

PRAGUEWALKS

IVANA EDWARDS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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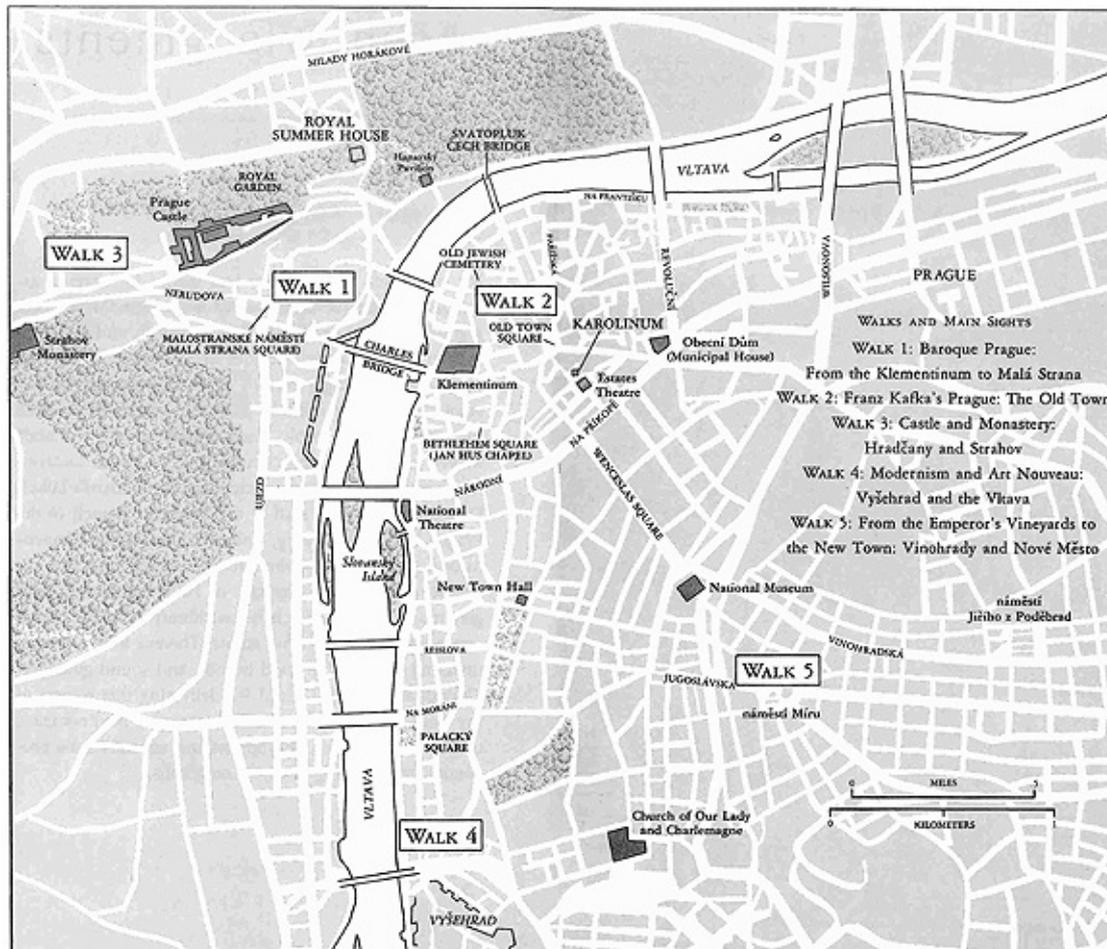
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Copyright

To my uncle Otakar Marek, in memoriam

Acknowledgments

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Charles Bridge and the Old Town

Introduction

You, dear traveler about to embark on your journey, will be in exquisite company: nearly a thousand years' worth of continental romantics and realists have feasted their eyes on the ancient capital of Bohemia and reported back in no uncertain terms. Thomas Mann called Prague one of the most magical cities on earth: "In her old beauty she surpasses much of what is Italian." It is not hard to see what he meant, for in its hilly, deeply curving river-valley setting Prague seems to have been built for the crown of a city. As French architect Jean Nouvel has noted, "All residents opening their windows here have the impression they live in a castle."

Prague is one of those cities that profoundly score the face of Europe, but here the feeling of eternity has hardly changed (though much else has). It is the ultimate nostalgia trip for those who resonate to the grandeur, the sweep, and, yes, the pathos of history.

In the last few years, visitors have been joined by returning natives, on whom it instantly dawns that the Prague they are seeing is actually more extraordinary and redolent of the past than the Prague of their youthful memories, the legends, or the hype. There are so many "returning to Prague" stories ... so many have left, so many have returned ... and so many dreamed of returning before time caught up with them.

My own returning occurred in the summer of 1964, in what proved to be an unexpected, sharply personal revelation that had a lot to do with identity, taking place as it did at the time of a precarious coming-of-age. On the last leg of my first European tour I arrived at Prague's old Ruzyně Airport, then reminiscent of a World War II airplane hangar, to an overwhelming royal reception, as the first member of my family to go back more than a decade. (My parents had bundled me up and departed in the face of the dooming Communist makeover in which my father had no intention of participating.) I recall a torrent of red roses, endless posing for my uncle's manic camera, and being excitedly fussed over by relatives, including battling grandmothers, who enveloped me in warm affection and curiosity.

Once I was in the city, shadowed by my devoted entourage that seldom left me alone, my eyes and expectations took a while to adjust to the shades of yellow that seemed to predominate—or was it the opalescence of light, especially before dusk, and

the aureate view of Prague Castle (known as the Hrad) from the Old Town side of the river, that made it seem so? *Zlatá Praha*, golden Prague ... the description is said to come from the copper roofing—long since dismantled—that Emperor Charles IV ordered for the Castle when he was renovating it. But these were the dreary gray days of the early sixties, and the famous Prague gold was less in evidence than it is today, when many buildings and coats-of-arms and hundreds of gold-whiskered tops of spires seem freshly gilded. It didn't take long, then as now, to see and feel beyond the surface to the otherworldly depths, to be transported back through hundreds of years of history, and farther back still into the Middle Ages, along meandering cobblestoned lanes with little hand-cut squares of granite embedded in the sidewalks in simple geometrical patterns.

Despite my delight in discovery, it was impossible to escape the presence of the ruling Communist government that shrouded everyday life like rusty chain mail, suffocating the natural vitality of a nation. Disregarding the pall as much as I could, I stopped at my family's landmarks and started to feel a pungent blend of pleasure and melancholy flowing through my veins, suffusing my brain. The sense of incalculable loss hit me hardest when my uncle took me to the top of the Gothic Bridge Tower on the Malá Strana side. This instantly became my favorite view of the city—the panoply spread below is enchanting, but there is something tangible and irrepressible about rooftops when you are so close to them, yet far enough to take them all in at once.

While those memories can't fail to linger in thinking about a lost generation, Prague is a different city today. In November 1989, the day we had all been dreaming about and praying for finally dawned as the oppressors gave way. Their time was up and they knew it. Prague Castle, as conspicuous as a compass to align oneself by, used to look phantasmagoric. Long the seat of Kafkaesque power (the Hapsburgs were entrenched for three hundred years), it seemed to brood like a despised, all-seeing warden over the whole city. The atmosphere could be so unsettling, some travelers probably aborted their stay. Back home they would shake their heads at the intensity and poignancy of it all. This went on for more than forty years (fifty years if you count the Nazi occupation). Now the Hrad is home to a democratically elected government and a president who is also a voice of conscience to the whole world, Václav Havel.

Just as Paris is France—almost anything of real consequence that happens in the country begins there—Prague is the Czech lands. This was also true in the former Czechoslovakia, which helps explain why the Slovaks felt they had to separate: they no longer wanted to be dominated by Prague. Today, with its 1.25 million people, 497 square kilometers, and 10 districts, a stranger will find a city seething with post-Communist impatience, anxiety, and sometimes confused expectations and behavior. The invincible urge is to forget the past and quickly forge a future. Ironically, most of

what visitors want to see—monuments, palaces, gardens, art, architecture—is old, but everything else promises, in time, to be new. A new society, emerging from synthetic isolation and cultural oblivion, is abuilding.

It is often said that Prague is preserved more by love than by law. And this seems true; Praguers are surrounded by the past at every turn in one of the world's largest and best-preserved historic centers. (In 1992 Prague was named to the United Nations UNESCO World Heritage List of sites “considered to be of such exceptional interest and such universal value that their protection is the responsibility of all mankind.”) They may occasionally grumble about the inconvenience of the eternal maintenance of old structures and the inevitable frailties of their great age, yet the majority wouldn't change anything and instinctively understand that here is something too special to tamper with. For the gift of Prague is sheer beauty—the haunting, as well as haunted, kind, possessed by only a few world-class cities simultaneously blessed and cursed with centuries-deep layers of tumultuous, polemical pasts and visionary, urbanistically astute rulers.

The rising and falling topography is what makes Prague one of the most stunning cities ever built and sets it apart from, indeed above, the flat-terrained beauty contestants in the “most ravishing” sweepstakes—on a continent where ancient loveliness is not exactly in short supply. Like Rome, Prague rises on and around seven thickly wooded hills. The variety of terrain provides superb, changeless vistas from vantage points throughout the city; one of the most filmed, photographed, sketched, painted, sculpted, and etched is that from Charles Bridge looking up at the Castle crowning the bluff.

But there are other, much less familiar views that are known only to native Praguers or longtime residents. Several of these naturally place in the center of the picture the axis of the city's historic core: the river Vltava, with its eight islands and sixteen bridges. Others offer unexpected panoramic perspectives on Prague's fabled red roofs and spires. Still others help to expose the enigmatic byways of the city's inner life and complex history at cobblestone level, through its streets, squares, and neighborhoods, its gardens, cemeteries, and memorials.

It is the purpose of this book to steer you beyond and away from the usual two- or three-day whirlwind tourist itineraries—the Royal Road through the Old Town to Prague Castle and St. Vitus Cathedral, and the glitzier Wenceslas Square/Na příkopě shopping, hotel, and entertainment scene—that constitute the basic Prague walks, the centerpieces of anyone's stay. That doesn't mean you should avoid them, of course. You could hardly miss them anyway—it would be like going to Manhattan for the first time and managing to skip Fifth Avenue. The first three walks in this book will pass through or skirt the glorious inevitables. The last two will take you to districts where

Praguers live and while away their recreational hours, and also introduce you to art and architecture that you will find nowhere else in Europe.

A word about Praguers. Some long-term (meaning since the 1989 revolution) expatriates, as well as other visitors, have noted that they find the city and its people unfathomable. They can't understand why Praguers seem to want to flee from the past, intent on putting it behind them, preferring even to disown it. But the Praguers' attitude toward history is not surprising. The Czech experience with Communism is an ongoing national trauma and probably impossible for anyone who did not live through it to empathize with fully. It is something social historians and psychologists will have to sort out. Suffice it to say that a new life lies ahead for all and that many middle-aged and older Czechs (the young are largely fearless) are coping silently, feeling their way, with a degree of bravado when confronted by Western lifestyles and attitudes that may mystify observers. They care terribly what you think, yet will usually not express such feelings. For visitors it is usually best to restrain criticism and unsolicited advice lest it be viewed as patronizing. However, I do not hesitate to advise that this rule does not apply to establishments where you are paying a good price and getting less than what you were led to believe you could expect.

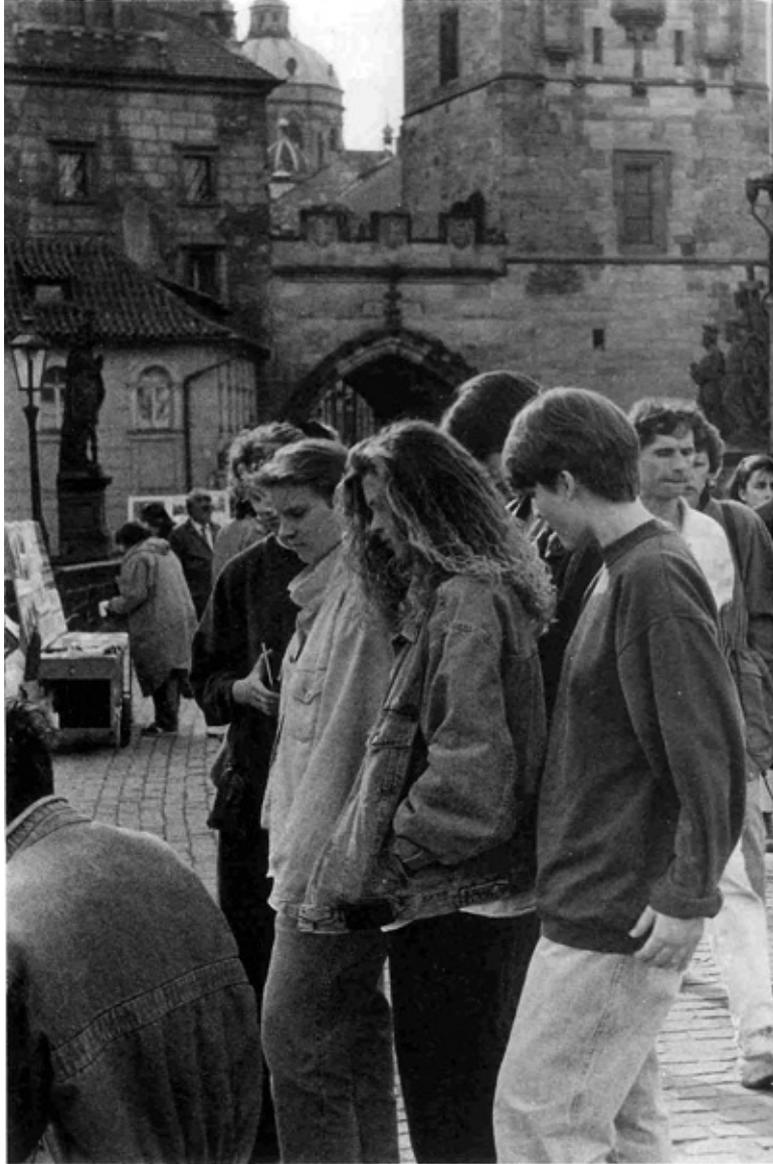


Malá Strana rooftops

Though the thousands of Americans in residence at this writing might belie the fact, Prague is still novel territory for many North Americans. Even some Western Europeans are newly discovering it now that most of Central and Eastern Europe are free. And so one unique and timely attraction of Prague is that it offers a chance to witness the unfolding of its rebirth and return to the continental mainstream of which it had previously been a part. Until the Velvet Revolution of 1989, when the monstrous concrete slab of Communism was finally lifted and Czechs and Slovaks could breathe freely again, Praguers were all too aware that their magnificent city, their tragic heroine, was all they had. Today visitors can participate with them in rebuilding the country, in reinventing the city, and in helping Praguers catch up with the waning twentieth century just by being there and being open to the experience of getting to know the people.

Something bizarre ended, something perhaps unimaginable today even to those who lived through it, and something new started. Prague is now a place of epochal opportunity, a new frontier, making it more exciting for the foreseeable future than its well-settled and perhaps jaded Western European counterparts.

Welcome to Prague.



Sightseeing on Charles Bridge

Information and Advice

The enduring wonder of the glories of Prague against all odds, homegrown and imported, from the distant past and the recent past, heightens the sense of awe the visitor feels in this city. But despite the history, the consensus is that the best is yet to come as the country re-creates itself. In the years since the 1989 revolution there has been more of everything—tourists, taxis, restaurants, hotels, nightclubs, stores, concerts. And, yes, more crime and sleaze—two categories that were news to Czechs accustomed to police-state repression but that won't impress in the slightest the majority of urban-dwelling Westerners who think they've seen it all. In 1992 it all seemed to take off, commercially speaking. As of this writing, mass tourism is a rapidly evolving industry in the Czech Republic, most highly developed in the capital, which has always seen many more visitors than the rest of the country. Free-market rules are being improvised every day as fledgling, though enthusiastic and hardworking, entrepreneurs try their wings, so be prepared to run into occasional awkward behavior and service, which can manifest itself in a variety of ways, from apathy and sheer ineptness to outright profligacy.

Though it should not deter you, any negative aspects are at their worst in June, July, and August, when the city is overrun by tourists (you'll have the same problem between Christmas and *Silvestr* [New Year's]). The government bureaucracy is a conspicuous cause of soul-numbing frustration, and I strongly recommend that you avoid dealing with any state agency if possible. This is, after all, Kafka country. Contrary to any tombstone you may have seen, the world of the author of *The Trial*, in which the hero is hounded for an unnamed crime, not only still lives but flourishes—to the despair of all who must entangle themselves in it. This also goes for the government-run tourist information bureau, PIS (Pražská Informační Služba). Don't bother trying to phone, for instance; PIS's single line is permanently busy. You will have to go there in person (they are located in central Prague on Na příkopě 20, not far from Wenceslas Square). Just don't expect the most up-to-date information or answers to all your reasonable questions. This also applies to the usually helpful American Hospitality Center (run by Czechs), located on the ground floor of Provaznická 1, just behind the Můstek metro station; they're friendly and do have CNN and decent pizza,

but they too have been known to give incorrect information.

So what is the unknowing traveler to do? Just be patient and perhaps somewhat less demanding than you might be elsewhere. By all means make your needs known, but realize that across-the-board efficiency has not yet arrived here. You will, however, run into many people who are trying hard, and an incipient, linear “Germanic” temperament characterized by extreme efficiency bodes well, at least for some Praguers. It is safe to say that Czechs are generally sensitive—perhaps oversensitive is more accurate—eager to please, and anxious to catch up with the Western *modus operandi* from which they were isolated for so long. By the time this book is published, standards will undoubtedly be much better established in the more tourist-frequented districts. In farther-flung areas, the management may be slower at figuring things out. Depending on whether you are in a hurry, that may or may not bother you; your experiences will simply be an even more authentic throwback to the past.

VISAS AND TRAVEL

To anyone who remembers the annoying prerevolutionary formalities, wherein you were obligated to exchange a certain amount of foreign currency into Czech crowns along with getting your visa stamped, travel to the Czech Republic is now a breeze and as simple as visiting any European nation. American citizens do not need visas for stays of less than thirty days—just grab your valid passport and go. Canadian citizens, however, do need visas (in retaliation for Canadian government requirements of Czech visitors), which cost \$49 Canadian. Apply at your local consulate (in Montreal: 1305 Pine Avenue West) or to the embassy in Ottawa (50 Rideau Terrace, Ottawa, Ontario, K1M 2A1). Visas may also be obtained at major border crossings and at the airport upon payment of the fee and completion of the application form.

The most convenient air service to Prague is via ČSA, Czechoslovak Airlines, which offers nonstop flights on comfortable Airbus 310/300 planes from New York, from Montreal, from Chicago via Montreal, and from Toronto via Montreal. The trip is seven hours or so from New York and the service is professional in business and economy classes. Ruzyně Airport, an expanding facility about twenty kilometers west of the city, is a fast fifteen-minute drive from the center. Public buses (Nos. 119 and 254) depart from the main terminal every half hour and will connect you with the metro at the Dejvická station. ČSA operates a shuttle bus to its central city terminal on Revoluční Street, also connected to the Dejvická metro station. Taxis are also readily available at the main terminal: the fare should be no more than \$10 to the center on the meter, but be sure to confirm this with any prospective cabdriver. If you have a valid international driver’s license, car rentals from agencies such as Pragocar are also available. If you’re arriving by train at the Central Railway Station (Hlavní nádraží) on

Wilsonova, you can also catch the ČSA shuttle bus, a taxi, or the metro (Red Line C).

TO READ

Arming yourself with reading matter of substance before departure is challenging, because as of this writing there is little nonfiction in print in North America, or in English, specifically about Prague. You might find Joseph Wechsberg's discursive, anecdotal, and affectionate 1971 *Prague the Mystical City* in a library, but the author ends with the Soviet invasion of 1968. Francis Dvornik's *The Slavs in European History and Civilization* (1962) does have most of the facts of the Czech and Slovak past (from the thirteenth century to the eighteenth century only), though it is presented in a pedestrian, academic style, which is also true of the *The United States, Revolutionary Russia and the Rise of Czechoslovakia*, by Betty Miller Unterberger. For rectification of this unfortunate state of affairs, readers who want a substantial social and cultural history of this famous city will have to wait a few more years. Your best bet in the meantime, short of learning to read Czech, is to find some memoirs, such as Heda Margolius Kovály's *Under a Cruel Star*, an extremely moving retelling of the horrific early Communist period. Alan Levy's 1972 *Rowboat to Prague*, about the late sixties, is a pleasure, and has been reissued by Second Chance Press. Fiction is a much better option: the earlier short stories and novels of Milan Kundera, such as *The Joke* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*; anything by Ivan Klíma; Josef Škvorecký's *The Cowards* and *Dvořák in Love*, for example; Bohumil Hrabal's *I Served the King of England*; and Jiří Weil's grueling *Life with a Star*. Another favorite is Marcia Davenport's *The Valley of Decision*, although it is actually more about Pittsburgh. In a similar category is Jan Novak's *The Willys Dream Kit*, partly set in the American Midwest. And anything by Václav Havel, the president of the Czech Republic, a world-famous essayist and playwright, is especially prophetic and inspiring.

CLIMATE

Prague's climate is officially described as maritime. The weather is somewhat tempered by not-too-distant encircling mountains, which means it doesn't rain that much, but seasonal extremes in temperature are typical. In fact, the weather will remind Americans of their own Northeast. If you don't thrive at extremes, avoid July and August—it's *hot* (temperatures often climb into the 80s Fahrenheit, though averaging in the 70s). Ditto for the post-Christmas to New Year's celebrations—it's cold (the range is 25–34). Competition from your fellow travelers is stiff during these two periods as well; it's often too much for the fragile service sector to handle. Western Europeans especially come here then, and Praguers vanish to their country

retreats.

The best months to visit Prague are April, when it's still sweater weather (the range is 48–56), and May, for glorious skies—the most clarity you'll see all year. This is also lilac weather and the time of blossoming horse chestnut trees—you'll see their frothy blooms all over town. June starts to heat up and get smoggy (the range is 56–72). February is cold and gray, but at least it's not January, and there are plenty of snug and cheerful venues *indoors*; March is nearly twice as sunny (33–45). September is excellent (52–68), and the crowds begin to thin out noticeably. October starts to get chilly (43–54), but it's still pleasant if you don't mind packing accordingly. Rainfall is heaviest in July, but you'll see few heavy or persistent downpours; the thirstiest month is February. Always remember to bring a lightweight folding umbrella in spring, summer, or fall.

MONEY

The currency in the Czech Republic is the “crown” (*koruna*, abbreviated *Kč*), each of which breaks up into 100 “hellers” (*haléře*). As of this writing the rate is about 27 Kč to the U.S. dollar, and 44 Kč to the British pound. The best exchange rates are at banks, though Prague is full of conveniently located money-changing bureaus charging high commission rates. If you change more money than you need, major banks will buy back whatever you want to sell for dollars or common European currencies. Changing money on the street for black-market rates is a relic of the past, because the rate is hardly better and it is, as ever, risky. Cash advances are available on major credit cards at the Živnostenská Bank (tel. 22 43 46) at 20 Na příkopě, where you can also most easily exchange Czech crowns or any other common currency for U.S. dollars. Hours are Monday to Friday from 8:00 A.M. to 12:45 P.M. and from 1:15 to 6:00 P.M.; Saturdays from 8:00 A.M. to 12:00 noon. Among its branches in the center of town, Komerční Bank has an exchange office at the Central Railway Station open from 8:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. Monday to Friday. And the American Express office at 56 Wenceslas Square (tel. 257 528) also provides banking services.

There are two price scales operating in the Czech Republic—one for Czechs who are dependent on the local economy and are paid in crowns, and one for visitors and foreign businesspeople who are generally charged prices similar to those in Western Europe. For example, a hotel room rate for a foreigner might be \$220, while the same room would cost a local citizen only 750 Kč. As market forces take over, the economy gains strength, and salaries rise, these two price scales will merge uniformly. In fact, this is already happening, and it is making life difficult for average Praguers on low salaries or fixed incomes and for those who have no foreign currency.

Here are some general price ranges. Cup of coffee: 15–25 Kč; half-liter of beer:

10–20 Kč (low end), 50 Kč (high end); local brand small bottle of mineral water: 10–15 Kč; an English-language newspaper: 25 Kč; restaurant dinner for one: 80–160 Kč (low end), 350–800 Kč (high end); movie ticket: 20–30 Kč.

ACCOMMODATIONS

A hotel shortage exists during peak season (May to October), but a number of projects under way in this hot-growth market should ease the situation in the near future. Of Prague's existing approximately seventy-five hotels, only about fifteen are in the four- and five-star slots. Five-star hotels include the Palace, the Intercontinental (recommended only for the view), the Esplanade, and the Hyatt International Praha in the Dejvice district. Room rates in these average \$250 per night. There are a number of large, ultra-modern, soulless (and expensive) new hotels catering primarily to the foreign business trade, such as the Panorama, the Forum, and the Atrium (788 rooms), but I don't recommend them if atmosphere and location matter to you—you might as well be in Atlanta, Georgia. By the time you read this, there will be others, including a Four Seasons on the riverbank and a Ritz Carlton, equally well situated.

One of the few hotels in the Old Town (Staré Město), that is, Prague 1, is the small, comfortable Ungelt on Štupartská Street, a few steps from the Old Town Square. Reasonably priced is the President (next to the dismal-looking Intercontinental) on the riverbank, with about as much charm as its neighbor. And then there is the smallish, truly inimitable art nouveau Grand Hotel Evropa on Wenceslas Square, which will not be tampered with too much in the future, I hope. It is said to be hard to get reservations there, but drop-ins sometimes get lucky. Also on Wenceslas Square is the four-star Ambassador, an old favorite with a cozy, bustling lobby; rooms usually must be booked well in advance. In Malá Strana a good choice is the tiny Hotel U Páva, but it's expensive. Your options at lower prices improve if you don't mind staying outside the city center. No need to renounce convenience; just ask for something near a subway or streetcar line.

Another alternative for budget travelers is to try one of several accommodation agencies that will refer you to a private home or apartment. This has become a popular and reasonable option and is highly recommended not only for the price, but because you get a chance to meet the locals, away from the usual tourism hustle. Adventurous travel is surely not about situating yourself in lodgings that specialize in your class and nationality. (Access to a refrigerator is only occasionally a possibility in these places.) One such agency (this is not a comprehensive list) is Top Tour at Rybná 3 in the Old Town (Prague 1), which can also find space in hostels; another is Alltours on Vodičkova 15 (tel. 235 12 31 or 235 55 94); and a third is Pragotur at U Obecního Domu 2, Prague 1 (tel. 232 22 05). The former state travel agency, Čedok, which has a