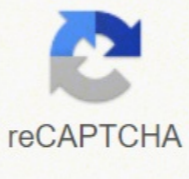


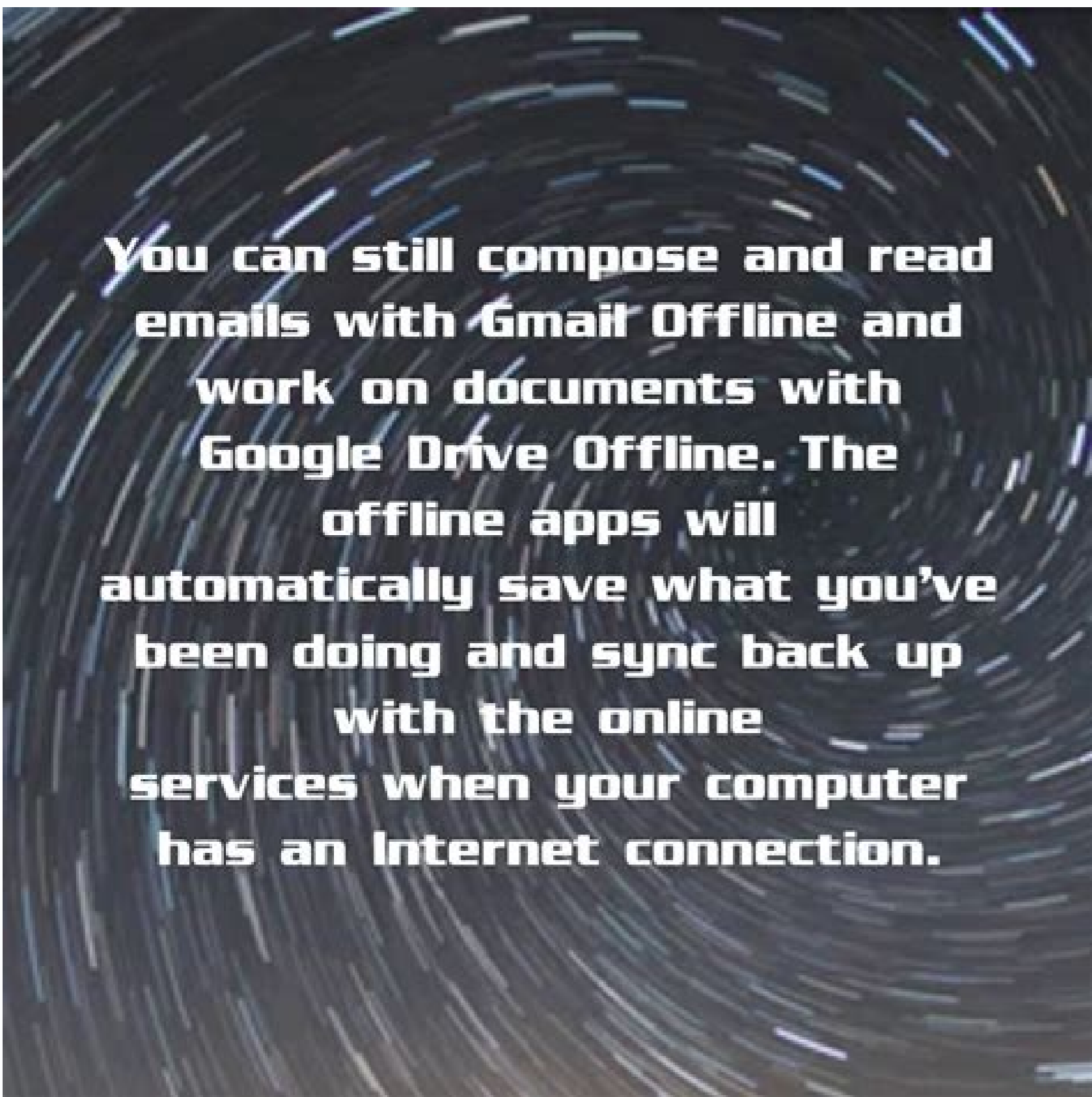
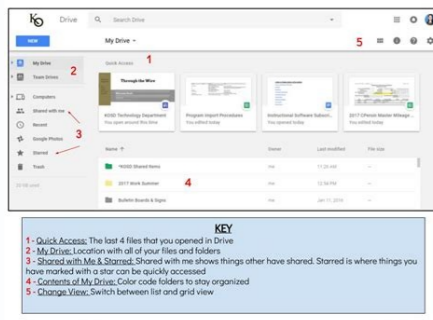
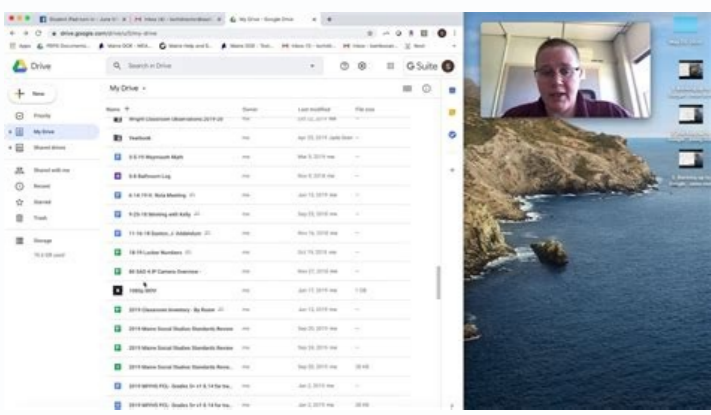


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The couple emigrated to the States in the fifties and now splits their time between Lake Bled and Scottsdale, Arizona. Despite Aleš's insistence that we go canyoning in the Soca, we forge past the adventure-sport town of Bovec and enter Triglav National Park. I'm only hoping for a glowing complexion. Italianate buildings are painted in Easter-egg shades—butter, mauve, coral. At dusk, we walk to Piran, an ancient town—filled with 13th-century architecture—that juts out into the Adriatic. The Kristancics have been harvesting the same vines since 1820, and Aleš has continued his family's tradition of allowing the grapes to ferment naturally, without introducing sulfites or sugar. Franc had a successful career as a structural engineer in the Midwest. Out on the terrace, we're joined by Franc and Lubi Strgar, two of Aleš's oldest friends. Next comes buttery tuna sashimi from Croatia, followed by goose prosciutto air-dried for 14 days and smoked with herbs. I'm left to marinate for 20 minutes. When the mud has cooled a bit, I let myself sink into it. Painted in the late 1400's by Johannes de Castuo, the pictures served as a Biblia pauperum—they taught illiterate parishioners the stories of the Bible. The studs weave past one another, meet in the center of the field, and then spiral out diagonally, doing a sideways skip. It would take a week to sample all of the treatments here—and many guests do just that. By the time we reach its marble-paved plaza, Tartinijev Trg (Square), the sun has already set. It's still hot, so I flinch. Like dedicated pilgrims, you must have faith. He's just opened a bottle of puro—a sparkling pink Pinot that won't be released until next year. The drive north from Lipica to the hilltop town of Stanjel takes us through the limestone-rich Karst region, up hairpin turns, past wineries, farms, and blink-and-you-miss-them villages. "You can still find shipwrecks out there, just off the marina." DAY 2 PORTOROŽ TO GORIZIA, ITALY, 50 MILES In the morning, while Michael is being pummeled by jets of sea water, I have a "fango pack." The local Istrian loam is rich in microalgae and plankton, and is said to be able to heal a variety of ailments, from rheumatic disease to skin rashes. There's nothing to do here except gape at the 360-degree views from the Fabiani Path, named for the architect (and former Stanjel mayor) Max Fabiani. Fango plumbing! She catches the mud in a basin and pours it over the treatment table. Gostišče Pri Lojzetu Dvorec Zemono, outside of Ajdovščina; 386-5/368-7007; DINNER FOR TWO \$120. Škocjan; www.park-skocjanske-jame.si. Aleš's fan club is growing: Thomas Keller and Mario Batali serve Movia at their restaurants; Alain Ducasse, who has visited the vineyard twice, has a few vintage bottles in his personal cellar. We take a gondola to tiny, tear-shaped Bled Island and each ring the bell in the little Baroque church. We turn off the highway just after the 7,158-foot-long Crni Kal bridge and careen down twisting roads, past heather-covered hills and lush pine forests, for 10 long miles. Sulfites are added at the bottling stage, but only in small amounts. Since then, the country has continued to turn out provocative artists with international reputations. Just as I'm about to ask her what that plastic pipe jutting from the ceiling is for, she turns a valve, and a torrent of hot, viscous mud spurts from it. It's sprinkled with shaved white truffles (gathered from a local forest) and served over a silky purée of potatoes. Slovenian Tourist Boardwww.slovenia-tourism.si. It's 7 p.m. as we drive into Ljubljana, and the light is beginning to fade. Afterward we drive past the industrial towns of Izola and Koper, then on to Portorož. Slovenia's Atlantic City. Now we've returned for a five-day drive: from Ljubljana, the capital, to the coast, then north along the Italian border (an up-and-coming wine region) to the Julian Alps. Hotel Vila Bled 26 Cesta Svobode, Bled; 386-4/579-1500; www.vila-bled.com; DOUBLES FROM \$230. Stanjel is so small that we feel as though we're trespassing. I wade in and gaze up at the mountains, which are reflected in the glassy water. In fact, my boyfriend, Michael, and I are in Slovenia. Kobilarna Lipica Stud Farm Lipica; 386-5/739-1580; www.lipica.org. Ten minutes later, we're ascending the 5,285-foot-high Vršic Pass (pronounced "ver-shitz"—a word I employ as a curse each time Michael hugs a hairpin turn). We skip the soup course and move directly on to asparagus risotto with nettles and "natural nuts of the season." Before we order dessert, I ask our waiter how far it is to Gorizia, the Italian town where we plan to spend the night. I ask the owner's teenage son what Piran means. Families stroll along the Ljubljana River eating gelato; students sit in cafes smoking. In the distance—but growing closer with each mile—are the craggy peaks of the Julian Alps. "But," Franc said, chuckling, "none of them want to leave Slovenia." I don't blame them. Poetry by Tomaž; Salamin; Slovenia and the Slovenes: A Small State and the New Europe by James Gow and Cathie Carmichael. There are 50 switchbacks (25 on either side), and plenty of oncoming traffic. We arrive in time for a half-hour dressage performance, during which the best-trained stallions prance around to a disco version of Flight of the Bumblebee. "If I use sugar, I take the character out." We're sitting on the terrace of Aleš's house, overlooking Slovenia's Brda Hills and Italy's Friuli-Venezia Giulia region. On the A1 highway, which heads southwest from Ljubljana to the Adriatic coast, we pass green fields, cows, and an occasional barn. This is the province of Notranjska, home to one of the largest cave systems in the world, the 12-mile-long Postojnska Jama. 18 Ceglo, Dobrovo; 386-5/ 395-9510; www.movia.si. Restaurant Neptun 7 &1; upanciceva, Piran; 386-5/673-4111; DINNER FOR TWO \$80. Hotel Mons Slovenia's first design hotel. Before we start our drive, we stop by Ljubljana's Museum of Modern Art, where I'm absorbed by Gabrijel Stupica's Modernist collages and Zoran Mušič's ghoulish etchings of Dachau. But we bypass the caves in favor of a detour to Hrastovlje to see the Church of the Holy Trinity, a rare example of southern Romanesque architecture that contains a series of Gothic frescoes. I peer up at the city's medieval castle. Kids scramble around, kicking a soccer ball. DAY 1 LJUBLJANA TO PORTOROŽ, 66 MILES Slovenian art has been pushing boundaries since at least the 1980's with the avant-garde collective Neue Slowenische Kunst. Movia is one of Slovenia's best-known wineries, and with good reason. Somewhere, a cellist is rehearsing a Bach suite. National Car Rental Book on their site for a 20 percent discount. But we're soon lured back to our table by the scent of freshly baked bread, which we dip in an addictive horseradish sauce. I'm suddenly reminded of something Franc Strgar told me. On the north shore, there are stone steps leading to a rocky clearing. "Your first time?" she asks. Now that Slovenia is a member of the European Union, its government has begun encouraging high school graduates to work abroad for a few years. In one pas de deux, two stallions execute a rhythmical canter called changement (a flying change) and then pirouette. If you're a true wine connoisseur, they'll invite you to stay over. As we climb the hill toward Trieste, the fertile landscape gives way to rocky cliffs topped with evergreens. Have we stumbled into a fairy tale? www.avantcar.si. Then, she slathers my entire front and wraps me in a cocoon of plastic wrap. Škocjan Caves Slovenia has over 7,000 caves; these are the most magnificent—with waterfalls and natural bridges. Fortunately, we won't be driving anywhere; the Kristancics have invited us to stay in one of their spare bedrooms. DAY 5 LAKE BOHINJ TO LAKE BLEED, 12 MILES After a short hike to Slap Savica, the 240-foot waterfall that feeds Lake Bohinj, we press on to Bled. We clap in awe, but wonder how the poor animals can put up with the technological Muzak. The small Alpine nation—east of Italy and north of Croatia—first seduced us last fall. "Ah! Lantieri! This was once his hunting lodge!" he says, gesturing to the restaurant, also known as Castle Zemono. Gostilna As 5A Copova, Ljubljana; 386-1/425-8822; www.gostilnaas.si; DINNER FOR TWO \$150. We've come not to gamble but to take the waters, at the Thermae Palace Spa and Thalassotherapy Center, known for its sea cures: salt water, mud, and mineral baths. Aleš and his wife, Vesna, have just returned from a two-week marketing trip to the United States, and as Aleš opens a 1998 bottle of Veliko Rosso (Big Red), he ticks off his favorite restaurants in New York's Meatpacking District, several of which now offer his wines. A young Slovenian therapist leads me to my own room and tells me to undress. "Twenty minutes," he says. "Pirate," he says. "Where are you staying?" "Palazzo Lantieri," I reply. DAY 4 BRDA HILLS TO LAKE BOHINJ, 94 MILES The next morning, we set out on one of the most spectacular drives of our trip. By the time we reach the outskirts of Ajdovščina, we're starving. Twelve skeletons merrily escort a sampling of humanity—from a naked child and a beggar to a queen and a pope—to an open coffin. Moderna Galerija 14 Tomšičeva, Ljubljana; 386-1/241-6908; www.mg-lj.si. Inside the church, a local woman switches on an English-language tape that takes us through the frescoes. Gorizia, Italy; 39-048/153-3284; www.palazzo-lantieri.com; DOUBLES FROM \$150. But we want to make it to the Lipizian stud farm by 2 P.M. Before World War I, when Slovenia was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the horses bred in Lipica were used by Austria's Spanish Riding school. Eventually we are drawn to the spectacular danse macabre. We stop at Restaurant Neptun for a simple meal of fish, shrimp risotto, and sautéed spinach. Later, from the castle, we have a bird's-eye view of the lake, ringed by snow-capped mountains. From the Brda Hills wine route, we head north, tracing the electric-turquoise Soca River. Palazzo Lantieri A three-room B&B with an art collection that includes works by Mario Merz, Yannis Kounellis, and Günther Förg. In Slovenia, he likes to drive a Cadillac with Minnesota plates. Hrastovlje. I've been looking forward to returning to Gostišče Pri Lojzetu ever since we ate at the restaurant last October. We've already tasted a fruity sivi pinot (Pinot Grigio), a crisp Sauvignon Blanc, and turno, a fruity blend of three white Pinots. The village of Hrastovlje (population 145) is not easy to find. Stanjel, perched high above the plateau, is one of these. We take our zlata penina (sparkling white wine) to the portico, which has views of the surrounding hills. I'm starting to feel dizzy. DAY 3 GORIZIA TO THE BRDA HILLS, 15 MILES "Sugar is not natural!" says Aleš (pronounced "Alesh") Kristancic, the force behind Movia, Slovenia's oldest privately run winery. Without realizing it, we've devoted our entire evening to a 15th-century Austro-Hungarian count. Church of the Holy Trinity To make sure the church is open, call Rinter Rozana at 386-3/143-2231. 55 Pot za Brdom, Ljubljana; 386-1/470-2700; www.hotel.mons.si; DOUBLES FROM \$184. "Lie down!" she orders. Our reward is Lake Bohinj, Lake Bled's wilder and less touristy sibling. Movia Winery Contact Aleš or Vesna Kristancic to set up a wine tasting and a tour of the cellar. Because it's located in Triglav, Bohinj is protected from development.

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