

## **Departing Prague 2009**

The Mandarin Hotel is in yet another re-cycled Benedictine monastery. Situated close to the River Vltava. The nearby Water Wheel quietly turns the churning water of the tributary Certovka (translates to Devilish). It slowly rotates for the tourists and no longer for milling the wheat. At night, the spot lights through the paddles create strange shadow patterns that dance across the walls of the Old Mill. In excavating the monastic site archaeological treasures were found. Some of these are displayed within the low, vaulted corridors. A small, carved ivory Madonna would have been greatly treasured.

The Benedictine order 'orare et labore' 'prayer and work' were simple guidelines. Most of the artifacts uncovered were basic food bowls, or storage jars. Any gilded treasure was long gone, invaders having lifted them in their pillaging.

Stone slab floors are now softened with thick, cream coloured rugs. Designer loafers and expensive high heels clatter along exposed stones where sandals once padded silently. Bathrooms are of unbelievable luxury. In contrast, earlier residents might have had tepid water, or more likely they needed to break ice in their washrooms. Discrete muzak has replaced ancient Latin chanting. The kitchen would have served meager portions of basic food in the refectory. Now Fusion foods resembling works of art are heavenly. Eaten on an outside terrace, cashmere blankets are wrapped round diners' shoulders while the candles are lit on the table.

For centuries Bohemian wine was drunk as a normal beverage. Now champagne, once brewed for the Tsars, is added to our wine list. The fine beers are always available. Soft spotlights on the walls resemble candles. All this is a very long way from sackcloth and ashes. Pictures of pastoral scenes and views of the city skyline show masses of spires and towers built by the religious communities of their days. Those Orders survived centuries of upheaval, invasion, occupation, plague, fire, re-development and modernization.

Cowboy builders were not involved in those constructions.  
The plumbing works as well now, as it did then.  
Learned perhaps from the Romans who passed this way.  
Water pumps still draw water, and water wheels can still grind corn.

A few years ago the flooding Vltava reached the first floors rooms, and a large area of this precious capital was submerged.  
Neighbouring countries mobilized and sent teams of helpers to rescue the city.  
Once upon a time they came as invaders, now they came as friends.  
Today tide marks left on walls illustrate how high the water reached.  
This flood was not the first, but the previous one was 100 yrs ago. There is, hopefully, time to plan preventative measures before the next big one hits.

And so my time in the Czech republic was coming to an end.  
The authentic taste of medieval times: the renovated homes after Restitutions;  
The State Opera; the churches, castles and palaces; my beloved and expanding herd of Jersey cattle; and the future of a friendly Europe .  
It seems the current Czech President is not thinking along those lines.  
He does not want to ratify the Lisbon treaty unless there is an exemption clause to prevent Sudeten Land Germans reclaiming their old border lands.  
Perhaps Hitler will spring to mind now & Word War Two & The Munich agreement.  
Modern history, with the horrendous consequences, of the last 60 yrs is still very close at hand in this part of the world.

But for me now, only two more places are left to visit.  
The main city library, built in the Art Deco style, contains a sculpture of unbelievable simplicity.  
Eight thousand discarded paper-backs, many previously censored, piled in a twisting, curving pillar from floor to ceiling.  
An opening, like window invites you to poke your head inside the column.  
Spotlights above and below brightly illuminate the internal space.  
Looking down, and then up, surprisingly the books disappear into infinity.  
Checking again the ceiling height outside, then the floor again, and once again looking inside and wow ! A Eureka moment ! The infinity of Knowledge !  
As I wave my arm inside the column I see how it is done with mirrors.  
This will remain a pleasurable, visual memory with me for a long time.

Unlike the sculptured collection of bent pipes ending in assorted items of sanitary ware in Wenceslas Square . Memorable only for its hideousness and the price paid by the city fathers to a NEW YORK artist... and why...?

Now off to the museum of Communism above Mac Donald's and next to a

Casino. It is housed in a lovely baroque palace. The elegant staircase has fine, lacy, wrought iron balustrades leading to the upper level.

The museum was established by an American, along with his string of night clubs, shortly after communism collapsed. He had the foresight to snatch up memorabilia when it was being discarded with venom.

The collection of so many artifacts has enabled the creation of fascinating tableaux. Depicting the drabness of work places, offices, school-rooms, butchers shops, doctors surgeries, a factory creche, sport, the arts (Socialist Realism), the People's Militia, the dreaded secret police, a magistrate court, interrogation cell, media propaganda, political labour camps, and everyday constrained living accommodation.

These displays, interspersed with films, photos and explanations of life in a totalitarian state, offers a journey through The Dream; The Reality; The Nightmare of Communism.

Each vignette takes me into the world of my relatives who I never met. My uncle was frequently imprisoned and had a hard time. Forced to install small pins into cards before being allowed to eat. His spectacles were confiscated and the electric lights were dull. He lost a lot of weight. The parcels sent via the Red Cross were his life line. I took pleasure in licking and sticking countless stamps all over the brown paper. Pretty seasonal stamps and commemorative ones in the smallest denominations I could buy. I knew visual stimulation would be lacking in jail. Many years later he told me those stamps were used as bargaining swops with wardens, for soap. bread, coffee, Gillette blades. He was charged, tried and imprisoned for spreading propaganda. Namely reading the Bishop's cyclical letter to his parishioners from the church pulpit. He too is buried in the family crypt after a lifetime of struggle.

It is not a museum visited by many tourists.

There are far more beautiful places and palaces to see.

This place is a very Czech experience.

In former Czechoslovakia life was regarded as a lot better than in many other Satellite States of the USSR . Comparisons were only able to be made by the elite party members who could travel.

My first cousin was one of those.

He does not have a villa on the Black Sea or a Swiss Bank Account.

I know this for a fact as he is having to move out of his roomy apartment and downsize very considerably in his old age. He believed in Communism.

Thirty five years ago my father said '*Communism will not be destroyed by*

*weapons. It will self destruct because it is worthless spiritually, morally, financially and philosophically and when it collapses it will be at its heart. It will happen so fast nobody will believe it even as they watch it happen.'*

He said quite a few other things that I keep close to my heart.  
I am thankful he was a man who could see round political corners.  
He took me as a toddler, during the night, over the border and away from his beloved homeland which he never saw again.  
And there is another story for another time..

If he could only see it now.