A guided walk through Prague's historic labyrinth

This museumpiece city has survived the test of time - with a renaissance of artistic expression that continues to attract tourists and artists from all over the world. But the only problem is how to navigate through the city’s historic labyrinth of streets and monuments.

It's nearly impossible to find a map detailed enough to guide visitors through the winding cobblestone pathways. Though the city contains an efficient metro and bus system, the most practical way to see Prague is via foot. I lost myself in the maze of narrow streets, where each corner and turn became a historical discovery and pleasurable reminder of other European cities that I had once experienced.

Labeled the "Paris of Eastern Europe," Prague displays a cluster of cafes and scenic bridges overlapping the expansive Vltava River. I couldn't help but envision glimpses of Venice, especially the canals and medieval buildings from the 14th century Charles Bridge. It was difficult to absorb it all, particularly when I only had several days. But if I planned my days well, I realized I could cover quite a bit of ground.

The Old Town (Stare Mesto) is the most strategic starting point for traipsing the pavement back centuries. My eyes never glanced down as they scanned the sunlit church towers and fresco-painted facades. I sat under one of the umbrella-covered cafes and enjoyed the activity in the Old Town's main square - a la St. Marks Square in Venice.

Situated up a flight of stairs overlooking the flurry of tourists parading the square sits Cafe Milena. Here I had a bird's-eye view of the Town Hall Clock while enjoying dessert and coffee. This astronomical timepiece draws crowds on the hour just to watch a march of statues of apostles appear at the chime. Tyn Church and its towering twin spires also captivate much attention from passersby. Just five minutes from this area, I arrived at Male Namesti, a smaller square riddled with medieval buildings.

As I walked toward the posh, tree-lined boulevard of Parizska, enmeshed in 16th century baroque-style edifices, I entered Josefov Street and journeyed through the Jewish Quarter. Here I encountered one of the oldest synagogues in Europe. A tour through this section can take a good hour in itself. My visit included the nearby Pinkas Synagogue, with walls strewn with heartbreaking inscriptions of the families who perished under the Nazi regime during World War II.

Perhaps the most poignant memory of this part of Prague surfaced from the Ceremonial Hall with its exhibit of the children of Terezin - over 4,600 drawings and paintings represent the horrors of the Holocaust.

I exited out into the Jewish Cemetery, with 16th century tombs with 12 or more gravestones layered in each plot. This would make a somber setting for a thriller flick.

Afterward, I stopped at the glass rotunda cafe of the Intercontinental Hotel for a respite at a relaxing cafe. A rare find near the synagogues, the restaurant Rudova Nora features a fair-priced menu (understandable for Americans) and walls lined with erotic cartooning. Just a reminder that reading any Czech menu can be a chore ... it would be helpful to have a pocket dictionary to dine.

I then headed onto Karlova Street toward the Charles Bridge and its continuous rows of medieval statues. I could have spent hours just people-gazing, eyeing musicians, artists, the scurry of schoolchildren and the Vltava river lined with ancient architecture.

The bridge presents a great vantage point, particularly at sunset, for a panoramic view of Prague and the adjacent salmon-shingled rooftops of the charming Mala Strana section. This is a day's romp in itself. At night, Prague becomes an outdoor concert hall. People approach you constantly with flyers of classical music events appearing every evening of the week in one of its 95 existing churches.

As I walked back across the bridge, alongside the riverbank of the Old Town, I came to the gold-crowned National Theatre at Narodni, host to international ballet, opera and theater. I continued down Narodni to the infamous Wenceslas Square, home of many an orator and reminiscent of Barcelona's Ramblas with numerous shops, theaters and hotels.

The nearby Hotel Europa's elaborate cafe was a "must-see" for a touch of Old World elegance. Embraced by grandiose marble, dark wood interior and crystal chandeliers, the hotel hops during evening hours when violinists and pianists play for customers engaged in conversation, drinks and desserts.
Close by, Cerny Baron is a reasonable pick with menus I could actually decipher, since I don’t know a word of Czech. Here I savored a typical Czech dinner of dumplings, roast duck, liver ball soup, and sweet and sour cabbage. Outside I found myself at the foot of Wenceslas Square, just a breath from the National Museum for an inside view of Prague’s vast history. Just seconds away sits the State Opera House where ballets and operas are staged almost nightly.

A visit to Prague could not conclude without a hike up to the Hradcany royal complex and the surrounding ancient architecture of the Mala Strana district. The best approach is via the Charles Bridge or a quick bus or metro ride to Malostranska station stop. I climbed up a steep hill and passed St. Nicholas Church with galleries galore, filled with surrealistic and expressionist paintings. This area throbs with artsy cafes and colorful boutiques.

As I approached the Roccoco-style gateway to the castle itself, I passed the changing of the guards and entered a series of courtyards. St. Vitus Cathedral is by far the most striking structure, a 14th century Gothic masterpiece and one of the most important churches in Prague. Note that the chapel inside is lined wall to wall with semi-precious stones and a 4,600-pound sculpture in the center of the old wing.

Before exiting this area, I experienced the 16th century cobblestone side street of the Golden Lane where writer Kafka lived. This quiet quadrille houses a coterie of antique and bookshops. A bit weary, I continued onto Rudnice Square and browsed through the National Gallery for an extensive exhibit of Picasso and the Impressionists.

When I came to Novy Svet, I discovered an array of art studios. At the end of this winding path appeared Cafe Loretka, where I just kicked off my shoes, enjoyed a drink and viewed the stark white and yellow facade of the famed Loreto Church - and its 27-bell carillon - a great photograph.

Finally, I edged my way downhill toward the main square and entrance to Charles Bridge and passed an eclectic array of musicians, artists and architecture. At that moment, reality hit. I realized that I had traveled more than just hours and miles, but through a time capsule of centuries and cultures - and all by foot.

**IF YOU GO**

For further information on Prague and other Czech cities, contact Czech Tourist Authority at (212) 288-0830, or online at www.czechtourism.com or www.visitczechia.cz.

For rail information, visit www.cdrail.cz.

Getting There: Many of the major airlines have connections to Prague. The Prague-Ruzyne airport is situated only 12 miles from the center of Prague.

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