognized wine locations. These are as follows: Little Carpathians region, Southern Slovakia, Nitra region, Central Slovakia, Eastern Slovakia, and Tokaj region. The area of Tokaj in Slovakia is rather small; a larger part of it is located in Hungary. If we had a look at the map of Slovakia showcasing the six wine regions, we would conclude that they are all areas with lower altitude located mostly in the Southern part of the country.

The wine areas are also sought-after tourist points. A typical example is so called *Malokarpatská vínna cesta (Little Carpathians Wine Route)*. According to its website, the Little Carpathians Wine Route incorporates several phenomena, such as wine, gastronomy, but also history, nature and countryside. Hence everyone can find something they like. The area we talk about is located between Bratislava and Trnava, with several smaller towns or villages in between, for instance towns Pezinok, Modra, and Svätý Jur. Thanks to the wine production, these towns received the title of free royal towns in the 17th century. The wine produced here was popular even among the members of the royal family in Vienna in the era of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Not far away from Modra, tourists can visit spacious wine cellars at the Červený Kameň castle, a picturesque sight in the land register of the village of Častá. Another noteworthy place representing a perfect combination of history and wine is the castle of Smolenice. From Smolenice, one can reach the town of Trnava in a couple of minutes (by car), although there is still a possibility to stop in one of the nearby villages for another glass of wine, for instance in Suchá nad Parnou. In the historical centre of Trnava, houses were usually built with cellars beneath them, many of which nowadays serve as cosy wine taverns.

The wine regions in Slovakia try to attract tourist by organizing various events for wine lovers. The previously mentioned wine route in the Little Carpathians is famous for its *Days of Open Cellars (Dni otvorených pivníc)*, an annually organized event regularly visited by hundreds of wine lovers. This year, the event is taking place on the 15th and 16th of November. Furthermore, this year marks the 20th anniversary of this occasion.

Slovak wines represent also an important item in Slovak export and are, among others, frequently exported to Asia. On the official website of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, wine is stated as one of the recommended articles for those contemplating export to China. Based on research, the tradition of wine cultivation was brought to Slovakia (and also to other European countries) by Romans during the period of the expansion of the Roman empire.

To the most famous wine festivals belong wine festivals in Pezinok, Modra, or Rača (a town district of Bratislava), which have a long tradition of this event. For example, the first wine harvest celebrations in the town of Pezinok took place in the 13th century, as stated on the town's website. According to the information on the website of Rača, the number of visitors of the wine festival in Rača increases year by year. At the time of wine festivals, the streets of the towns are filled with people of every age, residents and visitors. All the above-mentioned towns are located in the Little Carpathians area, i.e. in the Western part of Slovakia. The Little Carpathians wine area is the oldest and the largest region growing wine in the country.

In general, wines of any kind belong to the most favourite drinks in Slovakia and are an inherent part of family gatherings, celebrations, or parties. At wine festivals, not only wines in their final form are offered. Besides, so called *mušt* and *burčiak* are served. These represent earlier stages of the wine production process, and their taste differs from the taste of wine. Besides, with lowering temperatures, Slovaks enjoy a mug of hot wine, which is especially popular at Christmas markets.

However, wine producers in Slovakia need to deal with changing weather patterns, which has an impact on the volume of production, and consequently on the prices. According to the News Agency of the Slovak Republic (*Tlačová agentúra Slovenskej republiky - TASR*), the volume of wine production is expected to decrease by 15% this year. Last year, the producers had experienced a record volume of production, which resulted in lower market prices of wine and thus lower profits. And in the year before, i.e. 2017, approximately 40% of the crop was destroyed due to extremely cold weather.

Apart from wine, production of cabbage is typical for some locations in Slovakia. In such regions, autumn festivals are characterized by cabbage soup, which is a popular delicacy in Slovakia. Cabbage soup is a traditional dish also for Christmas time, whereby there are many variations of it, depending on a region. Despite its tradition, cabbage production in Slovakia is on decrease, as reported by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic. On the other hand, the production of sauerkraut (sour cabbage) is increasing, presumably due to its undoubtful positive effects on human health.

Same as in case of wine production, also cabbage is subject to changing weather conditions. Generally speaking, the problem is that the traditional four seasons are slowly disappearing. Instead, we have recently witnessed extremely cold winters and hot, dry summers.

One of the towns famous for its cabbage festival is Stupava, a small town nearby Bratislava in the region called Záhorie. The event is called *Dni zelá*, that can be literally translated as *Days of Cabbage*. This year, the festival took place on the 4th – 6th October and marked the 23rd year of its existence.

Of course, these festivals are not only about food or drinks. One can admire and purchase traditional handmade products by local craftsmen (for example accessories, wooden kitchenware, honey and sweets), enjoy a ride on a carousel, or attend various life performances such as concerts or dance shows. It is simply about spending some quality time with family or friends.

Wine and cabbage festivals are not the only keywords for the autumn season in Slovakia. This time is well-known also for its being “goose” (or duck) season. Many restaurants offer delicacies made from goose, such as goose liver paste, usually served with traditional *lokše*, a round-shaped potato dish similar to pancakes or Mexican tortillas. Lokše are popular both for the autumn season as well as for Christmas. The recipe is rather simple; the dough is a mixture of potatoes, flour and salt. At autumn festivals or Christmas markets, a broad variety of lokše is offered, sweet and salted, filled in with cabbage, goose liver paste, or with marmalade or chocolate spread.

In autumn, restaurants offering goose delicacies attract many private companies, families or groups of friends that enjoy a teambuilding or a pleasant gathering while tasting the seasonal menu. The web portal *Visit Bratislava* even ranks goose feasts the first in its list of TOP 10 autumn experiences in Bratislava. However, probably the place most famous for its spectacular goose feast is Chorvátsky Grob, a village located only several kilometres from the Capital city

of Bratislava. Of course, Bratislava and its surroundings is not the only location for a goose feast. You can find good restaurants offering these delicacies basically all around the country. And what is the preferred drink for such an occasion? If you guess wine, you are right.

In case you are planning to visit Slovakia in this time of the year, we highly recommend experience of this kind. Wine festivals are usually organized in September; goose feasts will actually continue until Christmas time. And a glass of lovely local wine is available any time a year. And, as already mentioned, the added value of these events represent picturesque Slovak towns, architecture, and wonderful nature of this little country.