

From “La Isla del Encanto” to “The City of Dragons”

**A Journey Through Migration,
Bureaucracy, and the Challenges of
Renting as a Single Expat in Slovenia**

Who I am: A Puerto Rican journey

I am a Puerto Rican American, born in 1989 in the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico, also known as “*La Isla del Encanto*” (The Island of Enchantment—because of its stunning natural beauty, rich culture, and warm hospitality)—an unincorporated U.S. territory located in the northeastern Caribbean. Puerto Rico is a place rich in cultural heritage and history. Though it is a territory of the United States and Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, our political and social identity often oscillates between the influences of both the U.S. and our native island culture. Our customs, language, and even legal systems are distinctive. Yet, our relationship with the U.S. remains complex and, at times, ambiguous, as Puerto Rico lacks voting representation in the U.S. Congress and does not enjoy the full political rights of the states.

As someone who was born in Puerto Rico and raised in the Bronx where many Puerto Ricans migrated—my life was shaped by a strong sense of island pride, but also by the realities of living in a U.S. territory where economic opportunities are limited, and the political landscape often clashes with the needs of its people. Seeking greater opportunities for her children, my mother decided to move to New York City—a place that seemed to offer limitless possibilities. Puerto Ricans have been migrating to New York City for generations, especially after President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones-Shafroth Act (1917) on March

2, 1917, giving Puerto Ricans U.S. statutory citizenship, which made migration easier. Many came after World War II, as Puerto Rico faced economic hardship. Over time, vibrant communities formed in neighborhoods like “El Barrio” (East Harlem) and “El Bronx” (The South Bronx), where Spanish-speaking churches, bodegas, music, and activism created a strong cultural presence. This gave rise to the term “Nuyorican,” describing Puerto Ricans born or raised in New York who blend island roots with city life. Today, NYC remains a place of opportunity, identity, and cultural pride for many Puerto Ricans.

New York City: A step toward greater opportunities

New York City, with its bustling streets and immense diversity, was a natural next step. The city’s rich multicultural fabric and endless opportunities in nearly every field made it an ideal place for someone like me—eager to build a career and explore life beyond the island. Coming from Puerto Rico, I was accustomed to change, and moving to a sprawling metropolis like New York was, in many ways, a natural extension of my desire to push boundaries and try new things.

Living in NYC comes with high hopes for a better future. While the city offered numerous opportunities, it also brought its own set of challenges. The fast-paced, competitive nature of life in New York, coupled with the high cost of living, quickly took its toll. Despite this, I carved out a place for myself in one of the city’s most vibrant communities, like the “Loisaida” also known as LES or Lower East Side, another community with deep Puerto Rican and Latinx roots. From my bedroom on the 22nd floor, I had a view of the whole city skyline, where I gained professional experience, built a network, and expanded my personal horizons.

However, after 26 years in New York—even with a good salary—I began to feel the toll of the city’s relentless pace. Growing up, I had often pictured myself leaving “The Big Apple,” but I never had a clear plan.

That changed when I met my first Slovenian partner. We began a long-term, long-distance relationship. Around that same time, I had to start paying nearly \$1,000 a month for insulin just to stay alive.

There are three major Insulin manufacturers in the United States of America; together, they represent over 90% of the Global insulin market and almost 100% of the insulin supply in America. However, medical security is easier to obtain in many other countries. Growing up in America, “The land of the free”, I felt like the older I became, the less free and the fewer opportunities I had. I felt, in a way, stripped of all my freedom. I had to pay to keep myself alive because of a system that puts profit and privatization above access and affordability. This then

leads to gaps in coverage and care, especially for people with chronic illnesses like diabetes. I was also one of the unfortunate souls who couldn't continue my education in the States, despite working immediately after high school and taking out student loans. I was still struggling with the high tuition costs and living expenses in New York City. Student debt continued to accumulate, along with interest. Before I knew it, I was 15k USD in debt and no diploma or degree to show for it. Many people have walked the path I did and ended up dropping out instead of burying themselves further in debt. However, I still consider myself a smart guy and a quick learner, and I have managed to get by without a higher education to this day. Thankfully, my student loans were expunged after fighting them in court for 3 years.

When we decided together to take our relationship to the next level, moving to Slovenia was not a difficult decision. I had already visited several times during the time I had started to get to know my partner and fallen in love with the beautiful country—a place I had known very little about before meeting him.

Ljubljana, Slovenia: A new beginning

Slovenia, a small yet stunning country in the heart of Europe, became the next chapter in my journey. Its capital, Ljubljana, is known for its charming old town, vibrant cultural scene, peaceful atmosphere, and, of course, its connection to dragons as shown in its coat of arms. Slovenia offers a high quality of life, excellent healthcare, and a deep respect for nature—all of which appealed to me deeply.

Relocating to Ljubljana has been both fascinating and, at times, challenging. Moving from the United States of America as someone with Puerto Rican heritage and a U.S. citizen came with a steep learning curve. Still, it has been incredibly rewarding as I've adapted to a new culture and gradually integrated into my surroundings.

The bureaucratic hurdles: Navigating immigration and the department for foreigners

One of the first major challenges I faced was navigating Slovenia's immigration and residency system. The bureaucracy around immigration is notoriously complex and overwhelming for newcomers. When I first moved to Slovenia with my then-partner, we hired a legal agency that specialized in obtaining work permits

for foreigners. At the time, I was still living in New York, and neither of us could get accurate information on the correct procedures. Administrative offices either didn't care or gave us conflicting answers, so we turned to professionals for help.

The process took nearly a year. I remained in New York during that time, unwilling to quit my job without income security. Once the agency assured us everything was submitted to the administrative unit, I packed up my life in New York and moved to Ljubljana. I arrived in November 2018, and we were told we were only waiting for the final review, which included FBI fingerprint clearance I had obtained from Washington, D.C. After two months of silence, we were informed that the documents had expired, as more than 60 days had passed. Due to holiday delays, the administrative unit was unable to review them in time. I was told to submit new fingerprints and supporting documents.

I was furious. We threatened to sue and use legal force, insisting that they accept the documents already provided. It didn't take long after that for them to approve my temporary residence permit.

Despite the hurdles, I finally had legal permission to live and work in Slovenia. But the experience underscored how exhausting and opaque the process will continue to be—especially for non-EU citizens. According to a 2023 *Slovenia Times* article, the country is working to streamline immigration procedures, but for many, it remains a slow and inconsistent system.

On my third time renewing my permit COVID-19 happened. I lost my job at a hotel where I was on the track for a managerial position. Because they waited until the last minute to decide to let me go, I found myself stuck in the country as the airports closed down. I was unable to submit a work contract to *Upravna enota*, triggering a domino effect. I was not approved for a permit, which meant I couldn't renew my health insurance. I quickly tried to get out of the horrible situation I suddenly found myself in.

I am forever grateful for the people in my life during this time who really went out of their way to help and assist me, like my current Director, my Egyptian friend's wife, Katja Utroša, and the rest of my colleagues at *Infokolpa*. I had blown through most of my savings during this time, but I came out of the other end of the tunnel seeing the light.

Renting as a single expat: The struggles of finding a home

When I moved to Slovenia, I was living with my then-partner in a flat that he owned. After our separation, I lived with my second Slovenian partner, but after

COVID-19, as I mentioned previously, I found myself in a difficult situation. The next battle was finding a place to live. Renting in Ljubljana is difficult even for locals—let alone single expats without guarantors or rental history.

Before moving into my current flat, I was renting a flat in Šiška. But it didn't come easily—I saw 37 flats over several months before finding one I could afford and live in independently, and comfortably. Before that, I was renting a room in Šentvid after separating from my second partner. The flat was spacious, but I shared it with three younger students. As a mature adult trying to rebuild my life, it wasn't ideal. Therefore, after a year, I started to look for a flat and found one in Šiška that really suited me. I was very lucky, but it took me many tries.

Eventually, my third partner and husband ended up moving in with me to the apartment in Šiška. We ultimately moved to a new place in the hope of making a fresh start. But now, amid our divorce and separation, I've been solely responsible for rent and all expenses on my own. On top of that, I manage my sole proprietorship, pay taxes, and try to dig myself out of debt.

As a single renter, I have to compete with families or groups—tenants often viewed as more stable. Many landlords wouldn't even consider my application without a work contract. As a sole proprietor, arranging this can be challenging. Slovenian rental laws are strict, and requirements like local co-signers or a long rental history create big hurdles for expats.

Ljubljana's rental prices, especially in the city center, are steep and continue to rise. According to the *European Union's "2021 Current Market Rents"* report, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Ljubljana is listed at €640/month. Now, according to data from Global Property Guide's latest figures, as of May 2025, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Ljubljana's city center is €1,100/month. Unfortunately, the data from Global Property Guide is sourced from local property portals based on median asking rents and not from an official or governmental data source.

There is a lack of official, up-to-date data on average rental prices for one-bedroom apartments in Ljubljana's city center from government sources like the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURSTAT). Many landlords and tenants enter into rental agreements without official documentation, often to avoid taxes or regulations. This results in a significant portion of rental agreements in Slovenia being informal or underreported, which leads to incomplete data. This makes it challenging to capture accurate and comprehensive rental statistics at a department that is already under resource constraints and may choose to prioritize other statistical areas and not have to deal with data protection laws as well.

According to the data, there is a 72% increase in average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Ljubljana. If we don't work together and assist each other in finding more efficient and functioning solutions, how far will this go?

When will it stop? Who will make the change that we are all demanding for? At this rate, Ljubljana city center will just become one Mega commercial hotel without any culture, character, or any of the things we love about Ljubljana. We are losing it, slowly.

I've tried to keep the comfortable rental flat I am renting on the outskirts and suburban-looking side of the city. Still, the process has been frustrating and challenging for me to deal with alone. I have been searching again—for something cheaper. I'm making compromises I never thought I would: downsizing, changing neighborhoods, sacrificing comfort. Just to stay afloat.

Local media, including *Delo* (2024), have highlighted how housing affordability is an issue for both expats and young Slovenians alike. The rental market has become increasingly competitive due to rising demand. Groups like *Stanovanjski blok* are advocating for reform, pushing for greater transparency and public investment in affordable housing—but change has been slow. I strongly urge all students, migrants, refugees, young single renters, and even homeowners to get involved in their local community. Because together we will be able to make the change that we demand.¹

Language barriers and the fight to integrate

Moving from NYC to Slovenia was the boldest decision of my life. As someone raised in a multilingual city like New York, I never imagined language would be such a huge obstacle. I assumed that, with my background in English and Spanish, I'd be fine. But even basic tasks—ordering food, reading official documents—felt overwhelming at first.

The timing didn't help. I arrived shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic. I lost my hotel job, my relationship ended, and the borders shut down. I felt isolated and cut off from everything familiar.

I managed to get by with the help of kind Slovenian friends and acquaintances. Through one of my former partners, I was offered a job. A friend helped me find a place to live. But dealing with institutions like *Upravna enota* was another story. Ironically, many caseworkers there refuse to speak English, despite working

¹ At the time of submitting this article, I was able to reach an agreement with my landlord to temporarily reduce the rent, easing some of the financial pressure described above. This shows that there are still very decent homeowners in Ljubljana. Sometimes, the most important thing is being honest and open about what you are going through, so others can have peace of mind too. – *Author's note*

with foreigners. I was often told “*samo slovensko*” (“only Slovenian”) when trying to ask for help.

The government offers free Slovenian courses through *Cene Štupar*—but the 180-hour program barely scratches the surface. Mixed-level classes, wildly different language backgrounds, and no prior experience with Slavic languages made it hard to progress. I looked into private tutors and courses at *Filozofska fakulteta*, but they were too expensive.

It felt like a cycle: I couldn’t access better jobs without the language—and couldn’t afford language lessons without better income.

Still, there were silver linings. At *Cene Štupar*, I met incredible people who were also struggling to integrate. We’re still close three years later. We check in, share resources, and support each other. Language exchange groups like *Kroček konverzacija SLO* run by *Društvo Medkulturni dialog*, which I am currently participating in, have created more welcoming spaces to learn. And I’ve signed petitions demanding stronger support and more accessible language programs.

I’m still on this language journey. But I’ve realized integration is more than just language. It’s about patience, resilience, and community.

Embracing the challenges

My journey from Puerto Rico to New York City to Ljubljana has been filled with challenges—but also transformation. From wrestling with bureaucracy to battling rental discrimination and language barriers, life as an expat in Slovenia has tested me in ways I never imagined. But it’s also made me stronger. I now volunteer at the *Infokolpa* office, where I strive to give back to the community, support others, and share my voice and personal stories.

Ljubljana—with its blend of history, culture, and serenity—has become my home. My story isn’t unique. Many foreigners face similar struggles, and while Slovenia has made progress, there’s still work to be done to make the country more welcoming and accessible.

As I continue building my life here, I remain hopeful that the systems will improve. That housing and language will become more accessible. And sharing my story might help someone else find their way, too.

Ljubljana, September 5, 2025