

# Fulbright Slovenia 2019

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## Dr. Eric Leake

I had invited some family and friends, who were visiting Slovenia from the United States, to join my class at the University of Ljubljana for a cross-cultural conversation. Students were encouraged to ask anything they would like to know about life in the U.S. They had questions: Why is American bread so bad, and is it true it has sugar added? What is the deal with guns in the U.S.? Can you explain American politics, especially Donald Trump? Their curiosity was understandable. Bread in Slovenia generally was much better than bread in the U.S.

I was in Slovenia with my wife and our one-year-old son during the fall of 2019 into early 2020. I was there as a Fulbright scholar hosted by the Department of English at the University of Ljubljana, where I taught a course on American Culture and Society. I also worked closely with my colleagues on the writing faculty to plan writing workshops with their classes, to fill in as a guest teacher, and to coordinate presentations and other events. I presented on my work on empathy and writing, and I also coordinated with some of my fellow Fulbrighters to present on topics as varied as American film, Las Vegas nostalgia, the geography and cultures of Tennessee, and the invention of the American shopping mall. I advised students, assisted with graduate student research projects, and met with student organizations. I also enrolled in Slovenian courses and learned the language and culture as best as I could. One touching experience was visiting the city's central cemetery on All Saints' Day and observing the thousands of candles and flowers left in memory of loved ones.

We lived in an apartment in a 400-year-old building a couple of blocks from my part of campus in the old-town core of Ljubljana. The city itself is totally charming with its central castle on a hill, the Ljubljanica river and its distinctive bridges, and the picturesque cobblestones streets in a central zone that is closed to traffic. The city's history as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then Yugoslavia, and now independent Slovenia can be read in its architecture. Slovenia is relatively small and impressively beautiful from the Julian Alps to the Adriatic Sea and everywhere beyond and between. We were lucky to be there.

At the heart of the Fulbright program is cross-cultural exchange, and I loved that about our time in Slovenia. The experience was even better because we got to share it with family and friends as well as the new friends we made. I had wonderful colleagues and students, not only from Slovenia but from across Europe. We exchanged stories about our research, our teaching, our lives and communities, the places we live, even the bread we eat. We remain in touch, and I very much look forward to future collaborations and visits.



With my wife and our son at Predjama Castle



With the students of my American Culture and Society class at the University of Ljubljana



With my brother and sister at Bled Castle