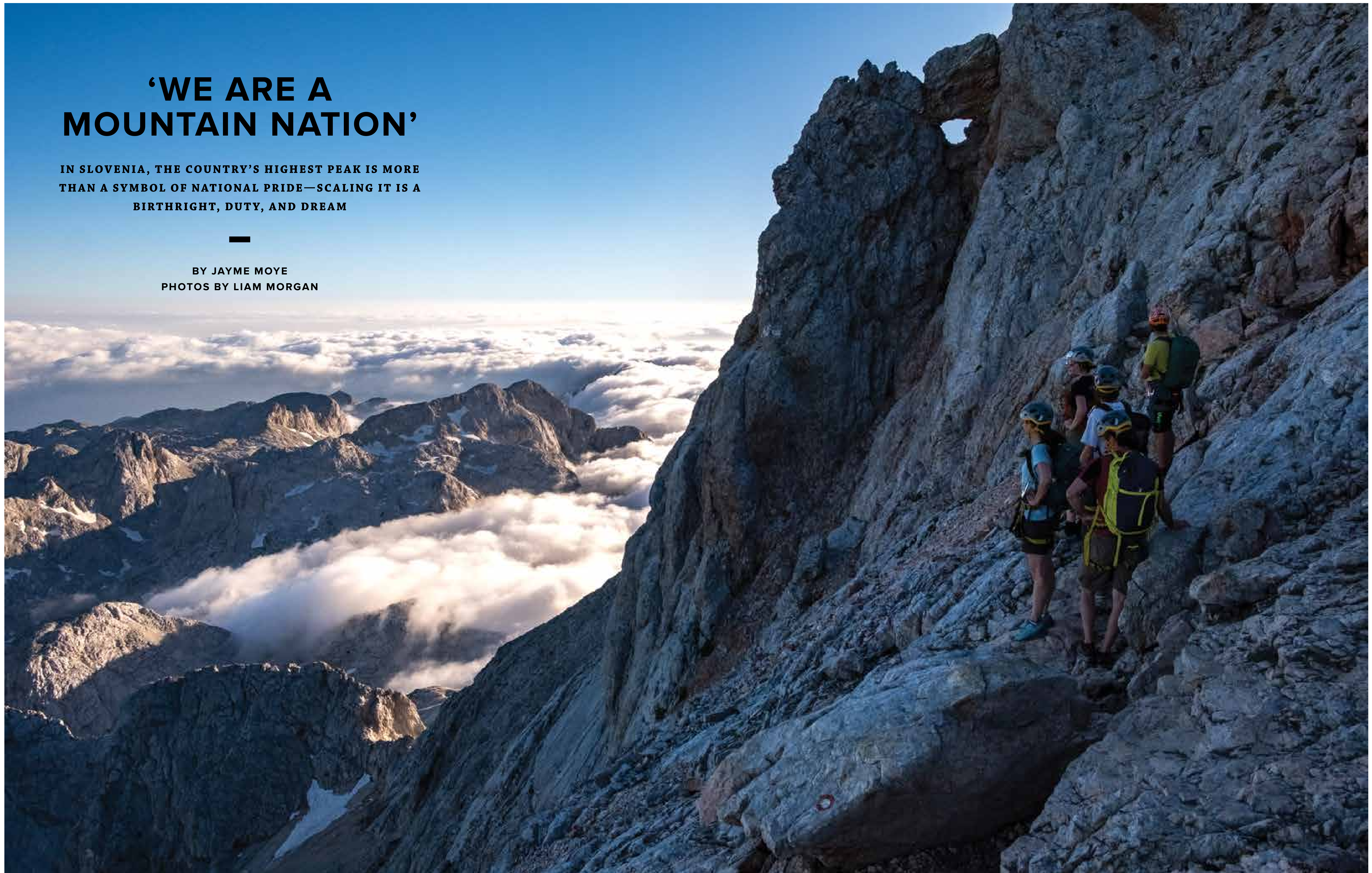

‘WE ARE A MOUNTAIN NATION’

IN SLOVENIA, THE COUNTRY’S HIGHEST PEAK IS MORE THAN A SYMBOL OF NATIONAL PRIDE—SCALING IT IS A BIRTHRIGHT, DUTY, AND DREAM

BY JAYME MOYE
PHOTOS BY LIAM MORGAN

After six hours of trekking, I crested one last rock ledge to stand atop the highest mountain in Slovenia. The first thing I noticed wasn't the three-hundred-sixty-degree view looking into Italy and Austria. It was the odd cylindrical structure at the summit's center. It appeared to be an oversized bottle rocket, about the height of a person, made of steel, with a jaunty tin flag flying from its pointy roof reading "1895."

I've climbed my share of peaks in the past decade, but I'd never seen anything quite like this. I tapped the cylinder with a knuckle and it rang hollow. I circled around and found a latched entry panel, above which was inscribed "Aljažev Stolp," Slovenian for Aljaž Tower. I turned to my local mountaineering guide with question marks in my eyes. "It's a storm shelter," he said. "And proof of how important this mountain is to Slovenia."

I already knew that the mountain, Triglav, is so highly regarded by Slovenians that it's the country's national symbol. Triglav is emblazoned on both Slovenia's flag and its coat of arms, as well as its fifty euro cent coin beneath the inscription "Oj Triglav moj dom," or "Oh Triglav my home." During World War II, a stylized depiction of Triglav's distinctive three peaks symbolized Slovenia's anti-Nazi resistance movement. Members of the resistance wore three-pronged caps they dubbed triglavkas. In 1991, shortly after Slovenia gained independence from the former Yugoslavia and became a democracy, then-president Milan Kučan said that it is the duty of every Slovenian to climb Triglav at least once in their lifetime.

And climb it they do. My guide Mitja Šorn is the former president of the Slovenian Mountain Guides Association and the country's resident Triglav expert, with more than three hundred fifty ascents to his name. He estimates that twenty-five percent of the county's two million citizens have climbed Triglav. More than ten thousand people climb it every year. Those numbers surprised me. Triglav isn't impressively tall, relatively speaking. There are ski resort towns like Breckenridge, Colorado, that sit at a higher elevation than Triglav's 9,396-foot apex. Nor does Triglav stand out among other mountains in the Alps, where there are much larger, more challenging, and more picturesque peaks, such as Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn, and the Eiger. Even within Slovenia, there are neighboring peaks that come within a couple hundred feet of Triglav's height. I wondered then, what is it about Triglav, or about Slovenians, that makes this mountain such an important part of the national identity? What drives a country to climb a mountain?

The question was more than just journalistic curiosity. While I live in the mountains of British Columbia now, I was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, in the largest resettlement of Slovenians in the United States. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all four of my mom's grandparents—along with about twenty thousand of their countrymen and women—immigrated to Cleveland seeking opportunity in the city's burgeoning steel and iron industries. But my mom never spoke the language, and by the time I was born my family had lost all connection with living relatives in Slovenia. By climbing Triglav, I hoped to better understand my cultural heritage.

I started my quest in Slovenia's capital city, Ljubljana, which is storybook-pretty, with a hilltop castle and a river winding through its historic cobblestone center. I hired a local tour guide named Simona to walk me around the city's farmers market and educate me on the region's agricultural bounty and fine wines. As we nibbled potica, a traditional nut roll pastry, I asked her if she'd climbed Triglav. She said she'd tried the previous summer, but didn't make it past Triglavski Dom—Slovenia's highest mountain hut at just over eight thousand feet—because of bad weather. She planned to try again the summer I was visiting.

I rented a car for the hour-long drive to Triglavski Narodni Park, Slovenia's only national park, to meet Mitja for our summit hike. The man behind the rental counter was friendly and talkative. I told him I was heading to the Alps to climb Triglav. "Then you will be more of a Slovenian than me," he said with a hearty laugh. "They say you are not a true Slovenian unless you've climbed Triglav."

"So when are you going to climb it?" I asked. He looked apologetic. He said he tried to climb a smaller, easier mountain and it didn't go well. "That's when I knew I am not a mountain climber," he said, with a shrug and another laugh.

Later, at the Krma Valley trailhead parking lot, I told Mitja I'd asked some city folk about climbing Triglav. "I went oh for two," I said.

"Ask anyone from a mountain town," he said, as he pulled climbing helmets from the back of his van, "and they will have climbed Triglav for sure, and more than once."

The ridge leading to the summit, top, and a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of the Snows, above, which shares a plateau with Triglav Lodge. Previous: Julian Alps limestone was formed beneath an equatorial sea and moved north via tectonics.

Triglav National Park was created in 1924 (then called Alpine Conservation Park), making it one of the oldest national parks in Europe. It's been a UNESCO biosphere reserve since 2003.

Slovenia is about the size of New Jersey. Mountains cover the country's north side along its border with Austria, and especially the northwest, where the national park is located and Mitja is from. He was nine years old the first time he climbed Triglav. His eleven year old has already climbed it three times, starting when the boy was six. His nine year old has only climbed Triglav once, but he was five then.

That's not to say that fulfilling the "duty of every Slovenian" is easy. Triglav is located in the Julian Alps, a fiercely steep range. The easiest route, the one I hoped to ascend, gains five thousand feet of elevation in four and a half miles to reach Triglav Hut. From there, the hike becomes more technical, gaining another thirteen hundred vertical feet along Triglav's narrow, exposed summit ridge. Most people take two days to climb the peak, opting to spend a night at the hut (which sleeps three hundred fifty) either before or after tackling the summit ridge.

The morning we set out, on a Sunday in June 2022, Mitja had two other guides leading two other groups for a total of twenty-two clients. Besides my group from Canada, there were people from the U.S., the U.K., the Netherlands, Portugal, and Germany. And where were all the Slovenians? "They don't use guides," Mitja said.

I met one such Slovenian at the trailhead parking lot. Anita was sitting inside the open hatchback of her car, changing into her hiking boots, wearing a black Lycra t-shirt and matching shorts, her straight brown hair pulled into a tight ponytail. She told me she climbs Triglav a handful of times every summer and that this was her first ascent of the season. It takes her eight hours car-to-car, including a brief stop at the hut's restaurant for a coffee before hitting the summit ridge. She pulled out her phone and showed me her Instagram account, where, every time she stands on the Triglav summit, she posts a photo of herself waving a Slovenian flag.

The Krma Valley trail starts in the forest, a dense intermingling of beech trees and conifers, on a gradual path littered with limestone shards. I thought I was a competent hiker of above-average fitness, but after only a few minutes of hiking, someone wanted to pass. It turned out to be a young Slovenian couple wearing the unmistakable waist packs and headbands of ultra-runners. We stepped aside. "Hvala, thanks," they said, translating their Slovenian to English as they ran by.

Then, forty minutes later, just as we were breaking out of the forest and into a subalpine meadow occupied by a flock of grazing sheep, I heard the clickity-clack of hiking poles on limestone. Someone else was gaining on us. This time it was a team of about eight middle-aged Slovenians wearing what appeared to be matching road-bike racing team kits. They were hiking in a single-file paceline at top speed, their poles hitting the earth in near unison. We stepped aside again. Mitja found out later that they were from an endurance sports club and had ridden their bikes to the trailhead.

I'd heard that professional Slovenian athletes were hardcore, and I remembered reading in *Alpine Warriors* by Bernadette McDonald that Slovenian mountaineers played a major role in the golden era of alpinism in the Himalaya during the mid-seventies. I just hadn't considered that tenacity trickled down to everyday people, too.

"Yes," said Mitja, "Slovenians take their mountain sports very seriously. But not too seriously." He said that before he earned his guiding certification in 2009, he hiked to the top of Triglav every other week during the summer carrying three cases of beer on his back. The guy who sold the beer at the summit paid him one hundred euros each time.

"Wait, there's a guy selling beer on the summit?" I said, noticing that my breathing had become a bit labored. We were in the alpine now, picking our way through unsteady limestone scree with no vegetation to shield us from the noon sun.

"Yeah, but you won't see him because it's Sunday," Mitja said.

The trail turned sharply to the right and Triglav's rugged summit came into view for the first time. As did another Slovenian—an elderly man in a straw hat and neon green shirt, walking the final approach to the hut with his dog. Mitja answered before I asked. "It's not allowed to bring dogs to the hut," he said. "But Slovenians are a little bit Balkan—they don't follow the rules, or only some."

When we reached the hut, I noticed how its contours mirrored Triglav's summit ridge: a massive, multistory cabin in the shape of a triangle, with sunlight glinting off its metal siding. About forty people were milling around on the large wooden deck, eating, talking, and soaking up the alpine scenery. At one of the picnic tables, I joined a pair of wiry Slovenian men in their late fifties, dressed in shorts and tank tops, their skin tanned the color and texture of leather.

The summit shelter is constructed from iron- and zinc-coated sheet steel and was assembled in five hours in August 1895.

Brane, who was finishing a cigarette, estimated that he's climbed Triglav about fifty times. His friend about twenty times. I asked Brane why he climbed Triglav and he looked a little surprised by the question. After a pause, he said, "Because Triglav is amazing."

After they left, I spoke with Miro, fifty-five, and his son Marcel, nineteen. They were drinking beer to celebrate their ascent—Miro's fifth time and Marcel's first. Miro said he last climbed Triglav in 1988; he did it again because his son asked him. It was harder than he remembered. "I must have forgot," he said with a grin that doubled as a grimace.

Marcel told me he was inspired to climb Triglav "because it is the biggest mountain in our country." And because his father had done it multiple times by the time he was Marcel's age.

It had taken them almost twelve hours to get to the top and back down to the hut. They didn't use safety equipment for the summit ridge. "It was very hard," Marcel said. "I was very tired. I barely made it down. So it was probably my last time—my first and last time."

I asked them if it was true that every Slovenian aspires to climb Triglav. "Yes, we are a mountain nation," said Marcel.

When it was time for my group to go for the summit, I donned safety gear—a helmet and a climbing harness with a leash that could be secured to the rock where a stumble would otherwise be fatal. As we began the ninety-minute ascent of the summit ridge, I asked Mitja about the metal bolts, cables, and rungs that had been drilled into the limestone to help us negotiate the path—a via ferrata, Italian for "iron way," which is common across Europe. He said the practice started on Triglav in the late nineteenth century to make the summit more accessible. It became especially important after World War II, during Slovenia's Communist period as part of Yugoslavia, when everyone was supposed to be equal. "The idea," Mitja said, as we grabbed metal rungs to negotiate a particularly steep, smooth section of limestone, "is that the mountaintop is the birthright of every Slovenian—not just mountaineers and athletes."

Having anchors and handholds built into the rock let me spend more time sightseeing and less time micromanaging safety. I relished glancing back down on the hut, now in miniature on a dramatic karst plateau among sweeping limestone pinnacles. As we angled closer to Triglav's summit, the views opened to the full three hundred sixty degrees. We were above the clouds, which churned like a river, swirling around the tips of lesser peaks and dropping like vapor waterfalls into the valleys between.

When I reached the summit, I was immediately distracted by the unexpected sight of Aljaž Tower, the incongruous bottle rocket. Mitja explained that the tower was named for Jakob Aljaž, a priest who lived in a village close to where we'd started our trek. It was erected in 1895, when Slovenia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was strongly aligned with Germany. Many Slovenians had begun to feel their way of life was under threat of "Germanization," as Mitja put it. Germans were suddenly climbing in the Julian Alps, constructing trails and building huts—including one on Triglav. "People felt like they were forcing German culture in the mountains," Mitja said.

Aljaž purchased the Triglav summit for one Austro-Hungarian gulden and built the tower as a declaration that the top of the mountain was Slovenian, not German. After World War I, borders shifted and some of western Slovenia temporarily became part of Italy. Triglav marked the border between the two, spurring what Mitja called "the painting wars." The Italian cavalry would sneak to the summit and paint the tower the colors of the Italian flag. Then the Slovenians would go up and repaint it their colors of red, white, and blue. After World War II, during the height of Slovenian Communism, Aljaž Tower was painted red. Later, it was painted white.

The tower that we stood beside has since been restored to its original limestone gray. It's now owned and maintained by the Alpine Association of Slovenia, which renovated the shelter but retained its initial cylindrical design. I thought about how Slovenian customs and language have survived multiple attempts at being erased, or at the very least, being rebranded. And how this mountain witnessed all of it.

What drives a country to climb a mountain? There are nuances to being Slovenian that I'll probably never understand, having been brought up an ocean away. But standing atop Triglav, looking out across the sea of clouds, I understood that this peak was in my DNA. I considered that the urge I felt to move away from the flatlands to the mountains at age twenty-three was likely related to the same draw that countless Slovenians feel for this summit. By climbing Triglav, I found a connection to Slovenia that I never knew I had.