

Prague  
Suzanne Wright

Prague is one of those places that seems to inspire universal adulation. In fact, I have never heard a single traveler disparage it. After visiting, I understand why.

A friend and I stayed at the Intercontinental Prague, which overlooks the River Vltava, the backbone of the city. The club floor, with its sweeping views, served as a kind of living room. There, we met a chatty Czech mother and daughter, a Jewish family from New York City on a heritage tour and assorted other solo, paired and group travelers. Our comfortable room had a spectacular river view and a cheeky red rubber duckie in honor of the holidays. On the hotel's top floor, the handsome Vlada Paha or "Golden Prague" restaurant, polished staffers served us delicious, award-winning haute cuisine, graciously and quickly adjusting the multi-course menu for my friend's vegetarian requirements. As we ate, we noted the many spires—more than 100—which rise from the snow-dusted red tile rooftops. Ironically, the country is still not very religious almost two decades after communism fell.

The following day, Christmas Eve, flame-haired Ilona Zahradnikova met us for a walking tour. Extremely compact, Prague, the heart of Europe, is on a scale for pedestrians. Just a couple of blocks from our hotel, is the Old Jewish Cemetery in Josefov, the Jewish Quarter. It was created in the 15th century when Jews were forbidden to bury their dead outside their own district. Space was scarce, so bodies were buried on top of each other—some 12 deep. Over the centuries, lopsided tombstones formed crowded, poignant groupings like broken, crooked teeth. The clomp clomp of horse hooves on cobblestone signals a passing carriage with tourists, as we continue on to Old Town Square, with its world famous astronomical clock, which gives a brief performance every hour when the 12 apostles appear. At the Christmas market, I sampled pork on a stick and melt-in-your-mouth sugar cookies; the three of us sipped mulled wine.

Although Prague's tourism board calls it the city of mystery and secrets, the people are open and kind. Like Dagmar, a sweet-faced, almost childlike lady in her 70s working the cloakroom at the Museum of Decoration. She took me to a window overlooking the adjoining Old Jewish Cemetery and gently encouraged me to snap pictures, while telling me of her past. Later, a young male docent pulled strings on one cuckoo clock after another to make them come to life, to our delight.

The Charles Bridge, a glorious pedestrian-only pathway for pedestrians, is Prague's most recognizable and popular attraction. Here monuments come alive with Ilona's stories, while we experience the immediacy of history with every step. From 1683 to 1928, 30 sculptures of saints were gradually set on the bridge piers. We are a sea of people: lovers holding hands, strolling the span; artists hawking their paintings; children, bundled against the wind, running with bright cries. Overhead, seagulls swoop and dip. Though radically different, it is every bit as enchanting as a promenade on the Champs-Élysées in Paris.

We work our way up to Prague Castle, passing by a marker of the water level during the devastating floods of 2002. The Castle district, formerly the residence of the princes and kings of Bohemia, is monumental in scope. Built in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and developed almost constantly since then, it is a 111-acre complex of ecclesiastical, fortification, residential and office buildings representing all architectural styles and periods. There are three castle courtyards.

After parting with Ilona, we returned to the hotel to freshen up for dinner. We had reservations at Kampa Fish on the island of Kampa. A newish restaurant with fusion food and Russian owners, it has great intentions and style. The flashy interiors are sleek in silver, white and black; a tuxedoed piano player plays new and old standards. Not all the dishes succeed, but it is great fun, nonetheless, a new twist on Christmas dinner.

Christmas dawned as the first sunny sky in a trip of gray days. I started with a gift to myself: an acupressure massage by the gifted Mirek and a leisurely breakfast. In winter the rhythm is different, with less daylight, we find ourselves less ambitious, which allows us to soak up the cadence of the city. We strolled past No. 22, where Franz Kafka once lived, a tiny, blue one-room house. We took a Venetian-style boat ride for a different view of the eye-popping architecture of the city. We walked downriver to the so-called “dancing building,” the two Frank Gehry-designed towers that appear to be waltzing. It is sometimes referred to as the “Fred and Ginger building,” after the legendary dancing duo.

The Gehry building provides an arrestingly modern contrast in an old-world city. Like everything in Prague, that fanciful sense of motion and playfulness, stillness and seriousness, explains why the city is so perennially well-liked.

#### If You Go

For general information on Prague, log onto [www.prague-info.cz](http://www.prague-info.cz) or [www.CzechTourism.com](http://www.CzechTourism.com). For hotel reservations, log onto [www.ichotels.com](http://www.ichotels.com) or call 1-888-IC HOTELS. To schedule a walking tour with Ilona Zahradnikova, email her at: [izahard@login.cz](mailto:izahard@login.cz).