



Prague: Baroque and Roll

(the city that un-disables you – well, nearly)

The good news is that you don't have to be going on a batchelor or hen's night out party to enjoy Prague. I knew it was a fun city with not probably, but actually, the best lager in the world. But I had no idea how wonderfully accessible Prague is.

Normally if a place is historic its geography makes it a 'no-go' place for wheels. Not so with Prague, both its glorious past and its layout makes it a 'come-see' choice for all of us who push not stride.

Prague, like every other European city worth its name, lies on a river. The Vltava is wide, majestic and be-bridged, if there is such a word, by a host of sturdy, whimsical and imposing bridges. The real legacy though of this unique setting is its compact size and flatness. No hills and little distance to cover makes for minimum effort with maximum effect. This benefit is compounded by the unusual advantage that there's no wasted space.

Prague is a continuous wonder. In other great cities like London, Paris or Rome the sites are spread about. You see one of them and find that the next has been plonked down elsewhere: a short and demanding (if you're in a chair) trip away.

That's not so with Prague. It's all in one extended area and it's non-stop. There are no pauses between one delight and the next. Not all of it is grand but all are gems of a kind. Push across one square and around the corner another is waiting for you. Scoot down a dark alley cut through with shafts of sunlight and you are at once into the next. You'll find rows of looming houses, each jostling for your special attention. And each of them worthy of it too.

The most majestic buildings are the Castle and the Cathedral. Two huge

tributes to brute power posing as embodiments of elegance and confidence. It never fails to amaze me how the Super Rich managed to persuade the Super Poor to labour so diligently on their behalf. I suppose back then it had a lot to do with the actual threat of the sword and the even worse fear of foregoing heaven after a life of hell on earth. Everyone was a loser, unless you happen to be the one with a crown or sceptre.

The airport is nearby. It's modern, speedy and efficient with accessible links to the heart of Prague. It's the city centre that I recommend you use as your base. The Old and the New Towns are cheek by jowl and interchangeable. Both are more baroque than a wedding cake. Each makes you feel that the Middle Ages, despite the painful absence of good dentists, might, if only for the architecture and the human scale of it all, have been a good time to have been around.

There seems to be lots of the 'best thing about Prague is ...': so you can't go wrong no matter what you choose. The centre is well on the way to being car free and the trams are not a menace, they are accessible. You press the reachable wheelchair button, the tram driver alights, a steel platform appears and hey presto you're riding the iron way.

The Metro too is a boon. Again not all of it is useable, but there's more than enough to get you around to all the places worth seeing. As the Metro

system is fairly new it's impressively benign and easy to use. It serves passengers first, makes money second. Take note Transport for London.

The Charles Bridge is pedestrians only. It's like a long open-air shopping mart, full of small, one-man stalls. They mainly sell touristy stuff but there's the odd gem. The Czechs are a clever lot. Their history is littered with leading names in the Sciences. In particular they had a love of Maths together with Mumbo Jumbo (or Alchemy as they, and our Isaac Newton, preferred to call it).

In Staromestske Namesti square, as testimony to this, stands Prague Orloj. This is the famous multi-chiming, all-action, upmarket 'cuckoo' clock. Which whenever it strikes the hour it eats up five minutes of your time with its farce-like opening and shutting of secret doors and waving of swords. It's a wondrous example of engineering ingenuity. A time piece that tells you the time while telling you about the Astronomical obsession that characterised the time in which it was built.

Despite his skills and brilliance Mikulas of Kadan, the clock's architect-cum-builder, paid the price of meddling in numbers. He was eventually shunned by an ungrateful orthodoxy but not before he'd used his wizardry to determine the most auspicious time to start work on the Charles Bridge. The number code he devised recommended that the work began in thirteen fifty seven at precisely one second after three minutes past five on the morning of July the ninth, or to put it another way 135797531. Phew!

Prague is full of such stories and sites and I haven't as yet mentioned that the great King Wenceslas was another of the city's favourite sons. You will find traces of him thankfully without Rudolf scattered everywhere. Another 'best thing about Prague' is that it is affordable. Suitable hotels include the Yasmin and the Elephant.

If you need to know more then contact the helpful and lovely Lea at www.accessibleprague.com And, yes, there are cobbles but there are also well-made mosaic pavements with drop kerbs. If an old, bump-averse tetra like me can enjoy it, then Prague is definitely worth looking in to. Raise high your Pilsner and Czech it out.

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