

Trip to Czech Republic - Greg Murphy

In September Jenny and I travelled to the Czech Republic to visit Prague before a five day cycling holiday outside of Prague centred around the town of Karlstein.

This was our first visit to Czech Republic. We travelled Emirates with a stopover in Dubai arriving in Prague around 2.30 pm on a Friday. We took advantage of our hotel's car service to be picked up and transferred. While in Prague we stayed at the wonderful Hotel Josef. This hotel was central to the Old Town Square which is a gathering place for tourists to Prague. Food is always a high priority and the breakfasts at this hotel were to die for with a special "sin of the day" featured each day. This special capped off a breakfast that provide a wide range of cooked, cereal, cold meats, cheeses, fruits, coffees and pastries. The "sin of the day" invariably provided one with a high calorie intake incorporating pastries/pancakes/cake/custard/chocolate etc.

Prague was a real surprise to us. Not knowing a lot about the Czech Republic, we were fascinated with history of Prague, from the bridges, Prague Castle, Astrological Clock, to the Catholic and Jewish history. We walked everywhere and occasionally caught the trams which provide excellent service. The Czech's have a great sense of humour and one sculpture by Franz Kafka shows this with two gentlemen having a competition while standing on a map of the old Czechoslovakia. The sculpted figures rotate and genitals move up and down much to the amusement of the many tourists.

Another oddity was Lennon's Wall where graffiti artists pay tribute to John Lennon.



Franz Kafka sculpture



John Lennon's Wall

After two and half days of sightseeing it was time to get serious about removing the kilograms gained via the "sin of the day". So we embarked on our five day bike tour. We had booked this with a Czech company, Ave, and this was to be a guided group tour. Just before we left Perth we received advice that we were the only booking on the tour. This was disappointing as we had wanted to ride in a group to meet new people and also we felt that it would provide more enjoyable after hour activities. Ave to their credit did not cancel and offered to provide the guide regardless that this would be a loss tour. We compromised and agreed to take the guide for 3 of the 5 days only.

We were picked up from our hotel and taken to the Ave depot in Prague where we met our guide, a young university student Vojta, who inducted us into the tour and fitted us with bikes. The bikes were new and fitted with rear panniers. Our travel bags were transported to our tour Pension by van. We left Prague around 10 am to ride 40 km to Karlstein where we were to be based for four nights with return to Prague on day 5. The ride from Prague to Karlstein follows the River Vltava upstream on a combination of cycle ways and quiet country roads.



Guide Vojta and Jenny



Karlstein Castle

Karlstein is home to Karlstein Castle which was founded in 1348, and has a unique position among Czech castles. It was built by Czech King and Roman Emperor Charles IV as a place for safekeeping of the royal treasures, especially Charles's collection of holy relics and the coronation jewels of the Roman Empire. The castle stands on a peak and dominates the town of Karlstein in a narrow valley below.

The first stay of Charles IV in Karlstein castle was documented to be in 1355 when he came to supervise the building works as well as the decoration of interiors, especially the castle chapels. The construction of the castle was finished in 1365 when the Chapel of the Holy Cross situated in the Great tower was consecrated. At the outbreak of the Hussite wars the castle became the place for safekeeping of the Czech coronation jewels, which were kept here, for nearly 200 years.

The castle was reconstructed in late Gothic style after 1480 and in Renaissance style in the last quarter of the 16th century. The present appearance of the castle comes from the last reconstruction, which was carried out in the purist neo-Gothic style by architect Josef Mocker at the end of the 19th century. Very impressive is the original step-like order of buildings. From the Well tower and Burgrave's palace located as the lowest you walk up to the majestic 5-storied Imperial palace and further up towards the Marian tower. And finally at the top of the headland stands the monumental 60 m high Great tower.

Karlstein Castle also houses original wall paintings dating back to the 14th century, a collection of 129 panel paintings by Master Theodoric in the Chapel of the Holy Cross (the world largest if its kind), the largest portrait gallery of Czech rulers in the country,

exhibited replica of St. Wenceslas crown - the coronation crown of the Czech Kings as well as the unique castle well.

Our accommodation in Karlstein was at a small Pension, comfortable and well-priced. It was part of the tour cost. Each day for 4 days, we radiated out from Karlstein on rides of about 40 km. These rides varied from cycle tracks, quiet country roads to bush dual use earthen paths. Generally the terrain was undulating; the weather mild and we were able to stop at small towns for lunch and sightseeing. We saw a range of sights from ancient to more recent history of WWII, of communist rule and the banishment of parts of society to hard labour in quarries such as Little America. Jenny found a Patchwork shop in a small town and was able to purchase some nice material. Our guide departed after day three and we navigated the trips from maps. We were provided a GPS system but found it difficult to use/read as the eyesight is not what it was. On return to the pension each day we imbibed Czech beer, not a difficult thing to do as excellent and low cost by our standards. We found the rural food very bland and not to our liking.



Rest stop with Karlstein Castle in background



Refreshments

On day 5 we rode back to Prague which was downhill all the way as we followed the river back downstream but by a different route than we came. We rode right into the middle of Prague on designated bike routes. We left our bikes at our hotel for pick by Ave and they had transferred our luggage to the hotel. Our impression of cycling in Czech Republic was very favourable and certainly would be less expensive than many other European countries. Cyclists were well catered for with dedicated paths, dual use paths and low volume country roads to ride on. The bicycles provided were good quality and Ave service was excellent. Only downside in Czech Republic was we found an underground Irish pub in Prague to watch the Collingwood - Geelong Round 24 match and saw the mighty Magpies thrashed.

From Prague we flew to Amsterdam for a quick two days. That city is dominated by the bicycle with people of all ages riding to and from work and bicycles on every street corner. We left Amsterdam by high speed train (300 km/h) Thalys to Paris. We love train travel in Europe as it gets you right into the centre of the major cities, without the fuss of airports/delays/security, and the trains run to the minute of published schedule.



Floating Garden Market, Amsterdam



Monet's Water Garden at Giverny

Paris is a wonderful city and this time we treated ourselves to a Michelin starred restaurant *Laurent* just off the Champs Elysees. One day we visited the Champagne Region and toured the Moet et Chandon winery which has over 250 km of underground cellars. Lunch in Epernay was of course accompanied by champagne and it was interesting that the Maitre d' advised that we start with typical champagne glasses and then use normal white wine glasses, which gave the same champagne a much different taste. I travelled by train to visit Villiers-Bretonneux and it is very sobering to see the War Memorial and realise the futility of the war.

We also travelled, again by train, to Giverny to visit Monet's Garden with its flower and water gardens; the yellow dining room and blue kitchen, and the many Japanese engravings and prints that he collected over 50 years.

After 4 days in Paris we took the train to Decize in the Loire Valley to start a 7 day canal holiday. We hired a boat from *Le Boat* and with two friends travelled on the Lateral Canal from Decize to Chatillon sur Loire, a distance of 133 km with 26 locks. We hired four bikes, so were able to head off each day to visit local towns (pick up our daily bread) or attractions. The bikes were essential as the larger towns were generally some distance from the canal. Food/eating/ wine is a prime pastime in France and we maintained the tradition. We found most wines very good and eventually, by way of contest, reached the price of 1€20 for a 750 ml bottle. Surprisingly this was drinkable.

The Loire River passes through very good wine country including the Sancerre Region, home of some of France's best white wines and Crottin de Chavignol (goats cheese).

We noted a number of cyclists using the tow paths alongside the canal. Each night we tied up at town ports or moored against the side of the canal.

As we neared the end of our canal tour we crossed the Loire River via a 660m long aqueduct built in 1890.



"The Barge" moored at side of canal"



Crossing the Loire River at Briare

We returned to Paris for a couple of days and then boarded Emirates for the long trip home; it seems to get longer each time you go overseas and home gets better. Any trip to Paris requires the obligatory visit (looking only) to the patisserie or specialty food shop so we leave you with Carre fruits noirs at €6 each and Foie Gras de Canard Entier Truffle at €450 per kilo.



Yum



Expensive