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PUDDLE JUMPING THROUGH PRAGUE

by Jane Cassie

(For Travel Writers' Tales)

What's something that everyone hopes for when traveling? Good weather, right? Prior to this quick visit to Czech Republic we constantly check the long range, in hopes of transforming the gloomy forecast. No matter how much we visualize bluebird skies we still end up puddle jumping our way through Prague.

"It's the wettest spring in fifty years," says the hotel receptionist who takes our damp luggage and checks us in. "But a drying trend is arriving sometime soon." Unfortunately, "sometime" ends up being the operative word.



Photo 1 Entrance of Hotel 16

Hotel 16, a Rick Steeves recommendation, is a quaint boutique property just a short walk from Old Town. Fourteen generously-sized rooms side the skylight-bright atrium, one of which becomes our home for the next two days. And as well as silver service, goodies are a given throughout our stay: afternoon cappuccino, 24/7 bevies and a daily breakfast spread that appeases us four rained-on nomads.



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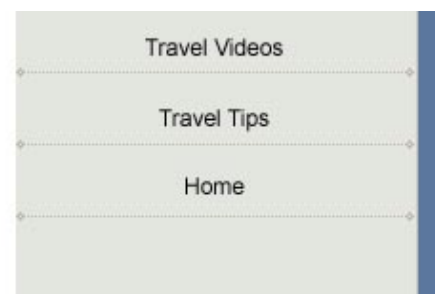


Photo 2 We fuel up at the amazing breakfast spread

We're travelling with friends, Sue and Don Fisher, and this visit to Prague is just a pit stop en route to our main, bucket-list must-do, a fifteen-day European river cruise from Budapest to Amsterdam.

"A little rain won't get in our way," I say with optimism, when checking out the map. "And being from the west coast, we've come prepared." In short order, up go our umbrellas and on go the slickers.



Photo 3 On the viewpoint atop Vyšehrad Hill

The nearby trolley bus offers a dryer mode of transit that zips us up to the viewpoint atop Vyšehrad Hill. Even on grey days this pinnacle provides a pretty panorama of the city's red roof tops, church steeples, and winding river.

Steps away is the guarded Vyšehrad Citadel and buildings that've been part of Czech's history for over a thousand years. We check out the Diet Hall, (no, nothing to do with food) where head gurus created the rules back in the 16th century, wander through the grand community hall and meander Golden Alley, a cottage-lined street that hugs up to the castle's northern wall. Back in the day, these colourful abodes housed everyone from blacksmiths to prisoners (many who were terribly tortured). "Pretty brutal times," my husband, Brent, comments, when checking out a gruesome-looking head-crushing device. "And here we are, complaining about a little drizzle."



Photo 4 Boaters ply the River Vltava

Though it's a wet one, the downhill sauntering is easy. Through the iron gates, past the castle guards, and along cobblestone paths to the Charles Bridge, a medieval-ager that has spanned River Vltava since 1347. It's also where the hordes hang out –even on dull days. Painters, palm-readers and pick-pocketers are all drawn to this tourist tromp. And not surprisingly, all are sporting their parasols during today's crossing.

We meander popular Old Town Square and attractions that date back to the 12th century. Immortalized in bronze at centre stage is Jan Hus, a famous fourteenth century philosopher, who was considered to be the first church reformer. The statue was erected in July 6, 1915, marking the 500th anniversary of his death.

The tower and Astronomical Clock, a still functioning time piece, is another historical focal point that everyone flocks to, especially on the hour, when it goes into action. With craned necks, we witness the Walk of the Apostles, an entertaining display that's marked by moving sculptures and ringing bells. For a price, we can climb to the top of the tower, a perch that provides a picturesque cityscape. But today, we pass on this overcrowded opportunity, thinking it's likely best to wait till the sun shines.



Photo 5 Saint Wenceslas rides in shining armor

Nearby are a couple of indoor malls where we seek reprieve. Lucerna Pasaz houses not only a cinema but a life-size statue of a horse, suspended upside down from the ceiling. And riding on the underside of his belly is Saint Wenceslas in shining armor created by sculptor, David Cerny. Although the next mall, Palladium, doesn't boast any objects d'art, it does house nearly two hundred stores that have lots of modern-day gems. Bennetton, Esprit, L'Occitane. Who says this rain is a bad thing?



Photo 6 Magnificent architecture rims Old Town Square

Our final meal of the day is at Kolkovna, an eatery that's known for its pub grub, and great beer. Though our pit stop to Prague has called for lots of puddle jumping, it's been an amazing visit.

And while clinking our steins and toasting to better weather, our server chimes in. "Have you heard? Many of the rivers are now closed to boating activity." We think about our upcoming river cruise, our must-do bucket list trip. Will we be boating or bussing for the rest of our trip? And that, my friends, I'll save for another story!

IF YOU GO:

Where to stay:

Hotel 16 <http://www.hotel16.cz/>

PHOTOS by Brent Cassie

1 Entrance of Hotel 16

2 We fuel up at the amazing breakfast spread

3 On the viewpoint atop Vyšehrad Hill

4 Boaters ply the River Vltava

5 Saint Wenceslas rides in shining armor

6 Magnificent architecture rims Old Town Square

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