

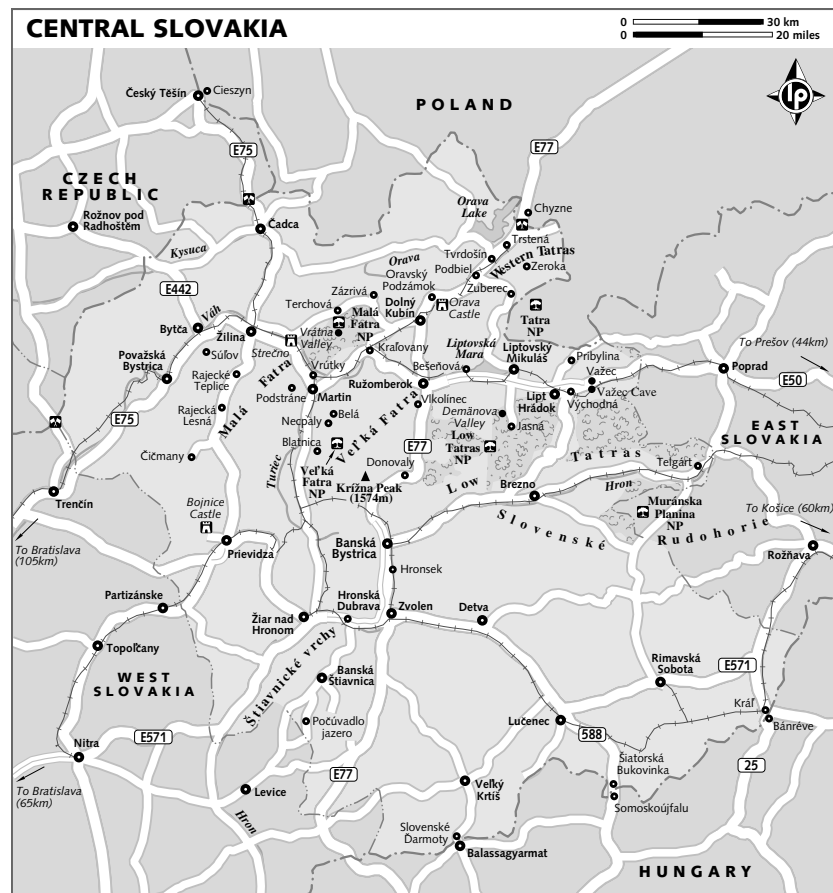
Central Slovakia



Here among the forested hills and stony mountains lies the consciousness of a nature-oriented nation. And no wonder, the landscapes of Central Slovakia are as accessible as they are stunning. Stand on the high plain beyond Liptovský Mikuláš and on a clear day you can see no fewer than five mountain ranges: the Western Tatras, the smaller but no less impressive Low Tatras, the very accessible Malá and Veľká Fatras, and in the distance, the mighty High Tatras. The ranges are blanketed with trees – at more than 50% coverage, Central Slovakia is the most heavily wooded part of either republic – and carved with deep valleys, the most magical of which are the Vrátna valley in the Malá Fatra and the Demänova valley in the Low Tatras.

A rich vein of history runs through Central Slovakia. In the 19th century, literary organisations in Martin helped to create a standardised language and national awareness. Below the mountains, mining brought wealth to the region and Banská Štiavnica contains wonderful examples of centuries-old architecture. Folk villages, such as Čičmany and Vlkolínec, represent another kind of treasure. And of the multitude of castles scattered along the length and breadth of Slovakia, the two most complete and ornate are here: Orava, impossibly perched on a high, rocky outcrop; and Bojnice, more like a fairy-tale than Walt Disney could ever have imagined.

CENTRAL SLOVAKIA



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Get your camera ready to capture the photo-genic plastered log houses in the village of **Vlkolínec** (p390)
- Take a cable car ride to the top of lovely **Vrátna valley** (p382)
- Dig into historical mining at museums in the town of **Banská Štiavnica** (p374)
- Follow the crowd to the ghost festival at **Bojnice castle** (p379)
- Ski the much-loved slopes of Jasna, in the **Demänova valley** (p391)



Getting There & Away

Slovakia's main train line, connecting Bratislava and Košice, cuts across the top third of Central Slovakia, allowing fast connections to Žilina and Martin. Because of the steep valleys and limited train runs, it's best to take the bus if you're going straight to the region's more central towns and cities. Though the train journey from Košice to Banská Bystrica, along the southern border of the Low Tatras, is quite rewarding.

Getting Around

Much of Central Slovakia is hilly and often mountainous. Therefore, the bus or car may be your only option for transport to the region's more inviting areas, especially

for north-south travel. Roads are generally good, and a lot of fun, what with all the steep gradients and windy sections.

BANSKÁ BYSTRICA

☎ 048 / pop 81,704

In the valley where the Low Tatras, Veľká Fatra and Slovenské rudohorie mountains meet sits Banská Bystrica. Slovaks know it best as the cradle of the Slovak National Uprising (Slovenské národné povstanie; SNP) against the Nazis and their Slovak puppet state. The SNP Museum here is probably the best museum in the country.

Banská Bystrica's small but handsome old town centre includes the remnants of a 15th-century citadel.

History

First Slavs, then German colonists, settled in the valley in the 13th century to extract and refine silver ore, and later copper, from the area's rich veins (*banská* means 'mining'). The town grew fat until the mines became exhausted in the 17th century, then almost faded away completely until a post-WWII industrial boom.

A traditionally bolshie town and interwar communist hotbed, it was from here, on 29 August 1944, that resistance radio announced the start of the Slovak National Uprising and partisans took to arms. Although the fascists did give way initially, two months later the German army marched in and crushed the revolt. German reprisals for the uprising included the torture and murder of some 900 Slovak men, women and children, along with some Russian and French partisans, and several members of an Anglo-American military mission in the Hron valley.

Orientation

Banská Bystrica's main square is Nám SNP, which gently runs down into the town's main shopping street, Dolná. The bus and train stations are about 1km east of here, across a large, unnamed park.

Information

Artforum (☎ 415 1335; Dolná 8) Excellent, artsy book selection.

Culture & Information Centre (KIS; ☎ 415 5085; www.kisbb.sk in Slovak; Nám SNP 14; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat mid-May–mid-Sep, 9am–5pm Mon–Fri mid-Sep–mid-May) Sells entertainment tickets, brokers private rooms, arranges walking tours.

Game Over (☎ 415 1511; Nám SNP 15; per hr 50Sk; ☎ 9.30am–10pm Mon–Fri, 2–10pm Sat & Sun) Twenty-plus computers with internet access.

Police station (9 Mája)

Post office (☎ 415 4780; Horná 1)

Všeobecná úverová banka (VÚB; Nám Slobody 1)

Sights

A Soviet-memorial oddity on the outside, on the inside **SNP Museum** (☎ 412 3259; www.muzeumsnp.sk; Kapitulská 23; adult/child 50/20Sk; ☎ 9am–6pm Tue–Sun May–Sep, 9am–4pm Tue–Sun Oct–Apr) is the most technologically advanced museum in the country. Flat-screened TVs and interactive displays bring to life not only the Slovak National Uprising, but Slovakia's involvement in the two world wars. This is a must-see for

any military history buff. The oddly shaped building is itself a memorial to the soldiers. North and south of the SNP Museum are remnants of **16th-century walls** erected against the Turks.

Brightly painted burghers' houses line Nám SNP, which was once the main market square; look for the chain roofs unique to the town. At No 16, **Benický house** (Beniczkého dom) is graced with frescoes and a Venetian-style loggia. **Thurzo house** (Thurzov dom), at No 4, once owned by the city's premier mining family, is now home to the **Central Slovakia museum** (Stredoslovenské múzeum; ☎ 412 5897; adult/student 30/15Sk; ☎ 8am–noon & 1–4pm Tue–Fri, 10am–5pm Sun), which has ethnographic displays, including some delicate bronze armlets and cloak pins. Climbing the 16th-century **clock tower** (Hodinová veža; adult/student 20/10Sk; ☎ 10am–8pm mid-May–mid-Sep) at the east end affords fine views of the square.

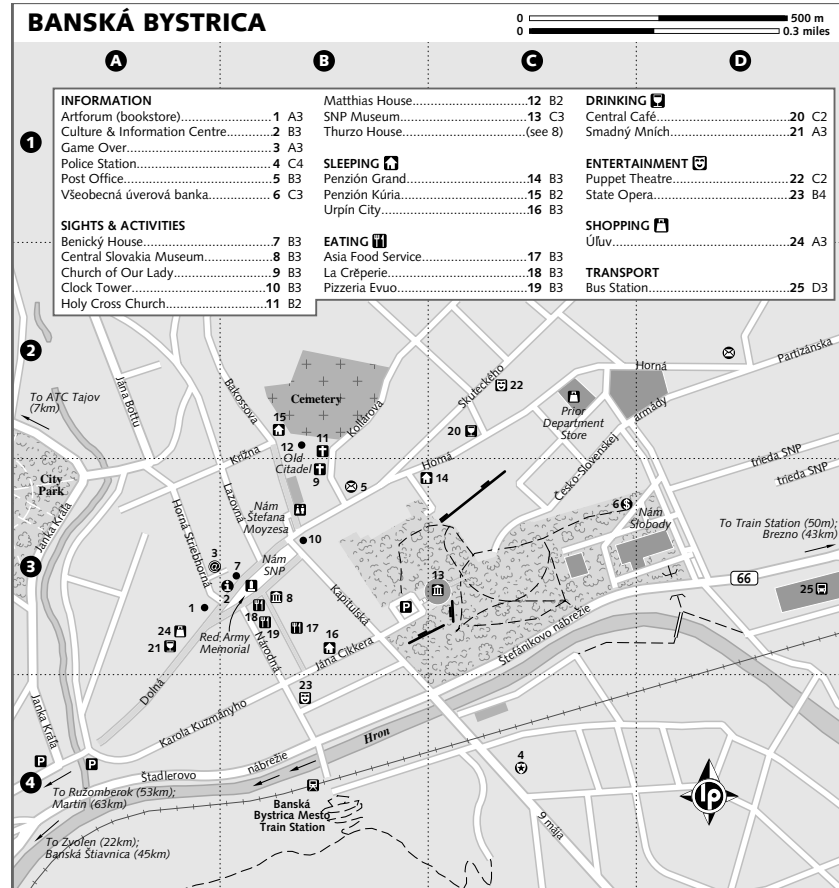
At the end of the 15th century the Gothic and Renaissance churches and houses north-east of Nám SNP were surrounded with heavy stone walls that made up the old citadel. Part of what remains is Banská Bystrica's oldest building, the 13th-century Romanesque (later Gothicised) parish **church of Our Lady** (Kostol Panny Márie Nanebevzatej). Inside, a side chapel (1500) dedicated to St Barbara, patron saint of miners, contains a fantastic Gothic altar carved by the master craftsman, Pavol of Levoča. (Some say in repayment of some of his son's debts.) The church is only open during services (generally at noon and 4.30pm). Joined by fortifications behind the church is the Gothic **Holy Cross church** (Kostol sv Kríža), the small **Matthias house** (Matejov dom) built for the Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus, plus three bastions, a peaceful cemetery and bits of the original walls.

Sleeping

The Culture & Information Centre has a list of student dormitories (about 300Sk) open to travellers in summer.

ATC Tajov (☎ 419 7320; Tajov; person/tent 90/50Sk; ☎ year-round) The nearest camp site, 7km west of town, has a lovely rural setting among pine trees. There are 20 tent sites and 16 bungalows (per person 200Sk).

Penzión Kúria (☎ 412 3255; www.kuria.sk; Bakosova 4; s/d 800/1200Sk; ☎) The atmospheric, old-world feel means this *penzion* is often booked by groups.



Penzión Grand (☎ 415 5173; www.penziongrand.sk; Horná 32; s/d 800/1200Sk; ☎) Younger cousin to Kúria, this *penzion* is lighter on the outside but still has the gorgeous, rustic dark wood panelling in the rooms.

Urpín City (☎ 472 3511; www.urpincity.sk; Cikkerova 5; s/d 1950/2950Sk; ☎) This is the ultimate in *urpín* (urban) minimalism. The wi-fi enabled lounge, restaurant, bar and bedrooms all have a sleek, Zenlike appeal, with low-lying beds and wheat grass as decoration. Apartments are available on a nightly or long-term basis.

Eating & Drinking

Nám SNP has several attractive outdoor cafés to choose from, for Slovak specialities, head

to the folk knick-knack-filled restaurant at Penzión Kúria.

Asia Food Service (☎ 415 3358; Národná 9; mains 55–110Sk; ☎ 11am–10.30pm Mon–Fri, 4–10pm Sat) Chinese staples are served from the counter front. There are a few steely bar tables and counters to chow down at in this tiny modern eatery.

La Crêperie (Passage Arkade; mains 60–100Sk; ☎ 9am–10pm) Think of some doughy delight you can stuff – crepes, dumplings, potato pancakes – and you can get it here, both sweet and savoury. The café also has internet access.

Pizzeria Evuo (☎ 415 2752; Nám SNP 8; pizzas 100–150Sk) Just the aroma from this pizzeria is fattening, and the pizza tastes even better than it smells. The entrance is on Národná.

Smadný Mnich (Thirsty Monk; ☎ 0905421317; Dolná 20; 🕒 4pm-midnight Sun-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat) Wander up for a quiet pint, or a loud one on Wednesday when there's live music.

Central Café (Horná 37; 🕒 7am-10pm Mon-Fri, 9am-10pm Sat, 4pm-10pm Sun; ☒) This hip bar is a good place to kick back with a cocktail.

Entertainment & Shopping

The **State Opera** (☎ 412 4418; www.stateopera.sk; Národná 11) has regular performances from September to June, as does the town's **Puppet theatre** (Bábkové divadlo; ☎ 415 3023; www.bdnr.sk; Skuteckého 14).

Dolná is a shopping street where you can find books, clothes and an **Úľuv** (☎ 4841241; Dolná 14) selling traditional handicrafts – clothes, wool rugs, wood, ceramics, embroidery – with an upmarket slant.

Getting There & Away

Buses run between Banská Bystrica and Bratislava (250Sk, 3½ to 4½ hours), mostly via Nitra (160Sk, two hours), every one to 1½ hours. Only two direct trains a day (6.15am and 3.30pm) make the journey from Bratislava (292Sk, four hours) and one to Košice (292Sk, four hours), otherwise there's a change at Zvolen or Vrútky. The trip over hill and dale to Martin is beautiful by train (104Sk, one hour, seven daily) or bus (89Sk, 1¼ hours, hourly); similarly scenic is the bus route to Liptovský Mikuláš (117Sk, two hours, hourly).

BANSKÁ ŠTIAVNICA

☎ 045 / pop 10,814

Like a fossil preserved in amber, Banská Štiavnica is a town frozen in time. Walking up and down among the steep hillsides crowded with town buildings, churches, alleys and stairways, you can't help but get a sense of another era (unless you're distracted by the exertion of climbing through town). Look across the deep valley from the old castle to the new and contemplate whether the view alone wasn't worth the effort.

Banská Štiavnica began as a medieval mining centre, exploiting some of Europe's richest gold and silver veins. Already a showcase town in the 13th century, in its 18th-century heyday it became Hungary's second-largest town. But then the mines began to dry up, and the town slipped out of the flow of time. In 1972 Banská Štiavnica was added to the Unesco World Heritage List. Today, at half

its largest size, the town is primarily a tourist attraction and has numerous museums. The buildings aren't in pristine condition, but the overall effect is still arresting.

Orientation

The surrounding area is quite wooded and hilly. From the train station it's a 2km climb uphill through the factories and housing blocks of the new town to Nám sv Trojice and Nám Radničné, the adjoining main squares in the old town. Buses stop 500m closer, at Križovatka. The terraced layout of the town can make this a confusing place to find your way around.

Information

City Tourist Information Office (☎ 694 9653; www.banskastiavnica.sk; Nám sv Trojice 3; 🕒 8am-5.30pm May-Sep, 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat Oct-Apr) Also doubles as a two-terminal internet café. They can arrange guided tours in several languages.

Post office (Kammerhofská 30) Located down the hill towards the train station.

VÚB (Nám Radničné 15) Has an ATM.

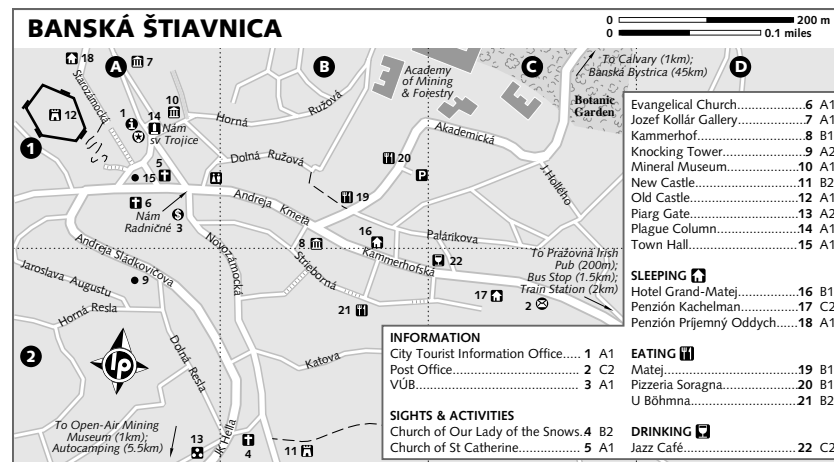
Sights

Unless otherwise stated, all museums and galleries are part of the **Slovak mining museum** (Slovenské banské múzeum; ☎ 694 9422; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Sun May-Aug, to 4pm Tue-Sun Sep-Apr). Museum tours leave on the hour and the last tour generally leaves an hour before closing.

NÁM SV TROJICE & NÁM RADNIČNÉ

Nám sv Trojice (Holy Trinity), the old town's main square, sports a grand, ornate **plague column** that commemorates deliverance in 1711 and is flanked by the old palaces of German and Hungarian merchants and mine owners. Behind the bold sgraffito at No 12 is the **Jozef Kollár gallery** (adult/student 40/20Sk), which exhibits 13th-century Gothic to modern art, with emphasis on local Slovak painter Jozef Kollár. At No 6 is the **Mineral museum** (adult/student 40/20Sk), with more than 400 minerals from around the world and a historical mine mock-up.

At the bottom of the square, opposite the pastel-yellow house with mining motifs, the Gothic parish **Church of St Catherine** (Kostol sv Kateríny) still has some original murals and statues among the baroque furnishings. A little further southwest is the **town hall** (radnica) with a backwards clock, and across Nám Radničné a richly decorated 18th-century **Evangelical church** (Evanjelický kostol). Miners'



houses line the back alleys behind the main buildings.

Uphill from the town square is Banská Štiavnica's ancient heart, the **Old castle** (Starý zámok; adult/student 60/30Sk). Between 1546 and 1559 an older Romanesque church was walled in, revamped and fortified to protect the municipal riches from the Turks, who never conquered the town. It houses baroque sculpture and historical town exhibits.

NEW CASTLE & AROUND

At No 7, on the way up on Andreja Sládkovičova to the castle, you pass a tearoom in the 1681 **knocking tower** (klopačka) – a sort of town alarm clock used to signal the miners' shifts and special events.

Five years after the Old castle was finished, the burghers evidently decided they needed more protection on the hill opposite, thus the strikingly simple **New castle** (Nový zámok; Novozámoká; adult/student 50/20Sk), a whitewashed block with four corner towers. It contains a 'Museum of the History of the Struggle against the Turks on the Territory of Slovakia' and has fine views over the town.

To the east of the castle is the **Church of Our Lady of the Snows** (Kostol Panny Márie Snežnej) and the 15th-century **Piarg gate** (Piargaska brána) that was one of six portals in the walls dividing the inner and outer town.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

A former mining camp 1.25km south of the city centre is set up as the **Open-air Mining mu-**

seum (Banské múzeum v prírode; JK Hella 12; adult/student 80/30Sk). Take a trip down the mine, and check out the machinery, workshops and a wooden miners' church.

Kammerhof (Kammerhofská 2; adult/student 40/20Sk) is yet another museum devoted to mining, this time dealing with its technical history. The working models of mining machines are its most intriguing displays.

About 1km northeast of the old town is the 1751 **Calvary** (Kalvária). Here baroque chapels with wood carvings illustrate the Stations of the Cross (14 images of the last stages of Jesus Christ's life before his crucifixion). The largest red-and-white chapel is visible for miles around and the site has understandably great vistas.

Festivals & Events

The annual three-day festival of **Salamander** starts on the Friday evening closest to 12 September. The townspeople dress up in miners' clothing and medieval garb and perform songs and dances. Events include a market, a beer day and arm-wrestling contests. The origins of the festival can be traced back to the 19th-century mining academy student ceremonies. This is one of Slovakia's best local festivals and is worth staying for the weekend.

Sleeping

The info office keeps a big list of private rooms and *penzión*; many line Kammerhofská and Andreja Sládkovičova.

Autocamping (☎ 0904668340 or 699 4112; Počúvadlianske jazero 43; sites per tent 200Sk) This basic camp sits beside one of several artificial lakes created as part of a water-pumping scheme for the mines, 5.5km southwest of the old town. Take the bus to Levice, get off at the second stop (Štiavnické Bane, Rychnava rázc) and walk 1km south to the camp.

Penzión Kachelman (☎ 692 2319; www.kachelman.sk; Kammerhofská 18; r 990Sk; (P)) Front and centre on the way up to the old town is a large, square Renaissance building-turned-30-bed inn. Antlers and other hunting trophies make up the primary decoration in the public spaces.

Penzión Prijemný Oddych (☎ 692 1301; www.prijemnyoddych.sk; Starozámocká 3; r 1100Sk; (P) ☒) No lies in advertising here; this guesthouse above the Old castle really is *prijemný* (pleasing). Yellow walls, framed folk embroidery and pine wood keep the 17th-century building feeling light and fresh. In addition to the restaurant, there's a garden playground and a sauna for guests.

Hotel Grand-Matej (☎ 692 1232; www.grandmatej.sk; Kammerhofská 8; s/d 950/1790Sk; (P)) With flags flying and window boxes in bloom, the Grand-Matej has an air of formality; it is indeed the grandest option in town. It rents bicycles for 300Sk a day.

Eating & Drinking

Pizzeria Soragna (☎ 691 2001; Akademická 9; pizzas 90-120Sk) A favourite among the pizza choices. A large terrace doubles seating capacity (from 30 to 76), but it's often still packed in summer.

Matej (☎ 691 2051; Akademická 4; mains 100-150Sk) Not the grand hotel, but the little Matej restaurant across from it is the best option for Slovak food in town. Dine on the green, shaded terrace.

U Böhmna (☎ 0903525022; Strieborná 7; mains 100-250Sk) Spoon into some really good homemade soups like the *kapustnica* (cabbage and sausage). Wild game is also on the menu.

For something a bit stronger, try the **Pražovná Irish Pub** (☎ 692 0076; Kammerhofská 12; ☒) 11am-midnight Mon-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat), which attracts a rowdy, bra-bearing young crowd, and the quieter **Jazz Café** (Kammerhofská 12; ☒) 11am-midnight Mon-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat).

There's also a grocery store at the bus stop.

Getting There & Away

Banská Štiavnica is not the easiest place to get to without your own transport. Only one bus daily departs from Bratislava (230Sk, 3½

hours) or Banská Bystrica (74Sk, 1¼ hours), at 1pm and 11am respectively. Otherwise a train or bus ride requires a change at Zvolen, from where you can take a direct bus (47Sk, 50 minutes); nine buses depart on weekdays but only one on Sunday.

MALÁ & VEĽKÁ FATRA

By far the most user-friendly mountains around, the Malá (Lesser) Fatra and Veľká (Greater) Fatra are where Slovaks go to hike, bike and ski. These mountains are a bit lower than the internationally known High Tatras, so trails are open more of the year. Services are a bit cheaper here too, and there's a comprehensive network of trails, chairlifts and *chaty* (mountain huts) scattered throughout.

The Malá Fatra is the more popular of the two mountain groups (despite the name, its peaks rise higher than those of the Veľká Fatra). The Váh river slices the Malá Fatra into two parts – the rounded Lúčanská Fatra west of Martin and the craggy Krivánská Fatra to the northeast. Most of the Krivánská Fatra is now the Malá Fatra National Park, centred on what many claim to be the most beautiful valley in Slovakia, Vrátna.

Žilina to the north, and folk culture-rich Martin between the ranges are the largest towns.

ŽILINA

☎ 041 / pop 85,268

A Slavic tribe in the 6th century was the first to recognise Žilina's advantageous location at the intersection of several important trade routes on the Váh river. Today travellers see it as a base for exploring the Malá Fatra National Park (p380), area fortresses and folk villages. Even Martin can be a day trip. In town, besides the old palacelike castle on the outskirts, there aren't a lot of sights, but the place has a lively young vibe and good, reasonable restaurants, because of the university population.

Žilina grew around a fortress in the middle ages. An influential compendium of principles on civic rights and obligations, written here in 1370, might be the oldest existing text in the Slovak language.

The town was occupied by the Hussites from 1429 to 1434 and, after being ravaged by the Thirty Years' War, faded away until the

railway brought industrialisation in the late 19th century. Today both the country's main motorway and the main Bratislava-Košice train line pass through here.

Orientation

Žilina is 64km northeast of Trenčín. From the train station the shopping street Národná leads into the old market square, Hlinkovo nám. Marble stairs and narrow Farská climb from here into the old town, centred on Mariánské nám. From the south end of the bus station, follow Jána Milca northwest to Národná.

Information

CK Selinan (☎ 562 0789; www.zilina.sk; Burianova medzierka 4; ☒) 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Ample information about Žilina and the Malá Fatra, including hiking maps.

Internet Caffé (☎ 0903522226; Bottova 12; per min 1.5Sk; ☒) 10am-10pm Mon-Fri, 2-10pm Sat & Sun) Full bar adjacent.

Left luggage office (per item per day 30Sk; ☒) 6.30am-11pm) At train station.

Ludová banka (Národná 28) ATM and exchange.

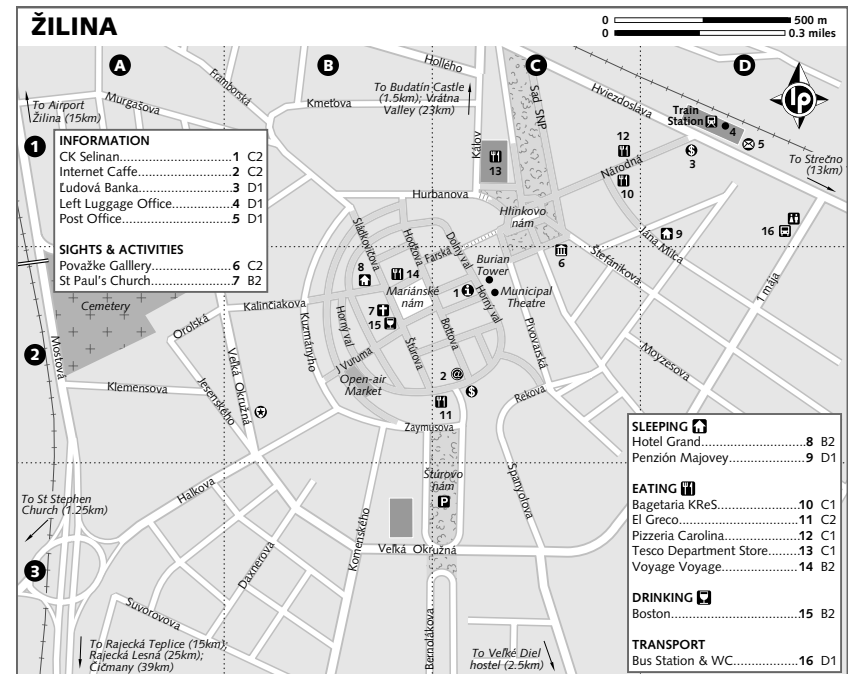
Post office (Hviezdoslava)

Sights

North across the Váh river, the **Budatín castle** (Budatínsky zámok; ☎ 562 0033; Topolová 1; adult/student 50/30Sk; ☒) 9am-5.15pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, to 4pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct) dates from at least the 13th century, when its Romanesque central tower was built. The Renaissance palace was part of a face-lift in 1551. (The last restoration was in 1920.) Inside, the **Považské museum** includes an unusual tinkers' trade exhibition with naive art figures of metal and wire, as well as displays on period furniture, church art and early history. Take bus 21 from the train station; otherwise it's a 20-minute walk from Hviezdoslava.

The old town square of Mariánské nám is completely surrounded by arcaded burghers' houses, which are intruded upon by the Jesuits' baroque **St Paul's church** (kostol sv Pavla), built in 1743. The fountain and open-air cafés make this a fine place to pause over coffee and cake.

Považské gallery (☎ 562 6931; www.pgu.sk; Štefánikova 2; adult/student 30/10Sk; ☒) 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun), on the southern side of the wide open Hlinkovo nám, displays thought-provoking contemporary art and has a suitably dark, smoky café attached.



St Stephen Church (Kostol sv Štefana; ☎ 0903116624; Závodská cesta; 🕒 services 10am Sun or by appointment) is one of the earliest Romanesque churches; the most ancient parts, including some frescoes rediscovered in the 1950s, date from around 1250. It's 1.25km southwest of the centre.

Sleeping

The information office has a list of private rooms for rent (about 300Sk per person) and student dorms that take summer travellers.

Veľký Diel (☎ 500 5249; kadorova@dm.utc.sk; Žilinská univerzita, Vysokoškolskú 20; dm 300-500Sk; 🕒) A student dorm open to travellers during July and August, Veľký Diel is worth contacting year-round in case it has a vacancy. Take tram 1 from the bus or train station.

Penzión Majovey (☎ 562 4152, fax 5625 239; Jána Milca 3; s/d 1000/1750Sk; breakfast 100Sk) The deep coral colour outside is more interesting than the stark white inside, but the bathrooms are huge and the tiled floors keep things cool.

Hotel Grand (☎ 562 6809; www.hotelgrand.sk; Sládkovičova 1; s/d 1590/2630Sk; 📍) The floor-to-ceiling windows brighten up the bland rooms in this 90-year-old hotel off the main square. Go deluxe and ask for one with a whirlpool tub and air-con (3180Sk).

Eating & Drinking

Food stands seem especially popular all around town, including on the northeast corner of Hlinkovo nám.

El Greco (Zaymusa 8; mains 90-160Sk; 🕒 10.30am-7pm Mon-Fri; 🍷) Has all your Mediterranean favourites, including a decent rendition of *tzatziki*. A picture menu helps you sort out the Slovak translations.

Pizzeria Carolina (☎ 500 3030; Národná 5; pizzas 98-137Sk) Tables are filled weekdays to weekend; Pizzeria Carolina is especially popular with college students. It has a mixed salad bar of sorts (with Chinese cabbage as the base ingredient).

Voyage Voyage (☎ 564 0230; Mariánske nám 191; mains 100-175Sk) Sleek neon and chrome alerts you that this is not your typical Slovak eatery. The mile-long menu lists re-invented traditional dishes as up-to-date as the scene (chicken breasts stuffed with exotic fruits instead of bacon and cheese, for example). Don't miss the milkshakes.

Boston (☎ 0905481214; Mariánské nám 24; 🕒 9am-midnight Sun-Thu, to 2am Fri & Sat) Live jazz Tuesday at 8pm; bar action nightly.

Self-caterers head to the **Tesco Department Store** (Hlinkovo nám), but the **Bagetaria KRES** (cnr Národná & Jána Milca; sandwiches 30-60Sk, hot dishes 60-80Sk; 🕒 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) is almost as cheap.

Getting There & Away

The main train line goes from Bratislava (268Sk, 2¼ hours, 12 daily), through Trenčín (180Sk, one hour, 20 daily) to Žilina, and on to Poprad (200Sk, two hours, 17 daily) and Košice (316Sk, three hours, 10 daily). Buses are quicker and more useful for smaller, regional destinations.

Airport Žilina (ILZ; ☎ 552 3288; www.letisko.sk), 15km west of the centre, has one daily flight: six days a week, Sunday through Friday, to and from Prague. Buses to the airport go from bus station stand No 1.

AROUND ŽILINA

Rising dramatically on a rocky outcropping, **Strečno castle** (☎ 041-569 7400; adult/student 50/30Sk; 🕒 9am-5pm May-Sep, to 4pm Oct) stands guard over the Váh river, 13km east of Žilina on the road to Martin. The fortress, built in the 14th century by warlord Matúš Čák, has been in ruins for three centuries, but sizeable wall and tower segments remain and some restoration work has been done. Hike up, up, up to the castle from the car park on the Žilina-Martin road, or from the Strečno train station across the river. Twelve daily trains go to and from Žilina (18Sk, 12 minutes).

From April through October you can take a one-hour **raft ride** on a *plte* (traditional flat-bottomed wooden boat) down the Váh river past the castle (250Sk per person). The launch is 7km south of Strečno; for more information contact the **Boating & Rafting Society** (Prvá pltnička a raftingová spoločnosť; ☎ 0907196999; http://plte.strečno.sk in Slovak; SNP 86, Strečno).

Rajecké Teplice

☎ 041

Fifteen kilometres due south of Žilina is a little spa town that's been known for its curative waters since the 14th century. The spa house and hotel underwent a complete transformation in the late 1990s to become the upscale **Aphrodite** (☎ 549 4256-7; www.spa.sk; s/d 60/109Sk; 📍 🍷 🍷). OK, so the decoration looks a bit like someone on acid was dreaming of a Roman spa (overdone gilt columns, garish stained-glass cupola...) But unlike other Slovak spas, where most thermal water is

reserved for individual services, here they have different temperature public pools (200Sk for two hours, free for hotel guests) meandering among the marble and palm trees. 'Sauna World' (300Sk for two hours) includes entry to steamy eucalyptus rooms, salt and herbal saunas, as well as regular wet and dry steam rooms.

Private accommodation and restaurants cluster around the small village lake. The **Tourist Information Office** (☎ 549 4366; Osloboditeľov 90; www.rajeckapohoda.sk; 🕒 8.30-11.30am & 12.30-6pm) has a welcoming little store and a comprehensive website. From Žilina, trains (18Sk, 33 minutes) and buses (22Sk, 30 minutes) zoom in at least nine times a day.

Rajecká Lesná

☎ 041

Further up the hill, the tiny village of Rajecká Lesná is insignificant except for the **Slovak Bethlehem** (Slovenský betlehem; admission by donation; 🕒 9am-noon & 1-6pm), a 10m wood-carved tableau of the Nativity interweaves with tiny animated figures illustrating Slovak rural life. Local carver Jozef Pekara began the project in the early 1980s. The tableau is next to the church – follow signs from the bus stop. Up to 10 daily buses from Žilina (36Sk, 39 minutes) stop here on the way to Čičmany (14Sk, 10 minutes), but few go midday.

Čičmany

☎ 041

Famed for a 200-year-old custom of painting its wooden cottages in patterns based on traditional embroidery motifs, **Čičmany** (www.cicmany.viapvt.sk) is a photographer's dream. The ubiquitous white graphic patterns on dark log houses are a striking example of living folk art. Varnishing the logs brown or black is part of a centuries-old preservation process. The white stripes and squiggles that repetitively cover every spare inch are purely decorative. Blooms in the spring flower boxes add a festive splash of colour to photos, but then again, the white snow in this mountain village is quite the contrast.

Most of the decorated log buildings are still homes, but one, **Radenov dom** (Čičmany 42; adult/student 40/20Sk; 🕒 8am-6pm Tue-Sun) is a branch of the Považské museum. Old furnishings, embroidered snow-white folk dresses, and local handiwork for sale are inside. Embroidered linens were originally part of elaborate

dowries that accompanied a new bride. So important was this skill that an embroidery needle was put in a baby girl's bath to ensure she would become skilled at the art. Across the road is a reconstructed two-family house (included in the museum entry) traditionally outfitted.

You can rent out a couple of the *drevenica* (wood cottage). One has been turned into the **Penzión Katka** (☎ 549 2132; penzionkatka@stoline.sk; r without bathroom per person 290-370Sk), near the museum.

At least five buses from Žilina (47Sk, one hour) stop at Čičmany on their way to Prievidza (51Sk, one hour), near Bojnice castle. Another five turn immediately around and head back to Žilina. Get off the bus as soon as you see the first of the log buildings and walk up. Day trippers take note, there may be a lapse of several hours between buses – especially around midday and on weekends.

BOJNICE

☎ 046

Could Walt Disney have built Bojnice castle, or maybe crazy King Ludwig? No? Well, the Pálffy family, owners from the 1600s to 1945, must have had a well-developed imagination. The elaborate crenulations and cylindrical towers are straight out of a fairy tale, and at festival time the costumed guides spin some fanciful tales. Slovakia's pre-eminent romanticised castle is the main attraction in the village of Bojnice, above Prievidza.

Orientation & Information

The nearest train and bus stations are 2.5km east of Bojnice in the town of Prievidza. Local buses from Prievidza stop at Bojnice's main square, Hurbanovo nám, just below the castle.

The **Tourist Information Office** (☎ 540 3251; tik.bojnice@stoline.sk; Hurbanovo nám 19; 🕒 8am-7pm) is approximately 200m east of the castle. There are a couple of ATMs on the main square and a **post office** on Sládkovičova.

Sights

The ornate exterior is your first clue that **Bojnice castle** (Bojnický zámok; ☎ 543 0633; www.bojnicecastle.sk; adult/student 130/50Sk; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun May, Jun & Sep; 9am-5pm Jul & Aug; 10am-3pm Tue-Sun Oct-Apr) is not the original 12th-century Gothic structure. It's an early 20th-century reconstruction modelled on the romantic style. Nevertheless, a few remains of the original Gothic and

Renaissance parts of the castle survive within the present structure.

The castle has the usual exhibits of furniture, paintings, statues, weapons, glass and porcelain in lavishly decorated rooms. Highlights include the Bojnice Altar, the only surviving complete work of Italian painter Nardo di Cione, the Golden Hall, with its gilded ceiling and a small cave system, some 26m below the courtyard, complete with its own well.

The time to visit is during one of the many festivals and night-time tours, the biggest of which is the **International Festival of Spirits and Ghosts** (adult/student 200/70Sk) for a week in May, which attracts as many as 3000 a day. Costumed guides re-enact legends and put on performances throughout the castle grounds. The place also gets decked out for Christmas, Valentine's Day and medieval events, among others; check the website for schedules. Queues get very long on weekends and holidays, so arrive early.

Sleeping & Eating

Numerous small guesthouses line the streets around the castle and most have restaurants. This is a tourist town after all.

Camping Bojnice (☎ 541 3845; person/tent/car/bungalow 140/100/100/1080Sk; ☞ mid-May–mid-Sep) Pine trees rise above the camp site 2km west of Bojnice on the bus route to Nitrianske rudno; A-frame huts (700Sk for three) are completely shaded. There's a small buffet on site.

YOU SAY CASTLE, I SAY POTATO

In Slovak, as in German, there are two words for the English equivalent of 'castle' – a cause for much confusion when translating. A *hrad*, like the German *burg*, was a highly fortified medieval residence; a *zámok*, like the German *schloss*, was primarily a palace-like structure with less defensive intent. The latter are often translated in English as *châteaux*, which isn't quite accurate as in Slovakia these buildings rarely resemble their French counterparts. In Slovakia they call both 'castle' and just know that one is fancier than the other. A *kaštieľ*, on the other hand, is a manor house or mansion, and a *palac*, a palace – usually in town. At least that's straightforward enough.

Hotel Lipa (☎ 543 0308; www.hotel-lipa-bojnice.sk; Sládkovičova 20; s/d 900/1300Sk; (P)) Peach walls set off simply elegant carved-wood beds at Hotel Lipa. The playground on the hillside terrace is full of laughing children in summer.

Penzión Bojnice (☎ 540 2141; www.penzionbojnice.sk; Prievidzská 39; s/d 700/1000Sk; (P)) Odd how some pastel paint and flowers can live up to a concrete box. The modern rooms are fresh too, and the accommodating staff will make you dinner upon request.

There are several eateries and cafés on Hurbanovo nám, including **Pálffyho Pizzeria** (☎ 543 1888; Hurbanovo nám 5; pizzas 110-150Sk), with large pizzas and views of the castle.

Getting There & Away

There is one direct bus a day from Bratislava (354Sk, 3¼ hours, 6.15am) to Bojnice. Nearby Prievidza has more connections from Bratislava (208Sk, 3¼ hours, 10 daily), as well as Žilina (89Sk, 1¼ hours, 10 daily) and Banská Bystrica (119Sk, 1½ hours, 15 daily). Local bus 3 takes you to the castle.

The only place of interest you can get to easily by train from Prievidza is Nitra (98Sk, 2½ hours, 11 daily).

MALÁ FATRA NATIONAL PARK

☎ 041

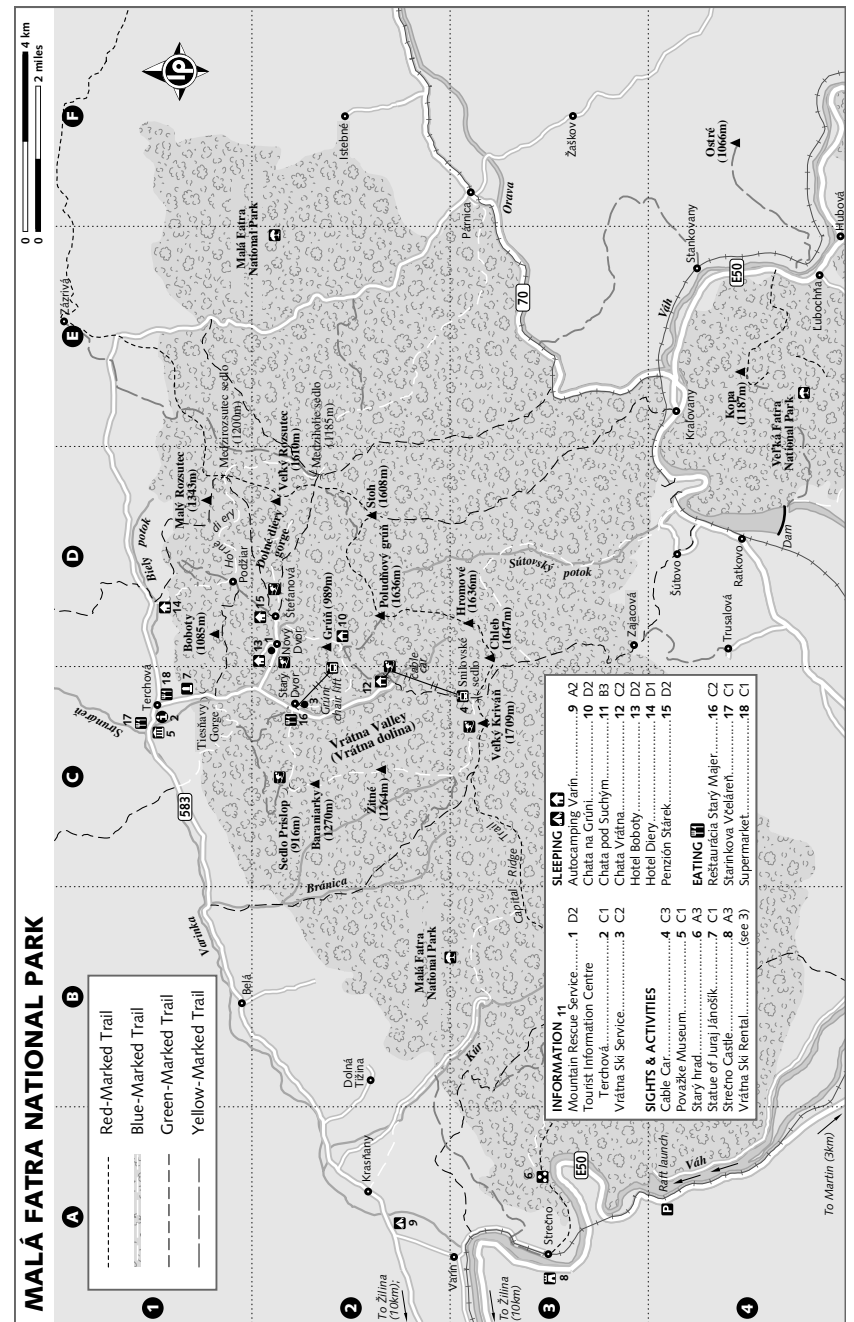
Precipitous peaks top the pine-clad slopes and sentinel-like formations stand watch at the rocky gorge entrance. The beautiful Vrátna valley is the focus of the 198-sq-km Malá Fatra National Park. The area contains some of the most accessible high-altitude walking in Slovakia, Veľký Kriváň (1709m) being the tallest peak, and services galore.

Terchová

The long village of Terchová is known for more than just being the lower entrance to the Vrátna valley (though it is a good base to gather info and maps). It was the birthplace of one of Slovakia's favourite folk heroes, Juraj Jánošík (p382), in 1688.

The **Tourist Information Centre Terchová** (☎ 569 5307; www.ztt.sk; Sv Cyrila a Metoda 96; ☞ 9am-6pm) has hiking, cycling and ski trail maps, souvenirs, and internet access for 100Sk per hour. Next door is an ATM.

Above the village of Terchová is an immense aluminium **statue of Juraj Jánošík**, and west of the village bus stop next to the *Obecný úrad* (village office) is a little branch of **Považke**



museum (adult/student 20/10Sk; ☎ 9am-1pm & 1.30-3pm Mon-Sun) devoted to him.

Jánošík Days, an international folk festival held at the beginning of August, draws musical acts from Slovakia and around the world.

The tourist office keeps a comprehensive list of area *chata* and private rooms for rent (both about 300Sk per person). All prices double during Jánošík Days. There's no camping in the park, so **Autocamping Varín** (☎ 562 1478; Varín; www.selikan.sk in Slovak; per person/tent 75/75Sk, 4-person hut 1000Sk; ☎ May-mid-Oct; 📍), 15km west of Terchová, is the closest. Žilina-Terchová buses pass here; get off at the Varín, Konhora rázc stop.

It's more interesting to stay in the Vrátna valley, but if you're stuck, **Hotel Diery** (☎ 569 5322; www.hotel-diery.sk; s/d 850/1200Sk; 📍), 1km east of the Vrátna valley road, is the old-fashioned favourite because of its log-lined *koliba* (rustic restaurant with an open fire, serving traditional Slovak specialities). It's at the base of a hiking trail, too. The friendly **Starinkova Včeláreň** (☎ 599 3130; A Hlinku 246; snacks 20-50Sk, mains 100-150Sk) tea-room in Terchová has scones and homemade honey to go with your brew. You can also get a small selection of grilled dishes to enjoy on a big terrace with Malá Fatra views.

At least hourly buses serve Terchová and Vrátna valley from Žilina (40Sk, 45 minutes).

Vrátna Valley

Wave after wave of mountains rise to a crescendo in the peaks that encircle Vrátna valley

(Vrátna dolina). Malá Fatra National Park was created in 1987 largely to protect this prime piece of real estate. Heavily forested – rock-strewn only the last 500m or so – summers are a symphony of green in the popular park. Trails, ski lifts and a cable car put you right among the scenery.

Naturally, a place this pretty is overrun in high summer and winter, but you can hike far enough to lose the crowds, and the valley is almost empty in May and September. Snow hangs around until April at the higher elevations.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The valley turn-off is at Terchová, 25km east of Žilina. South from Terchová the road branches left to the hamlet of Štefanová; continue straight and Starý Dvor is midvalley. You've reached the top of the valley at Chata Vrátna about 5km from the highway turn-off.

Check with the **Mountain Rescue Service** (Horská služba; ☎ 569 5232, Štefanová; http://his.hzs.sk/) for trail and weather conditions. If you plan to hike, get the VKÚ's 1:50,000 *Malá Fatra – Vrátna* map (sheet No 110) or Geografische Boekhandel Jacob van Wijngaarden's *Knapsacked Travel in The Malá Fatra Mountains*.

For trail and lodging info online, www.vratna.sk is the best.

ACTIVITIES

Hiking

A **cable car** (kabinkova lanovka; ☎ 599 3049; Chata Vrátna; adult/student one way 250/170Sk; ☎ 8am-4pm) runs from above the hut at the top of the

valley to **Snilovské sedlo** (1524m) below two peaks, **Chleb** (1647m) and **Veľký Kriváň** (1709m). It's about a half-hour climb to either summit and both are on the red, 43km-long **Capital Ridge trail** (Hlavný hrebeň) that stretches the length of the range. From Chleb you could walk north to **Poludňový grúň** (1636m), then head northwest, passing Chata na Grúni and ending at Starý Dvor, where there's a bus stop, restaurants and services. From the cable car that would be about a four-hour journey. Or continue on from Poludňový grúň to **Medziholie sedlo** (1185m) and descend to Štefanová village (six hours from the cable car).

One of the most beautiful, and most demanding, hikes is the trail from Štefanová (at about 620m) east to Medziholie sedlo, and then up over **Veľký Rozsutec** (1610m), with some steep sections that have ladders and chains. (Note: the trail is closed from 1 October to 30 June.) An easier return trail leads east to **Medzirozsutec sedlo** (1200m) then down through the **Dolné diery gorge** and back to Štefanová, crossing a stream several times. It's a 5½ hour loop.

For those with more time you could do the ridge in three days, starting at Zázriva bus stop, stopping the first night at Chata na Grúni (seven hours) and the second at Chata pod Suchým (eight hours), passing the freely accessible ruins of **Starý hrad** (old castle) before ending at Strečno (p378).

About as easy as it gets is the 1½ hour interpretative nature trail between Štefanová village and Hotel Diery in Terchová.

Skiing

The Vrátna valley is one of the more popular winter destinations in Slovakia. The ski centre encompasses a total of 14 ski tows, a winter-only chairlift, a year-round cable car and almost 13km of prepared ski runs, open December to April. A day-pass costs 680Sk for adults and 480Sk for children under 15. Buy your ticket from the **Vrátna Ski Service** (Lyžiarska stredisko Vrátna; ☎ 569 5055; www.vratna.sk) in Starý Dvor; look for the big car park and the *kasa* (cashier) on the left side midway up the valley. Next door there's a shack with **ski rental** (per pair 300Sk; ☎ 8am-4pm), and the biggest ski area is just above.

Sleeping

There's no free camping allowed in the park; the closest is Autocamping Varín (opposite). The Tourist Information Centre Terchová has

lists of private rooms for rent (from 300Sk per person) on its website (www.ztt.sk), as does www.vratna.com.

Chata Vrátna (☎ 569 5739; www.vratna.sk/chata_vratna/; dm 220Sk, d with shared bathroom 760Sk; 📍) Muddy hikers, giggling children and fragrant wood smoke fill this well-worn, chalet-style outfit at the top of Vrátna valley.

Penzión Stárek (☎ 569 5359; www.penzionstarek.sk; Štefanová 124; r per person 400-540Sk; 📍) A warm and welcoming eight room log cabin. You'll often find the owner's family gathered at the restaurant's outdoor picnic tables.

Hotel Boboty (☎ 569 5228; www.hotelboboty.sk; Nový Dvor; s 800Sk, d 900-1900Sk; 📍 📺 📶) Sky-scraping windows in the dining room create tremendous vistas of forests and mountains beyond, in a clean-line contemporary style. Expect services galore, including sauna, massage, billiards, a free ski shuttle and some in-room internet connections. From the bus stop at Nový Dvor walk five minutes north in the direction of Štefanová.

Up on the mountain trails, there are several hikers lodges. On the western end of the Capital Ridge trail is the 40-bed **Chata pod Suchým** (☎ 569 7394; s/d 200/400Sk). In the valley below Poludňový grúň, near the upper terminus of the Paseky chairlift, **Chata na Grúni** (☎ 569 5324; www.chatanagruni.sk; per person 270Sk) has four- to six-bed rooms with shared facilities and a self-service restaurant.

Eating

The food situation in the park is pretty bleak; most Slovaks bring their own. There are takeaway stands at Starý Dvor and there's a **supermarket** (*potraviny*) at the valley turn-off in Terchová. Farm implements decorate the walls at **Reštaurácia Starý Majer** (☎ 569 5419; mains 100-200Sk; ☎ 10am-9pm), whose hearty *halušky* (*gnocchi*-like dumplings, usually served with sheep's cheese and bacon) top the menu.

Pretty much every lodging has some sort of restaurant. The pizza at **Penzión Stárek** is pretty darn good (80Sk to 120Sk).

Getting There & Around

Plenty of buses serve Terchová from Žilina; several on weekdays and weekends continue on from Terchová to valley stops including Vrátna Štefanová (40Sk, 55 minutes), Vrátna Starý Dvor (47Sk, 55 minutes) and Vrátna výťah (50Sk, one hour), at the top of the valley near Chata Vrátna.

SLOVAKIA'S ROBIN HOOD

Juraj Jánošík has been talked about, written about, sung about, painted on canvas, etched on glass and carved in wood. He's been the subject of three movies and an opera – there's even a Jánošík card game. It's hard to imagine a bigger national character. But, like any legend, Jánošík is a mix of fact and fiction.

Born into a peasant family in Terchová in 1688, in 1703 Jánošík joined up with Ferenc Rákóczi II to fight the Habsburgs. While away his mother died and his father was beaten to death by their landlord for taking time off to bury her. Vowing revenge against the ruling class, Jánošík took to the hills and spent years robbing from the rich and giving to the poor (although it can be argued that he didn't make much of a distinction about who he stole from, nor did he give it away).

In 1713 he was captured in a pub. (Some say he was finally chased down because he murdered a priest he stole from.) Story goes that an old lady threw down some peas to trip him up as he tried to escape. He was sentenced and hung on a hook by the ribs to die (*gory, eh?*) somewhere in the town of Liptovský Mikuláš.

Ask a Slovak about Jánošík and you'll likely hear what sensational thing or other the robber-hero did in their ancestral village. In a country that was dominated by foreigners for most of history, it's not surprising that a guy fighting the system (maybe) is considered legendary.

In the winter there's a free ski shuttle between the valley resort areas. Ask about bicycle rental at the Tourist Information Centre Terchová; places that rent come and go.

MARTIN

☎ 043 / pop 59,490

Museums, museums, museums. If you have an interest in folk arts and architecture, linguistic and national history, or in Slovak fine art and photography, then Martin has something to offer for you. The industrial ugliness of the town seems in direct contrast to its significance in Slovak national identity. Martin sits in the broad Turiec valley separating the Malá and Veľká Fatra ranges. Unless you're going hiking in the area's hills, you might want to make this a day trip from Žilina. But whatever you do, stay long enough to try the other thing Martin is famous for, the dark, delicious Martiner beer.

History

In 1861 Turčianský Svätý Martin, a minor town, was pushed into the history books when a meeting of intellectuals here issued the so-called Martin Memorandum, urging the establishment of a Slovak-language administrative district within Hungary.

This drew only silence from the authorities at the time. Two years later a private cultural and educational foundation called Matica Slovenská (the kernel of Slovakia) was launched. The foundation promoted Slovak-language schools, museums, musical societies, publishing etc. During subsequent years of Hungarian cultural domination, Martin became the epicentre of simmering Slovak aspirations. On 30 October 1918 the Martin Declaration, in which the Slovaks formally opted to federate with the Czechs, was issued here. Though Bratislava became the capital of Slovakia, the town of Martin remained its sentimental centre. Today the town is still known for its strong nationalist slant.

Orientation

Most long-distance trains stop at the Vrútky station, in a modern industrial suburb to the north. From there bus 10 and 12 go the 7km south to the long-distance bus station in what remains of 'old' Martin. The small train station opposite is used mostly for regional connections. The main square, Nám SNP, is three blocks east.

In addition to the bus station, you can catch local buses by the open-air market south of Nám SNP. The *skanzen* (open-air village museum) is 3km southeast of the centre (about 100Sk by taxi).

Information

There are plenty of ATMs scattered around Nám SNP.

Netcafé (☎ 439 3195; Divadelná 7; per hr 30Sk;

🕒 10.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) In the courtyard.

Post office (nr Pavla Mudroňa & Andreja Kmeťa)

Tourist Information Office Martin (☎ 423 8776; www.tikmartin.sk; Štefánika 9A) Loads of information are available on the 2nd floor of a funky glass-walled millennial monument midsquare. Pick up area hiking and biking maps here.

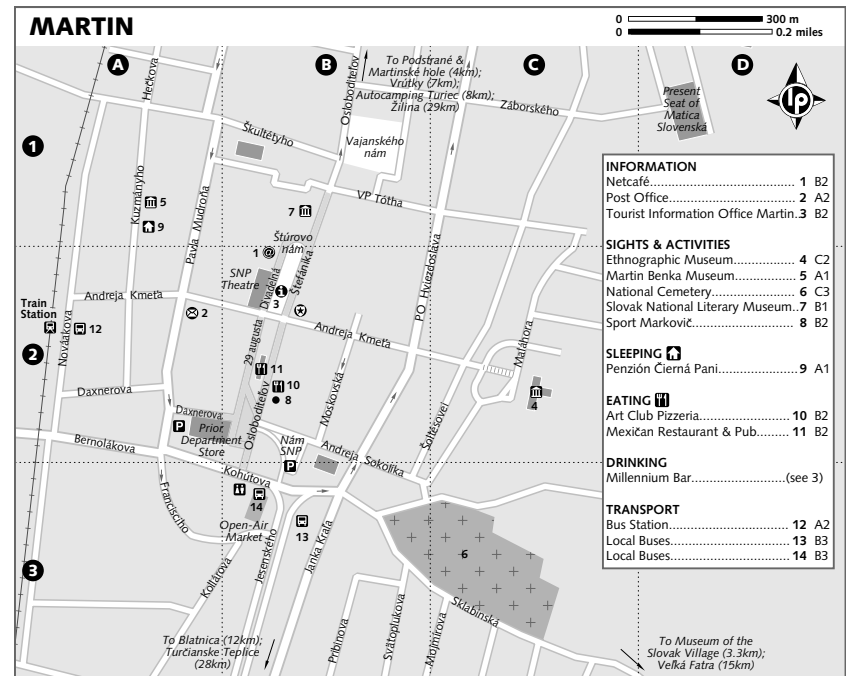
Sights

Traditional plaster and log buildings from all over the region have been moved to the **Museum of the Slovak Village** (Múzeum Slovenské Dediny; ☎ 423 9491; adult/student 50/30Sk; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sun May-Aug, to 5pm Sep & Oct, 10am-2.30pm Tue-Fri Nov-Apr). The country's biggest *skanzen* comes complete with a working *krcma* (tavern). Colourful costumed models and decorations that change with the season add interest to the traditional furnishings. Weekend programmes often include folk music. From the Vrútky train station take bus 10 or 11, or from the open-air market bus stop take southbound bus 10, 11, 20 or 41 to the end of the line at the Ladoveň housing estate. The museum is a further 1km hike up through the woods. It's only a 100Sk taxi ride from town.

Thought-provoking photography exhibits change regularly at the nationally run **Ethnographic museum** (☎ 413 1011; Maláhora 2; adult/student 50/25Sk; 🕒 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun). The encyclopaedic collection of Slovak folk costumes here is regarded as one of the most complete in Europe, though the display is a bit static.

The Matica Slovenská began in the building that is now the **Slovak National Literary museum** (☎ 413 4152; Osloboditeľov 11; adult/student 30/15Sk; 🕒 8am-4pm Tue-Sun). Today the Matica is housed in modern headquarters on Mudroňova, in the hills east of the city centre. Slovak artists and other cultural heroes rest in the modest **National cemetery** (Národný cintorín).

The former home and studio of Slovakia's best-known 20th-century painter is now the namesake **Martin Benka museum** (☎ 413 3190; Kuzmányho 34; adult/student 30/15Sk; 🕒 8am-4pm Tue-Fri,



9am-5pm Sat & Sun). The gallery brims with his happy, soft-focus paintings of rural life.

Sleeping & Eating

Seeing the museums as a day trip from Žilina, or from Lúčanská Fatra (right), are both viable alternatives to sleeping in a lacklustre town.

Autocamping Turiec (☎ 428 4215; www.autocampingturiec.sk; Kolónia Hviezda 92; per person in tent 130Sk, per person in bungalow 180-350Sk) Pleasant A-frame cottages sleep five, small cabins sleep two, and there's a field for tents. From the bus station take northbound bus 23 to the end of the line. Hike 1km west of the highway at Vrútky.

Penzión Čierna Pani (☎ 413 1523; www.penzion-cierna-pani.sk in Slovak; Kuzmányho 24; s/d 650/1100Sk) It's hard to miss this bright yellowish orange *penzión* as you go down the street. The furniture is kind of cheap, but then so are the room rates. Price includes the sauna. Book ahead.

Mexican Restaurant & Pub (☎ 090341695; Osloboditeľov 3; mains 120-180Sk; 🕒 10am-11pm Mon-Thu, 10am-3am Fri, noon-3am Sat & 2-11pm Sun) Hey *mucha-cho*, the burritos and fajitas are surprisingly good here (though jalapeños are scarce). This is a good place to socialise on weekends.

The pedestrian zone has several places to eat or drink, including the **Art Club Pizzeria** (Osloboditeľov 8; pizzas 80-150Sk) and the ultramodern **Millennium Bar** (Štefánika 9; 🕒 11am-midnight Sun-Thu, 11am-1am Fri & Sat) in the all-glass building constructed midsquare to celebrate the year 2000.

Getting There & Away

One daily express trains from Bratislava (316Sk, 3½ hours) and seven from Žilina (36Sk, 30 minutes), but at least 10 a day stop from each at Vrútky, 7km north of the town. Local trains go south to Banská Bystrica (84Sk, 1½ hours). There are six daily direct bus connections from Bratislava (272Sk, 4½ to five hours), and 10 to Žilina (44Sk, 30 minutes).

AROUND MARTIN

☎ 043

Lúčanská Fatra

The western, non-national park half of the Malá Fatra range, the Lúčanská Fatra, gets its name from its dominant peak, Veľká lúka (1476m), northwest of Martin. The hills are traversed by popular trails. **Podstráne** is

a wooded resort area with hillside holiday homes, from which a year-round *lanovka* (chairlift) climbs to **Martinské hole** (Martin Pinnacles), a ski and summer holiday area on the slopes of Veľká lúka. Or you can walk a half-day climb up the snaky yellow-marked trail. In summer there are fine hikes from Martinské hole on the red-marked trail along the Lúčanská Fatra ridge. About 11km north on this trail, guarding the entrance to the Váh gorge, is Strečno castle (p378).

The Turiec valley and surrounding hills are not only good for hiking, they're also well set up for cycling. Bike rental's available at **Sport Markovič** (Map p385; ☎ 422 3000; www.sportmarkovic.sk; Osloboditeľov 6, Martin; per day/week 300/1200Sk; 🚲 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat).

Martin's information office has a list of the many *chaty* and *privaty* (private rooms) for rent, or you could look them up at www.infoturiec.sk (click 'ubytovanie' to see the list). The steep chaletlike roof of **Hotel Grandis** (☎ 422 0015; www.grandis.sk; Hrdinov SNP 350, Podstrané; s/d 2800/3300Sk; 📍 🚻) conceals a crisp, modern, blue-and-white interior. The restaurant has a terrace, the café a fireplace.

To get to Podstráne, take northbound local bus 40 or 41 from the bus station in Martin, about 4km to the end of the line. The chairlift is 800m from the bus.

Veľká Fatra National Park

There are numerous marked trails in the 403-sq-km **Veľká Fatra National Park** (www.sopsr.sk/velkafatra), down from the ridge line into the river valley south of Martin. If you're planning on walking in the area, be sure to buy the detailed hiking and cycling VKÚ map No 121 (1:50,000; 80Sk).

Long and short loop trails start at the picturesque village of **Blatnica**, 15km south in the Turiec valley. A fine, long day hike follows the Gaderská valley at the foot of the 1574m Krížna peak, with an option to return down the valley of Blatnica past a 13th-century castle. The ridges between these two valleys contain several nature reserves. The town itself contains the small **Karol Plicka museum** (☎ 494 8142; Prónayovská kúria, Blatnica; adult/student 30/15Sk; 🚻 10.30am-1.30pm Tue-Sat), dedicated to the nationally famous photographer who lived from 1894 to 1987.

Autocamping Blatnica (☎ 494 4207; per person/tent 40/60Sk, per person d 200Sk), 2km south of the centre, has a big field for 100 tents and hostel rooms.

The Tourist Information Office Martin has lists of area *chaty* and many are posted under *ubytovanie* (lodging) at www.infoturiec.sk. Blatnica is connected hourly by bus from Martin (25Sk, 30 minutes) on weekdays, only a couple go on weekends.

ORAVA VALLEY

☎ 043

The Orava river rises in Poland, twists down through the highlands west of the High Tatras and eventually flows into the Váh river east of Martin. Just as the water flows together, so have Polish and Slovak customs and language, resulting in the area's Goral culture. The northernmost of Slovakia's regions has scenic villages, with ranks of traditional log houses, some with carved fronts. Other highlights include one of Slovakia's most photogenic castles, a first-rate *skanzen* and a hiker's back door into the High Tatras via the Orava's tributary valleys.

The upper valley and five villages were flooded by the Orava Dam in 1954. Unregulated postwar industrialisation has also blighted some stretches. Because of the steep valleys, regional transport can be tedious. About 6km north of Trstená on Hwy 59 is a border crossing to Chyżne in Poland, on the road to Kraków.

ORAVA CASTLE

The classic 1922 vampire film *Nosferatu* featured the pointed towers of **Orava castle** (Oravský hrad; ☎ 582 0240; www.oravamuseum.sk; adult/student 140/80Sk; 🚻 8.30am-5.30pm Jun-Aug, 8.30am-5pm May, Sep & Oct; by appointment Jan-Mar), which rise from the impossibly narrow blade of rock. The little town of Oravský Podzámok is quite overshadowed by this imposing structure. The castle is visible from the train station, across the river.

The oldest parts of one of the most complete castles in Slovakia date from at least 1267, with later additions by many royal and aristocratic owners. Today's look is largely the result of a reconstruction after the 1800 fire.

Ask if an English-speaking guide is available to take you on the compulsory tour. The museum is full of weapons, folk art and period furniture. It's said that looking in one of the mirrors can make you beautiful, and

another one, ugly – make sure to ask your guide to point out the difference.

During special summer programmes fairy-tale characters re-enact their legends as you tour, you can visit the castle at night, or opt to be lead by vampires (in late August). Sword fights and medieval marketplace hawkers are standard.

Below the castle in the village there's a small grocery and a pizza place/beer hall. **Penzión Toliar** (☎ 589 3124; www.penzion-rosnicka.sk; r per person 400Sk; 📍) is a fine grey-and-white rococo inn at the foot of the castle. Concerned owners spruce up the lodging and the restaurant before every tourist season. On the road to Dolný Kubín, 1.5km south of the castle, **Penzión Racibor** (☎ 582 3353; www.racibor.sk; Raciborie 382; r 600Sk; 📍 🚻) is a newish log lodge with a fire ring out back for barbecues, and a sauna for cooking indoors.

Trains bound for Oravský Podzámok require a change in Kraľovany (36Sk, one hour, 10 daily), 27km south. Žilina is a 40-minute onward train ride (48Sk, 18 daily) from there, and Liptovský Mikuláš (56Sk, 20 daily) is 45 minutes.

PODBIEL

A photogenic little village well known for its *drevenica* (log cottages), Podbiel is on your way to and from almost anywhere in Orava. A small museum dedicated to folk customs is open only sporadically. From here you can take a two-hour **raft trip** (☎ 532 0451; per person 250Sk) down river to Oravský Podzámok beneath the castle. Traditional *plte* are poled along by guides dressed up in Goral folk costume. (Want a shorter trip? One-hour trips leave from Horná Lehota.) Look for the beehives on the side of the road as you go along. This area is known for its honey.

Podbiel is on the train line north of Oravský Podzámok (18Sk, 30 minutes, 10 daily).

ZUBEREC

The village of Zuberec, 13km up the Studený valley from Podbiel, is a pretty little gateway to the Western Tatras, with its fair share of traditional architecture at the nearby *skanzen*. The **Tourist Information Office Zuberec** (☎ 532 0777; www.zuberec.sk; Hlavná 289; 🚻 8am-5pm Mon-Sat Jun & Sep; 8am-6pm Jul & Aug) can provide you with hiking maps and books. There's a little pastry shop café and the three-terminal **Internet Čitaren** (Hrady 307; 🚻 2-10pm).

Orava Village Museum (Múzeum Oravskej Dediny; ☎ 539 5149; adult/student 50/30Sk; 🚻 8am-5pm daily Jul & Aug, 8am-5pm Mon-Sat Jun & Sep, 8am-3.30pm Tue-Sat Oct-May), 3km east of the village, has a more traditional layout than many *skanzen*s. Its 50 or so log buildings are huddled close to the stream, as was typical in mountain villages. Since it's one of the few open year-round, here you can experience first-hand the harshness of a snowy winter. The oldest and most impressive building is an early 15th-century wooden church. Ask for the explanatory pamphlet in English.

The street from the village toward the *skanzen* is lined with *privaty* and *Zimmer frei* (free rooms) signs. By all means stop by the open fire at **Koliba Josu** (☎ 539 5915; www.kolibajosu.sk; 469 Zuberec; mains 70-120Sk; 📍 🚻); Slovak home cooking doesn't get any better. To start, try the fried potato pancake topped with *bryndža* (sheep's cheese) and crackling, or maybe the goulash soup made with lamb. Blueberry dumplings for dessert are a rare treat. The large log cabin has double rooms upstairs and cabins out back. Rooms per person cost 290Sk. It's 2km south on the road to Liptovský Mikuláš.

Zuberec is not on a train line and bus connections are sporadic. Two buses a day connect to Liptovský Mikuláš (47Sk, one hour). Counter to the usual pattern, more buses go to Podbiel (18Sk, 20 minutes) on weekends (daily on weekdays, 11 on weekends), from where you can switch to a train heading to Oravský Podzámok.

Centru Športu (☎ 539 5294; Zuberec 449) rents mountain bikes for a song at 120Sk per day.

WESTERN TATRAS

One way to escape the eager crowds in the High Tatras is to explore the western end of the range, called the **Western Tatras** (Západné Tatry; www.tatry.bsk.sk in Slovak). You have to be a go-getter though; transport's thin, facilities limited and the trails demanding. VKÚ map No 112 (1:50,000; 100Sk) has both hiking and cycling trails clearly marked. For weather and mountain conditions contact the local **Mountain Rescue Service** (☎ 539 5218; 🚻 8am-3pm) in Zveroka, 8km east of Zuberec. Trails from these points quickly lead into some of the highest mountains in Central Europe; don't attempt any long-distance treks here unless you have experience with high-altitude walking and climbing.

CHEESY BITS

Spend a few days in Central Slovakia and you'll realise just how important sheep's cheese is to the local economy. You can buy it at roadside stands, at stands near the ski slopes, and from display refrigerators in restaurants. A variety of different shapes and sizes is available: *ostiopok* is a semihard ball shape, *korbačky* (little whips) are braided ropelike strands, and then there's *bryndža*, the cheese at the heart of Slovak tradition. The soft, spreadable cheese is first mentioned by chronicles in the 15th century. It's thought that Vlach (Wallachian) shepherds may have introduced the process into Slovakia after wandering out of Romania.

The first *bryndža* factory was built in 1787 and prior to EU admission farmers and producers fought hard for their right not to pasteurise. Samples were sent off to French and German labs and *bryndža* was pronounced a viable EU product – hoorah! You can try it on top of *halušky* (*gnocchi*-like dumplings) and *pirohy* (moon-shaped dumplings, like Polish *pierogies*), mixed with butter and paprika as an appetiser spread, in *demikat* soup, and on top of fried potato pancakes. If you haven't had enough, look for *žinčina*, a traditional sheep's whey drink. Nowhere is it as fresh as in the rolling hills of Central Slovakia.

From the trailhead at **Chata Zverovka** (☎ 539 5327; www.chatazverovka.sk; Zverovka; dm/d 270/680Sk) there's a good day's hike to **Roháčska plesá** (1719m), where a small plateau hides three alpine lakes and a picturesque waterfall.

A very popular camp site, **ATC Oravice** (☎ 539 4114; www.oravice.sk/atc/slovak.htm; per person/tent 50/80Sk) is 15km north of Zverovka.

Buses run from Zuberec to both Zverovka (14Sk, 15 minutes, daily on weekdays, six on weekends) and Oravice (22Sk, 30 minutes, three daily).

LOW TATRAS

☎ 044

For many, the Low Tatras (Nízke Tatry) are synonymous with Jasná, Slovakia's best-known ski resort, in Demänova valley.

The 80km east–west ridge, framed between the valleys of the upper Váh river and the smaller Hron river, is most dramatic where it pushes above the tree line, and excellent hiking trails and ski runs crisscross the territory.

Since 1978 much of the mountains have been part of the 810-sq-km Low Tatras National Park, though the lower eastern half is the wildest, with significant numbers of brown bears, wildcats and other wildlife.

Historically, the administrative district that encompassed this area was called Liptov, and residents still refer to it as such. A national landmark village, a *skanzen* and the nation's biggest folk festival preserve the indigenous culture of the region.

As you travel look for roadside stands selling fresh cheese. Oh, and don't miss the thermal waters.

The website www.liptov.sk has thorough accommodation listings for the region.

LIPTOVSKÝ MIKULÁŠ

pop 32,930

As a base for heading off into the Low Tatras and exploring nearby villages, Liptovský Mikuláš is useful enough, and the sight of peaks rising on all sides of the valley is quite striking. Still, who wants to be in a city when the mountains and nature are so close?

Other than being the place where Juraj Jánošík (the 'Slovak Robin Hood'; p382) was executed, the town today is known for being near the mammoth thermal water park, Tatralandia.

Orientation

The mighty Váh river doesn't look so big here, pooling into a 24-sq-km reservoir called Liptovská Mara, the 'Liptov Sea', which starts 2km west of town and has public access 6km west, near Tatralandia.

The bus and train stations are located 500m north of the small main square, *Nám Osloboditeľov*.

Information

City Information Centre (☎ 552 2418; www.icm.mikulas.sk; *Nám Mieru* 1; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri, 8am–noon Sat, 11am–4pm Sun mid–Jun–mid–Sep; 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 8am–noon Sat mid–Sep–mid–Jun) Well prepared for the onslaught of tourists in summer and winter – hit 'em with any question you have about the region.

Liptour (☎ 551 4141; www.liptour.sk; *Nám mieru* 1) Can book accommodation in Demänova valley.

Post office (*Hodžova*)

Z@vináč Internet Café (*Pišúta* 19; per hr 60Sk;

☎ 10am–10pm Mon–Sat, 2–10pm Sun) Internet and email.

Sights & Activities

JANKO KRÁL MUSEUM

The leading poet of Slovak romanticism is honoured at the **Janko Král Museum** (☎ 552 2554; *Nám Osloboditeľov* 30; adult/student 30/15Sk; ☎ 10am–5pm mid–Jun–mid–Sep; 9am–4pm Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm Sun mid–Sep–mid–Jun), which also houses a reconstruction of **Mikuláš torture chamber** (*Mikulášska mučiareň*; adult/student 10/5Sk), the town dungeon where Juraj Jánošík was 'interrogated'.

AQUA PARK TATRALANDIA

The first water park in Slovakia, **Aqua Park Tatralandia** (☎ 547 4536; adult/student 450/280Sk; ☎ 9am–9pm Jun–Sep, 10am–9pm Apr–May & Oct–late Dec; 10am–10pm late Dec–Mar), just keeps getting bigger and bigger: six thermal pools (four open year-round), two regular swimming pools, slides and rides galore; an indoor spa with grottos and saunas; and outdoor sports, like a summer rope course and winter snow-tubing run. Western World, the newest attraction, is a rodeo theme show. There are cabins to rent and a train-shaped shuttle bus that runs to the park from the station in town (20Sk, hourly, 9am to 8pm). Tatralandia is quite the spectacle. The car park plateau has the most beautiful valley view of five mountain ranges (sigh).

Dip in the same thermal waters, with less hoopla, at the Bešeňová Thermal Park (p390), 18km west of Liptovský Mikuláš. The **Liptovská Mara** reservoir was the town's original aquatic playground. Head to the ATC Liptovský Trnovec camping ground, where there's boat hire and a popular beach.

Mutton Sport Services (☎ 0907481311; www.mutton.sk; *Ul 1 mája* 25) can arrange canoe trips on the Váh river as well as adventure sports, like paragliding in the Low Tatras.

Sleeping

ATC Liptovský Trnovec (☎ 559 8458; www.atctrnovec.sk; Liptovský Trnovec; per person/tent 110/60Sk, 4-person bungalow 2200Sk; (P) ☎) Families fill up the 1000-person capacity of this lakeside camping ground, attracted by the swimming pool, beach, fishing, boat rental, playgrounds, miniature golf course...

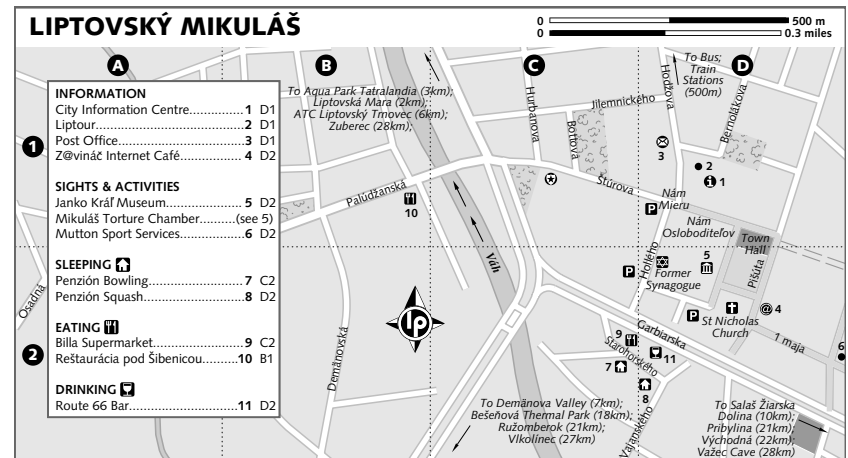
Like sports? Play while you stay at **Penzion Bowling** (☎ 562 0625; www.penzionbowling.sk; *Starohorského* 3; (P)) , with three lanes in the lobby/bar, and at **Penzion Squash** (☎ 562 0053; www.squash-liptov.sk; *Starohorského* 1; (P)), with a glass-walled court as you enter. Both are modern (wi-fi and all).

Eating & Drinking

The main square has many eateries.

Reštaurácia pod Šibenicou (☎ 554 1130; *Palučanská* 5; mains 100–170Sk) Located across the river, this place is a local fave.

Salas Žiarska Dolina (☎ 558 6318; www.salasziar.sk; *Žiarska dolina*; mains 60–120Sk) If you have a car, drive the 10km for the real deal; this 'sheep



Crystal Ski (☎ 559 1460; www.crystalski.sk; Hotel Grand complex; ☞ 9am-4.30pm) can arrange rock climbing, paragliding and the like, in addition to bike rental.

CAVES

Two limestone caves in the lower valley are part of Slovakia's biggest continuous cave system. About 2km of passages in the **Demänova freedom cave** (Demänovská jaskyňa slobody; ☎ 559 1673; adult/student 150/130Sk) are open to visitors, and the smaller **Demänova ice cave** (Demänovská ľadová jaskyňa; ☎ 554 8170; adult/student 140/120Sk; ☞ mid-May–Sep) has ice formations at the lowest level. Daily cave tours leave every hour on the hour between 9am and 4pm June to August; other months, 9am to 2pm. Take an extra layer against the subterranean chill.

HIKING

Better than going below ground is rising above it, on fine ridge walks with long views across the Tatras. From the bus terminus at Jasná it's a 20-minute walk up (south) to the mountain hut Chata Koliesko (halfway you pass a hillside *bufet*). From there a **chairlift** (adult/student round-trip 150/120Sk; ☞ 8.30am-3.30pm) ascends to **Luková** (1670m) below the range's highest peak, **Chopok** (2024m). To get a little closer, you could depart Záradky via **chairlift** (1 stage round-trip adult/student 150/120Sk, 2 stages 250/200Sk; ☞ 8.30am-4.30pm) to **Rovná hola** (1483m), where you change to go on to **Chopok úboč** (1829m). From there a trail returns via Luková to Jasná. Take extra layers even in summer.

Chopok is typically packed with people; you can escape the crowds by following the rocky, red ridge trail along the crest, west for 35 minutes to **Dereše** (2003m), or east two hours to **Ďumbier** (2043m), from where you could take the green trail through Široka valley down to the valley road and bus stops below Záradky. Or, continue west past Ďumbier and in six hours you reach **Čertovica sedlo**, a mountain pass village with services on a north-south road. (There are *chaty* en route.)

Alternatively, from Chopok you could mount the crest and hike down the *juh* (south) side 1½ hours to the Chata Kosodrevina in the less-developed Bystrá valley. From there a **chairlift** (adult/student 130/100Sk; ☞ 8.30am-4.30pm Jun-Sep), or another 1½-hour walk, lands you in Srdiečko, a village with several hotels and the occasional bus out, via Brezno, to Banská Bystrica.

SKIING

Jasná is the best downhill skiing area in both republics. It's possible to ski both the *sever* (north) and the *juh* sides of Chopok mountain. With 24 runs (eight with snow-making capacity, three lighted), there's a good range for all levels. Equipment rental stores and stands (open 8.30am to 4.30pm) are near the car park at the base of each ski area. Skis or snowboard equipment go for about 400Sk per day. During peak season, lift passes for an adult/student are 690/490Sk per day and 3990/2660Sk per week. Crystal Ski (left) can arrange snowmobile rides and snow windsurfing. There's an ice rink and skate rental behind the Hotel Liptov and snow rafting in Záradky.

Sleeping

There are accommodation options everywhere you look in Jasná. The odds of finding a room without a booking are pretty good in summer but nil in winter. A multitier system, slightly different at every hotel, makes quoting rates tricky. Prices are at the highest during Christmas and Easter. The next tier, about 30% less, is January to March for most hotels. Here we quote mid-high season (June to September), generally 20% less than the high-season prices. Low season (April and May, October to Christmas) rooms can be up to 50% off the highest room price.

Slovakotour (p391) and Liptour (p389) can help with private accommodation in the valley, at prices starting at 300Sk per person. Also check out the private listings on www.liptov.sk (called 'bed and breakfast').

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Tri Studničky (☎ 547 8000; www.tri.studnicky.sk; s/d 1725/2200Sk; P ☞ ☞ ☞ ☞ ☞) Massive logs hold up the glass-and-stone front entrance, a roaring fire blazes in the stone hearth inside. Furnishings are mid-century mod with low-slung lines and earthy hues. A copper wall in the restaurant sets off all the wood and stone to good effect. A few feet behind the hotel runs a picturesque stream with a wooden bridge and path beyond. Upstairs, the plaid bedspreads are appropriately woody, just not as upscale as the fabulous public room appointments. You really can't do better in the valley.

LOWER VALLEY

Hotel Bystrina & Camp Site (☎ 554 8163; www.hotelbystrina.sk; s/d 875/1100Sk, per person/tent 100/80Sk; P) The plain and simple doubles are some of the cheapest around. There's an 8-hectare camping ground that is quite shady around the edges at the base of the valley. Two restaurants are on site.

Penzión Energetik (☎ 547 6911; www.slovrekrea.sk in Slovak; r/ste 900/1300Sk) One of the many accommodation options with the log lodge look, this one has a sauna, sun bed and hydromassage shower. Some of the rooms are wheelchair-friendly, quite a rarity.

Apartmány Solum (☎ 562 3853; www.solum.sk; 4-person apt 2400Sk; P ☞ ☞) What a modern marvel: new and stylish one-bedroom apartments have a small kitchen and pull-out couch in the seating area. Downstairs, the communal living room has leather couches to lounge around the fireplace beside the billiard table. Offers wi-fi and bike rental.

JASNÁ

Hotel Liptov (☎ 559 1506; www.hotelliptov.sk; s/d 750/1000Sk, without bathroom 350/800Sk; P) Small shared bathrooms are the bargain of the hill (200m from the ski slopes). Adjacent to the sport-oriented hotel is an archery park, a paintball course and an ice skating rink (in season). Ski and sport rental.

Hotel Grand (☎ 559 9141; www.grandjasna.sk; s/d 1950/2600Sk; P ☞ ☞ ☞ ☞ ☞) One hundred and twenty rooms fan out in two wings from a central hub that looks a bit like a shopping centre. There's even a small information centre next to the ski rental place. Bike rental, one chairlift ticket, pool and sauna are all included in the room rate. A wi-fi hotspot and baby-sitting are available.

MOUNTAIN HUTS

Chaty (mountain huts) can be anything from a basic roof over your head to a *horský hotel* (mountain hotel). All have food service of some sort.

Chata MR Štefánika (☎ 619 5120; www.chatamr.sk in Slovak; dm 270Sk) You're at the top of the world in this hiker's hut near Ďumbier peak. Breakfast is included and full board (200Sk) is an option. Six-bed rooms.

Chata Kosodrevina (☎ 0905516519; www.chata.kosodrevina.sk in Slovak; d/tr/q per person 350/300/250Sk) Over the hill and through the woods, dorm-like Chata Kosodrevina is on the south side of Chopok mountain. Sleeping-bag space will set you back just 150Sk.

Chata Koliesko (☎ 559 1674; www.liptov.sk/koliesko/s/d 850/1700Sk; P) A short hike up from Jasná, at the base of the chairlift, Koliesko could hardly be in a better spot or feel more like an alpine lodge. The kitschy-in-a-good-way restaurant (mains 160Sk to 350Sk) has a fireplace and the requisite skiing trophies.

Eating

Stand-alone restaurants are an endangered species here, but most lodgings have decent, handy restaurants. The ones in Hotel Tri Studničky (fancy) and Chata Koliesko (casual) are good. There are small buffets at the Luková and Chopok chairlift terminals. There's a *krčma* and food stands at Záradky and near the car park south of the ice cave. Small **Bistro Jasná** (☎ 559 1554; mains 95-150Sk; ☞ 8am-7pm), above the main Jasná car park, serves standard stuff.

Getting There & Away

Almost hourly buses run between Liptovský Mikuláš (with valley stops along the way) to Jasná (23Sk, 40 minutes).

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