



## In Case You Missed

### Slovakia Attractions Lure Visitors

Most of Slovakia's towns and cities have one thing in common: they've been around for centuries and they literally breathe history.

Spissky Hrad (Spissky Castle) is generally considered Slovakia's greatest and most magnificent monument—and if you go by sheer size, it's also one of Central Europe's most majestic medieval buildings, reported Travelspedia.com.

Covering all of 4 acres, the castle dates back to 1120, when it was a fortress at the edge of the Old Hungarian empire. Through the centuries, the fort saw many ups and downs, and was finally sacked by drunken troops sometime in 1780. It has since been partially restored (it has been put on the UNESCO's World Heritage List), but only a fraction of the original grandeur can still be seen. The castle's ramparts still command an unparalleled view of the countryside, and the in-house museum has some interesting exhibits: weaponry, old instruments of torture and a replica of what the castle looked like in its heyday.

The capital, Bratislava, known at one time by its German name Pressburg, was founded in the 10th century, and its town hall, various churches and markets date back to the 11th, 13th and 15th centuries. Bratislava is also Slovakia's largest city, an important industrial center and a city of great cultural importance. Bratislava Castle is definitely worth a visit.

Other historical cities include Nitra, today an important center for agriculture. It is also the country's fourth-largest city and was once the capital of the Great Moravian empire. It's known for its historic churches, its synagogue, and the nearby prehistoric cave dwellings of Brňovce. Levoca in the Spis region and Poprad in the Tatras, are two of the other main cities of the country, especially as far as tourism is concerned.

The spa town of Bardejov was awarded the UNESCO's Gold Medal for Monument Preservation in 1986, so you can imagine what it is the town is best known for—its excellent buildings.

The town actually numbers, amongst its extant monuments, the 14th-century city walls, a medieval town square, medieval churches (the most famous one is the Church of St Egidia, a lovely Romanesque basilica), bastions and other buildings. There are a number of other churches in and around the town too.



In addition, there are museums galore, including Slovakia's only Icon Museum; an Ethnographic Museum and a Museum of Folk Architecture, which is actually a village of 30-odd peasant houses, built in the folk style and painted the distinctive blue used in the native villages. The spa of Bardejov is about 6 km from the town and boasts of waters with amazing curative powers that are probably just wishful thinking.

One of Slovakia's best known—and most popular—castles, Bojnice Castle is a major tourist attraction. It's also the sight of much activity, all of it geared to keep the tourists pouring in—there are constant cultural festivals and performances. At Christmas time, it's the scene of a nativity play as well. About 900 years old, the castle sits in the upper Nitra Valley, about three and a half hours' bus ride from Bratislava.

The castle, even though it has been in existence for nearly a millennium now (it started off as a wooden fort), changed hands many a time and was in a dilapidated condition when Count Jan Frantisek Palfy finally inherited it in 1852. It houses Palfy's personal art collection—some excellent paintings, Ming porcelain, sculpture and other works of art. Outside the castle is the country's largest and oldest zoo, a good treat if you've got children along.

Stretching across the northeastern border of Slovakia, the Vysoké Tatry or the High Tatras are the most famous of Slovakia's natural attractions—in fact, the national anthem of the country—"Thunder over the Tatras"—is an ode to them. Among the world's smallest ranges of mountains, the High Tatras occupy only about 341 sq km, but pack a lot of beauty into that small area. Within this area are about a 100 small lakes, a myriad brooks and streams, and dense forests which cover the lower slopes (higher peaks are virtually bare of any conspicuous vegetation). The nearest town to the Tatras—the main gateway, so to say—is Poprad, about 4 hours' drive from Bratislava.

There is virtually something for everybody to see in Slovakia; chateaux and chalets dot the mountains, and the cities are full of medieval buildings—town halls, churches. There are museums aplenty, including unusual ones like Bratislava's Museum of Folk Music.

The country is also rich in natural beauty, and the five national parks of Slovakia are a treat for almost anybody who's interested in wildlife. Try Mala Fatra, for instance: besides interesting flora and fauna, it also has quaint old villages and amazing limestone caves called karsts, which are a different form of natural "architecture" altogether.

# Susa 5th Oldest City

The British daily Telegraph's online edition recently published a report about 20 ancient cities in the world. The site has listed the Iranian city of Susa as the 5th ancient city in the world. Excerpts follow:

#### 1. Jericho, Palestinian Territories

Earliest inhabitation: 9,000 BC  
It is the world's oldest continually-inhabited city, according to our sources. Archeologists have unearthed the remains of 20 successive settlements in Jericho, dating back to 11,000 years. The city is situated near Jordan River in West Bank and is today home to around 20,000 people.

For the record, Europe's other oldest cities include Lisbon (ca. 1000 BC), Rome (753 BC), Corfu (ca. 700 BC) and Mantua (ca. 500 BC). London was founded in 43 AD.

of an Akkadian province until ca. 2240 BC, when its Elamite governor, Kutik-Inshushinak, rose up in rebellion and liberated it, making it a literary center. However, following this, the city was again conquered by the neo-Sumerian Ur-III dynasty, and held until Ur finally collapsed at the hands of the Elamites under Kindattu in ca. 2004 BC. At this time Susa again became an Elamite capital.

The Elamites under Shutruk-Nahhunte plundered the original steele bearing the Code of Hammurabi in ca. 1175 BC and took it to Susa, where it was found in 1901. However, Nebuchadnezzar I of the Babylonian empire managed to plunder Susa in return, around 50 years later.

#### 6. Faiyum, Egypt

Earliest inhabitation: 4,000 BC



#### 2. Byblos, Lebanon

Earliest inhabitation: 5,000 BC  
Founded as Gebal by the Phoenicians, Byblos was given its name by the Greeks, who imported papyrus from the city. Hence, the English word Bible is derived from Byblos. The city's key tourist sites include ancient Phoenician temples, Byblos Castle and St John the Baptist Church—built by crusaders in the 12th century—and the old Medieval City Wall. Byblos International Festival is a more modern attraction and has featured bands such as Keane and Jethro Tull.

#### 3. Aleppo, Syria

Earliest inhabitation: 4,300 BC  
Syria's most populated city with around 4.4 million citizens Aleppo was founded as Halab in around 4,300 BC. As the ancient site is occupied by the modern city, it is barely touched by archeologists.

The city was under Hittite control until around 800 BC, before passing through Assyrian, Greek and Persian hands. It was later occupied by the Romans, Byzantines and Arabs, besieged by the Crusaders and then taken by the Mongols and Ottomans.

#### 4. Damascus, Syria

Earliest inhabitation: 4,300 BC  
Cited by some sources as the world's oldest inhabited city, Damascus may have been inhabited as early as 10,000 BC, though this is being debated. It became an important settlement after the arrival of the Aramaeans, who established a network of canals, which still form the basis of its modern water networks. Another of Alexander the Great's conquests, Damascus has since been in Roman, Arab and Ottoman possession. Today, its wealth of historical attraction makes it a popular tourist destination.

#### 5. Susa, Iran

Earliest inhabitation: 4,200 BC  
Susa was the capital of the Elamite Empire before being captured by the Assyrians. It was then taken by the Achaemenid Persians under Cyrus the Great and is the setting of The Persians, an Athenian tragedy by Aeschylus and the oldest surviving play in the history of theater. The modern city, Shoush, has a population of around 65,000.

Susa is one of the oldest known settlements of the world, possibly founded about 4200 BC, although the first traces of an inhabited village have been dated to ca. 7000 BC. The evidence of a painted-pottery civilization has been dated to ca. 5000 BC.

In ancient times, Susa was the primary capital of the Elamite Empire. Its name in Elamite was Susun, Susun, etc. The city appears in the very earliest Sumerian records, for example in Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta, it is described as one of the places obedient to Inanna, patron deity of Uruk.

Susa is also mentioned in the Ketuvim of the Hebrew Bible, mainly in Esther, but also once each in Nehemiah and Daniel. Both Daniel and Nehemiah lived in Susa during the Babylonian captivity of Judah in 6th century BC. Esther became queen there and saved the Jews from genocide. A tomb presumed to be that of Prophet Daniel (PBUH) is located in the area, known as Shoush-Daniel. The tomb is marked by an unusual white, stone cone, which is neither regular nor symmetric.

Susa is further mentioned in the Book of Jubilees (8:21 & 9:2) as one of the places within the inheritance of Shem and his eldest son Elam; and in 8:1, 'Susan' is also named as the son (or daughter, in some translations) of Elam.

Susan was incorporated by Sargon the Great into his Akkadian Empire in approximately 2330 BC. It remained capital

is mentioned in letters to the pharaoh of Egypt as early as the 14th century BC. Since the end of the Lebanese civil war, it has become a lively, modern tourist attraction.

#### 11. Beit-ul-Moqaddas, Palestinian Territories

Earliest inhabitation: 2,800 BC  
The spiritual center of the Jewish people and Islam's third-holiest city, Beit-ul-Moqaddas is home to several key religious sites, including the Dome of the Rock, the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. During its history, the city has been besieged 23 times, attacked 52 times, captured 44 times and destroyed twice.

#### 12. Tyre, Lebanon

Earliest inhabitation: 2,750 BC



Southwest of Cairo, Faiyum occupies part of Crocodilopolis—an ancient Egyptian city which worshipped Petsuchos, a sacred crocodile. Modern Faiyum consists of several large bazaars, mosques and baths, while the Lehn and Hawara pyramids are found nearby.

#### 7. Sidon, Lebanon

Earliest inhabitation: 4,000 BC  
Around 25 miles south of Beirut lies Sidon, one of the most important—and perhaps the oldest—Phoenician cities. It was the base from which the Phoenician's great Mediterranean empire grew. Both Prophet Jesus (PBUH) and St. Paul are said to have visited Sidon, as did Alexander the Great, who captured the city in 333 BC.

#### 8. Plovdiv, Bulgaria

Earliest inhabitation: 4,000 BC  
The second largest city in Bulgaria, Plovdiv was originally a Thracian settlement before becoming a major Roman city. It later fell into Byzantine and Ottoman hands, before becoming



part of Bulgaria. The city is a major cultural center and boasts many ancient remains, including a Roman amphitheater, aqueduct and Ottoman baths.

#### 9. Gaziantep, Turkey

Earliest inhabitation: 3,650 BC  
Found in southern Turkey, close to the border with Syria, Gaziantep's history extends as far back as the Hittites. Ravanda



Citadel—restored by the Byzantines in the 6th century—is found in the city center, while Roman mosaics have also been discovered.

#### 10. Beirut, Lebanon

Earliest inhabitation: 3,000 BC  
Lebanon's capital, as well as its cultural, administrative and economic center, Beirut's history stretches back around 5,000 years. Excavations in the city have unearthed Phoenician, Hellenistic, Roman, Arab and Ottoman remains, while it

The legendary birthplace of Europa and Dido, Tyre was founded around 2,750 BC, according to Herodotus. It was conquered by Alexander the Great in 332 BC following a seven-month siege and became a Roman province in 64 BC. Today, tourism is a major industry; the city's Roman Hippodrome is on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

#### 13. Irbil, Iraq

Earliest inhabitation: 2,300 BC  
North of Kirkuk lies Irbil, which was ruled at various times by the Assyrians, Persians, Sasanians, Arabs and Ottomans. The city was a major stop on the Silk Road. Its ancient citadel rises 26 meters from the ground and still dominates the skyline.

#### 14. Kirkuk, Iraq

Earliest inhabitation: 2,200 BC  
Located around 150 miles north of Baghdad, Kirkuk stands on the site of the ancient Assyrian capital of Arrapha. Its strategic importance was recognized by the Babylonians and the Media, who have also controlled the city. The ruins of a 5,000-year-old citadel are still visible, while the city is now the headquarters of Iraq's petroleum industry.

#### 15. Balkh, Afghanistan

Earliest inhabitation: 1,500 BC  
Known as Bactra to the ancient Greeks and described as the 'Mother of Cities' by Arabs, Balkh is in Northern Afghanistan. It reached its peak between 2,500 BC and 1,900 BC prior to the rise of the Persian and Median empires. Modern Balkh is home to the region's cotton industry.

#### 16. Athens, Greece

Earliest inhabitation: 1,400 BC  
The cradle of western civilization and the birthplace of democracy, Athens' heritage is still very evident. It is filled with Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman monuments, and remains a hugely popular tourist destination.

#### 17. Larnaca, Cyprus

Earliest inhabitation: 1,400 BC  
Founded as 'Citium' by the Phoenicians, Larnaca is well known for its pretty seafront lined with palm trees. Archeological sites and numerous beaches attract modern visitors.

#### 18. Thebes, Greece

Earliest inhabitation: 1,400 BC  
A major rival of ancient Athens, Thebes ruled the Boeotian confederacy and even lent assistance to Xerxes during the Persian invasion of 480 BC. Archeological excavation has revealed a Mycenaean settlement dating back even further. Today, Thebes is little more than a market town.

#### 19. Cadiz, Spain

Earliest inhabitation: 1,100 BC  
Found on a narrow spit of land jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean, Cadiz has been the home of the Spanish navy since 18th century. It was founded by the Phoenicians as a small trading post and fell to the Carthaginians around 500 BC, becoming a base for Hannibal's conquest of Iberia. It then came under Roman and Moorish rule, before experiencing a renaissance during the Age of Exploration.

#### 20. Varanasi, India

Earliest inhabitation: 1,000 BC  
Situated on the west bank of the Ganges, Varanasi—also known as Benares—is an important holy city for both Hindus and Buddhists. According to legend, it was founded by the Hindu deity Shiva 5,000 years ago, though modern scholars believe it to be around 3,000 years old.