

Czech Mates

A couple seeks the soul of an enchanting country

BY ELIZABETH HARRYMAN



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One evening in the Czech village of Český Krumlov, a man wearing a black frock coat and a shirt with a white ruffled collar approached us from across the cobblestone town square and introduced himself. “My name is Joseph Anton; we’re in the 18th century, and I am the town scribe,” he said.

We had arranged to meet a guide but were surprised to see him in 18th-century clothes. As he led us up a narrow street lined with Baroque and Renaissance houses, he explained, “We are at the crossroads of Europe. A family of nobles built a medieval fortress to protect the area, and the town has grown up around the castle.”



The Vltava River meanders through Český Krumlov, a UNESCO World Heritage site in the Czech Republic.

We stopped in a park to take in a view of the castle's tower, which was painted in trompe l'oeil style so that the base appeared to be stones, and the top marked by carved moldings in shades of cream and rose. It resembled a birthday cake shaped like a fairy-tale tower. When we later toured the castle, begun in 1253 and renovated over centuries, we delighted in the Brussels tapestries and a rococo Meissen porcelain chandelier with flower clusters in myriad shades.

Our tours of Český Krumlov, a UNESCO World Heritage site, were highlights of a 12-day trip to the Czech Republic in June. To celebrate our 30th wedding anniversary, my husband, Paul Lasley, and I set out to explore the country's romantic castles, countryside, and villages—and we came away appreciating much more than the postcard-pretty panoramas.

Although we traveled independent of an organized tour,

Thirty Baroque-style statues of religious figures line the Charles Bridge.



we hired local guides along the way to enhance our experiences. When our Český Krumlov host dropped his Joseph Anton persona and spoke as 21st-century guide Stanislav Jungwirth, we learned about recent Czech history. “I grew up in the communist era,” he said. “I call it ‘the gray era.’ To be gray was a survival strategy. If you would be colorful or show your personality, you would have many problems.”

His words reminded me of lessons I'd learned years earlier in international relations classes at UCLA Extension. My professor, Karel Kovanda, had been a student activist during the 1968 Prague Spring, when Alexander Dubček, first secretary of the Communist Party in what was then Czechoslovakia, instituted liberal reforms. The Soviet Union and other countries quashed the movement by sending tanks into Prague on August 21.

“It was the collapse of a dream,” Kovanda had said.

Twenty-one years later, on November 17, 1989, other students launched the Velvet Revolution, which led a mere 10 days later to the end of the country's communist rule.

“The gray era changed to a colorful era,” said Jungwirth.

The courage and idealism that impelled two generations of Czech students to defy oppression echoed throughout our Czech Republic visit and taught us something of a gentle people's resilience.

Echoes of History To explore Prague's city center, with its mix of architectural styles dating from the 9th century, is to immerse oneself in history. Paul and I were transported to a time of powdered wigs, embroidered gowns, and harpsichords as we strolled the narrow, winding streets and gazed at 18th-century buildings roofed in red tiles.

“Four former towns united in 1784,” said our guide, Eva Vondrusová, a vibrant woman with reddish-blond hair and an enthusiasm that enlivened her astute commentary. On the 14th-century Charles Bridge we crossed the Vltava River from Malá Strana (“small town”) to what is called Old Town. As we walked, the city's Baroque beauty enchanted us, and its people's stories inspired us.

In the Jewish quarter, Paul donned a yarmulke upon entering the former Pinkas Synagogue, part of the Jewish Museum. Handwritten in black and red ink, the names of the 77,297 Jews from throughout Czechoslovakia who were victims of the Holocaust during World War II covered nearly every wall and alcove. Upstairs we viewed an exhibit about Terezín, an interim prison northwest of Prague for Jews being sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.

“Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, an art teacher there, asked her students to paint their impressions,” said Vondrusová. “She hid the works in two pieces of luggage. She and the children were sent to Auschwitz. After the war, the artworks were discovered.” The children's drawings, reminiscent of the kind of nascent artistic efforts you might see in any elementary schoolroom, spoke eloquently of the human spirit's endurance.

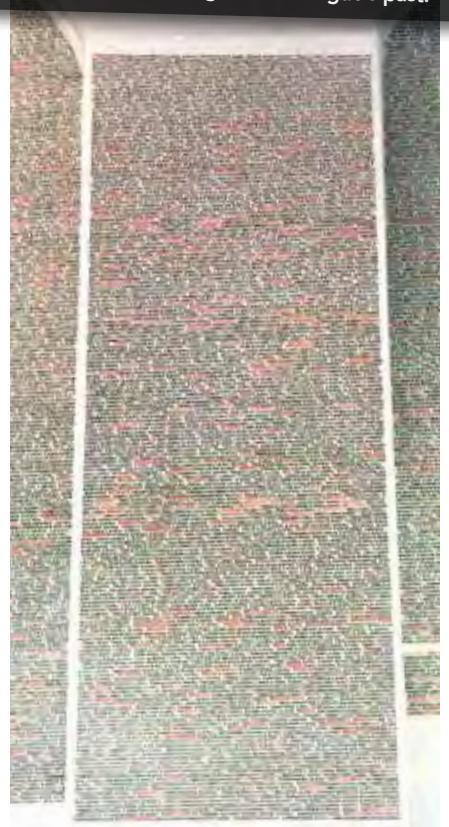
The Allied victory ended Nazi terror, but after the war, Czech citizens faced new challenges. Between 1948 and 1989, more than 200,000 Czechs were taken political prisoner.

“Under communism, we could not travel outside the country,” said Vondrusová, after we left the synagogue. “You had to get special approval.” And freedom of speech was absent.

At the John Lennon Wall—an expanse of street art with peace symbols, hearts, and Beatles lyrics in a kaleidoscope of colors—we saw how idealism persisted. Upon Lennon's death



(Clockwise from above) Since the 16th century, Vladislav Hall at Prague Castle has seen many royal events. Names of Jewish Holocaust victims on the walls of the Pinkas Synagogue and peace symbols on the John Lennon Wall provide thoughtful insights into Prague's past.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DAVID COLEMAN/ALAMY; PAUL LASLEY (2)



(From left) Fanciful towers and spires and the terraced Vrtbovská Garden lend Prague a fairy-tale feel.

in 1980, someone painted his picture on the wall. Gradually, people added messages of freedom and tolerance. The wall became an unofficial island of free speech. As we admired it, the air sweet with the scent of nearby linden trees, a family of Japanese tourists added their signatures.

Visiting these places gave fresh meaning to things Kovanda had said in class. “You Americans take your freedoms for granted,” he once remarked. “Your passport is the most valuable document you own. With it, you can travel anywhere in the world; that’s not true in many countries.” During our Prague stay, I found Kovanda on LinkedIn, but learned he had moved to Brussels. Still, he accepted my invitation to connect.

Of Castles and Kings Prague Castle, the world’s largest castle complex, towers above Prague like a Hollywood movie backdrop.

“It’s a textbook of different architectural styles going back to the 9th century,” said Vondrusová. The castle had been home to the royal family of Bohemia—the area’s historic name—for more than 1,000 years; at one point, Duke Wenceslas lived there. “You know him as Good King Wenceslas in the Christmas carol.”

“Was he good?” I asked.

“Well, he was of a royal family, but he worked with ordinary people,” replied Vondrusová, who indicated a fresco in the Gothic St. Vitus Cathedral depicting the duke stomping grapes. In a lovely irony, the complex houses both the 14th-century Old Royal Palace, where Charles IV lived when he made Prague capital of the Holy Roman Empire, and the president’s office, which houses the offices of today’s democratically elected chief of state.

That night, as Paul and I enjoyed a dinner cruise on the

Vltava aboard the riverboat *Luznice*, we saw Prague in yet another, different light. As the sunset cast a golden hue on the city’s waterfront buildings, we savored duck confit and strawberries with mascarpone while gliding up the river alongside swans. We couldn’t imagine a more romantic setting. Until we went to the countryside.

Country Living We took a bus to Český Krumlov in Southern Bohemia, passing green hills, red poppy meadows, and villages on slopes above valleys. In addition to taking our evening tour with “Joseph Anton,” we visited the town’s Seidel Photographic Studio Museum. Josef Seidel, an early-20th-century commercial photographer, chronicled the region’s people and landscape. We toured his 1905 home, where antique cameras, light meters, and a retouching station are on display.

Watching a short film, we learned that Seidel’s son František continued the business after his father’s death in 1935, and that during World War II, he was arrested by the Gestapo. František was released after the war, but the Czech communist government deported his fiancée, Marie, to Germany. She received permission to return in 1959, and the couple finally married. When the lights came up, Paul squeezed my hand; we felt grateful we hadn’t had to wait nearly 15 years to marry.

The showpiece of our Czech countryside adventure was Chateau Liblice, a palace dating from 1699, now a hotel, where we stayed two nights. As we drew near, the chateau’s perfect Baroque symmetry came into glorious view: Two wings flanked an oval center. Our high-ceilinged room had double doors, a Louis XVI-style desk, and window alcoves with wooden shutters.

FROM LEFT: HEMIS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; PAUL LASLEY

Stay, Eat, Do



Feeling like characters in a PBS *Masterpiece* drama, we dined on venison from a nearby game reserve; rose hip sauce—made from the dried fruits of rosebushes and flavored with sugar, sour cream, and allspice—gave the meat a heavenly sweet-tart finish. A trio of tiny cakes topped off the meal: strawberry mousse, banana caramel, and chocolate with nuts. “They’re so light you wonder how they get them to hold their shape,” Paul said, savoring the mousse’s strawberry essence.

We strolled through the formal gardens and into a forest of elm, oak, and chestnut trees—all part of the chateau’s grounds—pausing to admire wildflowers at the dirt pathway’s edge as songbirds serenaded us.

Before returning to Prague for our two final nights, I corresponded again with Kovanda, who emailed that, as it happened, he’d be in Prague then, too. We arranged to meet for coffee.

Feelings of Freedom “After the Velvet Revolution, I returned to Prague,” said Kovanda, as Paul and I sat down with him at V Kolkovne, a café and restaurant with wooden tables and brick archways. “I became the Czech ambassador to the United Nations, then deputy foreign minister, and I later worked with the European Commission in Brussels.” Today, Kovanda is semiretired, often giving talks and monitoring elections in post-Soviet countries.

“Your classes broadened my perspective,” I told him. “They gave me a context for looking at the world that I use in my work today as a travel journalist.”

I later asked him about the difference the Velvet Revolution had made to his country.

“One has this intense feeling of freedom,” he said.

On our last day in Prague, Paul and I listened to street musicians on Charles Bridge playing everything from Mozart to Dixieland, watched artists create pop-up installations in city squares, and saw young people enthusiastically exchanging ideas in riverside cafés. I sensed joy, exuberance, and passion. And an intense feeling of freedom. **W**

Elizabeth Harryman is Westways’ travel editor.

Hotels

Hotel rates typically include breakfast, often a lavish buffet with fruits, cheeses, cold meats, and freshly baked breads and pastries.

LIBLIČE

The 52-room **Chateau Liblice** (pictured) offers horseback riding, wine tastings, and tours of its game preserve. The staff will pack picnic lunches for excursions to nearby Kokorín Castle. Room rates start at about \$85. chateau-liblice.com.

PRAGUE

The 26-room **Boutique Hotel Klárov** features a quiet back garden and views of Prague Castle. Rates start at about \$100. astenhoteles.com. The 31-room **Boutique Hotel Constans** offers spacious rooms, accommodating staff. Rates start at about \$80. hotelconstans.com.

ČESKÝ KRUMLOV

The 59-room **Hotel Bellevue** exudes old-time charm. Its **Le Jardin** restaurant, in an elegant stone-walled room, offers local, seasonal specialties such as chicken with tarragon velouté (three-course prix fixe dinner, about \$22). Room rates start at about \$70. astenhoteles.com.

Prague Restaurants

At **Blue Fjord**, choose from fresh catches—grouper, sea bream, octopus—for the staff to cook. Grilled trout was delicious, served with roast potatoes and seaweed with oil and ginger. \$20–\$30. bluefjord.cz. **Nebozizek Restaurant**, on a promontory above Prague Castle, offers a spectacular view and gourmet fare such as venison goulash with house-made dumplings and a salad of thinly sliced beets with feta cheese. Entrées, \$9–\$10. nebozizek.cz/en. In a casual setting, **V Kolkovne** serves traditional Czech dishes such as beef *svíčková*, sirloin in cream sauce served with dumplings, whipped cream, and cranberries. Slightly sweet and velvety in texture, it was my favorite Czech dish, and I never did learn to pronounce it. Entrées, \$9–\$15. vkolkovne.cz/en.

Local Tours

Eva Vondrusová, **CAT Guided Tours**; catguide.cz.

Stanislav Jungwirth, **Magical Tours**; magicckrumlov.cz.

At press time, the Czech Republic koruna was worth about US \$0.04. Information about the Czech Republic is available from CzechTourism at (714) 343-4363; czechtourism.com.

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