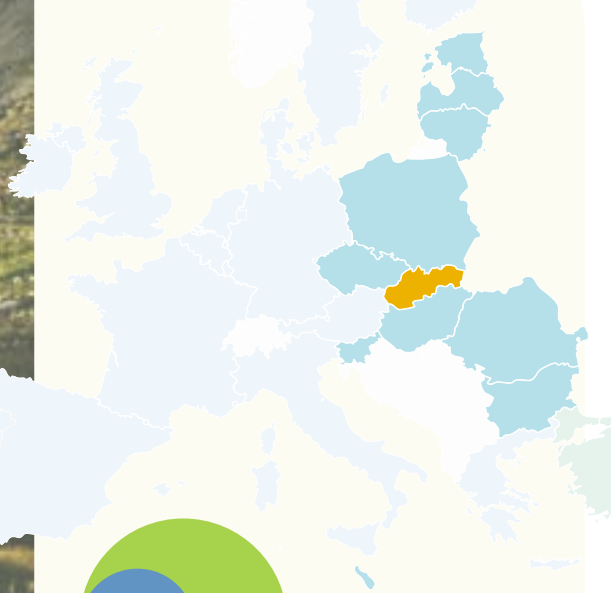




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## Slovakia Rooftop of Central Europe

Slovakia is sometimes called the rooftop of Central Europe. The **Carpathian Mountains** arch across most of the country before plunging south through Ukraine into Romania. They divide the region into main watersheds, with water flowing through Poland to the **Baltic Sea** in the north, or via tributaries to the **Danube** and on to the **Black Sea** in the south.

The Carpathians reach their peak in the northern part of the country in the rugged **High Tatras Mountains** (Vysoké Tatry) along the Polish border, and decline in altitude across central Slovakia, through the **Low Tatras** (Nízke Tatry) and **Fatras** (Velká a Malá Fatra) mountains before reaching the **Pannonian basin** in the south along the Hungarian border. The mountain range includes the rolling patchwork landscape of the **White Carpathians** (Biele Karpaty) along the Czech border to the west, the **Slovak Paradise** (Slovenský raj) in the central part of the country, and the **East Carpathians** (Východné Karpaty) to the east.

### Virgin forests

Thanks to its geographical position as well as diversified relief, Slovakia is home to a rich diversity of flora and fauna – one of the highest in Europe. Forests are one of Slovakia's greatest treasures, covering 40.6% (19,990 km<sup>2</sup>) of the country's territory. Almost half of these (40-45%) are semi-natural forests which regenerate themselves naturally and where the composition of species is very similar to that in natural forests.

The country is also remarkable for the more than seventy fragments of natural and virgin forests totalling 18,000-20,000 ha in area, including remnants of the beech forests that once stretched across some 80% of the European continent. The forests provide homes to a rich diversity of flora and fauna, including an estimated 700 bears, 500 lynx and 400 wolves – a significant portion of the European populations of these large carnivores.

### Wallachian shepherds

About half of Slovakia's territory is used for **agriculture**, including arable land, grasslands and pastures. Arable land (15,090 km<sup>2</sup>) prevails in the lowlands, located especially in the southern part of the country, where intensive agricultural practices have sharply reduced biological diversity. In other areas, particularly in the mountainous regions in the central and northern parts of the country, centuries old forms of land use have contributed to the development of species-rich habitats, including the typical patchwork landscape resulting from strip farming that is found in many parts of the country.

**Area:** 48,845 km<sup>2</sup> (somewhat larger than Denmark or Switzerland).

**Terrain:** hills to the east, rugged mountains in the central and northern parts (Carpathian mountain range), and lowlands in the south (Pannonian basin).

**Elevation extremes:** lowest point: Bodrog River 94 m | highest point: Gerlach Peak 2,655 m (High Tatras Mountains).

**Land use:** 49% agricultural land, 41% forests including temporary non-forested sites, 2% water, 5% built area and 3% other uses (1998 est.).

**Protected areas:** 9 National Parks, 14 Protected Landscape Areas; and ca. 1,000 Protected Sites, Nature Reserves and Natural Monuments (together with buffer zones, ca. 23% of the country's territory).

**Population:** 5,414,937 (July 2001 est.).

**Capital:** Bratislava (450,000 inhabitants).



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photo: © V. Stanová/Daphne

The mountain meadows that characterise the **Pieniny** in the eastern Carpathians were originally created by Wallachian shepherds and their sheep as they gradually migrated west across the Carpathian Mountains from present-day Romania to what today is the eastern part of the Czech Republic. Many of these valuable ecosystems are increasingly threatened by increasing disruption of traditional land use practices.

### Paper parks

Slovakia has a well-developed system of nature protection, including 9 National Parks, 14 Protected Landscape Areas, and more than 1000 Protected Sites, Nature Reserves and Nature Monuments that, together with buffer zones, cover some 23% of the country's territory. There are also significant restrictions on land use around designated water protection areas.

Unfortunately, the well-developed system is less developed in practice. Ambiguous and even conflicting legislation as well as the low priority and limited resources that are given to nature conservation significantly water down formal protection. This is one area where accession to the EU can be expected to bring significant improvements, turning the present, largely "paper parks" into real preserves.

### Threatened paradise

Intensive agriculture and inappropriate forestry practices have significantly intensified the pressure on the natural environment and exploitation of natural resources. The original structure of the landscape is gradu-

ally being affected by development, including large infrastructure projects for transportation and water management, urban development, as well as unsustainable agricultural and forestry practices.

The Communist era saw a considerable expansion in international tourism, largely based on arrivals from other Socialist countries on subsidised State holidays. When the Communist system collapsed, this market disappeared and a sharp decline in tourism occurred. A few hotspots such as the **Tatras Mountains** or **Slovak Paradise** have continued to attract tourists. In addition to permitting economic development, sustainable tourism in these areas and others can help support management of protected areas.

Degradation of the natural environment has already led to the extinction of some plant and animal species in Slovakia, while many others have become vulnerable or endangered. Of the total 3124 species of higher plants, 1135 are listed in the national Red List of Ferns and Flowering Plants. Similarly, the diversity of animal species is declining. Of a total of 555 vertebrate species, 244 are endangered, including 35 species of fish and lampreys, all species of amphibians and reptiles, 114 birds and 55 mammals. This tally is nevertheless relatively good in comparison with most western European countries.



The **Morava-Dyje floodplain**, a valuable wetland area bordering the Czech Republic and Austria, was protected throughout the Cold War within the folds of the Iron Curtain. Since 1989, however, and especially with the approaching accession of Slovakia and the Czech Republic to the European Union, the officially designated Ramsar wetland area is at the center of one of the most dynamically developing areas on the European continent. Various infrastructure and economic development projects, including bridges, ports, powerlines, and industry parks, are already threatening this unique area.

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### Useful links:

**Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic**

[www.lifeenv.gov.sk](http://www.lifeenv.gov.sk)

**State Nature Conservancy of the Slovak Republic**

[www.sopsr.sk](http://www.sopsr.sk)

**Slovak Environmental Agency**

[www.sazp.sk](http://www.sazp.sk)

**Information System on Environment**

[www.iszp.sk](http://www.iszp.sk)