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PRAGUE; AFFORDABLE RENT, OLD WORLD ARCHITECTURE AND 60-CENT ALE DRAW YOUNG AMERICANS TO THE CZECH CAPITAL

By Aaron Kuriloff Staff writer

Call me yappie.

I served as a soldier in the vanguard of a capitalist invasion. I helped teach an emerging market that money talks. I provided venture capital, drank cheap beer, talked incessantly about "my art" and steadfastly refused to speak any language but Ronald Reagan's English.

I was a Young American in Prague.

There's more of us than you might think. We crawl out of the gutters at the mention of all things Czech. I was at a hockey game the other night with a bunch of guys I didn't know very well, including at least one prominent local sports executive. We didn't discuss Prague. We didn't mention Prague. But when a player with a typically Bohemian name (think: Svoboda or Dvorak) scored the go-ahead goal, three of us started shouting random phrases in his native tongue:

Jeste jedno! Jeste jedno! (One more! One more!)

Na zdravi! (Cheers!)

Dvakrat pivo, prosimas! (Two beers, please!)

We looked at each other and grinned. Nobody talked about the incident. There was no need. We'd exposed each other - like Freemasons with a secret handshake. Yuppies. We were brothers.

I went to Prague shortly after my college graduation in 1996. My girlfriend, Katie, and I had wandered across Italy, studiously appreciating paintings of the Madonna and her disproportionately large baby. We politely applauded jousting clockwork knights in the Munich glockenspiel. Nice job, clock. We saw strange lands, met strange people, and tried to think up something clever to tell relatives when they asked about "our future."

"We have no marketable skills, no money and no lives," Katie said one day over sausages in the beer hall. "What are we going to do?"

"I'm going to be an astronaut," I told her. "That or a fire truck."

"I'm going to be Empress of all Europe," she said. We compromised. We went to Prague.

Word on the Eurorail had it that Prague was the place to go when you became, well ... us. Post-communism, devaluation and Maastrich criteria kept prices low. Kafka-esque architecture and municipal bureaucracy provided background soul. Pints of mighty Bohemian pilsner cost 60 cents, bars stayed open all night, and the Americans who'd settled in rivaled the Lost Generation of 1920s Paris in artistic excess and bulk absinthe consumption.

*** Fairy-tale castles ***

So we rolled into town on the overnight from Munich. Dawn broke over fairy-tale castles perched on bluffs above winding rivers. Sparse black trees surrounded red-roofed huts. We marched out of Hlavni Nadrazi, the main station, past three Romany children in scarves playing the accordion.

"So that's a little bit charming," said Katie. "But do they have 86 channels of cable TV?"

We rented an apartment from a booth in the main station (011-0602-2422-3521/avetours@antet.cz). The place stood on a bending cobblestone street in the Devicka neighborhood, an enclave of embassies and university dorms. It

contained exactly one room, a toilet that wouldn't stop running, and a tiny balcony on which roosted about 37,000 pigeons. We adored it.

It was almost as cool as our second apartment, which Katie found after she scored a job and housing allowance teaching English to wealthy tobacco executives (thanks, Philip Morris). It wasn't easy to find apartments. With many of the city's 1.2 million residents still living off government housing subsidies in massive public complexes (panelaks) on the outskirts of town, finding an apartment in the older parts of the city took luck, cash and effort.

Ours was a fifth-floor walk-up, perched on a hill about 20 stories over the railroad tracks. If you leaned far enough out the window, you could see the 1,000-year-old Prague Castle (Hradcany), seat of the Czech government. You could also see the time/temperature clock on the roof of a nearby office building. Average temperature that winter: minus 7 million degrees. You want a white Christmas? How 'bout a white April?

*** Hanging out at the cafe ***

When it was warm enough to go outside, I fortified myself with the aid of a wine-by-the-cask store downstairs and embarked on a job search. This consisted mostly of patronizing the Radost/FX cafe, a yuppie hangout behind the city's big museum at 120 Belehradská Street, and reading the Prague Post, the major English-language weekly. Radost was pretty cool. Frequented by expatriates from the States and half-a-dozen European nations, the multilevel bar/restaurant/nightclub might have resembled Rick's Cafe American, if Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman had favored black turtlenecks, bad art, and music measured in beats per second.

I read the bulletin board (typical ad: For Sale. Return ticket to Seattle. \$150 USD), watched free English movies on Monday nights and avoided the open mike poetry on Sundays. Despite such intensive efforts, no work appeared. Finally, I gave up, opened a phone book, and began randomly calling English-language news agencies and begging. The last one on the list offered me a job.

So we had an apartment, jobs, and, apparently, lives. We took the city's cheap and reliable subway to work. We took the insectile streetcars home from clubs after hours, carefully avoiding the gangs of unregulated taxi drivers lurking in dark alleys. We made friends and hung out at the Radegast Pub (Templova 2), Marquis de Sade (Templova 8) and the Chapeau Rouge (Jakubská 2) - three bars hiding in the narrow alleys of Stare Mesto (Old Town), all frequented by night-crawling foreign nationals who smoked legal marijuana and dodged semi-legal prostitutes. We could stumble home from the bars, past the new Versace store and through the Powder Gate marking the entrance to Stare Mesto, up Celetná Street to our place.

*** 'Guess the Translation' ***

We even considered learning the language. Yeah, right. The Czech alphabet contains approximately 43 billion characters and requires the use of esophagus muscles that take years to develop. Katie enrolled in a Czech class, and learned to say: Opravdu kosik nepotrebuji chci si koupit jen jednu vec (Really, I don't need a shopping cart. I only want one thing). I saved my tuition and learned to say: "I'm an American journalist. Do you speak English? How about your boss?"

So instead of blending, we settled into a blissful bubble, playing "Guess the Translation" on the metro.

"What do you think that means?" Katie asked, pointing to an ad bearing the portrait of a smiling doctor with one rubber glove.

"Sell organs on the newly free market," a friend said.

"Inexpensive glove removal," said another.

"Discount proctology," I offered.

"Why don't you people shut up?" asked a fully Anglophone Czech native seated nearby.

Aside from occasional linguistic humiliation, life was good. Our friends worked in consulting (what is that?), investing, or, of course, the Internet. They created entrepreneurial ventures - shipping local jewelry to Bloomingdale's or opening the town's first bagel shop.

Nobody created any art. Nobody wrote a novel. We mocked the posers and tourists hanging out at the Globe Bookstore, which billed itself as Prague's answer to Paris' famous Shakespeare and Company. Everyone knew the Globe (Janovskeho 14) charged outrageous prices for used books, and then offered a pittance in store credit to desperate backpackers seeking traveling cash for their Tom Clancy. Real expatriates stole books from the Globe. Then we sold them back.

Really, the new Lost Generation didn't exist. The whole thing had been misadvertised. Prague wasn't Paris of the 1920s. It was more like the Upper East Side of 1986. Still, we laughed at our friends back home, slaving away as office drones in New York and Los Angeles.

Then, they all showed up.

It started with our casual invitations: "Hey, you're going to be in Europe? Why don't you come visit us in Prague?" Soon, we were booked more than the city's fantastically overpriced hotels. My friend Dan stayed in our apartment for a week while we were away, and left the following note: "Someone named Steve called and said he was coming to Prague this weekend. I said you weren't here. He asked if I could 'Help him out,' but I didn't know what that meant, so I said 'No.'"

Dan immediately became our hero.

*** Crowds of tourists ***

The worst part about entertaining guests was having to visit the tourist parts of Prague. After the Velvet Revolution brought down the Iron Curtain in 1989, Prague emerged as one of Europe's most popular tourist destinations. Mobs of vacationers crowded the Charles Bridge, best known to Americans as the Gothic, statue-lined structure actor John Voight fell off in "Mission: Impossible." People would come to town and say, "Can we see the 'Mission: Impossible' bridge?" Katie would say, "Sure. Look under all the tourists."

Old Town Square (Stare Mesto Namesti) was even worse. School groups packed the heart of Old Town, staring at the Astrological Clock (FYI: which doesn't do anything), poking around the churches and donning bizarre velvet jester's caps. Motley motley, so to speak. When we first went there, Katie looked around and asked, "Why do people visiting foreign countries always feel obligated to purchase silly hats?"

But I can sum up the Prague tourist experience with one story. Early in our time there, we went to the Jewish museum - a collection of six synagogues and two cemeteries spared Nazi destruction, among Europe's last. One graveyard, with its fading Hebrew carvings, contains more than 30,000 headstones. One synagogue, legend says, hides the golem - a clay version of Frankenstein's monster, constructed to protect the Jewish ghetto. People from around the world line up to see the last remnants of Bohemian Jewry, including the grave of Franz Kafka (a former Prague resident).

We were in that line, which stretched around the corner from the actual museum, when a tall man with tight curly hair stormed out of the office.

"Fifteen dollars to see a synagogue," he shouted in a thick Israeli accent. "In Prague for this, we could rent a car. And drive, maybe, to Jerusalem."

Prague's the only place where a night at the orchestra, dinner for two and drinks afterward cost less than a bottle of mineral water in the tourist district.

*** History's empires ***

When people we actually liked came to visit, we'd walk around Vinohrady, our neighborhood, staring at art nouveau

facades, and then head for the ruins at Vyshehrad, Prague's ancient fortress settlement. Legend says, from that hill, the Princess Libuse looked out over the Vltava River valley and had a vision of a city that would reach the stars.

From the crumbling ramparts, we too would look out across the city and see the effects of history's empires. On the far side of the valleys stand the walls and spires of Prague Castle. You could see the tiny windows from which Czech Protestants tossed two Catholic governors in 1618, during the "Defenestration of Prague," which precipitated the Thirty Years War. You could see the moat they landed in. My eyes used to follow a wall built by the crusaders down to the streets of Mala Strana (Little Town), where Mozart premiered "Don Giovanni" during the Hapsburg dynasty. We'd watch the tourists buying silly hats on the Charles Bridge, which Charles IV built, before he became the Holy Roman Emperor.

On the right, the modern towers of downtown rise above Wenceslas Square, where Vaclav Havel addressed the crowds after the communists ceded power. Now proudly flanking the square: two McDonald's and a DKNY. Oh, and Havel recently married a TV starlet.

On warm days, we used to grab lunches on the patio at Na Zvonarce (Safarikova 1), behind Wenceslas Square in Vinohrady. All Czech restaurants serve exactly 150 grams of meat, a weird holdover from communist times. The measurement appears right there next to the food on the menu. Kureci (chicken): 150 grams. Sunka (ham): 150 grams. For the most part, though, we avoided traditional Czech cooking, which tended to favor red cabbage and dumplings (knedlicky), spongy dough balls, known for their unique ability to expand to more than three times their initial size in your stomach. Mostly, we ate pizza.

Our favorite restaurant was Pizzeria Grossetto (Francouska 2), which serves individual pies, huge helpings of pasta, and frothy pints of beer. (Czech beer, incidentally, deserves every bit of its outstanding international reputation.) Grossetto's corner location and multiple windows mean it also has a lot of light. OK, so it lacks that Central European soul. It also lacks red cabbage and knedlicky.

We were at Grossetto one night when Katie handed me an acceptance letter from an American graduate school. We both knew our time in Prague was running out. With no local evidence of productive careers, our parents were running out of things to tell neighbors at the supermarket. The International Herald Tribune, source of all relevant home information - basketball scores and Doonesbury - had named Vietnam as the chosen destination of today's hip expatriates. The torch had been passed. It was time to leave.

I scheduled a flight out of Ruzny airport in late June, almost a year after that overnight train from Munich. Katie and I drank a final pint in a subterranean arched cafe. I thought of New York City - of decent hamburgers and pizza delivery after midnight. We'd spend the next few days packing. I knew where I had to go. But Katie swirled her Staropramen beer around in her glass and looked at it thoughtfully.

"You know," she said. "I hear Barcelona's beautiful this time of year."

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