

Americans Discovering Slovenia

Slovenian Magazine "Zarja" Nov 2, 2016

One of the most interesting parts of working for this magazine is when we look back at previous articles, which we call Retracing Our Steps. Suzanne Brouillette, an American, lived here between 1999 and 2004 in the village of Drežniške Ravne, a remote village in the Soča valley. We wrote our first article about her back when she was first here. After that she moved back to the USA, but was recently back here for a visit, in a completely new and interesting role. Since then she has become an enthusiastic beekeeper and fate brought her right back to our lands.

Anything is possible if you believe in it, declared Suzanne Brouillette in the typical American fashion. With a decisive attitude, a love for life and new adventures she set off on a journey to find the thing she now says brings her joy. Her diverse life experiences could fill a book, written by the type of person who enjoys a good challenge. Each page would be completely enthralling. Some of the chapters would most certainly be set in Slovenia.

Med zelo zanimive izkušnje pri ustvarjanju naše revije spadajo tiste, ki jih imenujemo Po sledih naših člankov. Američanka Suzanne Brouillette je med letoma 1999 in 2004 živela v Drežniških Ravnah, odmaknjeni vasi v Posočju. Takrat smo o njej pisali prvič. Nato se je vrnila v ZDA, a je bila v prejšnjih dneh spet na obisku v Sloveniji – v povsem novi, zelo posebni in zanimivi vlogi. Postala je namreč navdušena čebelarka in ni se moglo zgoditi drugače, kot da jo je pot spet pripeljala k nam.

Tekst: STANE MAŽGON
Foto: IZTOK DIMC



Between Europe and America. Suzanne was born in France, where her father worked as a doctor at an American military base. Later, at the age of 17, Suzanne and her family moved back to America, but a love for Europe remained. At 27, she visited friends in Germany, whose other friends lived in Vicenza, Italy. She decided to visit them, too. She intended to take a short trip, only a few days. Suzanne vividly remembers that trip, as if she could feel her life course redirecting. "The train was so packed because of the holidays, that I spent the whole journey standing in an overcrowded carriage." A few days passed, but Suzanne never left, in fact she stayed there for 10 years. "I worked at an American military base, starting off in the kitchen, where I prepared meat dishes, despite being a vegetarian. I was also an accountant, I organized sporting events and was even a travel agent for 6 years."

Love at first sight. The first trip she took to our country was in 1992. "It was soon after the Slovenian Independence War, my mother and a friend accompanied me to Piran for five days, followed by another five days in Bled. It was wonderful." She fell madly in love with Slovenia. "I told my mother then: One day I'll live here! But I didn't know how it would come to be," she recounts fondly.

What gave her such a sense of certainty? "The atmosphere, the people, the nature... Everything was very different, very calm." A fellow American, who worked at the American embassy in Milan, had visited Slovenia with his family and was similarly in awe. He advised her to organize trips to our country as it was not well known. She brought her next group to Lipica and Otočec.

You're moving here! Based in Italy, she began to explore the possibility of moving, despite her friends' discouragement. "I searched for a place, suitable for weekend visits, and I found Camp Koren in Kobarid. Soon after, I arrived with a group of Americans and together we visited Drežniške Ravne. I was driving the van through the village, saw Mount Krn before me and heard a little voice in my head: "You're moving here!" I know it sounds crazy. During that time I met people I'm still friends with. I asked them to search for a house for me."

V skupini, ki jo je Suzanne Brouille pripeljala v Slovenijo, je bila tudi Renate Barton. Navdušena je nad vsem, kar je doživela. Lani oktobra je prišla k nam prvič, letos znova. »Od nekdaj sem si želela biti čebelarica. V ZDA je čebelarjenje pogosto usmerjeno le na pridelavo medu, mene pa zanima lepota čebel, želim najti načine, kako jim lahko pomagamo preživeti. Moja galerija se imenuje Bee house art, v njej prirejamo tečaje, delavnice, izobražujemo člane in se srečujemo, na kratko povedano pa želim vedno najti povezavo čebel in umetnosti. To je zame kot meditacija, zelo poduhovljeno delo. Poudariti želim sporočilo, da kmetijstvo in čebelarjenje sodita skupaj, ne pa da kmetijstvo uničuje čebele. Pri vas imate srečo, da tradicija še živi, ljudje so povezani z zemljo, mladi se učijo veščin, pri nas pa je stanje mnogo bolj skrb vzbujaajoče.«

Two weeks later she was back looking at the first house. Her new friends had a neighbour who was building a house nearby, but it was not yet finished. According to him, he was building it to pass the time. Would he lease it? "Come back in two weeks and I'll give you an answer," was his first response. Return she did and he answered that he would lease it to her. "But for how much," was the next question. "I don't know, come back in two weeks and I'll think about it." Suzanne agreed and returned once more, with a new group of Americans...

At last, the unfinished house was leased to her. She spent the next three years living in Vicenza and spending every other weekend in Drežniške Ravne. "I didn't know what to do with my business, I was overworked, I wanted to rest and take a break from everything..." In November of 1999, she finally moved permanently to Drežniške Ravne, using her house as a base of operations to organize trips to Slovenia. She loved her new surroundings and everything about it – the people, the places, the customs, etc. She tutored neighbouring children in English, and so five years flew by...

A new chapter: beekeeping. Isn't it about time we mention beekeeping? "No, that comes later. I can't forgive myself that I didn't even think about beekeeping all those years ago, when I was here, in the land of beekeeping, full of beehives." In August 2004, Suzanne returned to New Hampshire, USA, where she still lives with her parents, who need her help and care. Another reason was that after the September 11th terrorist attacks very few tourists decided to come to Europe, so business was slow.

Po sledih naših
člankov: **Suzanne
Brouillette,**
ameriška
ambasadorka
slovenskega
čebelarjenja

Her family owns a big estate in the town they live in. "I always wanted to work on the land and my dream came true. A friend casually said to me: 'You have such a huge garden, why don't you have bees?' I could only answer: 'I don't know!'" When a beekeeping course started nearby, she jumped at the chance to learn. She learned a lot and even joined a beekeeping society. "During my next visit to Slovenia I only visited beekeepers and beehives."

"This was the start of a new chapter," says Suzanne, "when two years ago I realised I missed travelling and seeing the world. I got the idea of organizing trips to Slovenia for beekeepers. I was surprised to find out that someone in Boston was already doing it and that there was not enough room for two." She was upset that she waited too long and missed her chance. Still, she decided to contact the man organizing the trips, Mark Simonič, who has Slovene ancestors. Years ago he discovered his family came from the village Semič and now regularly visits his ancestral home. "When we met, he presented a travelogue about Slovenia and organized the first shipment of Slovene-made beehives. He has already established contacts with Slovene beekeeping experts. He asked Prof. Janko Božič to write a book for them, as there was no previous literature about this kind of beekeeping in English." In the end, Simonič and Suzanne realised they could cooperate.

Life took a new turn. After Simonič retired last year, Suzanne took over the business. "I now have a company called Slovenian Beekeeping. So far, I've sold five shipments of beehives and other equipment to American beekeepers. I collaborate with local manufacturers and the business has found its footing.

American beekeepers are thrilled. According to Suzanne, the greatest advantage of a Slovene beehive is that there's no lifting required. "In America, our beehives stand individually or are stacked up on one another. This makes the upkeep and moving individual parts very hard, unlike in Slovenian hives, where even children and the motorically impaired can work. Everyone at our presentations is very surprised how easy it is to operate the hives. All of the equipment is in one place and the bees have a safe spot to overwinter.

Continuing the streak. Suzanne converted her barn into the first and only Slovene beekeeping shop in the USA. She is very proud of her new business. She has become a genuine ambassador for Slovene beekeeping, which makes her happy, but she adds: "I would jump at the chance to move back to Slovenia, but I'm quite tied to my hometown at the moment."

Our article about an American moving to Drežniške Ravne now has a sequel, undoubtedly not the last, as Suzanne has big plans.

he last group to come to Slovenia was the third, with a fourth one due to arrive in May of next year. Each group uncovers something new. Suzanne is also a keen believer in the therapeutic powers of working with bees. "I have an acquaintance whose son is autistic, and he taught him how to keep bees. We would like to work with war veterans in the future, I'm sure it will improve their quality of life. When you start beekeeping, your life changes," she stresses.



» Dolgo je trajalo, da sem na tem svetu odkrila, kaj me zares veseli, in zdaj sem našla življenje, ki povezuje potovanja, vrtnarjenje, čebele in Slovenijo. «



Renate Barton: Čebelarjenje je zame kot meditacija, zelo poduhovljeno delo. Poudariti želim sporočilo, da kmetijstvo in čebelarjenje sodita skupaj, ne pa da kmetijstvo uničuje čebele."

Renate Barton was part of the last group Suzanne brought to Slovenia. She's very enthusiastic about everything she experienced here. Her first visit was in October 2015 and had to come again. "I've always wanted to become a beekeeper. In America, beekeeping is mostly geared towards honey production, while I'm more interested in the beauty of bees. I want to find ways to help them survive. My gallery is called Bee House Art, in it I hold courses and workshops, we educate our members and meet as a group. In short, we're always on the lookout to find new connections between bees and art. It's like meditation for me, a very spiritual practice. I would like to promote the idea that agriculture and beekeeping go hand in hand. There's no need for agriculture to harm bees. You're lucky in Slovenia, tradition is alive and well, the people have a good relationship with the land and young people are learning the appropriate skills. The state of things in the USA gives us cause for concern.

Suzanne Brouillette organizes trips to Slovenia for American beekeepers twice a year. Here they learn about our beekeeping tradition and modern experience. Her last group to come here was also very enthusiastic about their trip.

Suzanne Brouillette dvakrat letno v Slovenijo pripelje ameriške čebelarje, kjer spoznavajo našo čebelarstvo in sodobne izkušnje. Tudi tokratni obiskovalci so bili nad vsem, kar so doživeli, navdušeni.