

In Prague, the city of 100 spires, grandeur surmounts soot

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Even to the seasoned traveler to Europe's capitals, Prague is startling. None hits you with such instant grandeur as the compact old sector of this former capital of the kingdom of Bohemia.

However, there is much more to the story, including the fact that getting there is not half the fun. Driving through the environs into the heart of old Prague — 12 miles from Ruzyně airport or on highways from Austria or Germany — is an environ-

mentalist's nightmare.

You compete on jammed and rubbly roads with vehicles (trucks outnumbering cars) that incessantly blast horns and spew great furls of black exhaust in your window.

Omnipresent, half-completed construction and street repair work, a deafening cacophony, rows of grim gray apartments, numerous factory smokestacks spitting out gray and orange dust, and a too-visible smog layer leave you in dazed confusion, cursing whoever told you to visit beautiful Prague.

But once you've negotiated this madness and have settled in your hotel, or in the immediate area of Wenceslas Square, the hub of today's Prague, you can relax. Here are the better shops, hotels and restaurants, all in conspicuously fine order, and the only din rises from the endless stream of mostly foreign shoppers, promenaders and cafe sitters.

Now you can get your bearings by going in Cedok (18 Na Prikope St.), the government travel office, for free maps, brochures, tour informa-

tion, bookings or help for a do-it-yourself visit.

Walking the length of short Wenceslas Street you come to the beginning of the old city, and your next surprise. You find that neglect has characterized the last decades. The paving-stone streets are torn up and full of holes, buildings are crumbling, bronze statues are green with oxidation, and black grime from the mostly coal-heated city covers houses and monuments.

Yet, somehow, the state of ill repair is not that disconcerting. Old

Prague's magnificence still shines through almost unscathed. Crossing the pedestrians-only, 14th century Charles Bridge in either direction (the old city's two parts face each other across the Vltava River), you pass before dozens of colossal statues of saints rendered coal-black, and approach a concentrated and overwhelming stone vision of pointed spires, massive towers, domed cathedrals, tile-roofed houses and palaces unparalleled in Europe.

Moreover, a rescue operation is under way. With tourism becoming

an increasingly important foreign currency earner, the Czechs hope to lure many more tourists by investing in the costly restoration of old Prague. From the opera house to the Old Town Square, scaffolding meets the eye.

Located in the center of Europe, Prague spreads out on five hills on both banks of the Vltava, connected by 12 bridges. Its character evolved mainly during two cultural periods that left numerous monuments: the Romanesque-Gothic (900-1500) and (See PRAGUE on 12-F)

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PRAGUE, from 1-F
the Renaissance-Baroque (1500-1800). And unlike western European capitals whose old sectors have been conscientiously maintained and restored as needed, neglect has bequeathed an exterior unaltered here by a profusion of signs, modern lights, doors and windows. Plus, few cars penetrate the old city to disturb the peace and old world charm.

The Czechs have romantically labeled their capital the "Golden City of 100 spires, 1,000 years old, the heart of Europe." Back in the 10th century an Arab merchant, Ibrahim Ibn Jacob, calling it a wondrous city of stone joined with lime, wrote, "Prague is the biggest trade center in the Slavic countries; Russians and other Slavs, Muslims, Jews and Turks come here." It was known as the "Queen of Europe" in the 15th century, and Goethe proclaimed it to be "the most beautiful precious stone in the crown of the world." As for the present, even the ravages of recent neglect have not veiled its beauty and grandeur.

The original old city, founded with the building of Prague Castle on the city's highest hill in 850 by Princess Libussa, who married a Bohemian peasant, is still entirely of stone. Here are buildings with round-arched, heavy wooden doors on large studded hinges, streets of massive arches and imposing porticoes. Ornate lintels adorn the facades on narrow lanes, and wrought-iron street lamps hang from the walls of the houses.

Wars have torn Prague apart over the centuries, including the Thirty Years War and the Seven Years War, and Prague Castle has been destroyed and rebuilt several times. Today's "castle" is a 14th century, 440-room Gothic palace — a sprawling complex with gardens, museums, a fabulous view over the city and tombs of the Bohemian kings, plus Prague's striking landmark, St. Vitus Cathedral, with stained-glass win-

dows that are among Europe's most outstanding.

Zlata Ulikca, the "Golden Lane," is a tiny intact street of miniature 16th century houses built onto the castle fortifications. It was among the poorest areas of the city centuries ago, and Franz Kafka once lived here, seeking creative inspiration. Walking here is like treading a Jack-the-Giant-Killer lane, as if reality were a fairy tale.

The newer old city is a surprising Gothic marvel begun on the east bank by Carl IV in the 14th century, with the houses ornate to a fault. Facades are bedecked with carved statues, lintels and balconies, elaborate relief work often in flowery motifs, plus painted-on swirls, patterns, gold trim and murals. Mini-spires, gables and bulbous turrets rise from sharply sloping roofs.

Among Prague's 21 museums and many art exhibition galleries is the State Jewish Museum, housing silver objects, synagogue textiles, and 16th to 18th century Hebrew prints. It includes five synagogues (the earliest from the 13th century, which looks like a mini-castle), a 16th century town hall and a 15th century cemetery, all in the old Prague ghetto.

Prague offers a steady program of theater and concerts, including jazz at the Parnas and free classical performances at the castle music pavilion. The magnificent and enormous Old Town Square, with its great tower and astronomical clock, is the site of free evening folklore presentations throughout the summer. Otherwise there are few surprise diversions. Communist Prague is not a city of living it up, nor does it provide much for its residents.

Bakeries and butcher shops are scarce and long lines the norm. Food stores stock a pitiful selection of poor quality. Most of the few and inferior consumer goods are as costly as in the West, often more, while the average monthly income is under \$250.

The money changers who constantly approach you offering up to three times the bank rate for dollars are among the country's highest earners, but lead an illegal and perilous existence. The Czechs want the Western goods that can only be bought with "special crowns" purchased with hard currency, hence the black market. In a contradiction, it is illegal for Czechs to possess foreign money but they must obtain it to buy these imports.

Probably the favorite Czech evening out is to have goulash or sausages in a typical "vinarny," a wine restaurant or terrace, or especially in a "pivnice," or beer cellar.

The great national pastime is beer drinking, and the Czechs make the world's best. As far back as the 14th century they were exporting their renowned Pilsen beers.

While most of Prague has fallen silent by 7 in the evening, the beer cellars are going full bore. The usually standoffish and close-mouthed Czechs are jabbering away here and guzzling endless 35-cent half-liter mugs of potent 13 and 14 percent brew. You'll find more action here than anywhere else in the city.

In the U Bonaparta pivnice one night, I was having a long political discussion with a young Czech when two men in plainclothes whom he claimed were government snoops entered and sat near us. He suddenly became silent and aloof — as Czechs usually are with tourists. Then, at a few minutes before 11 o'clock closing time, soldiers came in and politely cleared the place.

Your visit to Prague will probably not be wild and gay, but it will be a jaunt both fascinating and illuminating that you'll never forget.

A visa is required and hotel reservations are a must in summer. For bookings and further information contact Cedok, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N.Y. 10016.