

Prague, Czech it out!

By Dr Martin Chio, Editorial Board Member

It is not easy to take my editor seriously when he has paired PCK-type yellow boots with a dinner jacket as he reminds me that I owe him a travelogue. Thankfully the excuse of preparing for JCI and writing grant applications have staved off expulsion from the editorial board... for the time being.

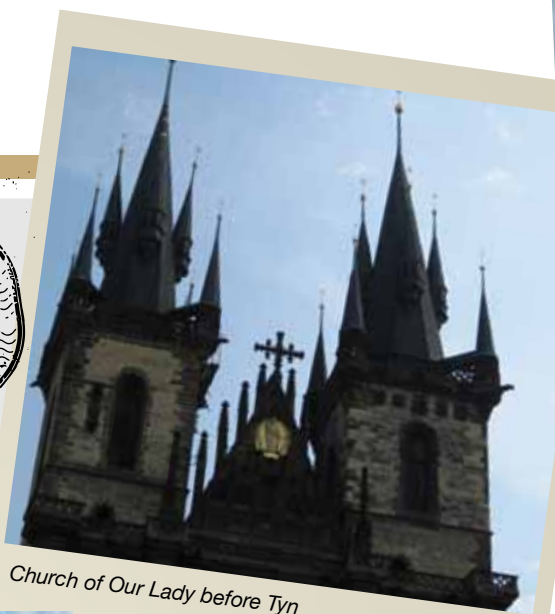
The trip to Prague was planned so that we could take advantage of the cool September autumn. We arrived in the late afternoon by train from Berlin and were met at the station before being whisked to our rental apartment on Senovázně náměstí, which was to be our base for the next five days.

The historic, cultural and picturesque city of Prague was left fairly unscathed after World War Two and is home to luminaries like writer Franz Kafka, astronomer Johannes Kepler and composers Bedřich Smetana and Antonin Dvořák. It is also a popular location for film settings and was featured in *Amadeus*, *Mission Impossible*, as well as *The Bourne Identity*. It is also home to the unusual: a museum of torture instruments and a sex machine museum, neither of which I visited.

We set off to explore the vicinity and happily realised that we were a stone's throw from the Municipal House and the adjoining Powder Gate. The Powder Gate was used to store gunpowder in the 17th century. Prussian forces damaged it in the 1750s and the current Neo-Gothic façade dates from the 1870s. The Municipal House is the art nouveau gem of Prague with an impressive Karel Špillar mosaic, and is home to the Prague Symphony Orchestra. We decided to have a simple traditional Czech dinner at Café Obecní dům within and I tried knedlíky (doughy dumplings) for the first time with stewed pork. We then sauntered down to the Old Town square nearby, which was quite crowded for a Wednesday night, to walk off dinner and to soak in the festive atmosphere and merriment.



Powder Gate



Church of Our Lady before Týn

POSTCAR



Astronomical Clock



Wenceslas Square

Day 1: The advantage of staying in an apartment instead of a hotel is to be able to concoct your own fry-up. After a hearty breakfast, we made our way to the old town towards the Church of St James. I was quite taken that the baroque façade had stone carvings embellished with gold. Search as I did, I was unable to spot the mummified arm that is meant to hang inside! We continued on through the Ungelt courtyard which used to be a fortified merchants settlement in the 11th century. One particular shop that caught my fancy was a quaint shop selling traditional wooden puppets. We approached the Old Town square and the main church, Our Lady before Týn, built in 1365. The twin Gothic towers dominate the square with the shiny gold Madonna between them.

The other structure looming over the square is the Old Town Hall. It houses an Astronomical Clock, which dates back to the 15th century and tells the time and also relates the movement

of planets, earth and moon. On the hour the bells chime and ancient statues dance while the crowds crane their necks to watch in awe. We decided to make our way up the 70-metre tower which won a best design award in 1999 for the skilful melding of a modern metal interior with the stone. What's amazing was that it allows wheelchair access right to the viewing deck at the top! As we enjoyed the birds-eye view of Prague valley we espied a roof top restaurant and decided to give it a try. Making our way to Terasa@Hotel U Prince, we enjoyed lunch and a commanding view of the square.

After a satisfying salad and tuna steak, we made our way to the banks of the Vltava to the St Agnes' convent. Princess Agnes founded the convent in 1234; it was restored in the 1960s and is now home to medieval and early Renaissance art from the National Gallery. Its most prized possession is a 700-year-old statue and we spent the afternoon wandering the cloisters admiring



View of Old Town Square from lunch terrace



the formidable collection of 14th century Czech art, wall panels and altarpieces.

En route back to the apartment, we strolled through the Jewish quarter as the architect among us wanted to admire the unique buildings and structures. We did not venture in to view the Moorish interior of the Spanish Synagogue but decide to take a photograph of the Franz Kafka statue just outside it. This larger than life bronze by Jaroslav Rona was unveiled in 2003 and based on Kafka's early short story *Description of a Struggle* and depicts a young man riding on another man's shoulders through the streets of Prague.

We decided to try something different and chanced upon Restaurant U Golema. Legend goes that Rabbi Loew from the 16th century created a clay robot (golem) to help out around the house and defend the ghetto. When it created havoc during one Sabbath, he had it deactivated and stored in the attic of the Old-New Synagogue. I had the "Rabbi's pocket of beef tenderloin stuffed with Roquefort and garlic with fried potato dumplings" washed down with Czech Budvar beer.

I am truly lucky to have friends who indulge my odd whims. We proceeded to Rise Loutek to catch what I think is one of the must-sees for Prague: a marionette show. Mozart premiered his opera *Don Giovanni* at the Estates Theatre in 1787 so I thought it would be fun to "kill" two birds with one stone. The sign above the door proudly declared that this was the most successful production since 1991 and we would be enjoying the 3968th performance. The small theatre was filled with mainly tourists and I for one found the music and antics of the puppets whimsical and entertaining.

Day 2: I had an amusing start to the next morning – being not terribly fluent in Bohemian/Czech I had bought what I thought was milk for my muesli which turned out to be unsweetened yoghurt and ended up with a very sour breakfast.

I find that sometimes a good way to understand a city better is to have a guided tour so we arranged for a customised walking day tour of Prague. We started with Wenceslas Square, which originated as a medieval horse market and is now

lined by early 20th century art nouveau façades. It has been the centre of historic events starting with its first demonstration in 1419 and most recently the end of communism in 1989. We didn't have time to explore the interiors of buildings but hope to be able to do so on another occasion.

We leisurely strolled through the twisting alleys of Staré Město (Old Town) en route to the bridge. It was a sunny day and there were lots of tourists around. The Charles Bridge is an iconic 600-year-old thoroughfare with an outdoor gallery of 30 statues of saints and religious figures. They were installed from the late 17th century onwards to lead the masses back to mass. The current statues are apparently reproductions as the originals are preserved in museums in the city. The bridge was thronging with crowds and small stalls hawking souvenirs.

We walked through the Malá Strana (little quarter) and made our way to the Church of our Lady Victorious. This Baroque church houses the famed Infant Jesus of Prague which is credited with various miracles. On wandering the museum I was pleasantly surprised that the Singapore archdiocese had previously presented an outfit for the statuette and discretely took a photo of it.

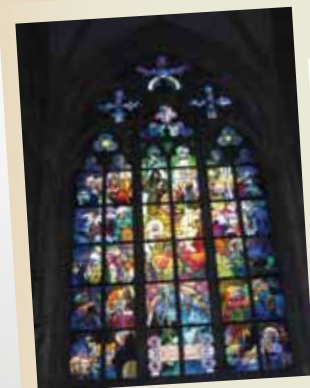
We were starting to wilt from the noonday heat so we sought solace in lunch at Malostranská Pivnice. It is styled as an old Czech pub, which is popular with both locals and tourists. I decided on knedlíky with meat again and discovered a wonderful new dessert: honey cake! Having had our fill we made our way up the hill to Prague castle. The origin of this was a fortress in the late 9th century and thereafter became the capital of the Holy Roman Empire. The current Renaissance buildings are a result of rebuilding in the 16th century. The castle is crowned by the spires of St Vitus' Cathedral. We wandered around the various courtyards with an informative historic commentary from our guide. On entering the spectacular Gothic cathedral the gleaming high altar was shimmering in the sunlight. I made my way to the unique Alfons Mucha window which depicted Slavic saints which was *painted* instead of the usual stained glass in art nouveau style.



Franz Kafka statue



St Vitus Cathedral



Alfons Mucha window



Rotunda of St Martin



"Fred & Ginger" Building



Municipal house



Church of St James



Our guide decided to show us another fortress and we hopped onto the subway and proceeded to the legendary Vyšehrad, which is surrounded by peaceful parks. Many Czech luminaries are also buried in the National Cemetery there. A historical highlight was the rotunda of St Martin, an 11th century chapel, which is likely to be the oldest house of worship in the country. Walking back to the apartment along Rašínovo nábřeží, we sought out the "Dancing House" (Tančící dům) the nickname given to the Nationale-Nederlanden building created by Croatian-Czech architect Vlado Milunić in cooperation with Canadian architect Frank Gehry. It resembles a couple dancing and is fondly referred to as the Fred (Astaire) and Ginger (Rogers) building. We ended the evening with a concert at the Municipal hall by the Prague Royal Symphony Orchestra featuring beloved Czech composers Dvořák and Smetana.

were used before a numbering system came about: white swan, two suns, golden key, red lamb, golden wheel, three fiddles and green lobster. At the top of the hill is the Loreto: a replica of Santa Casa in Loreto, Italy. It was one of Prague's first baroque buildings.

In the evening, after a simple dinner at Resto Cafe Patio of salad and duck, we got tickets for another must-do in Prague: Jiří Srnec's Black Light theatre. He has been creating his magic since 1961 with actors dressed in black manipulating "requisites" against a black background: the requisites, things and objects seem to move by themselves. This trick is not the main purpose of the plays but a way to evoke "scenic and mimic metaphoric, realised by movements of graphic artefacts and actors accompanied by music."

Day 4: Having packed so much into the past three days, we took it easy on day four and did some laundry. After a French meal off the Old Town square we headed for the Mucha museum. Alfons Mucha is a celebrated art nouveau artist and is revered as a national hero. The museum houses his journals, sketches, books and paintings – both private and commercial. We had a simple traditional dinner at U Šuterů situated in a Gothic vault below the hotel which is apparently popular among Czech celebrities for its soulful cuisine.

Day 5: We awoke late on the last day and proceeded to Cafe Obecní dům again for brunch: simple sausages with mustard and finished off with a fruit flan. Satiated, we proceeded to the train station. I had a fantastic time in Prague, onward to Vienna ...

Day 3: Having had a sampler of the city during the walking tour we decided to venture across the bridge. We crossed the Charles Bridge and tried our luck (without a reservation) to lunch at one of Prague's top-rated restaurants: Kampa Park. We were lucky and obtained a riverside seat with a view of the length of the bridge. The top-notch food (beef with salad, salmon and mash) and the lovely view made for a very pleasant lunch indeed.

We had to walk off lunch and proceeded to explore the rest of the Malá Strana. Nerudova street is lined by many art and craft shops and galleries. It is also home to a unique collection of historic house signs. These house signs



Beef salad at Kampa Park



Salmon with mash at Kampa Park



Fruit flan



Honey cake



Martin is an honorary visiting specialist to the Dover Park Hospice and finds food and travel photography a pleasurable distraction...