

# Styling Confidential

Europe's best-kept beauty secret is the tiny country of Slovenia, soon to become the styling mecca of a new generation.

By Suzanne Munshower

You may not know the name, but it won't be long before you recognize the style. Little Slovenia is ready to make fashion news.

Home to a rising generation of fashion and jewelry designers, hairdressers and stunning models (Melania Trump is a native), Slovenia is small—a mere two million inhabitants—and tucked in the beauty spot between Austria and Italy. After declaring its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, the country, unlike other Balkan states, escaped unscathed after 10 brief days of war. In 2004, it joined the European Union (EU).

Slovenia has it all: mountains, beaches, picturesque villages, a high standard of living, a university and a cosmopolitan outlook. The postcard-pretty capital Ljubljana is just an hour's drive from Trieste, the Italian port.

With approximately 300,000 residents, Ljubljana still feels small. More precisely, it feels small, upscale and trendy. Scattered throughout the ancient streets and tucked into the town's medieval alleys are pricey shops like Hugo Boss and Frette, hip clubs, hostels and many sleek hair salons.

A pivotal character in the beauty business is Roman Hlep. For the past 14 years, Hlep has been editor and publisher of *Hair Fashion Slovenia*, the country's professional trade magazine.

A former beauty product sales representative, Hlep is passionate about nurturing Slovenian hair stylists. He →



A geometric look from MS Mic's "Rokettara" collection shows the influence of British cutting techniques.



The busy floor at Stevo Salon and Academy in Ljubljana's Old Town.

took 300 Slovenian hair stylists to Italy for Cosmoprof. He's brought headliners like Anthony Mascolo, Richard Thompson, Mark Hayes and the Vidal Sassoon Team, Guy Kremer and Patrick Cameron to Slovenia.

His magazine has sponsored 34 seminars since 1993. Hlep's goal: to make the skill and creativity of Slovenian hairdressers known worldwide.

It's certainly working on the homefront. Says Mitja Sojer, director of Mic Styling (MS) salons, "Here, hairdressers are famous. Sometimes even the fashion designers are jealous."

In 1991, Sojer and a team of young, ambitious stylists opened the first MS salon.

Now there are 41 MS hair salons in Slovenia as well as in Croatia, Bosnia

and Serbia, and two cosmetic salons and an academy.

The MS brand is franchised (something new for Slovenia), as well as its diffusion chain, SIMPLE, which offers faster, less expensive services.

The Mic salon on Trzaska street has 10 stations, four reserved for colorists. In Slovenia, women make up 70 percent of the clientele, and half of them get color. The salon occupies a prime Ljubljana location, in a main square, in a building that also houses the company headquarters and academy.

Creative Director Tomaz Turk and his art team develop the styles. "We like to do our collection before the London and Paris collections," he says, "so people can see we don't just copy what's on the runways." This year, he's working



*Hair Fashion Slovenia*, edited by Roman Hlep, is a tireless promoter of native-grown salons.

with more asymmetry, midlength and natural-looking hair.

"Ex-Yugoslavia" is an often-used term in Slovenia that refers to the other Balkan countries as a group, but there's no geographical uniformity in hair fashion.

"Slovenia is totally different from the other countries in the former Yugoslavia," says Turk. "We have more British style here, more cutting; it's not so much about the blow dry. I say the women look more beautiful in Serbia and Croatia but more interesting in Slovenia."

An emphasis on education is something else Slovenia borrows from the British. A narrow street in Ljubljana's Old Town is the site of flagship Stevo Salon and Academy. Owner Stevo Pavlovic owns three salons and travels a lot, holding seminars for his own academy and for Joico in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia. He's a busy but happy man. →

“I wanted to be a history teacher,” he recalls, “but my mother said maybe I should also do something else to have more chance of getting a job. I come from a village in Bosnia and my family was very poor, so for me, this is a dream.”

The country, says Pavlovic, is now advanced in the field of beauty. “A lot of companies have come into Slovenia selling products, so hairdressers now have a lot more knowledge, not just about products but also about business and marketing,” he explains. “And more and more have traveled out of Slovenia, especially to London, but to France, Italy and Germany as well. I’ve also been to Denmark and Amsterdam to study.”

Pavlovic’s salons are trendy. The stylists are young, and 35 percent of the clients are men. Still, Pavlovic says 80 percent of his clients are over 40.

“The best customer is between 30 and 50,” he notes. “They spend money,



Styling area at KSFH.



The storefront of the MS salon in Gorica, one of 41 in the franchise.

have gray hair, want to look fresh and buy products. They understand quality and they want quality.”

As in many Slovenian salons, make-up application is popular, as are manicures, under the direction of Pavlovic’s wife Branca at Stevo. “Nails are just now becoming popular here,” he explains. “In Slovenia, it’s just in the last two years, but hairdressers now consider manicures an extra to offer the client, as we still have few nails-only salons.”

Salon prices are carefully itemized, a common European practice, especially in the former Communist countries. Pavlovic’s menu lists separate color prices for long, medium and short hair. Shampooing and blow drying are also billed separately.

The salon’s prices are high for Slovenia, with an average ticket ranging from \$50 to \$70 for cut and color.

Tips are the rule, but 5 percent is more common than 15 percent. As in most of the EU, stylists’ the government-regulated salary is enhanced by commissions.

Pavlovic’s current plan is to enlarge his main Ljubljana salon, which now has 10 styling stations and three back-wash bowls. He’s come a long way since his first job after hairdressing school: cleaning up in a salon.

Education has become so important that Kristijan Petek keeps someone on staff simply to sell his seminars.

Petek has owned KSFH (Kristijan Styling Fashion Hair) since 1993, and now has two locations, plus a wig store in Celje, a large town in central Slovenia. While he runs seminars for L’Oréal, he also directs his own academy. He gives seminars almost every weekend, and trains his own staff every other month. →

He rarely has time to attend other stylists' seminars but says, "I'd have to say I've grown up with Toni and Guy."

Petek favors small, hands-on training sessions. "Some people think it's okay to go to London and watch Toni and Guy for two hours, then come back and think they're an expert. We must give them something so at the end they say, 'Okay, I got something from that,' rather than, 'Boy, were they good.' That's for shows, not seminars."

For Petek, it's not enough just to see a finished model. "When we do small seminars, everyone must present a model to explain what was done, what's fresh, what's new." Many hairdressers come from Austria to attend his seminars, he says, adding proudly, "Slovenia is known for fashion."

Petek always produces two photo collections a year. "Every one of our collections is a step from the last collection," he explains, "not something opposite, because we're doing collections to sell to our customers and not just to make a splash. For casual collections, we always think commercial. We want to sell our trends." Right now, he likes to incorporate details from the 1950s and '60s in his deconstructed volume looks.

"Our philosophy was always to stay creative and unique," he says. "It's no problem opening a salon—keeping the quality is the hard part."

After a scant 14 years of freedom for Slovenia, it still tastes new, and possibilities seem endless for the beauty pioneers like Hlep, Sojer, Pavlovic and Petek. After all, they've just started to share the news. **m**



A rocker cut for men from KSFH.



A sexy volume look from KSFH's "Avenue" collection.