

Prague Castle and St. Vitus's Cathedral seen from across the Vltava River. It's easy to see why this city rates high with romantics.

CHILLING OUT IN Prague

By MANNY GONZALEZ
 Plantation Bay Resort & Spa

BRRR! WHEN I VISITED Prague, it was so cold that spit would freeze solid before it hit the ground. Well, not really. But it was mighty cold.

In defiance of this fact, it was crowded to the gills with tourists. There were waiting lines at most attractions, and walking around the Prague Castle district was, if not quite as bad as Grand Central Station, still a bit of an effort. What the crowds in Prague are like in summer with the sun shining, I can only guess. But my guess is, if you are smart, you will avoid Prague in summer.

And if you are smarter than me, you will avoid Prague in winter.

History Lesson. Like most places in Europe, Prague has a somewhat complicated history, so let's simplify. Bohemia is an old name for a large part of what is today the Czech Republic. First there were Slavs, then Germans (the result of this intermingling is very pleasing to the eye). After the last Premyslid ruler of Bohemia was assassinated around 1300, the crown went to John of Luxembourg, who was actually French. John's son ruled as Charles IV.

Are you with me so far? Charles IV liked Prague so much he moved the capital of the Holy Roman Empire (much of Northern and Central Europe) there, and started building like crazy — castles, cathedrals, bridges, universities, you name it.

One of his creations was the Charles Bridge, today a huge tourist attraction. When I started looking for the Charles Bridge, nobody bothered to tell me that it is a purely pedestrian bridge, and hence approached by pedestrian paths several blocks inland. Therefore, I did not actually find the bridge until my fourth day, having wandered pathetically through the snowdrifts and surviving on tree-bark until then.

Well, not really. But it is hard to find, unless someone tells you the magic words ("down Moskva Street, coming from Starbucks"; you're welcome). Once you do find it, Charles Bridge is totally worth the effort. It is a kind of open-air mall or flea market, with all sorts of souvenir peddlers and stunning views of both sides of the city.

Punctuating the railings are statues of Czech saints (of which there are apparently many), including one of St. John of Nepomuk, which you can rub for good luck. John was a Bishop who heard the Queen's confession, then refused to tell the King what had been confessed, i.e., whom she was — ahem — entertaining when the King was elsewhere; for this refusal he got thrown into the river in chains.

Warning: Charles Bridge is over half a kilometer long and has no toilet facilities.

Tourist Central. On the east bank of the river is most of the city, including Old Town Square. This neighborhood includes churches, shops, and restaurants, as well as the Clock Tower, classical concert venues, and assorted museums. And many, many tourists, all freezing their butts off.

One day, freezing cold, I saw an ad for an organ concert inside a church, so I thought I'd warm up and become cultured at the same time. However, as soon as I sat down, I realized that it was a tragic mistake. If you think it is cold outside, then sitting still in an unheated stone church feels twice as

cold.

There were only 20 or so customers. We were neatly arranged in church pews and escape was blocked by cordon-ropes on both sides (the organizers evidently having learned from experience how to deter their audience from leaving early). As the organ cranked up I looked at the others and knew we were all asking the same question. The eventual answer to this question was: Not Soon Enough.

Off Old Town Square, Parizska Street is Prague's high-end shopping district, with an Hermès and other fancy boutiques, though why you should go to Prague to shop at Hermès is beyond me. However, Parizska Street has a spiffy-looking pay toilet, the kind that looks like a rocket ship. By the way, the other pay-toilet in this

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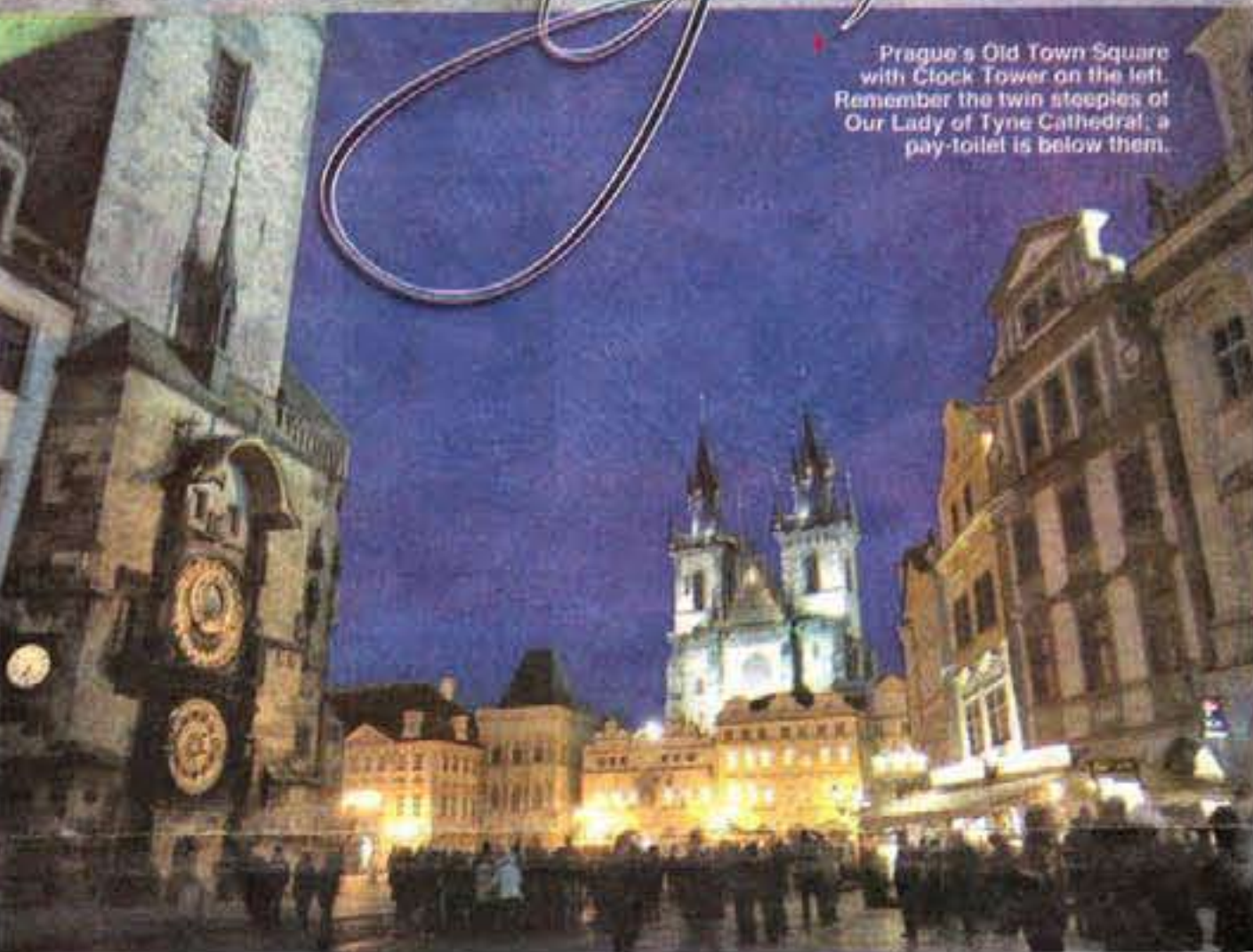
Snowstorms are best experienced from indoors. View from the author's hotel window, but the name of the hotel is confidential.



area, and the one you will get to first if you were on the bridge and needed to go, is beside Our Lady of Tyne Cathedral, on Old Town Square, about 10 minutes' walk from the east end of the bridge. Guidebooks should tell you useful information like this. You're welcome.

Government Officials with Good Manners. On the west bank of the river is Prague Castle, which is not so much a castle as a palace complex and medieval town on a hill, and is well worth spending a day or two to explore.

Parts of Prague Castle are still in use by various government ministries, and one thing that really impressed me about the Czechs was that Skoda limousines, with probably fairly important people inside, would without exception wait patiently and allow the



Prague's Old Town Square with Clock Tower on the left. Remember the twin steeples of Our Lady of Tyne Cathedral; a pay-toilet is below them.



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Guided only by my unerring sense of culinary discernment (i.e., it did not have "traditional Czech platter" on its menu), I finally tried it on my fifth walk-by, and got a very tasty sauerkraut and roast pork dish, complemented by a nice Moravian red wine.

This is a serious recommendation. The Three Violins is on the main pedestrian route from Charles Bridge up to Prague Castle, so you will definitely pass right beside it during your fascinating 30-minute walk up the hill unless you foolishly take the boring five-minute tram ride instead.

My second favorite restaurant was the Kampa Park, which though sort of pricey is right on the banks of the Vltava and offers stunning nighttime views of the Charles Bridge. The Kampa Park, like the bridge, is not easy to find, but with my unerring sense of direction I located it after only three nights. Take heed: in winter, no amount of space heating is going to make up for being seated at a table literally two meters from the fast-flowing and very chilly Vltava River. The Seared Foie Gras was not at all bad. And when, halfway through, I asked for it to be re-heated, thus showing my understanding of fine cuisine, the chef sent an extra serving.

The Wilds of Petrin Hill. One thing I desperately wanted to see in Prague was St. Michael's Church. This is a tiny timber chapel with a somehow Art Deco look (see picture), transplanted from Russia a hundred years

ago and now in Prague's Petrin Hill Park.

As city parks go, Petrin Hill is not for the faint-hearted. It is not so much a hill as an Apprentice Mountain, rising 300 meters above the city. Guided only by my unerring sense of direction, I boldly disdained the funicular and entered the park on foot in search of St. Michael's. I eventually discovered that nowhere in the entire park is there a single sign pointing to St. Michael's, or even acknowledging its existence.

Three hours later, having walked most of the way up the hill, down, up, then down again, and seen only two other human beings and one dog along the way, I finally found it.

It was closed.

Then it started to snow. This was not my finest morning. But I took a picture.

Romantic Prague. My hotel, by the way, was a really nice place, reasonably priced, just down the road from the castle, and with sweeping views over the city. It even had heated bathroom floors, and an affordable breakfast. And after coming out of a snowstorm on Petrin Hill, it is positively out of sight.

However, I cannot tell you its name, or next time I come back it will be overrun with Filipinos and they will have raised the price.

But do go. Prague is justifiably regarded one of the most romantic cities in the world. So if you are smarter and more fortunate than me, you will go with someone you love. In autumn.

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Travelogue/Humor By Manny Gonzalez, Plantation Bay Resort & Spa

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Parts of Prague Castle are still in use by various government ministries, and one thing that really impressed me about the Czechs was that Skoda limousines, with probably fairly important people inside, would without exception wait patiently and allow the tourists to go first. This bodes well for the country's future progress.

I Will Not Be Held Responsible. In Prague, you will naturally be tempted to try the local food. A lot of it is good, but under no circumstances should you order the "traditional Czech platter" which almost every restaurant offers. This is their way of unloading dried-up duck legs and leftover ham on Americans, who can't tell the difference, and Asians, who won't complain.

Do not order the traditional Czech platter. I cannot be held responsible for what happens if you do.

On the other hand, almost everything else is well north of palatable, and reasonably priced. My favorite restaurant experience was at U Tri Houslicek (The Three Violins, but there is no English sign, so you have to look for the logo).

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CAPTIONS

[Prague 24 OldTSq] Prague's Old Town Square with Clock Tower on the left. Remember the twin steeples of Our Lady of Tyn church; a pay-toilet is below them.

[Prague 27 St. M] After three hours lost in Petrin Hill Park, the author finally finds St. Michael's church. It is closed.

[Prague 39 SnSkyIn] Snowstorms are best experienced from indoors. View from the author's hotel window. But the name of the hotel is confidential.

[Prague 48 RvVw] Prague Castle and St. Vitus's Cathedral seen from across the Vltava River. It's easy to see why this city rates high with romantics.

[Prague 53 Street] The charming main pedestrian route to Prague Castle is well worth the walk, especially if no one told you about the tram.







