



a postcard from prague

More than 20 years after
the end of Communist rule,
Kate Armstrong revisits
the Czech capital and finds
its cultural, culinary and
club scenes in full swing.
Could this be Europe's most
buzzworthy, not to mention
beautiful, city?

Of the 30 stone statues on Prague's beautiful Charles Bridge, one – of St. John – stands out. According to local legend, if you make a wish after touching the statue's cross while rubbing the bronze plaque below it, your wish will come true. A gleaming patch testifies that millions of hands have stroked the plaque; I once did the same.

It was 1991 and I was a young romantic. I'd traipsed across Europe to Prague in pursuit of Jakub, a Czech university student with whom I'd flirted over vines at a French grape harvest. After a long train journey, I'd arrived dishevelled at Prague's central station carrying a backpack and a copy of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Jakub greeted me with a single red flower.

Czechoslovakia was still reeling from the effects of the Velvet Revolution of 1989 that resulted in the bloodless overthrow of communist rule. (In 1993, the country was officially divided into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.)

Today, 20 years after my first visit, I'm back in Prague, the

so-called "princess of cities." This time, however, I disembark from an Emirates Business-Class flight with designer luggage and a computer rather than a dog-eared novel. There are no flowers on arrival but I just know that my three days here will be as sweet as ever.

At first sight, Prague is exactly as I remember it: fairytale architecture, a mix of Gothic and Renaissance-style buildings, Baroque and Neoclassical, Art Nouveau and Cubist; a network of medieval streets and riverside parks; lively beer gardens and bohemian cafés. But the city has an edge to it today, a pulse that wasn't quite there back in the '90s.

There are stylish boutiques, cutting-edge eateries and classy hotels – hip, design-driven lodgings alongside *grande dames* such as the five-star Hotel Imperial, where I check in. The rooms here are decorated in beautiful Deco style: rich fabrics, heavy furniture and onyx-filled bathrooms. The café dazzles with detailed mosaics and gilded furnishings. As much as I'd like to while away a day sipping strong coffee here, I have just

FROM THE ROOFTOPS

Opposite: Overlooking old Prague from the city's Town Hall Tower



three days to explore the “city of 100 spires” – another of Prague’s nicknames – so I move on.

The Town Hall is a great first stop. Above the Astronomical Clock, famous for its figurines that come to life on the hour, looms a 70-metre-tall tower that you can climb to gain your bearings. I huff to the top; directly below me is the Old Town Square, Prague’s principal plaza. From here, winding alleys form a web across the Staré Mesto – the old town.

Josefov, the Jewish quarter, lies to my north and borders the Vltava, the river portrayed by Czech composer Smetana that snakes through the city. Across the Vltava is Hradcany, the hill that is dominated by Prague Castle. And at its foot sprawl the medieval lanes and hidden gardens of Malá Strana, literally “little side,” commonly referred to as the city’s Lesser Quarter.

Despite the hawkers and hordes of

visitors – around 4.1 million annually – who clog Charles Bridge, a stroll across the structure is unavoidable if you want to gain access to Prague Castle. Allow a morning to wander through the castle’s wonderful playground of palaces, St. Vitus Cathedral and the surrounding laneways.

After a full day of sightseeing I’m ready for a spot of retail therapy and spend my second day in Prague perusing the city’s finest boutiques. The gorgeous tree-lined Parížská, Paris Street, so named for its beautiful buildings and upmarket shops, features big-name brands – Gucci, Armani and Louis Vuitton. I make a beeline for Dlouhá Street, around which several high-end fashion boutiques, marketed together as the Czech Fashion Centre, sell funky items crafted by local designers, from streetwear to

flamboyant evening dresses.

The city is a Mecca for history buffs, home to dozens of art, folk and historical museums. I choose the quirky Museum of Communism near Wenceslas Square, rather ironically flanked by a McDonald’s franchise on one side and a casino on the other. The exhibits, including a reconstructed interrogation room and busts of former dictators, are poignant, if dated and dusty, reminders of the rigid authoritarian practices that were once commonplace across the region. My knowledgeable young guide Adela, who was born after the 1989 revolution, loves this place. “It’s cool,” she tells me, “to be against communism.”

My lunch spot, Lokal, continues the trend. Bread arrives in fifties-style plastic baskets, the menu lists dishes such as goulash and sausages,



and anti-communist graffiti has been scrawled over the walls.

Whatever their political views, locals agree on one thing: beer is good. The Czechs are among the biggest beer-drinkers in the world, every year imbibing a staggering 160 litres of liquid gold per person. I make my way to one of Prague's oldest beer halls, Restaurace U Pinkasu, and enjoy an ice-cold pilsner draught beer. The place is packed with happy drinkers perched on wooden bar stools over three floors; there's an alfresco area, too, for when the sun comes out.

Next stop is The Pub, which offers a memorable drinking experience. Each table comes equipped with its own draught tap and a computer screen. Beer consumption is tallied at the table, then displayed on a big screen for the rest of the room to view. The pressure is on!

I reserve my final day for Josefov, Prague's Jewish quarter and former ghetto. It's a warren of narrow alleys lined with stone buildings, some of which date back to the 13th century. The Old Jewish Cemetery was a burial site from the mid-15th century until 1787. Stone tombstones crammed together represent only a fraction of the estimated 100,000 bodies that are buried here, one on top of the other. The walls of the Pinkas Synagogue, a Holocaust memorial, are covered with the names of nearly 80,000 victims. It's a confronting and a moving place; there are few dry eyes around me.

For lighter relief and reflection, I wander through peaceful Petřín Park, which sprawls above the western bank of the river. Towering trees (including the Czech national tree, the linden) shed their leaves to form a dense yellow-and-red autumnal

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

Above, from left: On the banks of the Vltava River, Prague is one of Europe's loveliest cities; Petřín Hill Tower

travelfacts

gettingthere

Emirates flies to Prague from Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane via Dubai. 1300-303-777; emirates.com

gettingaround

APT offers excellent guided tours around Prague as part of its 15-day "Magnificent Europe" river cruise package. This luxury trip heads overland from Prague to Budapest and then continues on to Amsterdam via a cruise along the Danube, Main and Rhine rivers. 1300-229-804; aptouring.com.au

whentogo

There's no bad time to visit Prague. June through August is summer and hence, busy. Winter can be cold but there are fewer tourists.

wheretostay

For a lavish introduction to the city, check in to the Art-Deco Imperial Hotel. 420-246/011-600; hotel-imperial.cz

wheretoeat

- Café Louvre. Národní třída 22; 420-224/930-949; cafelouvre.cz
- Café & Restaurant Slavia. Smetanovo nábřeží 1012; 420-224/216-244; cafeslaviva.cz
- Grand Cafe Orient. Ovocný trh 19; 420-224/224-240; grandcafeorient.cz
- La Dégustation Bohème Bourgeoise. Haštalská 18; 420-222/311-234; ladegustation.cz
- Brasserie La Gare. V Celnici 3; 420-222/313-712; lagare.cz
- Lokal. Dlouhá 33; 420-222/316-265
- Little Whale. Maltézské náměstí 15; 420-257/214-703; umalevelryby.cz
- U Zavešeného Kafe. Úvoz 6, near Prague Castle; 420-605/294-595; uzavesenyhokafe.com

wheretodrink

- The Pub. Velešlavínova 3; 420-222/312-296; thepub.cz
- Restaurace U Pinkasu. Jungmannova náměstí 15/16; 420-221/111-150; upinkasu.cz



STEPPING UP

Inside the Black Madonna House, a fine example of Cubist architecture in Prague's Old Town

carpet. A funicular grinds its way to the top of Petřín Hill, where the 63.5-metre-high Petřín Lookout Tower offers spectacular views over the town.

From this height, you can take in the controversial Fred and Ginger building, built in 1996 by Frank Gehry and local architect Vlado Milunic and nicknamed "the Dancing House" for the fact that it resembles a pair of dancers. "Ginger" is pretty and pinched in at the waist, and one of Prague's top restaurants, Celeste, occupies the top floor of the building, dishing up superb international and Czech fare.

The award-winner for Prague's most adventurous eatery and the dining highlight of my trip is La Dégustation Bohème Bourgeoise. The seven-course degustation menu *du jour* features traditional Czech dishes given a contemporary twist – delicacies like celery-root soup with a tangy orange jelly and pork neck baked for 12 hours and served with the "essence" of red cabbage.

Still, it's hard to beat the city's

cafés for ambience and offerings. At Café Louvre, I soak up my surrounds – Art-Nouveau mirrors, marble-clad walls and half-moon-shaped light fittings – while sipping a good strong coffee; a perfect heart has been drawn into the foam. Later, I pant up a steep hill to the bohemian U Zavešeného Kafe, the Hanging Coffee Café, where large oil paintings decorate the walls and patrons gossip over heady brews. The gimmick here is that you purchase a coffee for yourself and another – a "hanging" coffee – for someone else. Anyone, really: someone who has forgotten their money, a good-looking patron you wouldn't mind meeting, a friend. A giant abacus hanging above the doorway represents the number of pre-purchased drinks up for grabs.

On the morning of my departure I return to the Charles Bridge for one last rub of the plaque. If St. John's legendary power is real, I'll be back in the "city of 100 spires" sooner, rather than later. •

Photography by Kate Armstrong.