

Prague Study Tour 14/05/18 - 18/05/18

Day 1: The visit to Prague started on a rather startling note as two of the Group, stranded on the tarmac, were left behind at Birmingham Airport, watching their aircraft reverse away from the Terminal and begin to taxi down to the runway ... but that's another story! (See the Autumn 2018 WF U3A Newsletter, yet to be published).

Eventually the Group were re-united and arrived in Prague for an interesting and enjoyable short Study Tour. The hotel, The Jury's Inn, was situated in a most convenient location, just a mile from the City Centre, and with a transport hub of Metro, trams and buses right outside the front door. The area was, however, in a charming local region, with a good selection of restaurants and cafés within walking distance. For the first night, a generous buffet meal was laid on for the Group at the hotel.

Day 2: After an excellent buffet breakfast the Group set out on a **walking tour of the City**, led by a local Guide. The hotel was situated close enough to the historic centre of Prague to be reached on foot, and the route took the group down some grand streets with imposing Art Deco and turn-of-the-century buildings. Their itinerary took them past some large multi-national shops, along narrow passageways and busy shopping streets. The impressive architectural features were pointed out and historic associations made.

The start proper of the **Old Town tour** began at the Municipal House, a striking Art Nouveau building, associated with the artist Alphonse Mucha (1860 - 1939), a Czech Art Nouveau painter and decorative artist, known best for his distinctive style, which he produced on many paintings, illustrations, advertisements and postcards. Nearby stood the Powder Gate, a much-restored Gothic gate at the entrance to the Old Town.



Municipal House & Powder Gate



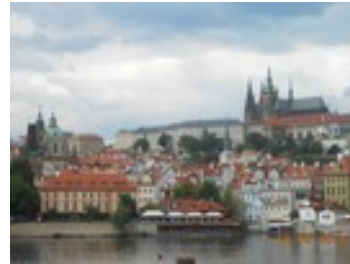
Group in front of 'Tyn' Church

Among the other notable buildings and sites seen on this tour were the Old Town Hall, the Astronomical Clock (under renovation), Celetna Street (one of the oldest

streets in Prague), Church of Our Lady before Tyn, and the Old Town Square. The extremely comprehensive guided tour continued through to the historic Wenceslas Square and ended at the highly decorative and much admired Charles Bridge, with its view of the Castle across the River Vltava.



Petrin Park and Observation Tower



Castle Quarter from Charles Bridge

The Group were then free for the rest of the afternoon and evening to explore this charming and historic city at their leisure. A list of sites visited in the available free time is appended to Day 5. In the evening the group were at liberty to choose where to eat, and many decided to eat in local restaurants, sampling the national and local cuisine.

Day 3: This day was taken up with a coach tour through the beautiful Bohemian countryside to the former 'Sudetenland' and the charming towns of **Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad)** and **Mariánské Lázně (Marienbad)**. The journey took the group past some charming hamlets, extensive woodland and productive fields.

Karlovy Vary is a spa town in the west of the Province of Bohemia in the Czech Republic. It was founded by Charles IV in the mid-14th century. 'Karlovy' is the Czech word for Charles and 'Vary' means 'hot spring'. Its numerous thermal springs have made it a popular resort since the 18th century. The riverside spa district is home to several colonnades with columned walkways. The modern Hot Spring Colonnade houses the Pramen Vřídlo geyser, which spouts up to 12 meters high. The group were amazed at the heat of the water projecting out of the geyser. The waters were 40°C and steaming. The town is also known for its china - the first porcelain factory opened in the early C19 - and for Moser glassware.

Karlovy Vary also boasts some beautiful, elegant and ornate buildings and is renowned for being a well preserved Renaissance town. The Teplá River runs through the centre of the town and the town itself is situated in a valley with steep cliffs and woods on either side. Grand hotels line the wide streets and avenues and the town has many high-end shops.



Steaming fountain at Karlovy Vary and some of the elegant buildings

After lunching in this delightful spa town, the tour continued to Mariánské Lázně, another spa town.

Mariánské Lázně is also in the west of the Province of Bohemia. The name 'Mariánské' means 'Mary' and 'Lázně' means 'baths/health resort/spa resort'. It became a fashionable spa resort in the second half of the 19th century, and among its famous visitors were Chopin, Mark Twain, Goethe, Freud, Kafka, and British king Edward VII. It's surrounded by mountain forests, mineral springs and green parks. The central Kolonáda is a baroque colonnade with bronze reliefs and a frescoed ceiling. Within the colonnade, the group had the opportunity to sample the spa water, which was not to everyone's taste! Nearby, the neoclassical 'Singing Fountain' played classical music with a magnificent water display. The large park, Bohemium Mariánské Lázně, next to the colonnade was planted with a very colourful display of spring flowers and was dotted with miniature models of Czech monuments.



Famous Visitors to Mariánské Lázně



The Spa Colonnade Mariánské Lázně,

In the evening the group were again at leisure to choose where to eat, and a number of local restaurants were patronised.

Day 4: The group took a Metro train and bus to **Prague Castle**, where we had a most informative and interesting guided tour. Among the highlights of this visit we were able to see The Changing of the Guard, the ornate St Vitus Cathedral, the historic Chapel of St Wenceslas and the vast Tournament Hall. Lunch was taken in the Lobowsky Palace with magnificent views over the whole of the city of Prague. To exit the Castle one has to pass down Golden Lane, a narrow street with tiny houses (now used as shops) built into the fortress wall.



View over old Prague from Castle



St Vitus Cathedral and Castle Wall

In the evening, the group had a most enjoyable **River trip on the River Vltava**. As we partook of a generous buffet meal and listened to the on-board commentary, we passed by many interesting and historic buildings such as the National Theatre and the Castle and also under the Charles Bridge.



Martin with our Prague Guide



Charles Bridge from Vltava River Cruise

Day 5: The Group were **free to explore Prague** for the morning and part of the afternoon, prior to their departure to the airport.

Among the sights seen and places visited in the historic Quarters of Prague, (the Old Town, New Town, Jewish Quarter, Little Quarter and Castle Quarter) were the Petrin Park, with its funicular and Observation Tower, which is a 1/4 sized version of the Eiffel Tower; the Jan Hus Trail; the Jewish Synagogues and Cemetery; Mariánské Square; the Church of St Nicholas; the Bethlehem Chapel; the Kinsky Palace; the Carolinum (University); Little Quarter Square; the Wallenstein Palace and Gardens; the Church of Our Lady Victorious; Wenceslas Square; Charles Square; the Municipal House, among others.

Famous people associated with Prague and the Czech Republic are:: Antonin Dvorak (composer), Jan Hus (preacher who influenced Martin Luther), Franz Kafka (novelist and author of *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*), Alphonse Mucha (artist) and the composers Josef Suk, Leoš Janáček, Bedřich Smetana, Bohuslav Jan Martinů.

It was agreed by the group that Prague was indeed a hidden gem, with much to commend it and a return visit would be most welcome.

Heidy Hague