

**DEAR  
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### **Getting it wrong in Prague**

Sharon Hudgins' report on Prague has me ruminating about our own visits there. The earliest Prague story to appear in these pages was February, 1991. Our then contributing editor team of Claudia Fischer and Roger Holliday reported dining *and* drinking for less than \$2 per person in one of the town's beer halls, and a ride on the metro cost three cents. My introduction to the city came in 1996, when Liz and I wore the same clothes for an entire four-day visit, and spent most of our first day chasing down medication she requires to keep her heart in proper rhythm. Fortunately, our hotel, the Savoy, found a clinic and for about \$35 gave us a Mercedes Benz with driver for the day. Practicing out of a crumbling mansion on the edge of town, a pleasant young doctor was happy for the opportunity to speak English and write a prescription for the Czech equivalent of the required medication, about \$25. Our driver then took us to a shabby pharmacy where we waited in a tiny vestibule with elderly locals. When it was our turn at the lone service window, an attendant rummaged through boxes on shelves and handed us a container of pills. Another \$25 we were delighted to pay.

These inconveniences were all self-inflicted. Since we were in for a long train ride from St. Gallen, Switzerland to Prague, we decided to check our luggage; at a cost, as I recall, of about CHF 40. Though we had done a fair amount of train travel by then, we were clueless when it came to checking baggage. We incorrectly assumed it would go with us on the same train. Instead our checked items took a different train, traveled a different route, and did not arrive until four days later—conveniently in time for

*Continued on page 2...*

# GEMÜTLICHKEIT

The Travel Letter for Germany, Austria, Switzerland & the New Europe

## Prague

*Twenty years into capitalism, Prague is now one of Europe's most popular destinations. Our Sharon Hudgins recently spent a week there. Below is her report.*

**T**his year Prague and the Czech Republic celebrate the 20th anniversary of the 1989 "Velvet Revolution" that brought an end to four decades of Communist rule.

*by Sharon Hudgins* There have been vast changes in those 20 years. Modern real estate developments, an influx of international businesses, and hordes of foreign tourists have all left their mark on one of Europe's most venerable metropolises.

Visitors are soon seduced by the many layers of history, the monumental and varied architecture, the rich cultural life and lively street scenes, and the abundance of museums, art galleries, specialty shops, sidewalk

cafes, and cozy beer taverns. It's the sort of city where one goes for a short visit and ends up wanting to stay for a lifetime.

However, since the city is now one of Europe's top tourist destinations, it can be uncomfortably crowded during peak travel periods. To avoid the crush, go in early spring, late autumn, or even in winter when Prague looks even more romantic under a soft blanket of snow.

If you have only a short time for Prague, there are difficult choices to be made, as at least two days are needed just to see the highlights. All the major sights can be reached on foot or on Prague's excellent public

*Continued on page 3...*

## Vacation rentals: Europe for fewer \$\$

**M**ost readers are aware of the advantages of renting an apartment or house in Europe, rather than moving from hotel to hotel. Generally speaking, vacation rentals are less expensive than hotel rooms, offer much more space, and the ability to cook "at home" saves money on food. Also, being in one place for a week or more makes for a deeper cultural experience.

An apartment with bedroom, sitting room, bathroom, and kitchen in the German or Austrian countryside starts at around \$300 per week and can cost as much as \$1200-\$1500 in major cities. Figure 25-percent more for similar accommodations in Switzerland. Vacation rentals enable inexpensive independent European vacations. For example, at \$800 for

two weeks in an apartment—let's say one week in Germany and another in Austria—\$50 per day/per person for food and restaurants, May air fares in the \$500 range, a rental car and fuel for two weeks for around \$650, adds up to a 14-day late-spring vacation in Europe for under \$2,000 per person.

The key factor in a successful vacation rental is choosing the right property—often sight-unseen. Four-color brochures and slick website photos do not always tell the complete story. Sometimes, in fact, they are downright misleading. This can be a big problem because, unlike hotels, most vacation rentals require full,

*Continued on page 7...*

**Exchange rates as of 4/5/09**  
**1 euro = \$1.35 1 CZK = \$.0507**  
**1 Swiss franc = \$0.88**  
**1 gallon diesel, Germany = \$5.28**

**DEAR SUBSCRIBER**

*Continued from page 1*

us to pick them up at the rail station on our way out of town. I now know this is normal for checked bags and am acutely aware of the primary rule relating to checking luggage on European trains: don't do it.

\*\*\*\*

One night on our most recent Prague visit about a year ago, we managed to choose the restaurant that serves the worst food in town. At least it was the worst meal I have ever encountered in a European restaurant. The food was literally inedible. After one or two tentative bites from a lump of much too-sour red cabbage, futile attempts with knife and fork to extricate a few shreds of meat from a rock-hard duck leg, I suddenly realized I would be unable to eat what I had ordered. Liz agreed. Her food was also terrible. Saying I didn't feel well, I called for the check, we paid and left.

This was a restaurant chosen based on "curb appeal." When walking during the day we always look for dinner possibilities. On the afternoon of the disaster meal, we strolled the town for more than three hours, peering through windows, poking our heads inside doors, and perusing the menus of perhaps a dozen restaurants. The place we finally chose was off-the-beaten track, away from the main streets and squares where tourists gather. It looked authentic, lively, clean, and

appeared to have a local clientele. This is a process that usually works for us, but this time intuition failed. I have since learned that the restaurant in question, **Svejk** (Siroká 20), is part of a chain designed to look like traditional Czech neighborhood pubs.

I'm happy to report that dinner the next night was better. Though the Michelin stardom sought by upscale **Restaurant Zatisi** (Betlemske Namesti, Liliova 1, [www.zatisigroup.cz/](http://www.zatisigroup.cz/)) is not yet attained, main dishes of venison filet and a slow-cooked lamb shank were satisfying, if not sensational, and served in a romantic, candlelit setting. Without beverages we paid about \$92. Our bill carried the following notation in English: "Tips shall be appreciated in cash." Very "Prague."

It should be noted that I diverge somewhat from our page six review of **Kavárna Obecní Dum**. Keep in mind that Sharon Hudgins, who spent nearly a week in Prague researching this month's main story, is not only a savvy travel journalist but also a noted food writer, and her evaluation is based both on personal experience with the restaurant and that of friends and colleagues. **Kavárna Obecní Dum**, in a magnificent Art Nouveau space in Prague's gloriously restored Municipal Hall, has to be one of Europe's most beautiful dining rooms. Nonetheless, I had a lousy breakfast there. Inferior coffee, stale rolls, slow and indifferent service undermined the experi-

ence of being in this gorgeous room. But one simple breakfast is not enough to judge a restaurant.

\*\*\*\*

My great grandparents came to America from Bohemia. I remember the *Kolaches* baked by my great grandmother and my grandmother. We lived in a small Nebraska town where people of Czechoslovakian origin were known as "bohunks" or just "hunkies." When I hear "The Moldau" from Bedrich Smetana's *Má vlast* (My Country or My Fatherland), something stirs my hunky blood and is probably why I like the little museum dedicated to him (**Smetana Museum**, Novotného lávka 1) on the second floor of an ancient building past which his beloved Moldau (Vlatva river) flows. Visitors can listen to excerpts of his music—including "The Moldau"—by ascending a conductor's podium and pointing a laser-tipped baton at

*Continued on page 8..*

**Using Gemütlichkeit**

- Hotel prices listed are for one night. Discounts are often available for longer stays.
- All hotel prices include breakfast unless otherwise noted.
- Local European telephone area codes carry the "0" required for in-country dialing. To phone establishments from outside the country, such as from the USA, do not dial the first "0".

**Logging on to Our Website**

Back issues in PDF format from January 1993, except for the most recent 10, are available free to subscribers only at [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com) (click on "Members"). To access the issues, enter the user name and password published in this space each month. The new codes are:

User Name: **garp** Password: **5420**

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**Publishers:** Robert H. & Elizabeth S. Bestor  
**Executive Editor:** Nikki Goth Itoi  
**Contributors:** Tom Bross

**Consulting Editor:** Sharon Hudgins  
**Online Services:** Thomas P. Bestor  
Kurt Steffans

**Subscriber Travel Services:** Andy Bestor, Laura Riedel

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**HOTEL RESTAURANT RATING KEY**

Rating Scale	Scale	Restaurant Criteria	
Excellent	16 - 20	Food	65%
Above Average	12 - 15	Service	20%
Average	8 - 11	Atmosphere	15%
Adequate	4 - 7		
Unacceptable	0 - 3		
Hotel Rating Criteria	Value Rating	Scale	
People/Service	30%	Outstanding Value	17 - 20
Location/Setting	15%	Very Good Value	12 - 16
Guestrooms	30%	Average Value	9 - 11
Public rooms	5%	Below Average Value	5 - 8
Facilities/Restaurant	20%	A Rip-Off	0 - 4

**PRAGUE***Continued from page 1*

transportation system of subways, buses, and trams.

Choose one side of the **Vltava River** to explore each day, ending up at the iconic **Charles Bridge** that connects both sides of the city. Built in the 14th century, this graceful stone bridge (now a pedestrian route) is adorned with more than two dozen Baroque statues of saints. It's a focal point of Prague, a meeting place for locals and tourists alike, and an outdoor venue for artists and craftsmen, jazz bands and mimes. Just watch out for pickpockets, too.

Starting high over the city at **Hradcany**, the **Castle District** on a hill, you can spend half a day wandering the large complex that includes the castle itself, the impressive **St. Vitus cathedral**, several galleries and special exhibition halls, the narrow **Golden Lane** with its tiny shops, and the castle's own vineyard and gardens.

Then head downhill along **Nerudova street** to the Baroque **St. Nicolas church**, stopping to peek into the little shops along the way. This lower section of the city is known as the **Malá Strana (Lesser Town)**, although there's nothing "lesser" about it. It's a delightful district of small streets and alleyways, art galleries and craft shops, quirky cafes and boutique hotels.

Continue downhill along **Mostecká street**, then cross the Charles Bridge to the **Old Town (Stare Mesto)**. Follow **Karlova street**, part of Prague's historic "**Coronation Route**" in the direction of the **Old Town Square (Staromestké Náměstí)**, one of the most beautiful public spaces in Europe, bordered by Gothic and Baroque buildings, including the towering **Tyn Church**, and the intricate **astronomical clock** on the **Old Town Hall**. In this same part of town, you can also visit the former **Jewish quarter**, including the **Old Jewish Cemetery** and four historic synagogues.

From the Old Town Square walk

**Prague Basics**

**Population:** 1.2 million

**Elevation:** 179-399 meters (587-1309 ft)

**Visitor Information:** Prague Information Service, 4 locations: Staromestské nám. 1, Old Town Hall; Rytířská 31; Hlavní nádraží (Main Railroad Station concourse); Malostranská mostecká vez (Lesser Town, Bridge Tower); tel. 221-714-444, [www.prague-info.cz](http://www.prague-info.cz).

Czech Tourism, 1109 Madison Ave., New York, NY 1028, tel. 212-288-0830, fax 212-288-0971, [www.czechtourism.com](http://www.czechtourism.com).

**Sightseeing tours:** Prague Tours (in English), Dlouhá 37, tel. 608-200-912; [www.praguer.com](http://www.praguer.com). Cedok Travel Agency, Na Příkopě 18, tel. 221-447-242/218/202, fax 222-216-324, [reservation@cedok.cz](mailto:reservation@cedok.cz); [www.cedok.com](http://www.cedok.com). Prague Walks, Jakubská 4, tel. 222-322-309. See also [www.prague-tourist-information.com](http://www.prague-tourist-information.com).

**Driving distances from:**

Frankfurt	552 km	343 miles
Munich	363 km	226 miles
Berlin	354 km	220 miles
Zürich	676 km	420 miles
Vienna	312 km	194 miles

New motorways in the Czech Republic include the D5 to the Bavarian border and the D8 to Dresden and Berlin. Motorways require an auto toll sticker, available at border crossings, post offices, and gas stations (200 CZK for 15 days, 300 CZK for two months).

**Discounts:** Discounted passes for 24 hours or three, seven, or 15 days on Prague's public transportation system (buses, trams, subways) are available at tourist offices and larger metro stations.

**Nearest airport:** Ruzyne Airport, 18 kilometers (11 miles) from downtown Prague. Minibus to Náměstí Republiky every 30 minutes, 5:30am–9:30pm, 90 CZK. For taxi service, be sure to agree on a price beforehand; to downtown Prague the cost should be approximately 600 CZK for up to four people in one cab.

**Rail service:** Express trains connect Prague with many cities in Europe, including Frankfurt, Munich, and Berlin.

**Recommended guidebooks:** *Frommer's Prague Day by Day*, (Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2008). *Welcome to Prague: City of Prague and Czech Republic Official Guidebook* (free at Prague Information Service Offices and from Czech Tourism). *Travelers' Tales: Prague and the Czech Republic*, edited by David Farley and Jessie Scholl (Travelers' Tales, Inc., 2006). *Michelin Green Guide Prague & Michelin Main Cities of Europe*.

along **Celetná street** to the **Gothic Powder Tower** at Republic Square. Turn right and stroll along the fashionable **Na Příkopě** pedestrian street to the lower end of **Wenceslas Square (Václavské Náměstí)** where the big demonstrations of the Velvet Revolution were held in 1989. Then head uphill to the famous statue of **St. Wenceslas** and the **National Museum** at the top of the square, stopping along the way for a spicy sausage at one of the little stands, a cone of excellent ice cream, or a cup of strong coffee at the venerable, if time-worn, **Cafe Europa** next to the Art Nouveau **Hotel Europa**.

Once you've scoped out the major sights and found your bearings, the best way to see "behind-the-scenes" Prague is to wander around the city at random, on the little winding cobblestone streets off the main tourist arteries, ducking into quiet courtyards that look like they haven't changed since the Middle Ages. On the back streets you'll also see the old buildings that haven't yet been renovated or restored, their gray color and peeling plaster evoking the past half century of neglect—matching the pewter skies of winter and suggesting that the murky Prague of Franz Kafka's stories still does exist.

**Prague Shopping**

Prague is a shopper's paradise, with plenty of art galleries, jewelry stores, folk craft shops, souvenir stands, and street vendors concentrated in the central part of the city on both sides of the Vltava River and even on the Charles Bridge itself. And a glitzy new shopping mall, with 200 stores and restaurants, has recently opened on Náměstí Republiky near the Gothic Powder Tower.

Prague has been invaded by legions of gaudily painted Russian wooden *matrioshki* (stacking dolls), as well as pashmina scarves from India, tacky T-shirts, and more amber than surely has ever been collected from natural sources around the world (so beware of inexpensive "amber" jewelry actually made of plastic in China).

Truly local arts and crafts include

beautiful Bohemian crystal, garnet jewelry, colored glass costume jewelry, paintings and prints by Czech artists, traditional and modern ceramics, and folk crafts such as wooden toys, corn-husk dolls, Nativity scenes, indigo-printed cotton cloth, expressive marionettes, and intricately painted Easter eggs.

Recommended stores in central Prague:

• **Bohemian crystal and glass:** Moser (Na Příkope 12); Erpet Bohe-mia Crystal (Staromestké Nám. 27); Celetná Crystal (Celetná 15)

• **Garnet jewelry:** Studio Sperk (Dlouhá 19); Granat (Dlouhá 30)

• **Ceramics:** Tupesy (Havelská 21); Czech Ceramics (Celetná 4)

• **Folk crafts:** The Manufaktura chain of folk craft stores is the best in Prague, with 10 locations in the city. One of the largest stores, with an excellent selection of items, is at Melant-richova 17, near the Old Town Square. Other centrally located Manu-faktura shops are at Nerudova 31, Mostecká 17, and Karlova 26.

#### Key Websites for the Traveler

- **www.gemut.com** Gateway site for travelers to Germanic Europe, including car rental, rail passes, hotel bookings, travel tips, and past issues (free access to back issues for subscribers; see log-on info on page 2).
- **www.viamichelin.com** The Michelin database of hotels and restaurants, plus great interactive trip planning tools
- **www.travelessentials.com** Guidebooks, maps, travel accessories, luggage, all at 10 percent off for subscribers. Use discount code gemut2009.
- **maps.google.com** Best maps on the web. Driving & walking. Zoom in-out. Great detail city & country. Satellite & terrain views.
- **bahn.hafas.de/bin/query.exe/en** German rail website, with train schedules throughout Europe, as well as Germany
- **www.sbb.ch/index\_e.htm** Swiss and European rail schedules
- **www.ski-europe.com** Top Web resource for skiers with much data on Alpine resorts
- **www.myswitzerland.com** Website of Switzerland's national tourist authority
- **www.germany-tourism.de** Germany's national tourist authority
- **www.austria.info/us** Austria's national tourist authority
- **www.historicgermany.com** Website for an alliance of historic German cities
- **www.thetravelinsider.info** Info on electronics for travelers — cell phones, computers, etc.

• **Marionettes:** Among the many marionette shops in Prague, some of the best-quality handmade examples can be found at Truhlár Marionety (Ungelt – Tyn 1, near the Old Town Square, and Luzického semináře 5, in the Mala Strana section).

• **Open-air market:** The colorful outdoor market on Havelská, not far from the Old Town Square, features two long parallel rows of stalls selling fruits and vegetables, chocolates and cookies, souvenirs and crafts. Prices of souvenirs can be a bit lower than in the shops, but many are made in China and elsewhere besides the Czech Republic. On both sides of the market street, indoor souvenir shops also sell similar goods.

#### Prague Hotels

Prague is such a popular tourist destination that it can be a pricey place to stay, especially in the highest seasons (mid-March through June, all of September and October, and over the New Year holiday). Since prices vary throughout the year, however, you can save money by traveling in mid-season (July and August) or low season (January to mid-March and November through Christmas).

Check online for seasonal rates, as well as bargains for early or last-minute booking, discounts for longer stays, and packages that include transfers from the airport or train station to the hotel.

The good news is that travelers now benefit from the price competition among the many hotels opened since 2000. Unlike some other countries of the European Union, star ratings in the Czech Republic refer only to a hotel's amenities, not to a specific price category designated by law. Since hotels want to fill as many rooms as possible, a four- or five-star property might have a special offer on a double room for the same price as a standard three-star. You'll find discounted rates at [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com). In the left column click "Book a hotel in Europe."

Parking can be costly in downtown Prague, so consider arriving by rail or air. Most hotels charge CZK600

(total, for one to four people) for a hotel taxi one-way to or from the airport, and less from the train station. Once you've checked into a hotel, you can easily explore the city on foot and by public transportation.

Room prices quoted here are those listed on the hotels' websites for mid-December 2008 (low season). The telephone prefix for Prague is +042.

#### K + K Hotel Central

A member of the family-owned international K + K hotel group, this Prague version combines authentic Art Nouveau architecture with a stylishly modern interior, in a building that is included on the UNESCO World Heritage List in Prague's historic Old Town.

Constructed as a hotel a century ago by a famous Austrian designer, the building was later used as a theater where satirical plays were staged during the Communist era. The government closed it in 1970 for political reasons and the abandoned building fell into disrepair. The K + K group bought it in 2000, restored the beautiful facade, and renovated the interior to the standard of its other luxury boutique hotels. A new building was added behind the original edifice, and the four-star, 127-room hotel opened in 2004.

The historical part of the hotel features an ornate brass elevator, stained glass windows, and rooms with high wooden door frames, all in the Art Nouveau style. Five of the 57 rooms in this section also have high ceilings decorated with Art Nouveau stucco work.

All rooms in both the old and new sections of the hotel are similarly decorated with sleek wooden furnishings and textiles in soothing colors. They also feature air-conditioning, under-floor heating in bathrooms, minibars, safes, tea-and-coffee-making facilities, TV with international multilingual channels, and free high-speed Internet access.

An ultramodern fitness center and sauna are located in the space that was originally the "Oriental Bar," once frequented by Prague's rich and

EDITOR'S  
CHOICE

famous. The highly decorated walls and ceiling have been preserved for guests to admire while working out on the machines or baking in the sauna. Use of the fitness center and sauna (except for massage) is included in the room price.

In keeping with the K + K hotel company's motto, "Four & More," the generous breakfast buffet at this four-star hotel is equivalent to those served at five-star establishments. The bright, open breakfast room occupies the area that was once the theater. On Sundays guests linger until noon, reading newspapers, sipping champagne, nibbling smoked salmon and organic products that include breads, yoghurt, fruits, cheeses, or indulging in rich, freshly baked pastries, all while admiring the view over the large manicured garden.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CZK4,275 for the first two nights, then CZK3,625 for the next two nights; doubles CZK4,775 for the first two nights, then CZK3,625 for the next two nights. Parking available (check availability and rates online for the dates you plan to stay there).

**Contact:** K + K Hotel Central, Hybernská 10, 110 00 Prague 1, tel. 225-022-601, fax 225-022-999, [hotel.central@khotels.cz](mailto:hotel.central@khotels.cz), [www.khotels.cz](http://www.khotels.cz)

**Rating:** QUALITY 17/20, VALUE 16/20

#### Hotel U Medvídku

Formerly a modest pension next to a well-known beer tavern of the same name, **U Medvídku** (At the Bears) was completely renovated and reopened as a three-star hotel in 2007. Located in a historic building that dates from the 1400s, it's a delightfully quirky little hotel, whose 33 guest rooms are all different in size and shape, some with exposed Gothic wooden rafters or Renaissance painted ceilings.

All rooms are scrupulously clean, with simple, dark-wood furniture, hardwood floors, and small TVs. Most are spacious (except for a few singles), and many are decorated with oriental rugs, antique beer-brewing equipment, and old photos of Czech

breweries. Number 33 is a huge triple, with old wooden roof trusses in a small loft. "Historical" rooms such as Number 33 cost a bit more than standard rooms.

Winding hallways with flagstone or wooden floors thread through this atmospheric old edifice. Many rooms are located up steep flights of stairs (no elevator), but the friendly staff will help carry your luggage. The hotel is not only well located in Prague's Old Town, it's also next door to the U Medvídku restaurant, beer tavern, and brewery, which serves very good Czech food at reasonable prices, famous Czech Budvar beer, and the house microbrewery's own unfiltered Oldgott-brand beer, straight from wooden barrels.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CZK1,550, doubles CZK2,300; historical rooms cost 10% more, and the large historical rooms Numbers 23 and 33 cost 20% more. Parking at a public garage is CZK720/day. The hotel also offers seasonal discounts, such as four nights for the price of three.

**Contact:** Hotel U Medvídku, Na Perstýně 7, 110 00 Prague 1, tel. 224-211-916, fax 224-220-930; [info@umedvidku.cz](mailto:info@umedvidku.cz), [www.umedvidku.cz](http://www.umedvidku.cz)

**Rating:** QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 15/20

#### Hotel Antik

Set in the historical center of Prague, near the Old Town Square, this quiet family-run hotel occupies a 15th century building. In the older, front part of the hotel, a stone staircase (no elevator) leads to three floors of four rooms each. All are spacious, clean, and bright, with large windows and large bathrooms; some have a balcony.

Behind the older building, a new addition, opened in 2008, houses 18 rooms on three floors (with elevator). Each is equipped with heated towel rack, safe, flat-screen satellite TV, minibar, and free Internet access. Some are comfortably large, others a bit small—so be sure to ask before you commit to a specific room.

A modest breakfast buffet is served in the glass-covered, stone-

floored courtyard between the two buildings, and there is also a small bar/cafe/restaurant on the ground floor. Friendly staff.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CZK1,690, doubles CZK2,090

**Contact:** Hotel Antik, Dlouhá 22, 110 00 Prague 1, tel. 222-322-288, fax 222-328-540; [info@hotelantik.cz](mailto:info@hotelantik.cz), [www.hotelantik.cz](http://www.hotelantik.cz)

**Rating:** QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 15/20

#### Hotel Cloister Inn

Behind the drab concrete block-house facade of this five-story hotel you'll find 75 clean, bright, comfortable, and spacious rooms equipped with modern furniture, air conditioning, TVs, safes, heated towel racks, and minibars.

Walking down the wide, brightly painted hallways, it's hard to imagine the building's earlier incarnations. Originally it was a medieval monastery founded by the Jesuits, and later used as a prison by the secret police during the Communist era.

The large breakfast buffet is served in an airy room that was once a chapel and then later a training facility for the police. Now nicely renovated, it's a pleasant place in which to enjoy the wide selection of hot and cold breakfast foods, including country-made hams and sausages and delicious fresh pastries from a small family-owned bakery.

Excellent central location on a quiet street. Friendly staff, free coffee/tea bar in the lobby, a small reading room off the lobby, and two elevators to all floors.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CZK1,690, doubles CZK1,825; discounts for longer stays. Parking in the courtyard, CZK350/day (reserve in advance).

**Contact:** Hotel Cloister Inn, Konviktská 14, 110 00 Prague 1, tel. 224-211-020, fax 224-210-800; [cloister@cloister-inn.com](mailto:cloister@cloister-inn.com), [www.cloister-inn.com](http://www.cloister-inn.com)

**Rating:** QUALITY 13/20, VALUE 16/20

#### Hotel U Zlatých Nuzek

On the other side of the Vltava River, very near the Charles Bridge, the **U Zlatých Nuzek** (At the Golden

Scissors) is a small, quiet, 10-room inn well located for exploring the Malá Strana and Castle Districts of Prague.

The original building dates from 1586, but reconstructed in 1804 and recently renovated. All rooms are different size and shape. Some have exposed wooden beams, and each is equipped with simple, modern furnishings. Number seven is a large, bright, pleasant double, with a sitting area and several large windows overlooking the tree-lined square in front of the hotel.

The buffet breakfast is served in the hotel's ground floor restaurant, which also offers midday and evening meals of Czech and international cuisines, good wines, and of course Czech beer.

Friendly staff, but no elevator or parking.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CZK2,280, doubles CZK2,450

**Contact:** Hotel U Zlatych Nuzek, Na Kampe 6/494, 110 00 Prague 1, tel. 257-530-473, fax 257-533-175; [hotel@AtTheGoldenScissors.com](mailto:hotel@AtTheGoldenScissors.com), [www.AtTheGoldenScissors.com](http://www.AtTheGoldenScissors.com)

**Rating:** QUALITY 10/20, VALUE 12/20

### Prague Restaurants

Though Czech food has the reputation of being heavy and dull, in the hands of the right cook, it can be very good indeed. And now, with the influx of new restaurants serving a wide variety of foreign cuisines, one can dine on everything from Thai to Tex-Mex (and even Czech-Mex), from Japanese to Italian, Spanish to French, Chinese to Indian.

But why go to Prague to eat sushi? Many good restaurants, from humble beer taverns to posh establishments, serve local and regional specialties that soon overcome prejudices against "stodgy Central European cooking." Accompany the meal with a stein of excellent Bohemian beer or a glass of fine Moravian wine, and it's clear why the Czechs are justifiably proud of their cuisine.

Czech specialties include hearty soups (sometimes served in a rye bread loaf "bowl"); devil's toast

(spicy hash spread on thick slices of fried bread); trout with bacon; carp cooked in dark beer; roast pork, smoked pork, Prague ham, and a wide array of sausages; slices of marinated and roasted beef fillet with sour cream sauce and cranberries; potato pancakes, potato dumplings, and bread dumplings; thin, crêpe-like dessert pancakes with apricot or plum jam, and sweet dumplings with a whole apricot or plum inside.

Most restaurants catering to tourists have menus translated into English, and the staff usually speaks English, too. Some restaurants add a cover charge (for bread and condiments) of CZK10-30 per person.

### Kavárna Obecní Dum

Dine in splendid surroundings at the **Kavárna Obecní Dum** in Prague's historic Obecní Dum (Municipal House) next to the landmark Gothic Powder Tower. The entire Obecní Dum is a masterpiece of Art Nouveau architecture and interior decor. The reasonably priced Kavárna (Coffee Shop/Cafe) is on the left side when entering the building—although this spectacular space is far more grand than a mere coffee shop. (On the right side is a more expensive French restaurant with a reputation for excellent food, and in the building's basement a Pilsen Restaurant serves Czech specialties to the accompaniment of live oompah-band music.)

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Open from 7:30am to 11:00pm, Kavárna Obecní Dum serves breakfasts until 11:00am (CZK90-120). Through the day, the standard menu offers a selection of cold cuts and cheese platters (CZK160-470), salads and sandwiches (CZK120-280), large omelets (CZK170), and desserts (CZK165-215), as well as an extensive list of wines, beers, coffees, teas, and liquors.

The daily menu varies, with soups and cold starters (CZK65-170), traditional Czech dishes such as slices of roasted beef with sour cream sauce and bread dumplings (CZK210), and pan-fried pork *Schnitzel* with potato salad (CZK220), along with three- and

four-course menus (CZK280-580). Don't miss the dessert pancakes on the standard menu, served with caramel sauce, bananas, whipped cream, and other goodies (CZK180-190); the portion is very large, enough for two.

**Contact:** Kavárna Obecní Dum, Náměstí Republiky 5, 110 00 Prague 1, tel. 222-002-763, [kavarna.od@vyshehrad.2000.cz](mailto:kavarna.od@vyshehrad.2000.cz), [www.obecnidum.cz](http://www.obecnidum.cz)

**Rating:** QUALITY 14/20, VALUE 14/20

### U Modré Ruze

For an elegant meal in the intimate ambience of an authentic Gothic cellar, dine at **U Modré Ruze** (At the Blue Rose) in Prague's Old Town. This restaurant specializes in game dishes such as wild duck breast with currant sauce (CZK690); goose breast stuffed with goose liver, served with port wine sauce (CZK750); pheasant breast with mushroom salad and Madeira sauce (CZK570); and venison with rose hip sauce (CZK640).

The menu also offers a number of beef, pork, fish, and poultry dishes (CZK390-960), as well as several three- and four-course meal options (CZK890-1,830). Be sure to order a side dish of the delicious gratinéed potatoes with four cheeses (CZK80).

**Contact:** **U Modré Ruze**, Rytířská 16, 110 00 Prague 1, tel. 224-225-873, fax 224-222-623, [restaurant@umodreruze.cz](mailto:restaurant@umodreruze.cz), [www.umodreruze.cz](http://www.umodreruze.cz)

**Rating:** QUALITY 16/20, VALUE 12/20

### Staromacek

Visit Staromacek, near the Old Town Square, at night when the restaurant is lit by candles. Yes, it's touristy, with "Old Bohemian" decor, waiters in traditional costumes, and a menu in many languages, but the food is good and the prices reasonable for a restaurant so near the city center.

Starters (soups, cold and warm hors d'oeuvre) are priced from CZK40-70. There's a large selection of beef, pork, and fish dishes (CZK180-400), including rabbit and venison specialties. Portions are large, but when choosing a meat or fish entree

you'll need to order side dishes separately (potatoes, rice, dumplings, etc.)—as in many Prague restaurants—at an extra charge.

**Contact:** Restaurant Staromacek, Dlouhá 4, 110 00 Prague 1, tel. 222-311-366

**Rating:** QUALITY 14/20, VALUE 15/20

### Demínka

Looking for a good restaurant frequented more by locals than tourists? Head for Demínka, a couple of blocks behind the massive National Museum at the top of Wenceslas Square. With its spacious rooms, ornate high ceilings, chandeliers, and arched windows, Demínka evokes Prague of the late 19th century, when it opened under the auspices of the Pilsner Urquell brewery.

EDITOR'S  
CHOICE

The menu features tasty traditional Czech cuisine (and lighter fare, too) at good prices. The first item on the table is a basket of excellent fresh breads with a little bowl of delicious pork spread (CZK10), which every Czech eats with the first beer that arrives. Start the meal with garlic soup (CZK35) or devil's toast garnished with smoked sheep's cheese (CZK85). Main dishes such as spicy goulash, roast pork with dumplings, and wild boar with rose hip sauce, range from CZK145-180. The *galusky* (little dumplings, like gnocchi) with sheep's cheese and crispy bacon are the ultimate comfort food (CZK125). And the seductive dessert menu includes apple strudel with caramel and vanilla ice cream (CZK57) and pancakes with blueberries and sour cream (CZK65). Fresh pilsner beer on tap is a bargain at CZK32 for 1/2 liter.

Note: The entrance to Demínka is on the corner of Skretova and Anglická streets. Don't confuse it with the dark, smoky, little beer tavern just around the corner on Skretova.

**Contact:** Demínka, Skretova 1, 120 00 Prague 2, tel. 224-224-915, fax 224-229-933; [info@deminka.com](mailto:info@deminka.com), [www.deminka.com](http://www.deminka.com)

**Rating:** QUALITY 15/20, VALUE 16/20

## VACATION RENTALS

Continued from page 1

nonrefundable payment in advance in cash, too bad if the accommodations don't suit. The best plan, of course, is to personally inspect before committing. Except in high-season, the flexible traveler can research properties in desired destinations prior to departure from the U.S. and withhold the final choice until the properties can be viewed in Europe. That doesn't always work, however. A few years ago, without prior research, your editor showed up in mid-October at the east end of Lac Léman with the idea of finding a rental. His dreams of sipping Chasselas from a balcony while watching steamers ply the lake's waters lay in tatters after a two-day search from Lausanne to Villeneuve, and points between, turned up nothing but cave-like basements and raggedy spaces that looked like frat boys had just moved out. Turns out October for this region is high-season and we would have had better success in someplace like the Emental, Austria's lakes region, or even southern Bavaria.

If you must make the decision prior to departure, there are websites for research. VRBO.com (Vacation Rentals By Owner) offers rental listings throughout Europe, with pictures, descriptions, and comments from previous guests. You can pay by credit card and deal directly with the owner, thereby avoiding the markup of middlemen. But the prospective renter has to take into account that listings are placed by owners themselves and not inspected or overseen by any agency. VRBO is little more than a classified ad service. It does offer HomeAway, a kind of renters insurance, but policies explicitly exclude coverage if you simply don't like the apartment because of condition or location.

A somewhat more reliable option is to view vacation rental listings on the website of the tourist office of your proposed destination. Again, you'll deal directly with owners, and you will likely have to pay in cash in advance. Properties listed on these sites, however, are usually inspected by a tourist authority, a process which provides a star-rating system and can sometimes weeds out the unacceptable.

An even better way to ensure quality accommodations is to spend time on the website, [www.slowtrav.com](http://www.slowtrav.com), a forum that invites user evaluations of mostly European vacation rentals. It is *not* a TripAdvisor kind of site where the casual Web surfer tosses off a couple of sentences of high praise or scathing denunciation. Slowtravel, is a small, family-run operation, not a corporately-owned Internet behemoth like TripAdvisor (owned by Expedia which also owns Hotwire, Venere, Classic Vacations, and other online travel sellers), and its reviews and content are closely monitored by management. Reviews are fairly lengthy and all seem to follow a prescribed format. Reading them imparts a sense of credibility and authenticity, unlike the brief, anonymous, and sometimes illiterate trashing or praise-singing of most online forums. They are in-depth enough that the reader gets a sense of the reviewer's travel values and is thus able to determine if those values match her/his own.

There's a lot going on at this site and we found it a little hard to locate exactly what we were looking for, but a Google site search got us to the vacation rental reviews at [www.slowtrav.com/other/vr/reviews.asp](http://www.slowtrav.com/other/vr/reviews.asp).

If you still think you're buying a pig-in-a-poke, a small, but reputable vacation rental agency is probably your best option. I say small because it is hard to imagine the very large middlemen with "operators standing by" effectively screening the literally thousands of properties they represent. You will want to speak by telephone with a person who has actually seen the properties under consideration, not a scripted telemarketer. Yes, you'll pay more than by directly dealing with the property owner, but you are much less likely to find yourself faced with a week or two in an apartment you don't like. Small agencies depend on referrals and repeat business. Unless their customers' expectations are met, there will be no next year. This is also to an extent true for the largest ones, but their managers are removed from the fray and short-term financial realities often dictate practices that compromise quality control. It's a different story when the own-

er of the business is one who answers the phone and deals directly with customers. That's the situation with the only three vacation rental agencies that *Gemütlichkeit* is in a position to recommend. Two are headquartered here in Ashland, Oregon. We know the owners of both companies, but what's more important we know some of their customers and the reports are uniformly positive.

The first company, **At Home in France** (P.O. Box 643, Ashland, OR 97520, 541-488-9467, [info@athomeinfrance.com](mailto:info@athomeinfrance.com), [www.athomeinfrance.com](http://www.athomeinfrance.com)), unfortunately does not handle rentals in our countries but specializes in the south of France, Paris, and Spain. Allyn Kaufmann, a fluent French speaker and former executive at *Journal Français*, and her husband/business partner, Bruce Dicoskey, spend six weeks each year in Europe inspecting properties and interviewing property owners. Their standards are high and the properties they represent have been carefully chosen.

For vacation rentals elsewhere in Europe it's **Drawbridge To Europe**. (98 Granite St., Ashland, OR 97520, tel. 888-268-1148, fax 541-482-7779, [travel@drawbridgetoeurope.com](mailto:travel@drawbridgetoeurope.com), [www.drawbridgetoeurope.com](http://www.drawbridgetoeurope.com)).

Owners Karin Volpert and John Spillman have been finding vacation rentals for travelers since 1996. Ms. Volpert was born and raised in Germany and thus offers a native's insight to the German-speaking countries. The couple regularly inspect a portfolio of rentals that includes properties throughout our three countries.

We can't discuss vacation rentals without a strong recommendation for **Untours** (tel. 888-686-6871, [www.untours.com](http://www.untours.com)). This family-owned company's affordable programs not only include carefully-selected, privately-owned, self-catering accommodations, but roundtrip air from the U.S., rail pass or rental car, and in-Europe assistance. It makes a nice compromise between complete independence and guided, packaged tours. Settling-in advice and help is available upon arrival and whenever it is requested throughout the stay. ☒

## DEAR SUBSCRIBER

*Continued from page 2*

one of several music stands. (See an ad on YouTube.com for Pilsner Urquell that uses "The Moldau" as background music. Do a Google search for Pilsner Urquell Smetana.)

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When communist rule was banished in 1989, the West rushed *en masse* to this city of rich culture and splendid buildings that survived World War II intact. Prague was so valued for its old-world grandeur and lack of commercialism that it was chosen as the stand-in for Vienna in the 1984 movie about Mozart's life in Vienna, *Amadeus*. While the world celebrates the glorious refurbishment of buildings such as Obecní Dum, some aspects of the city have not been so well served by the tsunami of tourists. Even in winter, the Charles Bridge, the town's most recognizable landmark, is a sea of tourists, souvenir sellers, and "artists" who sketch "portraits" for a few dollars. Sometimes it seems that every possible square foot of retail space along the city's narrow, winding old lanes is taken up by tee-shirt shops, bead stores, sleazy bars, and currency exchangers charging usurious rates. Perhaps the worst development of all is the planeloads of mostly young males who, lured by minuscule airfares, out-front prostitution, gambling, cheap beer, and inexpensive nightlife, come from all over Europe to party for a weekend, or even just a few hours before going back home via Easyjet or Air Berlin. Though most North American tourists encounter little evidence of these goings on, they have, in our opinion, damaged the town's old-world ambience.

Prague is a city in which one must be watchful. There are pick-pockets, unscrupulous taxi drivers, and sharp business practices. Last December we sat under gas warmers at an outdoor table at **Staromestká Restaurace** and ordered two glasses Pilsner Urquell. They came with a bill for CZK 65 (\$3.10) each, a fair enough price for great beer but a

sign in the window advertised it for CZK 28 (\$1.34). The lower price, our server explained, applies only if the beer is served indoors, not at outdoor tables. We wouldn't have been inside even at the lower price, but the incident illustrates the point: North American visitors need to pay attention.

Despite its westernization pains, Prague is an extraordinary city in the Paris, Rome, Berlin, Venice, Florence, London, Vienna category. You must see it at least once in your life.—RHB ☒

## Readers' Forum

### Country Hotel Near Rothenburg

Would like to share with you our favorite place to stay in Germany -- the **Gasthof Schwarzes Lamm** ([info@hotelschwarzeslamm.de](mailto:info@hotelschwarzeslamm.de), [www.hotelschwarzeslamm.de](http://www.hotelschwarzeslamm.de), tel. +49/09861/6727) in Detwang, just outside Rothenburg. We discovered Detwang on a trip to Germany and Austria in 2006, and liked it so much we went back the next year and spent the entire two weeks there, which made a great base for day-trips to little towns on the Romantic Road.

As much as we love Rothenburg, it is nice to stay outside of town in this peaceful 1000-year-old village just steps away from numerous hiking trails and bicycle paths. Rothenburg is a 20-minute walk up the hill, or a five-minute drive—but we found our daily walks into town to be a good way to keep all that *Schnitzel* and *Spätzle* from settling in to stay on our hips!

The Schwarzes Lamm is run by the Familie Friedle whose friendliness and good humor keep many patrons coming back year after year. Not everyone there speaks English, and their website is German-only, but the younger family members speak English and they will respond to emails in English. A very authentic and charming place, and the prices are quite reasonable. We eagerly look forward to our return visit in May!

STEPHANIE STULLICH  
COLLEGE PARK, MD ☒