

That Mysterious Charm about Prague

By Kristin L. Wiemer

(published in the Davis Island Newspaper)

Throughout my life, I've often heard people say, "Well, I'm going to Prague this summer" or "You must go to Prague." There almost seemed to be an air of arrogance in the way the one syllable word Prague flowed out of their mouths. Prague, Prague, Prague. What is this Prague place all about? Or as the Czech's say -- *Praba*. Well, I had the opportunity to discover just what this mysterious city located in the western region of the Czech Republic was all about. A spur of the moment weekend trip while I was traveling in Germany, landed me in the golden city of Prague.

I can't put my finger on exactly what it is about Prague that draws you in, but its stunning physical beauty is a good place to start. While many cities throughout the eastern European nations were heavily damaged during World War II, Prague survived – practically untouched – and it remains in pristine condition today. The perfectly laid cobblestone streets and sidewalks twist throughout the old world architecture of Prague. Thanks to the city's role as a central point of culture and commerce for nearly a thousand years, it retains the evidence of the many nationalities that have influenced its course in history. Gothic and baroque spires, or pinnacles, art-nouveau facades and cubist structures reflect the imported flair of the German, Italian and Bohemian artistic movements.

Since the 1989 Velvet Revolution, when communism was swept out of Prague, the city has developed into a bustling capital, offering visitors an interesting collection of attractions including casinos, discothèques, international cuisine and crystal boutiques with the finest in Bohemian glassware and antiques. Tourists and foreign expatriates continue to descend on the "City of a Hundred Spires" to experience the charm of the Old Town Square and the vitality of an awakened city that has left its totalitarian past far behind. Even with the fast-food restaurants, automatic cash machines and ever-present cellular phones, Prague's old world appeal and proud stature have been steadfastly preserved. Arched stone bridges, old cellar bars humming with modern music and mysterious lantern lit alleyways linger around almost every corner. If you slip away from the main tourist scene in the Old Town Square, you'll stumble upon the center of modern

Prague, Wenceslas Square, filled with flavorful entertainment, cinema houses, jazz clubs, restaurants and new commerce.

My trip was short, but a full-day walking tour led me through the grandest of sights revealing a historic trail of evolution. The beginnings of this ancient city date back to the 9th century when the Prague Castle was erected to serve as a residence for princes and kings. Today, the larger, reconstructed castle is the home of the President as well as a highly visited tourist interest. The Castle's many courtyards, Romanesque cathedral and extensive artifacts will surely keep you engaged for a good part of a day. The St. Charles Bridge and astrological clock tower that chimes on the hour as a rooster flaps its wings and crows, offer additional intrigue. Climb the stairs to the top of the clock tower for exquisite, panoramic views of Prague's city line. Red tile roof tops and sharp spires stand tall in the air as you look out from the observation level. The view will take your breath away and for a brief moment, as I did, perhaps you'll find yourself in a poetic trance – envisioning what 16th century civilization must have been like in the enchanting capital city of Prague.

Beyond the endless sightseeing, Prague offers a steady flow of shops with delicate crystal pieces, from hand blown collectibles to goblet style wine glasses and eclectic antiques. The open markets in the Old Town Square and along the now pedestrian-only St. Charles Bridge are definitely worth checking out. They are filled with artistic treasures for you to take home including photographs, paintings, hand crafted jewelry, and knight armor and swords.

Whether you are a history enthusiast or simply a leisurely traveler that enjoys outdoor cafes and the bold notes of a jazz tune, Prague is a city filled with poetry and mystery that will leave you wondering why you didn't visit sooner. Its charming character, captivating entertainment and architectural details demand to be explored -- little by little and with absolute appreciation.