



# PRAGUE 1

*Prague*

THERE'S MORE TO THE CZECH CAPITAL'S HISTORIC CENTER THAN COBBLESTONE ALLEYS AND MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE

**O**n Prague's Old Town Square, the sheer level of competition is weighing heavily on the silver human statue. "There are so many performers, it can be hard to get people's attention," says Czech-born Robert Horvak, whose shtick is to flutter his eyelids and greet passersby with a squeaky bird voice. Even with these enticements, it can be hard to draw a crowd when there's also a traditional five-piece band on the square, as well as a very huggable 12-foot-tall polar bear.

The performer's primary *bête noire*, however, is the Slovakian gold human statue, who operates a few yards away with a more conventional "stand very still" routine. "We are not friends," Horvak says. A young girl appears with some small change, and the silver statue snaps back into character, which he refuses to break even after she is gone. "Bye-bye!" he

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Words  
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squeaks, proffering a thumbs-up. "Fantastic!"

In fairness to Horvak, it's not easy to stand out in Prague's historic district, or Prague 1, an area that includes the Old Town, the New Town, the Jewish Quarter and the Little Quarter. The neighborhood is barely more than three square miles, running on either side of the Vltava River across the famous Charles Bridge, but it contains perhaps the greatest convergence of medieval buildings on Earth.

Ever since Charles IV, the 14th-century King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor, made Prague his pet project, the city has attracted a succession of show-stopping architects who have built extravagant marvels such as the Gothic St. Vitus Cathedral and the neo-Renaissance National Theater by the river.

This is a place to gawk while walking along cobbled alleys, ideally not on a motorized vehicle (Segways were banned in 2016, >

nd locals still grumble about scooters). It's district so evocative that you can forgive the fact that there's one too many Irish bars and a few too many tour groups moving en masse between St. Nicholas Church and the Astronomical Clock.

I'm staying a selfie stick's-throw away from the clock at the Grand Hotel Praha, on the Old Town Square, where the service is on the austere side, the decor tends toward the kitsch and it takes about five minutes roaming through dark hallways to find my cavernous, spooky room. It's perfect.

On my first morning in Prague from London, I decide to visit a museum, but am paralyzed by the many options. The museums here run the gamut from the place-specific (Kafka, beer, torture) to the downright out-of-place. I am dismayed to find that the Apple Museum is not an homage to the Czech Republic's orchards, but to Steve Jobs.

I settle for the Museum of Communism, which is a humane and surprisingly humorous primer on the old Czechoslovakia's tricky relationship with Soviet rule, ironically situated in an 18th-century aristocratic palace, next to a McDonald's. Originally opened in 2001 by an American political science major, the museum's replica classrooms and video testimonies are fascinating and moving—as are the written accounts of the Prague Spring, a brief period of relative freedom and optimism in the 1960s,

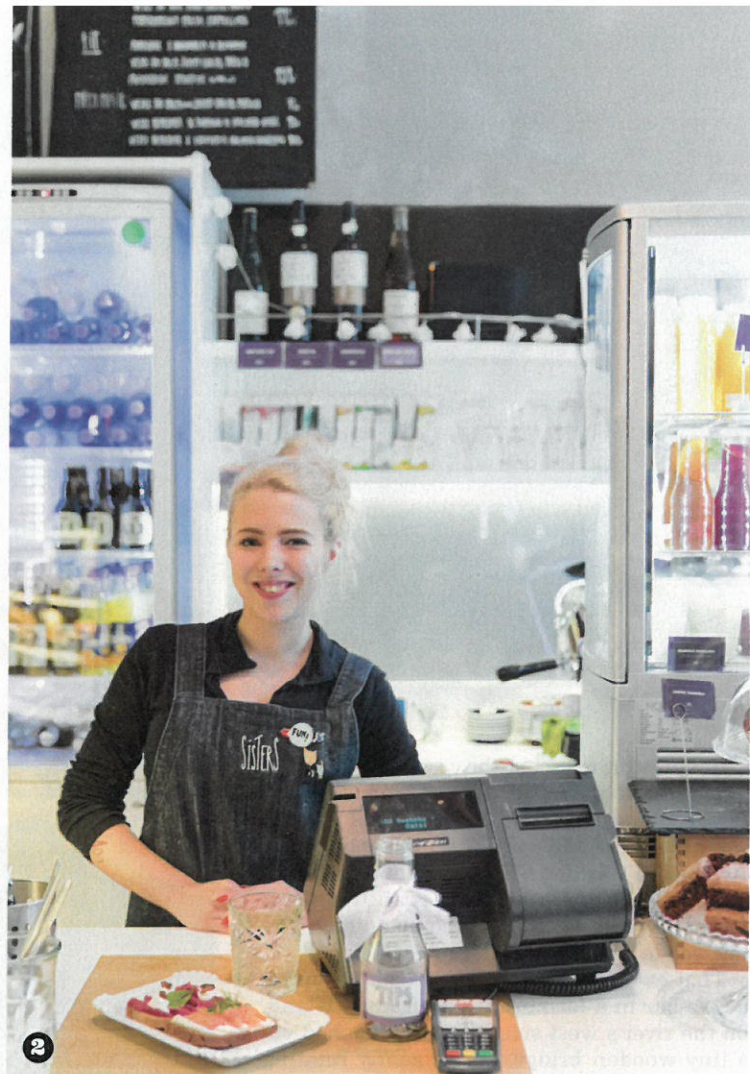
“MUSEUMS RUN THE GAMUT FROM THE PLACE-SPECIFIC TO THE DOWNRIGHT OUT-OF-PLACE.”

which was eventually crushed by Soviet troops in the process of so-called normalization.

I get a more tangible version of the story on the way back to the square, at the tiny Bric a Brac Antiques store, packed to the rafters with vintage Czech Pilsner Urquell signs, art deco chandeliers, communist-era phones and just about every other curio imaginable.

Martin Mičan, the shopkeeper, was a punk in the communist era, with his mohawk and black-market Dead Kennedys records, who came back from military service in 1989 to find the world changed. He claims there are more than a million items between the tiny shop and its roomier sister location a few





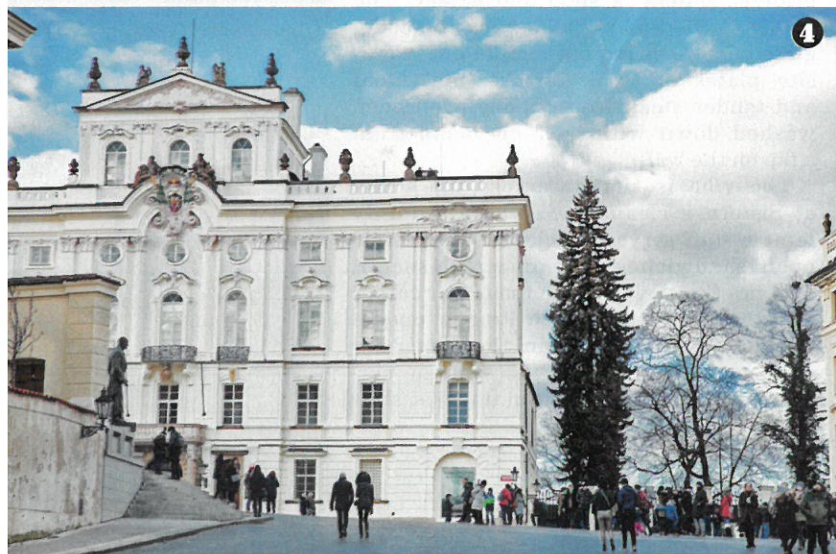
1. Open sandwiches at Sisters
  2. Sisters' server Barbara Stejskalova
  3. Inside the Pivnice Štupartská restaurant
  4. The Archbishop's Palace
- Previous page: A view across the Charles Bridge

streets away, and that you'll find pieces relating to most phases of Prague's history.

"The '60s here was really like Swedish socialism," he says, picking through the merchandise. "But most of the things we sell are from the period between the wars, when Prague was stable and affluent, and the stuff was not only beautiful but built to last. All my cooking pots at home are from the 1920s."

After telling me a story about how charming Matt Damon was when he came to the shop—Prague is one of Europe's top filming locations—Mičan points me to Pivnice Štupartská, a traditional Czech restaurant just down the road, which he prefers to the popular U Fleků, the church-like microbrewery and restaurant that has been operating since 1499.

With its dark wood, decorative mirrors and copper beer tanks, Pivnice Štupartská looks the part, and has a classic Czech menu: beef goulash in a bread bowl, chicken schnitzel and a wide array of pork. I order the knuckle, not quite anticipating the head-sized hunk of pork that hits my table, wedged onto a thick skewer. It tastes better than it looks: rich and tender, with crispy crackling, washed down with a half-liter of Gambrinus tank beer. >





It is possible to escape the crowds in Prague 1. If you walk in any direction from the Old Town Square, the souvenir shops selling absinthe and Matryoshka dolls thin out. Across the Charles Bridge, northwest toward the castle or south past the graffitied John Lennon Wall, the streets become quieter, giving way to a more neighborhood feel.

That evening, I head to Kavárna Mlýnská, a cafe-bar in a former mill on Kampa Island, on the river's west side, which is reached via a tiny wooden bridge, past a gently rotating waterwheel. It's said to be the social center

## AWAY FROM THE OLD TOWN SQUARE, THE TOURISTS TRAPS THIN OUT.

of literary and artistic Prague, and its most famous regular is David Černý, the enfant terrible of Czech art, who managed to offend even the art world when he pickled a lifelike statue of Saddam Hussein in 2005.

Černý has an apartment nearby, and a few of his iconic faceless baby statues can be seen crawling creepily by the river in Kampa Park. For Kavárna Mlýnská, he created a pop art bar top, with old toy planes and severed doll heads built into the plexiglass, and the bartender seems surprised that he's not in for a beer tonight. Instead, the people-watching consists mainly of well-heeled locals in knitwear, seemingly deep in conspiratorial chat.

If it's possible to escape the tourists, it's



also possible to dodge the medieval-themed restaurants that dot Old Prague's alleyways. From the Old Town Square, I take a 10-minute walk northeast to find Naše maso ("Our meat"), a buzzing, slickly branded butcher's shop and eatery. The young staff—who are all smiles and collegiate banter—bring out simple but exquisite plates of steak tartare, meat loaf and tender steak from 70-day aged beef, washed down with beer or vodka from a tap on the wall.

The vibe is similar across the street at Sisters, a clean space where a mostly female staff serves delicious Danish-style open sandwiches. The cheerful server, Barbora Stejskalova, tells me of her career plans to run food tours in Prague, open a Czech restaurant in Spain, then open her own school in Prague. Whatever the personification of dismal communism is, she's the opposite. >

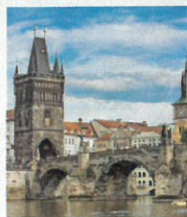
3	Steak	200,-
	Naš hamburger /cheesburger/	100,-
	Naš stárek hamburger /chees	100,-
	Naš tatarák	100,-
	Sakana v housce	100,-
	Sakana	100,-



1. Vintage finds at Bric a Brac Antiques
2. The Old Town Square
3. Naše maso butchers at work
4. Woundwort, porridge, *modřenin* and leaven at Field



**A QUICK GUIDE TO ARCHITECTURAL ERAS IN PRAGUE 1**



**Gothic**

The Charles Bridge, built from 1357 on the orders of the all-powerful Charles IV, is a Gothic masterpiece—though its 30 statues weren't put there until around 1700 and have all since been replaced.



**Renaissance**

The House at the Minute on the Old Town Square was rebuilt in the 16th century, with sgraffito decorations of Habsburg rulers completed by 1615. Writer Franz Kafka lived there at the end of the 19th century.



**Baroque**

St. Nicholas Church, on the west side of the river, was built from 1704 to 1755, and is considered Radical Baroque for its oviform spaces and one of the largest frescoes in Europe. Mozart played its 2,500-pipe organ.



**Modern**

The whimsically curving 'deconstructivist' Dancing House was designed for a Dutch finance company by Czech-Croatian architect Vlado Milunić, aided by Frank Gehry. Finished in 1996.

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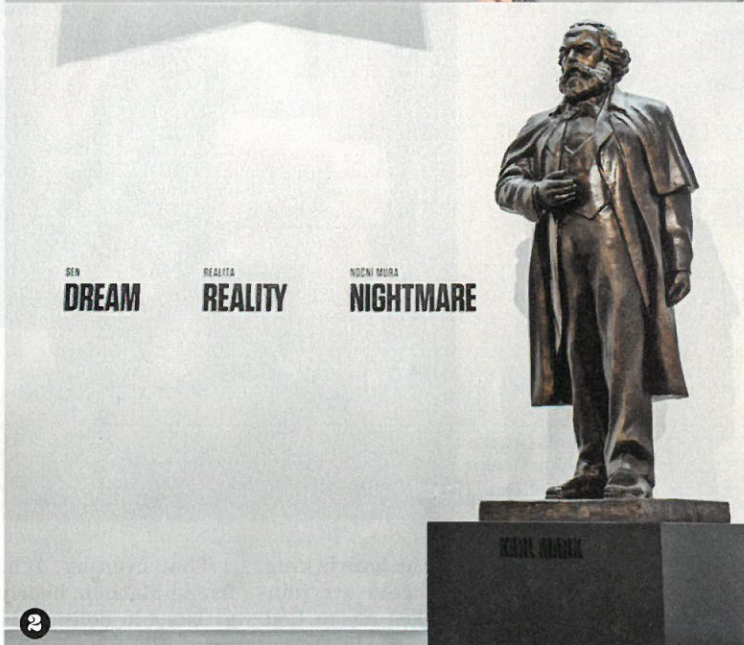


If Sisters draws inspiration from mod-ish, minimalist Denmark, so does Field, the Michelin-starred restaurant just up the way. Czech chef and co-owner Radek Kašpárek sources his ingredients from the Czech Republic but takes his cues from Noma, Copenhagen's temple of New Nordic gastronomy. I've been told he has plans to put ants on the menu, but the dishes I try are interesting enough as is: a starter of porridge and Czech *modřenin* cheese

## IN PRAGUE, DOCTORS ARE SAID TO SOMETIMES PRESCRIBE BEER TO PATIENTS.

that contains the wormlike root of a woundwort, a little-known cousin of the nettle; and a main of tender lamb with six types of fennel. Both are willfully esoteric and utterly delicious.

Even the suds are getting an update in Old Prague. This, remember, is the center of a country that drinks more beer per capita than anywhere else on the planet; where they serve Pilsner Urquell in McDonald's (I checked); and where doctors are said to



sometimes prescribe beer to patients with stomach and kidney problems.

I get the lowdown that afternoon on a private tour with Jan Macuch, a born-and-bred local who once unearthed old Czech recipes for the *Prague Post*, and who currently runs popular beer and food tours for the Eating Prague tour company.

With his flat cap, big smile and faintly subversive air, Macuch is not your average guide—not only can he hold his own on the works of John Irving and Irvine Welsh, but he is also a fount of gossip and cute lines. “What’s the greatest lie told in the Czech Republic?” he asks me over a house pilsner at T-Anker, a modern brewpub with a terrace overlooking Old Town. “Let’s go for one.”

In between quips, he gives me a brief history of Czech beer: from the earliest brewery at Prague’s Břevnov Monastery in 993 A.D., through the invention of Pils in the city of Pilsen in 1842, to the fact that communism inadvertently helped local brewers by forcing them to stick to traditional methods. “We’re about light, balanced beers,” he says. “Czech brewers tend to use so-called noble hops, and they’re very clean and drinkable. Maybe too drinkable.” >

1. Cocktail guru Tomáš Palička of Bonvivant's CTC
2. The Museum of Communism



1. Food and beer guide Jan Macuch at T-Anker

2. Lod' Pivovar, a microbrewery on a boat

1

While Pilsner Urquell from the tank is king, more and more great craft beers are joining the fray here. Macuch takes me to Lod' Pivovar, on the northern edge of Old Town, which opened last year and claims to be the world's first microbrewery on a boat. Set over two floors, it has a restaurant as you enter and a bar/library on the lower deck, with shelves of board games and books.

The magnificently bearded owner Vojtěch Tyvola is sitting in the barroom—all blonde wood and steel vats—where he tells me the idea for the place came to him in a dream. Shortly after opening, having spent almost 3 million refitting what was formerly a Hamburg party boat, he had his head brewer create a beer called Titanic, which is one of the strongest in the Czech Republic.



2

That evening, I hang out with my new friend Macuch, hearing tales of Czech actors, artists and politicians that aren't suitable for print. We end up in Bonvivant's CTC, a cocktail bar with a tin ceiling, Jazz Age fittings and no menu. Cocktail guru Tomáš Palička opened the bar four years ago, inspired by legendary New York bartender Jerry Thomas and a love of Czech spirits like the herbal liqueur Becherovka and Slivovitz plum brandy. I have a Becherovka old-fashioned with a giant orb of hand-cut ice, which is seriously good, even if I'm no longer remotely capable of taking notes.

As Macuch and I stumble along the cobblestones on the way back to the Old Town Square, I hear the familiar refrain of an English soccer chant, presumably from one of the city's many drunken bachelor parties. "I'm sorry for my people," I say to Macuch.

"Hey, don't worry about it," he shoots back. "Socks and sandals as a fashion choice was invented in Czechoslovakia—so we know national shame." He stops and raises his arm to the beautiful baroque townhouses looming over us. "Then again, we also gave this to the world," he says with a smile. "So there's that." **AW**

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**LOCAL TIPS ON OLD PRAGUE**

Eating Prague tour guide Jan Macuch shares his faves

"Beat the tourists by going to the Charles Bridge at sunrise and the Prague Castle after 6 p.m. It's open till 10 p.m., and you get amazing views across the city."

"The family-run Czech Slovak Restaurant Lounge Bar does the best goulash in the city, made with wild boar and venison, with a prune confit and Armagnac."

"Many Czechs only drink tank beers in pubs, which come straight from the brewery, unpasteurized and in pressurized tanks—meaning they're always fresh. Ask for a tank Pilsner Urquell."

"Czech wine is massively underrated; I think it's just as good as Austrian wine. Head to the Vinograf wine bar, close to the Charles Bridge, and ask the staff for pointers."