

# PRAGUE

## *A Pearl of a City* by Ginger Henry-Künzel

**H**aving purchased two horses and a covered wagon, the adventurous young man set out to make his fortune. A familiar pioneer story? Perhaps, except for the fact that this story is taking place now in the 20th century.

And rather than heading west with his team of horses, this young man has remained in the east – in Prague, to be exact. The pioneer's name is Robert and, along with his partners Wenceslas and Wilda, he is embarking on a joint (ad)venture in the uncharted territory of the country's new free market economy.

### **Enterprising Czechs**

Their "covered" wagon, open at the sides, takes visitors on rides through the streets of Prague. Sitting at a wooden table stretching the length of the wagon, guests are served the famous Czech Pilsner beer during the journey.

The risks of this enterprise are perhaps as great as, albeit different from, those facing the original pioneers. The 450,000 crown (\$17,000) loan from the bank, at 25 percent interest, must be paid back within one year. In a country where the average monthly wage is about \$125, the stakes are high.

Crossing over the narrow bridge our driver, Wilda, demonstrates his expertise in keeping the wagon wheels out of the trolley tracks, no mean feat. The pace is slow and there is no room for the trolley approaching from the rear to get around us.

Wenceslas jumps out of the wagon to hand the trolley driver a package of orange juice – for his patience. Further along the route, the street cleaners are also provided with refreshments – for the extra work the horses cause.

There is a sense of solidarity among the people of Prague, a willingness to

## "Czech" out the new Prague, reborn since the fall of communism.

help each other out in their attempts to make a new start. It's a refreshing experience for those accustomed to the "dog eat dog" ways of western free enterprise.

The wagon leaves on the hour from under the famous Apostle's Clock at the old town hall, every day except Thursday. On Saturdays and Sundays, a bagpipe player is on board. The cost: 200 crowns (about \$7) including beer and soft drinks.

### Rooms for rent

Other enterprising Czechs have moved out of their apartments, doubling up with neighbors or relatives, in order to rent the rooms to tourists. Anxious to attract visitors but recognizing the severe shortage of hotel rooms in the city, the government encourages this practice. For tourists, the advantages are two-fold: inexpensive accommodations while getting a firsthand glimpse of Prague lifestyles.

The apartment we stayed in recently was a 15-minute walk from the center of town, had a bathroom and fully-equipped kitchen and costs only \$30 per night. Although by no means luxurious, it was clean and pleasantly furnished.

With hotel rooms in Prague starting at about \$70 per night, these private accommodations are a welcome alternative. They can be booked at the AVE office in the train station, as well as at travel agencies located throughout the downtown sector.

### A money-changer's market

Every city has its black sheep and Prague is no exception. The money-changers, stalking their prey all around the city center, are the most common among the entrepreneurs who are making their living at the expense of others.

Ignoring the warnings to avoid the black market, we paid dearly for our mistake, discovering later that we had been given bogus Czech bills printed just before the fall of the Communist regime and never put into circulation. Another trick of the money-changer: Giving you Polish zloty, worth nothing compared to Czech money.

The best place to exchange money is at a bank (1 percent commission) or Cedok office (2 percent). Private exchange offices usually charge a much higher commission.

Now that you've found a place to stay and have the correct currency in your pocket, it's time to set out to see the city. A good place to start is the American Hospitality Center, located just off the main square (Male Namesti 14). This center, founded last year by two Czech men now living in America, has a coffee shop, souvenir store, tours office with maps, accommodations bureau and money exchange.

The people who work here are Czechoslovakians who speak excellent

English and are willing to answer any questions you might have. Here, too, you can pick up a copy of Prague's monthly English newspaper "Prognosis," which provides tourist tips.

### Time to clock-watch

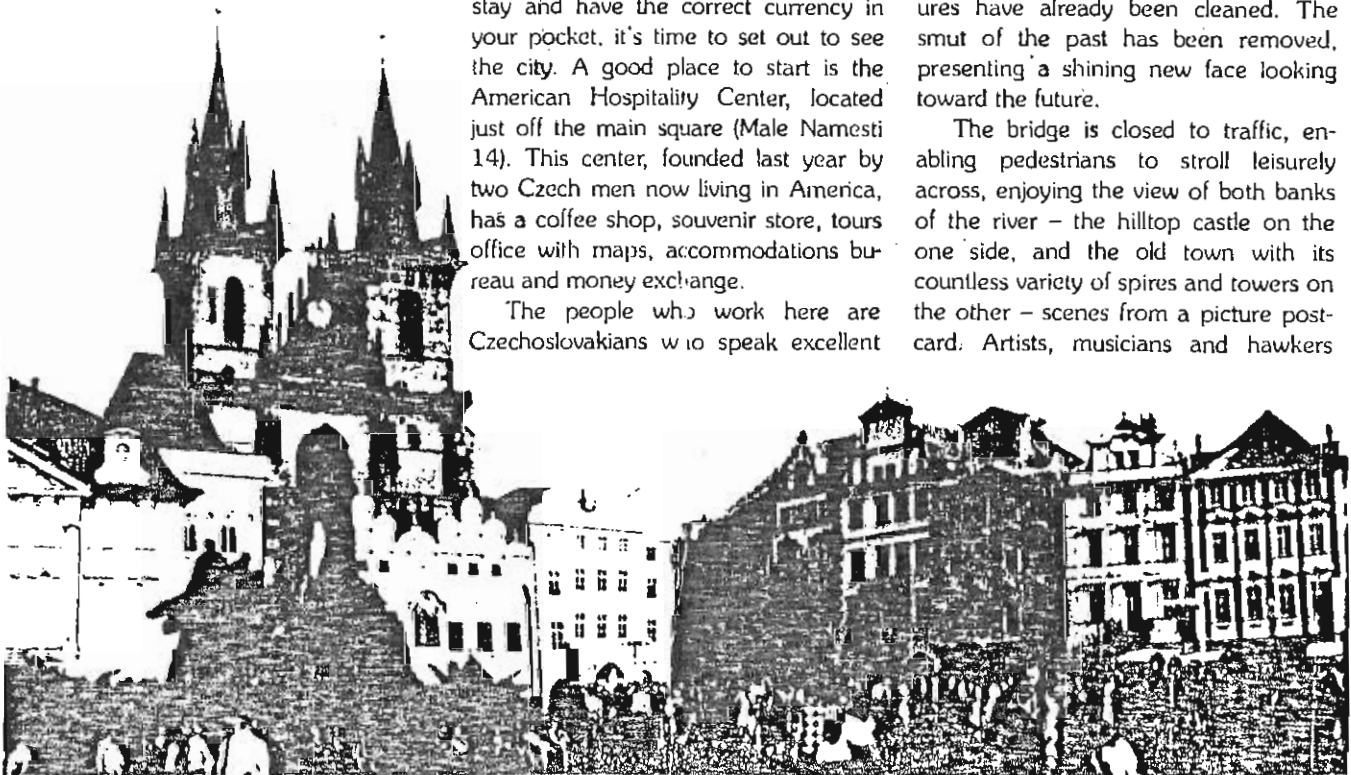
With a map of the city in hand, you can start your explorations. Almost all of the important buildings and museums are located in the central sector, an area easily covered on foot. Every hour on the hour the Apostle's Clock at Staromestske Namesti (Old Town Square) begins its performance.

A skeleton pulls on a rope with one hand, tolling the death bell. With the other he raises an hourglass. As the bells ring, the apostles appear one by one in a doorway. Finally, the rooster crows and the bells sound the hour.

### Bridge of statues

Another "must-see" is the Charles Bridge, lined with 30 statues of saints, Europe's largest open-air sculpture gallery. The statues are black with soot, perhaps symbolic of the dark years of Communist rule. But a restoration program is under way and the first two figures have already been cleaned. The smut of the past has been removed, presenting a shining new face looking toward the future.

The bridge is closed to traffic, enabling pedestrians to stroll leisurely across, enjoying the view of both banks of the river – the hilltop castle on the one side, and the old town with its countless variety of spires and towers on the other – scenes from a picture postcard. Artists, musicians and hawkers



selling everything from jewels to junk line the bridge.

The sun sets and the lights of the city come on one by one, a cruise ship glides by underneath as a solitary violin player entertains beside one of the statues. This is the best time to linger on the bridge and soak up a bit of the atmosphere of Old Europe at its best.

### The "Lesser City"

At the other end of the bridge is Malá Strana, or the Lesser City. Here, below the emperor's castle, the aristocracy built their glorious palaces, and magnificent churches were erected. Overgrown gardens, many in unusual terraced forms, idyllic secluded squares, tiny alleyways and splendid facades lie waiting to be discovered.

And then there is Josefov, the former Jewish Ghetto, founded in the early Middle Ages, integrated into Prague in 1848. A window high up on the eastern wall of the 13th-century Old-New Synagogue, Europe's oldest synagogue still in use, served as a kind of clock. When the first rays of sun streamed through, it was time to begin worship.

### The Jewish burial place

Nearby is the Jewish cemetery where 12,000 gravestones are placed almost literally on top of one another. This was the only burial place allowed for Jews in Prague from the beginning of the 15th to the end of the 18th century. The area is small and the numbers were great, so the dead were piled on top of one another – up to 12 layers high.

A gray-haired lady offers to show us around. Some of the tombstones have tiny rocks placed atop them. She explains that this is a holdover from the days when the Jews were wandering through the desert. Pebbles were placed on the sand above a burial site to hold the sand in place so that the grave would not be uncovered. Nowadays, out of respect and tradition, people put pebbles on the gravestones.

We ask what the tiny pieces of folded paper on many of the graves signify. "These," she tells us, "are either wish lists or notes of appreciation for wishes fulfilled. I have often placed notes here

### Beer Halls in Prague

- U Dvou Koček (Uhelny trh 10): Fine beer and good basic meals in a Gothic building.
- U Fleku (Kremencova 11): Prague's largest and most famous; lots of tourists.
- U Malvase (Karlova 10): Near Charles Bridge. Try the dark beer here (Tmavé pivo). If Raadio is the bartender on duty, the beer flows well into the wee hours.
- U Medviku (Na Perstyně 7): The Budweiser (Budvar) beer served here is a far cry from the U.S. version.
- U Supa (Celetná 22): This place is much less smoky, brighter and less crowded than the other beer halls. Try the Branik beer here, which has a higher alcohol content than other Czech beers.



### Wine Restaurants

- U Suteru (Palackého 4): Dark, quiet romantic atmosphere. Small tables with candlelight. The food could be better, but the wine is tasty and the setting perfect.
- U Křávcu (Dlouhá 25): Walk through a courtyard and down the steps to get to this restaurant, a real insider's tip. Order a plate of sliced ham, salad and rye bread to accompany your wine. This vaulted cellar with rough stone walls will make you feel like you're in medieval Prague.



### Finer Restaurants

- Myslivna (Jagellonska 21, tel. 276209): Famous for its wild game.
- U zlaté hrušky (Nový svět 3, tel. 531133): Here, too, the wild game is the house specialty. Let the waiter give you his recommendations.

myself."

In the museum next to the cemetery, pictures drawn by children interred in the Theresienstadt concentration camp are displayed. It's a chilling exhibition reminding us that, for many Czechs, the suffering began long before the Communist regime came to power.

### The "real" Prague

Now take a subway to the stop called

Na Městci Miru. Just a short distance from the city center, you will find yourself as the only tourist in the middle of a Prague residential quarter. The buildings here, just as in the center, are splendid examples of different eras, ranging from the baroque to art nouveau.

However, while the center appears a bit like a showcase, the buildings here represent everyday life. Take some time to wander around the area and soak up the atmosphere of the "real" Prague.

Scaffolding has been built above many of the sidewalks – to protect pedestrians from pieces falling from the crumbling buildings. A few of the structures have been renovated, but many, in their grayness, are easily overlooked unless one sets out to discover them.

### Drink and food

A trip to Prague would not be complete without a visit to the beer halls. One thing to be aware of is that these beer halls tend to run out of beer early. No new kegs are tapped after about 8:30 p.m. Bottled beer is still served after that time, but even that seems to disappear by about 10 p.m.

Dining can also be a treat in Prague, especially on your pocketbook. Meals are still extraordinarily inexpensive (about \$3-4 at an average restaurant or beer hall) and usually consist of Bohemian home-cooking, which means meat with gravy, sauerkraut and a slice of dumpling. Prague also has some high-quality restaurants where you will pay a bit more for better meals, but make reservations several days in advance.

Prague, once known as the Golden City, is polishing itself up, presenting a new face to the world. More and more tourists are adding the city to their itineraries, bringing much-needed western currency into the country. The city fathers are walking a fine line between providing modern services for the increasing influx of visitors and business people while at the same time preserving Prague's historic past.

For Prague, the old adage, slightly modified, holds true: Present a new face but preserve the old, one brings silver and the other is pure gold.