

# At close quarters

Prague is as proud of the articulate architecture of its five quarters as of its fine local beers

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SITTING at U Fleku, a raucous restaurant in the heart of the Nové Mesto or New Town quarter of Prague



I was drawing diametrical parallels to an Udipi restaurant in Mumbai. The seating was the share-a-table kind, so you could be eating next to a stranger. While this new friend of yours in Mumbai would be spooning his idli into coconut chutney at Madras Cafe or alike, the gentleman next to me was relishing his dumplings with the rich and meaty gravy of a beef goulash, dominated by the aroma of *ajwain*.

Instead of skinny boys rushing about to replenish glasses of water at tables, apron-clad waiters walked around balancing reinforced trays filled with thick-bottomed half litre glass mugs of dark beer. These portly waiters, whose waists could more conveniently be measured in yards than in inches, slammed down these glasses with foam oozing over the side at any table with a drained glass.

Bills were settled at the table itself with the waiter scribbling on a note pad and instead of bowls filled with fennel seeds with sugar crystals, the bill was held down by shot glasses filled with Slivovice, the bitter sweet, plum liqueur that is as unique to the Czech Republic.

And, the more shots you knocked back of this smooth spirit with a kick much like that of a disgruntled donkey, the easier it became to shake a leg to the energetic polka that the band belted out.

**My world was still a neon lit merry-go-round when we got back on to a tram. It was past midnight but Prague was wide awake.**

As the tram trundled down the streets of the Nové Mesto strains of laughter and music drifted out of a *kavárna* (cafe) or a *pivnice* (pub). Pavement beer and sausage stands, the *chai* and *wada pav* tapri equivalent of central Europe, were still doing brisk business as customers tucked in on chorizo or *bratwurst* sausage hot dogs.

This was our third evening in Prague. I'm fortunate to have good friends in Elisabet and Peter, a couple from Sweden and Holland respectively and we'd driven from Margretetorp in Sweden, to Prague via Copenhagen, Rostock and Berlin.

Since we had access to a friend's apartment in Prague we had set up base for four days before heading towards Poland.

The centre of Prague comprises of 5 quarters: *Pra ský hrad* (Prague Castle), *Malá Strana* (Little Quarter), *Josefov* (Jewish Quarter), *Nové Mesto* (New Town) and the most charming of them all, *Staré Mesto* (Old Town).

On the first morning we'd opened our windows to a gray day with the rain coming down in a persistent drizzle. Away from the



Cafes are always at hand for some goulash and refreshing hand drawn beer, like this lively one in the Old Quarter

centre of Prague in the more residential areas, life goes on without the English language and you can buy tram tickets from general stores. So after being offered a bottle of jam, a pound of yam and a leg of smoked ham, the lady behind the counter finally understood we needed tickets for the tram after I pointed frantically at one gliding past her shop window.

The windows of the tram had misted up thanks to the weather and I remember being absolutely wonderstruck when we stepped out of the tram in the heart of *Staré Mesto*, the old town. Our apartment was in an area which still had a communist era feel to it with drab and featureless residential blocks, whereas the Old Town was like a three dimensional rendering of a picture from a book by the Brothers Grimm. Every building in my sight was an example of articulate architecture. Ledges, window frames and doorways were all ornately done up to look pleasing to the eye. Flat surface like walls were lavished with lovely frescoes or had family crests emblazoned on them. Towering above all this were the twin Gothic steeples of the Church of our Lady of Tyne and I almost expected Rapunzel to pop her head out of one of the high windows.

Since it was our first day in Prague and the rain just wouldn't let up, it was impossible to pull out maps and books to refer to and the three of us moved like a

rudderless ship through cobbled streets to arrive at the *Staroměstské náměstí* — the Old Town Square.

One of the biggest crowd pullers here is the astronomical clock of the grandiose Old Town hall. When the clock strikes the hour twin windows open and out pop figurines of the 12 apostles which do a little jig to a flurry of flashlight bulbs and pop in again. Legend has it that the clockmaker Jan Z Ru e who made this clock in 1490 was blinded by the councillors who didn't want it replicated elsewhere.

Beer is big in Prague and every beer hall and restaurant is supplied by a local brewery so there is always fresh beer on tap. If you do happen to ask for an international brand the waiters will look at you with heartfelt pity in their eyes. Some might even venture "tebe bezvýznamný nevedomý bláznit" ("you poor ignorant fool"). Peter and Elisabet's favourite was *Pilsner Urquell* and I was hooked onto the caramel taste and hoppy flavour of the *Velkopopovický Kozel Cerny*, a deliciously refreshing dark beer.

The next day, the sun was shining and everyone was out sightseeing. Cafes packed with happy tourists had spilled onto pavements.

The Prague Castle is once again opulence at a grand level with stained glass windows and statue of saints and kings



(Above) Wenceslas Square in the Nové Mesto and (below) Centre of the Old Town by the Jan Hus Monument

commonplace.

The day was so hot that I had a raging thirst by the time we'd seen the castle and descended the steps leading to the Little Quarter. This was slaked at *U krále Brabantského* which claims it's the oldest medieval tavern in Prague, in business since 1475.

**The bartender proudly told us that even W A Mozart had once got smashed here after a certain concerto had bombed.**

As popular as the town hall clock is Charles Bridge connecting the Little Quarter with the Old Town. Flanked with beautifully carved statues of saints, this pedestrian bridge is Prague's defining monument. Here you'll find solitary buskers and jazz quartets. There are also portrait makers, but for something more whacked out, pose in front of a caricature artist and you might get pencilled with an overstated nose or an exaggerated cup size.

By our third day, we had been awed by all the quarters of this culturally rich city with rare and unexpected delights. This time though, the only doorways we walked into were those leading into beer halls — and each time, we walked out very happy.

