

Gorizia and Nova Gorica

A twin city along the Italo-Slovenian border

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Gorizia in July 2003. At Piazza della Vittoria I get on the bus bound for Nova Gorica. Just once I wanted to test the latest acquisition - a cross-border bus line - which has been running for only six months now.

On reaching the S. Gabriele checkpoint, the bus is inspected by a stern-looking Italian customs officer. He meticulously examines the passports of the passengers. Catching a fleeting glimpse of the passports of the passengers sitting in front of me, I notice a small green pamphlet with the words "lascia passare" and it slowly dawns on me that I might get into trouble with my German identity card. When the customs officer finally catches sight of my document, he shakes his head and says: "Non internazionale". He asks me to leave the bus and go the international checkpoint "Casa Rossa", which, by the way, is located 4 km south of the S. Gabriele checkpoint. I try to explain to him that I passed the very same checkpoint only yesterday. But he wasn't aware of that and merely looks at me in disbelief. The ladies on the bus, all of whom were elderly, want to come to my aid and nag the customs officer in the hope of convincing him that he should let me go with them to downtown Nova Gorica which is just a few metres ride (approx. 500m). Did he really intend to let me walk back four kilometres in such blazing heat? That would be irresponsible. "And, besides, nobody will take any interest in the border any more in less than a year from now," the ladies argue. All of a sudden, the customs officer leaves the bus without saying another word to me. In response to my look of surprise, the kind elderly ladies indicate that I should simply remain seated. Feeling somewhat weak at the knees, I stay put. However, there is still one more hurdle I need to overcome: the Slovenian customs officer. On command, we all hold up our passports at the same time, but he remains where he is and makes no effort to get on the bus. Instead, he waves the bus through with a friendly smile. This different perception of the border is always present in the every-day life of both towns. In the past, too, the border has sparked lengthy disputes between Italy and Yugoslavia.

Nova Gorica - the young, modern "sister" of the historical town of Gorizia (first mentioned in 1001) was founded in 1948, immediately after the border was erected. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, Gorizia became part of the Italian state; before that, the territory had belonged to the Austro-Hungarian empire. After the Second World War, a highly contentious ethnical benchmark served as the basis for establishing the border between Italy and the Serb, Croat and Slovene Kingdom. This meant that the city of Gorizia would be divided: Italy was given the city centre while the suburbs of the city were assigned to Yugoslavia. It will probably never be possible to establish an accurate ethnical border. In the majority of cases, the areas are of mixed population - as in the

case of Gorizia - a city centre which has always been populated by an Italian majority, whereas the surroundings have mainly been populated by Slovenes. In the surrounding areas of Gorizia, i.e. on Italian territory, municipalities can still be found that have a Slovenian majority.

Today, approx. 10 percent of all Slovenians live in Gorizia, whilst more than half of the inhabitants have multi-ethnic roots. Virtually no minorities live in Nova Gorica. Nova Gorica is among the largest towns (approx. 25,000 inhabitants) in the a largely rural Slovenia, whereas Gorizia (approx. 38,000 inhabitants) is one of the smaller towns in Italy. Both towns nestle in charming rural surroundings which have an abundance of parks and vineyards. Nova Gorica is the place for sports enthusiasts and pleasure seekers. It has numerous bars, discotheques and three casinos. Culture-vultures will find that the town offers numerous arts and cultural events. Gorizia, on the other hand, captivates the visitor above all thanks to its rich history and cultural heritage. From the very beginning, Görz, the name customarily given to the town in German-speaking areas until 1918, has stood out for its tri-culture cohabitation: Italo-Venetian, Slovenian and Austro-German culture.

Gorizia Castle, which represents the showpiece of the town's historical centre and which is the town's landmark, is perched on a hill from which the small, narrow alleys wind their way down to the town below. Whilst Gorizia is a frequent destination for the town's Slovenian neighbours when they go on a lengthy shopping expedition, Nova Gorica is a rare choice for Italians to go to on an excursion. The prospects for a cultural and economic exchange between the two states have long since been rosy, even during the Cold War when the Italo-Slovenian border was considered to be the most open of all along the Iron Curtain. EU enlargement now presents an opportunity for the last barriers to be removed.



Gorizia Castle

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