

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

April 26, 2001

Tales of a Traveler

Foggy, jet-lagged ruminations on a European trip that included stops in Vienna, Lucerne, the Bernese Oberland, Munich, Bad Reichenhall, and Berlin:

- First, and most important: right now, this year, is the time to get across the Atlantic. Someday — and I have a feeling it will be sooner rather than later — we will look back on this summer as the good of days when things were dirt cheap for Americans in our part of Europe. Prices are almost too good to be true, especially in Germany and Austria. For example:

Here in Ashland, a pair of top-of-the-line, French-made **Mephisto**, Gore-Tex walking shoes cost \$255. In Vienna the same shoe sells for 2490 AS (\$155).

An order of *Garnelenspieße* (grilled shrimp, absolutely fresh, with salad and a plate of the world's tastiest fried potatoes with *Speck* (ham/bacon) at Berlin's fabulous **Rogacki** market (which so far only *Gemütlichkeit* readers know about) is 17.85 DM (\$8.11). Of course that's enough for two persons and they will happily divide the order. Huge glasses of a sprightly Bordeaux white wine, a perfect accompaniment, are 3.95 DM (\$1.80).

A candlelit, three-course dinner for two in the rustically elegant

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GEMÜTLICHKEIT

The Travel Letter for Germany, Austria, Switzerland & the New Europe

PRAGUE 2001

Our Fischer/Holliday eastern travel specialists return to Prague 10 years after their first visit for Gemütlichkeit. This time around the key to their hotel room actually operates the lock.

Katerina Hajkova, the two-stripe receptionist at the **Hotel Adria** on Prague's Wenceslas Square, would easily win any "fastest finger" competition on "Millionaire."

By Claudia Fischer & Roger Holliday Faxes answered the instant they arrive. If not sooner. Want a good seat at the Opera? No problem. A minivan tour to Theresienstadt? Arranged. The schedule for trains to Pilsen? Got them right here. Restaurant reservations? Easy.

And so it goes with Katerina H. Attractive. Smart. Multilingual. And very, very quick.

Admittedly, we were there in late February, long before the tourist

hordes descend to blot out Prague's Old Town cobblestones and blur its dreamy landscapes. But we suspect that Ms. Hajkova's attentive expertise runs the full 365/24/7 and isn't just a wintry blip on the efficiency meter.

What a difference a decade makes.

When we first visited Prague in the summer of 1990, moments, relatively speaking, after the bloodless Velvet Revolution had rolled back more than 40 years of communist domination, "fast, efficient and attractive" were nowhere to be seen.

Certainly not at the dumpy Wenceslas Square hotel (see *Gemütlichkeit*, Feb. '91) we had to virtually

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Accommodations

Reports on recent hotel experiences by the Gemütlichkeit staff.

Except for the amazingly fresh meat, dairy and produce used by its kitchen, there is very little that's "Neu" about the 18-room Neu-Meran Hotel in the forest above Bad Reichenhall. And in great part that is its charm. This is old-time, country Bavaria. There's a TV (a few local channels only) and a phone in the rooms but almost everything else about this comfortable, rambling 18-room hotel reminds us of our German visits of the 70s.



Arriving on a Saturday at the Munich rail station with vague plans to spend two nights in the south Bavarian countryside, we had booked a car but not a hotel. A spur-

of-the-moment call to the Neu-Meran, however, quickly solved the problem of a roof over our heads.

Two hours later we stepped into the time machine. The first wave of nostalgia was when, on entering the hotel's antique-bric a brac-taxidermy-filled reception room, we found no sign of life. After a few minutes of snooping various public rooms we encountered a pleasant young woman in the dining room who exclaimed, "You must be Mr. Bestor. I have three rooms to show you. You can pick the one you like."

We settled on Number 212, a somewhat larger than average double that offered a balcony with a sweeping view over Bad Reichenhall, the surrounding green hills and jagged peaks for 110 DM (\$50) per

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dining room of the hotel **Neu-Meran** (see story page 1) near Bad Reichenhall, is about 82 DM (\$37), not including beverages.

Double rooms in comfortable three-star hotels in major cities can be found at from \$85-\$125; substantially less in the countryside.

- On the other hand, a Vienna hotel owner who had just returned from Paris was still in shock over the cost of beer in the lobby of the **Hotel George V**, a cool \$19 — and yes that is a U.S. dollar sign in front of the 19.

- I fear there have been compromises in the making of my all-time favorite beer, **Budvar** from the Czech Republic. The last couple of years it's not been the same rich lager that first won me over. Austria's **Gösser**, however, was marvelous at Vienna's **Gösserbier Klinik**.

- When winter and spring air fares are so low — \$350 to \$450 — I notice couples purchasing three tickets in order to keep a middle seat open between them. The airlines must love it; one less passenger to feed, clean up after, or get belligerent — and they still get paid.

- Let's hope a new airport is on the long list of great buildings to be constructed in Berlin. Either Tegel is too small to handle current passenger traffic or new boarding procedures are needed. We dutifully arrived two hours before our **Swissair** flight to Zürich. Check-in at

Tegel is at the gate, immediately behind which is the boarding lounge. The check-in area has only about 12 seats. There are plenty of seats in the boarding lounge but no one was allowed to enter until about 45 minutes before flight time. Thus about 100 of us stood for more than an hour in the tiny check-in area, with nowhere else to go, clogging traffic and peering through glass into a deserted boarding lounge and its couple of hundred empty seats.

- That's my only complaint about Berlin, easily the most interesting and exciting city in our three countries — some say in all of Europe. The new film museum is stunning, the **Hotel Art Nouveau** (Leibnitzstr. 59, 10629 Berlin, tel.: + 49/030 327 744-0, fax: 327 744 -4, web: www.hotelartnouveau.de) is now the "official" *Gemütlichkeit* Berlin headquarters, and we already told you about Rogacki. We'll have a more complete update next month.

- For the first time we are now seeing restaurants marked "No Cell Phones." Some rail cars are signed "Quiet Zone," meaning no phones or noisy talk. (I always assumed the ability to speak rapidly at high volume for long periods without taking a breath was, like baseball, an American pastime. But when I began to ride European trains a few years ago, I discovered otherwise.) Loud applause from *Gemütlichkeit*.

- Germany's speedy ICE trains are great machines. Try to reserve one of the seats just behind the train's "driver" (engineer?, opera-

tor?) who sits, like a mad scientist, at a space-age console in the nose of the lead car. On the Munich-Berlin ICE we discovered that seats 11, 13 and 15 in car #28 offer a view over the driver's shoulder as you rocket down the track. Those seats are separated from the train's nose cone by only a few feet and a clear glass wall. It's like being in the cockpit of an airplane, except there is a much greater sensation of speed.

- The quietest, smoothest rail cars are the two-level commuter cars of **Swiss Rail (SBB)**. You'll see them on main routes between Switzerland's largest cities. By the way, we did not reserve seats in advance on any Swiss train. No problem.

- And finally we should mention a couple of careless typos in last month's issue: the correct address for **Ski Europe's** excellent website is www.ski-europe.com, and the German for Vienna of course is *Wien*, not *Wein* (wine).— RHB

Notes for Readers

- Foreign currency prices are converted to U.S. dollars at the exchange rate in effect at the time of publication.
- Hotel prices listed are for one night. Discounts are often available for longer stays.
- All hotel prices include breakfast unless otherwise noted.
- Local European telephone area codes carry the "0" required for in-country dialing. To phone establishments from outside the country, such as from the USA, do not dial the first "0".

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HOTEL RESTAURANT RATING KEY

Rating Scale	Scale	Restaurant Criteria	
Excellent	16 - 20	Food	65%
Above Average	12 - 15	Service	20%
Average	8 - 11	Atmosphere	15%
Adequate	4 - 7		
Unacceptable	0 - 3		
Hotel Rating Criteria		Value Rating	Scale
People/Service	30%	Outstanding Value	17 - 20
Location/Setting	15%	Very Good Value	12 - 16
Guestrooms	30%	Average Value	9 - 11
Public rooms	5%	Below Average Value	5 - 8
Facilities/Restaurant	20%	A Rip-Off	0 - 4

Special Designation

By virtue of location, decor, charm, warmth of management, or combination thereof, an especially pleasant establishment.

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bribe our way into. And out of. And where the door frame of our Spartan room collapsed on us when we tried to lock up.

Not at the dreary, dirty train stations. Nor the barren Soviet-style department stores. Or at the official Cedok Tourist Offices where the *dobry dens* (hellos) were sullen and the signs read "No Informations Here."

Forget too, any idea of fine dining. Or sometimes just dining, period. Restaurants were either closed up tight, or mere waiterless movie sets posing as restaurants. The only way to fill your tummy was to search out some smoky, somber, ill-lit *pivovar* (beer joint) serving dismal platters of boiled beef or duck...and dumplings. Brown stuff and white stuff as we got to calling it. And where the only things to die for were the cheap frothy mugs of Pilsner Urquell and Budvar you washed it all down with.

Anyway, 10 years later Team Hajkova, and the clean, totally renovated, businesslike Hotel Adria, seem pretty representative of the greater good that's happening throughout tourist Prague. Where 'drab' is definitely out and the city dubbed "Golden," while not yet plus-perfect, is once more living up to its name.

We understand *Gemütlichkeit* readers are here principally for the inside scoop on digs and dining — not standard guidebook travel babble or lengthy historical backgrounders — but one should not go to Prague without learning about its turbulent past. While this is true of any destination, the multiple and complex dramas that make up the Czech story require special attention.

For without it, how can one ever properly appreciate the architectural splendor that has made Prague Europe's most beautiful and sensuous medieval city....despite decades of victimization. Nazis. Communists, et al.

Ignore the past and the impres-

Prague Basics

Population: 1,184,000

Altitude: 235 meters / 771 feet

Driving Distances:

City	KM / Miles
Berlin	342 / 214
Dresden	151 / 93
Frankfurt	523 / 327
Munich	380 / 237

Information:

Czech Cultural Center (State run information center), 1109 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10028, tel. 212-288-0830

Ask for a copy of *Welcome to Prague*, Prague's official guidebook and an excellent source of information. Contains city map and a large, detailed public transportation map.

Prague Information Service (PIS)
Na Prikope 20, near Wenceslas Sq.
M-F 9-6, Sat 9-3.

Staromestske nam, 1, Old Town Hall
M-F 9-6, Sat/Sun 9-3

Prague Tourist Center: Rytirska 12.
Daily 9-8 pm.

Prague in Your Pocket. Very useful. Published five times a year so info is up-to-date. Includes sightseeing, unbiased hotel/restaurant recommendations, events calendar, addresses, etc. Order for \$5.00 from http://inyourpocket.com/Czech/Prague_home.shtml. Also sold at Prague newsstands for 40 CSK (\$1).

Daily Walks of Prague: <http://www.walks.cz/walks/walks.htm>

sion one might take away, at least in the busy summer season, is of a crowded, noisy, (albeit drop-dead gorgeous), metropolis filled with the dazzling trappings of capitalism gone mad.

McD's, B-K's, KFC's and American pizzerias have erupted, pimple-like, on every corner. Illuminated signs scream world brand names from the tops of tall buildings. Shops are filled to the gunnels with cheap Bohemian glass and other *tschotckes*. Massed bands of tourists tread a well-worn trail with their brology-waving guides who spout endless dates, times, numbers and names. Instant facts. Instantly forgotten.

But forget the past and you'll wonder at some of Prague's incongruities, too. Like the morose mien of so many of its seniors....next to the joyous foot-stomping rhythms of a youthful New Orleans-style jazz group. A pervasive, almost tangible, fatalism...alongside a sports-mad country that lives for its soccer and hockey. A surfeit of grizzled retainers in museums, art galleries, churches and public toilets....cheek by jowl with the heartiest two-fisted beer drinkers in the world, 160 liters per person, per year.

To start to understand how the Czechs have reached this dichotomous point, one must go back 50, 100, 500, even 1,000 years. At least to good King Wenceslas (actually a prince), the country's patron saint who sits atop his steed on the broad boulevard named for him.

Or to King Charles IV who founded his University in 1348 making it the first seat of higher learning in the Holy Roman Empire. And then built an enchanting bridge across the Vltava.

You must also go back to the massive Old Town Square statue of Czech martyr Jan Hus, burnt at the stake in 1415, the very same century the nearby Astronomical Clock first began ticking and telling its morality tale of "Greed, Vanity, Death and the Turk"...a playlet that brings out crowds of onlookers for every hourly chime.

But skipping back just 50 years provides enough tragedy to justify a whole population of fatalists.

Abandoned by the Allies in the Munich Agreement of 1938, Europe's "Second Switzerland" was invaded and taken over by the Nazis. Resistance was brutally repressed. Demonstrating student leaders were executed or sent to concentration camps. Universities were closed. Jews were sent to nearby Theresienstadt and other camps.

When Nazi leader Reinhard Heydrich was assassinated in 1942 by the Czech underground, a period of even harsher suppression fol-

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lowed. Whole villages were annihilated and the deportation of Jews was accelerated.

Even at war's end Prague's suffering continued when 5,000 citizens died during a May 5, 1945, uprising against the German occupiers.

Three years later, the Soviets came calling, imposing their own style of repression which prevailed until the spring of 1989.

(For a compelling description of this "Spring Fling," by an American journalist who lived it, we recommend *So Many Heroes* by Alan Levy — The Permanent Press, 4170 Noyac Road, Sag Harbor, NY 11963, tel. 631-725-1101, \$22 plus shipping. Levy is also cofounder and editor-in-chief of the touristically indispensable English language weekly *Prague Post* that has appeared at news stands every Wednesday since October '91.)

But now Prague has risen to the top of the tourism "must-see" list. Medievally correct. Architecturally splendid. And romantic as all get-out.

And herein lies a major problem. The city has become a victim of its own popularity. Millions of summertime tourists literally drown out the place, making sightseeing a difficult proposition.

Thus the preferred time to see Prague is out of season — way out — when, as the new pocket-size city guide, *Prague in your Pocket*, aptly puts it, "The deluge of visitors slows to a mere flood."

Fortunately our February visit coincided with a week of almost spring-like weather. But even if it had rained and stormed and howled the whole time, we would have found plenty to occupy our time.

On the cultural front, for example, Prague has few peers in either diversity or deeply discounted prices (the current exchange rate doesn't hurt either). And beyond the many museums, art galleries, special exhibitions, 'nary a night goes by without

an opera, concert or theater production somewhere...with prime seats available for next to nothing. And any hint of blue skies brings out instant combos of jazz, pop and classical on street corners, in squares and subways.

If music is not the food of your particular life, and you want something more energetic to warm the cockles of your wintry heart, the Czechs are no pikers on the athletic front either.

As defending Olympic hockey champs they frequently take great pride and pleasure in knocking off the mighty Russians. Their two main teams, Sparta and Slavia, are in action throughout the season. Take in a game. Tickets are cheap between 7 - 120 CZK (18 cents to \$3.15).

Soccer is another Czech passion and the city's AC Sparta Praha club is among Europe's best.

Prague is also a great walking city, conveniently organized into manageable sectors that can be easily covered in a long weekend.

Several companies (see Prague Facts Section) conduct daily walks, both general and themed. Among the latter include *Musical Prague*, a tour of Mozart, Beethoven and Dvorak haunts; a literary stroll with Prague's own Franz Kafka; *Mysterious Prague* follows a trail of legends and folklore; and a good-fun, three-hour evening *Pub Tour* focuses on the city's ancient brewing traditions, fabulous beers and visits to three or four local taverns you're not likely to find on your own.

Pick up a *Prague Walks* brochure from any hotel rack or at one of the tourist offices. Failing that, simply turn up most any time at Old Town Square or the Astronomical Clock and you'll likely find a walking tour about to depart.

For the less active there are several bus tours of Prague available, some coupled with a bit of walking. Most of these companies also organize river cruises and day-trips to places like **Karlstein Castle**, **Karlovy Vary** and the concentration camp, **Theresienstadt**.

But as a good portion of tourist Prague is pedestrianized, the best way to see it is to strap on a good pair of walking shoes (the cobblestones can be hard on your feet) and check out the major neighborhoods.

Our suggested sightseeing "musts" include:

- **Wenceslas Square**, site of the pro-democracy demonstrations of 1968 and 1989 and dominated by a statue of the good Saint himself.

Though lacking the excitement and atmosphere of the Old Town — much of it was razed in the 19th century to make way for offices and apartments — Wenceslas offers a good selection of restaurants, up-market shopping, the **National Museum** and the **National Theater**.

Next to the theater be sure to visit the **Cafe Slavia** where the unofficial opposition gathered during the communist era and where President Havel wooed his first wife, Olga. Closed for many years due to property wrangles, it re-opened in late 1999 and offers fine river and castle views.

- **The Stare Mesto** (Old Town). Narrow, meandering cobbled streets radiate from the **Staromestski** (Old Town Square) with its **Astronomical Clock** and **Jan Hus Memorial**.

This is an area of beautiful baroque and Renaissance architecture sprinkled with some marvellous restaurants, pubs and cafes.

It is, of course, a popular tourist domain and many shops are filled with kitsch and the ubiquitous glassware. But, because there are a few jewels among the dross, browsing can still be worthwhile .

- **Josefov**, Prague's melancholic Jewish Ghetto, comprises several synagogues, the **Jewish Museum** and two cemeteries...all that remains of one of Europe's oldest Jewish communities.

It was from this ghetto that three trainloads of children were able to escape German occupied Prague in 1939, thanks in part to Oscar Schindler (*Schindler's List*). The **Pinkas Synagogue** contains a permanent

exhibition of children's drawings brought from nearby Theresienstadt concentration camp. Most of these children, however, were shipped on to Auschwitz and did not survive.

• **Hradcany**, the castle area on a hill incorporating **Prague Castle**, **St. George's Basilica** and the narrow, shop-filled **Golden Lane**. On foot it's a bit of a haul or take the #22 tram.

At the end of your explorations, you'll have discovered a city of church towers and golden spires. Of gargoyles and angels. Doors and arches and guild signs. Of crooked, crinkled, cobbled streets. And gracious pedestrian promenades with elegant mansions in pinks and blues. All surmounted, of course, by the obligatory magic castle on a hill.

A Word on Safety and Taxis

While Prague has a reputation for petty crime and corruption, walking during daylight hours is perfectly safe. Just take the basic precautions against pickpockets you would in any other major city.

At night, a bit more vigilance is called for as Prague has quite a swinging nightlife, from smoky bars to up-market nightclubs, dance halls and casinos.

Prague taxis are famous for over charging...and worse. So book through your hotel or, better still, use the excellent and inexpensive public transportation system of trams, buses and subways.

Accommodations

(Editor's Note: Many Prague hotels have more than one web site. Additional sites are usually run by booking services which may offer higher prices. Obtain your price quote directly from hotels as well as any outside reservations services.)

Hotel Adria

While Prague today has no shortage of accommodations, from neighborhood pensions to five-star international high rises, we particularly appreciate the location, comfort and efficient attitude of this Wenceslas Square hotel cited in the first paragraphs of this story.

In a row of relatively bland neighbors, the classic canary yellow exterior of the fully-renovated, five-story building stands out. The spot-

less interior features gleaming surfaces of steel and glass and a lobby bar affords immediate relief from the outside world.

The 88 guest rooms are fully air-conditioned, comfortably and prettily furnished and contain all the usual amenities. As befits a property catering to a business clientele, guests have 24-hour access to an Internet room.

Daily Rates: Singles \$86 to \$127, doubles \$105 to \$151.

Contact: Hotel Adria, Vaclavske namesti 26, 110 00 Prague 1, tel. +420 2/210 81291, fax 21 0 81300, email: mailbox@hoteladria.cz, web: www.hoteladria.cz

Rating: QUALITY 15/20, VALUE 15/20

Hotel U Cervene Sklenice

One of the few guidebooks that even bothers to mention it calls Kampa Island an "oasis of calm even on the busiest August day." It seems odd the island receives so little attention because in addition to its quiet park and pretty square it is home to a number of excellent hotels and restaurants.

Today, shaded by giant chestnut trees, the park offers panoramic views of the river and the Charles Bridge, while the main square, Na Kampa, is a focal point for lots of low-key activities.

Na Kampa, in fact, was chosen as the setting for several scenes in the 1996 movie, *Mission Impossible*, and Tom Cruise actually stayed in the only hotel on the square, then known as the Sidi, but now reopened under the name Hotel U Cervene Sklenice.

With only five rooms, it is the smallest and the least expensive of the island's hotels. Furnishings are strictly functional but all is well maintained and comfortable. Each room has private bath, satellite TV, phone, minibar, safe and terrific views of either the river or the square.

Room Number 5 is best for river watching. Or ask for the second floor room facing the square and forever be able to assert, as we do, that Tom Cruise once spent the night in your bed.

There is a small restaurant open March to October. No elevator.

Daily Rates: Doubles 2900 to 4600 CZK (\$76-\$121), apartments 3300 to 5200 CZK (\$87-\$137)

Contact: Hotel U Cervene Sklenice, Mala Strana – Kampa, Praha 1, tel. +42/0602/357700, fax 42/02/57531332, email: recepc@hotel-kampa.cz, web: www.hotel-kampa.cz

Rating: QUALITY 10/20, VALUE 13/20

Hotel Na Kampe 15

A few doors down, Hotel Na Kampe 15, has 26 rooms on three floors (again, no elevator). Each stylish guestroom has a view of the river or square and is individually decorated with well-chosen antiques, framed prints and oriental rugs over hardwood floors. The hotel is only two years old so everything is fresh and bright. Four rooms have bathtubs, the rest showers. All bathrooms are tiled.

Daily Rates: Singles 3600 to 5400 CZK (\$95-\$142), doubles 4000 to 5800 CZK (\$105-\$153)

Contact: Hotel Na Kampe 15, Na Kampe 15, 118 00 Prague 1, tel. +4202/57531430, fax +57533168, email: nakampe15@archibald.cz, web: www.nakampe15.cz/

Rating: QUALITY 17/20, VALUE 18/20

Hotel U Pava

Two other hotels, while not technically on Na Kampa, are so close both in distance and ambiance that they qualify for full membership status.

The first, U Pava (At the Peacock), is just the other side of the Charles Bridge. The early 18th century building, originally a seminary, was scheduled for demolition in the early 1990s when Karel Klubal and family took over and produced a fine new hotel. Last year 16 new rooms were added.

The style, offbeat elegance and eclectic flair of the hotel's decor is evident throughout. The lobby is fairly restrained with a fireplace, deep leather chairs, painted ceiling beams and oriental rugs over a stone floor, but watch out for the odd

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Greek column or gilded cherub.

The deluxe guest rooms in the new part are both opulent and dramatic with unexpected design twists.

One feels like a medieval great room, another has painted stucco gargoyles. Number 205 is a large corner room with a five-star castle view and handsome murals.

There's more clever decor in the corridors, where floor to ceiling murals have been painted by local artists.

Standard rooms are smaller and less flamboyant but nonetheless very pleasant. In the new section is an elevator as well as a guestroom suitable for handicapped travelers.

A small (max. 12 persons) restaurant has a vaulted ceiling, fireplace and leather club chairs.

Daily Rates: Singles 4300 to 5400 CZK (\$113-\$142), doubles 4500 to 5900 CZK (\$118-\$155)

Contact: Hotel U Pava, U Luzickeho seminaru 32, 118 00 Praha 1, tel. +4202/57533502, fax: 57530919, email: hotelupava@iol.cz, web: www.abaka.com/Czech/UPava/

Rating: QUALITY 17/20, VALUE 17/20

Hotel Certovka

This 21-room hotel, also just off Kampa Island, opened in July of last year and is named for the creek it overlooks.

Its ample guestrooms are nicely furnished in good quality reproduction antiques with pleasing color schemes. Bathrooms have both tubs and showers and fluffy, thick towels, but we found the atmosphere somewhat standardized and a bit unnecessarily formal.

Two observations: prices are quoted only in U.S. dollars and German marks and the framed prints on the guestroom walls have price tags on them.

Daily Rates: Singles 145 to 240 DM (\$66-\$109), doubles 195 to 320 DM (\$89-\$145)

Contact: Hotel Certovka, U Luzickeho seminaru 2/85, 100 00 Praha 1

Phones +420 2 5753 2235, fax 5753 4392, email: reservations@certovka.cz, web: www.certovka.cz

Rating: QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 13/20

To reach Kampa Island, either take the steps down from the Castle end of the Charles Bridge or cross the river on the Legii Bridge and walk along the water to the island.

Sustenance

The dining out scene in Prague has changed dramatically since 1990. There are now more than 2,000 restaurants representing a wide variety of cuisines and styles. Remnants of the long, dreary communist past are in steady decline.

To give you an idea of what things were like in the old communist days, each proposed new menu item had to be relentlessly tested by the Ministry of Health before it could be served to the public. To avoid a nightmare of bureaucratic red tape, most restaurateurs simply stayed with the pre-approved, government dishes detailed in *Recipes for Warm Meals* and *Recipes for Cold Meals*, volumes I and II.

But with all the privatization and modernization, visitors can still run into places stuck in the old mind-set regarding food quality and, especially, service. Which brings us to...

Francouzska Restaurace

The stunning art nouveau **Municipal House**, built in 1911 and recently reopened after a painstaking renovation, is a must on any trip to Prague. After a look around the premises one day, we decided to try the three-course "quick lunch" being promoted for 490 CZK (\$13) in the elegant "French" restaurant just to the right of the building's front entrance. A perfect chance, we thought, to study the architectural splendor of the room as we enjoyed a good meal. As it turned out, we had more than ample opportunity for study; the "quick" lunch took an hour and a half.

We breezed through the starters, a choice of consomme or something called "chicken mosaic paté," but when it came to the main dish, veal ragout, the system fell apart. After a

30-minute wait the veal finally arrived. With full ceremony, waiters moved portentously through the dining room, bearing plates under enormous silver domes which were removed with a flourish to reveal, ta da, brown stuff arranged around a mound of mashed potatoes garnished by a single potato chip "artistically" stuck in the center.

Obviously trying but haven't quite got it.

Also on the ground floor is *Kavarna Obecní dum* (Municipal House Cafe), just as architecturally interesting as the main dining room but more informal. Good for a light meal, a snack, a cup of coffee and some first-class people watching.

Plzenska restaurace on the lower level is less formal still. Essentially a tavern, the decor is still remarkable. Tiled murals, wooden benches, gleaming fittings and stained glass windows combine for a charming atmosphere.

Francouzska restaurace, Obecní dum, Nameski republiky 5, Praha 1., tel. 2200 2777.

Rating: QUALITY 9/20, VALUE 11/20

Bellevue Restaurant

For those who tire of goulash and dumplings, the chic, widely-known Bellevue is considered Prague's best restaurant. Located on the river, its window tables and outdoor terrace offer water, bridge and castle vistas. Reserve two or three days ahead and ask for a view table.

The fare is mostly international jet-set staples the likes of Russian and Iranian caviar, foie gras, Norwegian salmon, and aromatic French cheeses, but with a few Czech specialties and game dishes — notably a filet of venison with a creamy cranberry sauce — mixed in.

The Bellevue (formerly Parnas at another location) is expensive by Prague standards. You'll pay about \$35 per person without beverages.

Bellevue Restaurant, Smetanovo Nabrezi 18, tel. +42/22 22 14 38, fax: 22 22 04 53, email: bellevue@praguefinedining.cz

Rating: QUALITY 15, VALUE 13

Restaurant Na Kampe 15

The hotel reviewed in the previous section also has an excellent restaurant with wide windows and a dining terrace that look out on the river.

From the extensive menu, one can choose Bohemian potato soup with wild mushrooms 60 CZK (\$1.60) or country beer soup, loaded with cream and sharp cheese 70 CSK (\$1.85). A main course of roast goose breast is beautifully crisp and served with pureed green peas, sautéed cabbage and two kinds of dumpling 290 CSK (\$7.60). Equally delicious is a hearty brewer's pork stew with potato pancake for 250 CSK (\$6.58). There are several vegetarian offerings, a full menu of fish dishes ranges in price from 260 to 300 CSK (\$6.84-\$7.90) and even a grilled T-bone steak for 300 CSK (\$7.90). Wines start at 690 CSK (\$18) per bottle.

The hotel also has an informal brasserie/pub around the corner which serves a few of the same dishes in smaller, cheaper portions. Cabbage soup with sausage is 40 CSK (\$1) and homemade goulash with dumplings 120 CSK (\$3.16). A frosty half-liter of Pilsner Urquell is only 25 CSK (65 cents). In warm weather tables are set by the river. Hotel-Restaurant Na Kampe 15, Na Kampe 15, tel. 5753 1430

Rating: QUALITY 14/20, VALUE 15/20

U Dvou Kocek

U Dvou Kocek never shows up on anybody's list of recommended restaurants in Prague but we wouldn't miss it. "The Two Cats" holds a warm place in our hearts because back in 1990 when meals were as hard to come by as hotel rooms, we were welcomed there with something akin to open arms.

A 1990 Fischer/Holliday quote, "Dinner was disappointing. Undistinguished braised pork, a large number of dry, heavy dumplings and a generous helping of very pureed spinach. Still, it was food and the total cost of 100 CSK (\$3.23) for the two of us included quite a lot of beer!"

EDITOR'S
CHOICE

Happily, all that has changed.

There's now a full Czech menu, lots of good beer and an aging but enthusiastic accordionist works the crowd...but the atmosphere hasn't changed much at all from the working class bar it's always been. Which is to say you still can order plain braised pork; the general concept is the same except now it's topped with a sprig of limp parsley.

Still, U Dvou Kocek is a dependable, inexpensive spot.

U Dvou Kocek: Uhelný trh. 10, Prague 1 No credit cards

Rating: QUALITY 8/20, VALUE 10/20

Restaurant Velvet 14

This restaurant is next door to Hotel Na Kampe 15. The lunchtime set menu for 600 CSK (\$16) featured a choice of potato or onion soup, a Bohemian meat platter with sausages, a potato pancake, potato croquettes, two kinds of dumplings and sauerkraut. The fish platter came with carp, pike and trout with boiled potatoes and more croquettes. For anyone left standing — remember, this is only lunch — dessert possibilities were apple strudel with ice cream and thick pancakes topped with wild bilberries and whipped cream. Whew.

Velvet 14 Restaurant, Na Kampa 14.

Rating: QUALITY 13/20, VALUE 14/20

HOTEL NEU-MERAN

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person with breakfast.

There was no check-in, no paperwork or credit card processing, we were given the key and told the hours of breakfast (8-10am). While this was going on we requested a table for dinner and it wasn't until then, when we were seated in the dining room, that we were handed forms to complete for the local kurtax.

The "old-time Bavaria" impression was only strengthened by our Neu-Meran dining experiences. Sophists would probably use the word kitsch to describe the dining room's profusion of knickknacks, plants and religious icons. But *Ausländern* charmed by Bavarian ways would call it homey and reassuring.

Put us in the latter category.

In the sense of ease and well-being engendered, there are few dining experiences equal to the cozy, relaxed charm of such country restaurants; each table bathed in its own pool of light, tall, froth-topped glasses of beer, the wood smell and the beaming faces of prosperous locals out for an evening of good *essen und trinken*.

And of course there is all that farm-fresh food. In the near future we have plans to bore you with our "dish hall of fame," a list of the best plates of food we've been pleased to report on in these pages over the past 15 years. One of them, you can be assured, will be the duck liver paté with apple shavings served by the Neu-Meran as a first course. Two butter-cube sized chunks of rich but surprisingly subtle paté was just enough for one — one cocktail party. The apple had been marinated lightly in an indefinable something that, when joined with the duck, took the dish to a higher level. A smear of the paté sprinkled with a few strands of the apple and it was magic on toast.

While nothing reached the culinary heights of the duck paté, all dishes were prepared with care and

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Key Websites for the Traveler to Germany, Austria & Switzerland

- www.gemut.com Gateway site for travelers to Germanic Europe, including car rental, rail passes, hotel bookings, traveler feedback, free travel advice and past issues (free access to back issues for subscribers; see log-on info on page 2).
- www.michelin-travel.com The Michelin database of hotels and restaurants plus great interactive trip planning tools.
- www.mapblast.com Map and automobile trip planning. Locates routes and distances.
- bahn.hafas.de/bin/query.exe/en German rail. Train schedules throughout Europe, not just Germany.
- www.sbb.ch/index_e.htm Swiss and European rail schedules.
- www.ski-europe.com Top web resource for skiers with much data on Alpine resorts.
- www.switzerlandtourism.com Website of Switzerland's national tourist authority.
- www.germany-tourism.de Germany's national tourist authority.
- www.anto.com Austria's national tourist authority.

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the highest quality, freshest ingredients. Two of the best were *Hirschgulasch* (25.80 DM/\$12), a deeply hearty venison ragout with *Spätzle* and *Preisselbeeren* (similar to cranberries) sauce, and *Zanderfillet* (43 DM/\$20), eight small, sauteed filets of a sole-like white fish served over creamy mashed potatoes and garnished with a handful of earthy mushrooms.

The Neu-Meran is known for its extensive wine list, but we were happy with glasses chosen from among the several *offen* wines available, notably a lively *Schwarzriesling* (red) that cost 7.5 DM (\$3.40). We had no quarrel either with the beer *vom Fass* from the local *Wieninger Brauerei* (half liter: 5 DM/\$2.30). Without beverages the three-course dinners averaged \$19 per person.

In summer, meals can be taken outside on a terrace that offers the hotel's superb view of green hills and rugged mountains.

The "served" breakfast — rather than from a buffet — demonstrated the hotel's commitment to house-made, top quality ingredients. Butter, eggs, cheese and sliced breakfast meats don't get any fresher. One morning we were presented with slices of an ethereal, butter-infused coffee cake that had just been baked on the premises.

For almost 50 years, Franz and Ingrid Weber have welcomed travelers to their hideaway in the forest above Bad Reichenhall. Franz runs the kitchen and Ingrid is out front. On both nights they were still charming guests in the restaurant when we toddled off to bed just shy of 11pm, and back on the job still smiling when we came down for breakfast next morning a few minutes before 8. A hardy couple.

The Neu-Meran has a small indoor pool, fitness center, steam room, sauna and other accoutrements of a resort hotel but the real draw is the food and the *gemütlich* management.

Daily Rates: Sinigles 98 to 150 DM (\$45-\$68), doubles 196 to 320 DM (\$89-\$145).

Contact: Hotel Neu-Meran, D-83435 Bad Reichenhall-Nonn, tel. +49/08651/4078, fax 78520, email: hotelneumeran@aol.com, web:www.hotel-neu-meran.de

Rating: QUALITY 15/20, VALUE 16/20 

Inside Travel

More & Faster Swiss Trains

Starting June 10 the **Swiss Rail System** will introduce new, faster equipment and more frequent service. Half-hourly departures will be available on most Intercity lines, new late-night and early-morning trains are being added, and ICN tilting trains — faster around curves — will reduce travel times. The Zürich-Lausanne route, for example, will drop by 17 minutes from 2 hours, 43 minutes to 2 hours, 26 minutes.

For those attending evening cultural events, more than 20 new **late-night trains** will operate on many routes. In addition, **earlier trains** will operate to get passengers to Zürich and Geneva airports by 5:30 or 6am.

The **ICN tilting trains** feature new dining/restaurant cars where a full meal is served; three business compartments in first class (four seats each in a glass-walled compartment with table, laptop outlets, and built-in amplifiers for better cell phone reception); and one "quiet car" in both first and second class where no cell phones, laptop computers or loud discussions are permitted.

Double-decker IC 2000 trains will operate on many routes. These feature one "quiet" car in first and second-class, a "Bistro Cafe" car where passengers can purchase snacks/light meals and beverages at a counter and sit at small tables or stand at a bar; and a newly-designed children's playground/family car.

Another innovation is the **Co-op Railshop**, an onboard grocery store on weekday peak-hour trains between Bern and Zürich. Launched in

late May 2000, the Railshop offers 900 items, including beverages, cheese, meat, prepared meals, sandwiches, and salads.

Internet Hotel Deals

• Readers about to leave for Europe are advised to regularly check the websites of European hotels for last minute specials. At press time the **Steigenberger Maxx Hotel**, near the Frankfurt Airport offered a price of 146 DM (\$66) for a double room with breakfast, 122 DM (\$55) single. Click on "Special Offers" at www.steigenberger.com. You must book via the Internet.

• At its website, one of Switzerland's poshest hotels, the **Victoria-Jungfrau**, whose double rooms cost up to 670 Sfr. (\$395), offered doubles for 250 Sfr. (\$147) on four dates in April. Visit www.victoria-jungfrau.ch and click on "News."

• The **MinOtel** chain, which has nearly 200, mostly moderately-priced hotels in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, offers a 3-nights-for-the-price-of-2 deal at its website, www.minotel.com. For example, the double room price for Munich's **Hotel Amba** is 218 DM (\$99). Under terms of Minotel's 3 for 2 arrangement the per night price for a three-night stay becomes \$66.

• One of Germany's top hotels, the **Brenner's Park** in Baden-Baden, where double rooms can cost as much as 980 DM (\$445), is offering a double room, breakfast and a four-course dinner in its elegant Park-Restaurant, or the more relaxed *Schwarzwaldstube*, for 360 DM (\$164) per person. Visit the website at www.brenners-park.de.

• Each Monday, **Inter-Continental Hotels & Resorts** offers low rates on hotel rooms around the world for the coming weekend. For April 27-29, the rate for the **Forum Hotel Hamburg** was approximately \$66 per room, per night. See "Weekend Offers" at www.interconti.com. 

www.gemut.com

The website for travelers to
Germanic Europe