



magical, mystical PRAGUE

THE GOLDEN CITY OF ONE HUNDRED SPIRES

BY MIRA TEMKIN



Fairytale castles. Fascinating architecture. Centuries of history. This is what lured me to the capital city of the Czech Republic; lovely Prague on the banks of the Vltava River. It all came alive with **Wittmann Tours**, a company specializing in Jewish history around Eastern Europe. Since 1990, Wittmann and their knowledgeable guides have been offering a range of individual as

well as group tours in Prague, Poland, Hungary and Germany, all designed to create an unforgettable experience.

On a private architectural walking tour, Sylvie Wittmann, the director, explained the various Baroque, Rococo, Cubist and Gothic facades as well as Prague's colorful past. Sylvie enthralled my husband and I with stories about the famous Astronomical Clock on the Old Town Hall. Designed in the 16th century, the clock displays both the actual time as well as the movement of the sun and moon around the 12 signs of the zodiac. When the clock chimes hourly, statuettes representing death, greed and vanity run through the clock. Sylvie said it reminds us that every hour of our lives is measured. Walking along the cobblestone streets, I couldn't help but think about how this city has been influenced by forms of government as diverse as its architecture. Yet, today the square is filled with vendors selling art, Bohemian glass and marvelous, hand-painted Russian dolls. Crossing Charles Bridge is like taking a trip through time. Thirty statues line the sides of this pedestrian-only bridge, although many of the originals are kept in the National Museum.

No trip to Prague is complete without a visit to the castle, a vast complex of regal palaces, gardens and churches. The seat of Czech power since the 9th century, it is still used by government today. If you love stately affairs, the "Changing of the Guard" takes place every hour on the hour. But don't miss the special fanfare and flag ceremony at noon. And, it was from this high vantage point we could see hundreds of spires rising up to meet the sky.

The Jewish Quarter is the city's most popular sight, next to the castle, which we explored on one of Wittmann's group tours. Jewish roots in Prague date back to the 10th century, although the area is named Josefov after Emperor Joseph II (1780) who eased some of the ghetto restrictions. What remains today are synagogues of magnificent architecture and other buildings that

tell the story of a people's survival. At the Jewish Museum, we saw where Judaic objects were stored during the war. The Nazi's intended to create a museum of an extinct people, showcasing the Torahs and other Jewish artifacts. Our guide told us that today, many of those Torahs have found their rightful place in Jewish communities around the world. In the Pinkas Synagogue, a memorial to the Jews of Prague who died in the Holocaust is preserved. As we ventured into the Old Jewish Cemetery, established in the 15th century, we were awestruck. Its most unusual appearance is due to the fact that graves are buried on top of each other, some 12 levels deep!

Naturally, a visit to Terezin, the Jewish ghetto outside of Prague was met with some apprehension. We were taken in a private car with Petr Hobal of Wittmann who gently guided us through the restored barracks, museum and cemetery. He explained that Terezin was used as propaganda settlement to hide the real fate of the inmates, including thousands of children. Yet in its tragedy, the ghetto served to inspire artists, musicians and playwrights, whose work has created an indelible mark.

Top, left: Astronomical Clock next to old Town Square has been keeping time for over six centuries. **Below:** Old Jewish Cemetery where graves are buried atop each other. **Right:** Historic Charles Bridge is traditionally filled with street-vendors and tourists.



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Thanks to Wittmann Tours, I had been swept up by the passion of a city committed to honoring its past. That golden city of spires and fairytales had stolen my heart. I will return. ❖

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