

BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

Pilsner, golf and spa makes a visit to the Czech Republic a delightful combination that can be experienced over and over again.

BY DAVID J. WHYTE



There seems to be a general confusion about the term, “Bohemian”. In modern parlance, it refers to an unconventional lifestyle followed by artists, writers, poets or just plain vagabonds unwilling to settle for the prosaic lifestyle. The term first appeared in the 19th century to describe such groups in major European cities but has little to do with the Bohemian region of the Czech Republic.

The term was first applied in France in the early 19th century to artistic types who were living in low-rent districts of Paris otherwise occupied by Romani people. It was the Romanis who were mistakenly thought to have reached France via Bohemia (the western part of modern Czech Republic) when in fact they had nothing to do with the region.

The first time I visited Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, I was in raptures. It’s that kind of place; that combination of beauty and charm that’s completely irresistible.

Take a stroll down St Wenceslas Square towards the Old Town or across the dark, Gothic spans of 15th century Charles Bridge and you too will soon be captivated. This is a very easy place to fall for.

I was staying at The Icon, a simple, efficient sort of boutique hotel close to the centre of things yet far enough away to lay your head down in peace. And now that the free market economy is clearly here to stay, there are ritzy fashion shops, flash software companies and swanky BMWs intermingling with the Baroque splendour of Prague’s Old Town.

The dark, cobbled streets glistened with yellow lights from the shops and street lamps. Trams trundled by clanging their bells, steamy yet cosy. I love the first few minutes in a different country; the images, the character of the people, the architecture; it all seems so much more intense and enchanting. Once you get by the High Street shops of Nové Město (New Town), Prague’s Old Town is akin to stepping back into a 1950s Hollywood romance set.

Restaurants in this quarter tend towards the traditional schnitzel and goulash. I’m not keen on stews with bread-based dumplings or leftover potato patties that seem to be the Czech’s go-to dish - or at least what they offer to the tourists. Vegetables, it would seem, are only served on special occasions here.

We stopped by the Dutch Pub, a well-appointed steak and burger joint with a Dutch twist who concoct a splendid array of dishes including some excellent fish.

Downtown Prague is popular. You’ll see groups from Sweden, Denmark, Holland and the UK, usually stag or hen



parties in good spirits migrating from pub to pub. Hotels are similar in price to the UK and the rest of Europe but you save considerably on food and drinks. A glass of pilsner costs around €1.50 and a decent dinner could set you back around €15 to €20 per head with wine.

Apart from the D+D Real Czech Masters held each year at the Albatross Golf Resort just outside Prague, you don’t hear that much about the golf courses in the Czech Republic, but there they are, and good too.

Last year, I played the Albatross, Black Bridge and Karlštejn Golf Clubs all of which were highly recommendable and surprisingly challenging. This visit, I was keen to explore the area between Prague and the German border known as West Bohemia. But before heading for those hills, there were still a couple of other Prague city courses I’d heard about and needed to ‘Czech’ out.



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GOLF AROUND PRAGUE

In spite of its rather ‘uninspired’ name, Prague City Golf is my newfound favourite. 15 minutes southeast of the city, it offers a surprising palate of links conditions. I’m a bit of a stickler when courses refer to themselves as ‘links’ or even try to emulate a seaside track especially when they’re landlocked in the middle of Continental Europe.

But here, Alex Cejka, the German golf professional with Czech roots and British golf architect Jeremy Ford, have cooked up something almost as good as a sandy-based seaside links.

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Water is predominant on the back nine, with large lakes predominant, such as at holes 13 and 14 where it’s tempting to cut the corners. The 12th is the hardest green to hold – small,

with bunkers on the right and rough on the left. Like the beer and most everything else, green fees are reasonable here at only €55 through the week.

A little bit further down the motorway is the brand new Panorama Golf Resort with 27 holes of widely diverse terrain (Forest, Meadows and River) making for a great variety of shots and elevations along with dramatic views. Especially striking is the contemporary clubhouse where you can stay at if you book one of their ultra chic 10 double rooms or four suites.

Soaring high above all others in my opinion, however, is the Albatross Golf Resort. I didn’t play its lake-ridden loops this time as I was heading further west but I did pop in to remind myself just how good it was. This is undoubtedly the premier track in the entire country.

Host to the D+D Real Czech Masters since 2014, Albatross is as fine an inland track as you’ll find with service and amenities to match. And you can play it for little more than €70, a steal for a course of this calibre.

So that’s the City of Prague and I must say, the combination of this eclectic centre with its surrounding, superb golf courses easily matches up to any European golf destination I can think of. But what of the other parts of the country?

WEST BOHEMIA GOLF

The region of West Bohemia is tucked into the folds of the wooded Sudeten Hills close to Germany’s eastern border. From Prague, it is a straight two-hour drive but enroute, there is one more golf course and attraction that cannot be missed.

Greensgate Golf Club and the Urquell Brewery are both located in the town of Plzen and yes, this is where the word ‘pilsner’ comes from. Even the Germans, who are fanatical in a very, quiet, taciturn German way about beer’s purity, admit that the fresh, Czech pilsner is probably the finest foamy brew in the world.

Here, you can take a tour of the Pilsner Urquell brewery, descending to the cellars where they’ve brewed Urquell since 1842. The cool temperature and ‘Glasgow-in-December’ dampness nurtures the beer to perfection, and you can help yourself to unfiltered, unpasteurized pilsner straight from a massive oak barrel.

Did you know, you can pour pilsner in different ways? Czech connoisseurs (Czechs, by the way, consume more beer than any other nation on the planet) are so attuned to their national drink, they request a certain pouring style.

The classic is called ‘Hladinka’, a smooth, creamy rendition



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leaving about an inch of head. Meanwhile 'Na dvakrat', the most popular, leaves less body with a good measure of foam. Some Czechs ask for the 'Mliko' which is, to all intents pure foam, said to release the most aromatic sweetness from the beer. I'd feel cheated if I didn't see a good measure of the light golden nectar in my glass so was happy with the standard 'Na dvakrat', and with that, "Na zdraví", or "Cheers" in Czech.

Before we leave the fascinating topic of beer, there are two other famous Czech beers that we should mention. They are Staropramen, which I do frequently find on tap in Scottish pubs and Budweiser Budvar. The most widely exported is Budweiser Budvar and it's important, nay critical to distinguish between Czech Budvar and the American "Bud" since they have next to nothing in common.

Budweiser was the original name of beer brewed in the Czech city of Ceske Budejovice. Germans, just across the border referred to the town as 'Budweis' and someone from Budweis is called a Budweiser - like Hamburg and Hamburgers - the first hamburgers did actually come from Hamburg although the bunned version was adapted by German immigrants in New York.

Similarly, a couple of Americans from St. Louis, Missouri,

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Adolphus Busch and his friend Carl Conrad, following a trip to the Bohemia region in 1876 decided to develop a "Bohemian-style" lager and name it 'Budweiser' clearly without much thought. Anheuser-Busch has been involved in a trademark dispute ever since.

When we finally arrive in Plzen, it was raining - that's how we came to spend the morning underground in the Urquell Brewery emerging but happy. By lunchtime, the skies cleared giving us the afternoon to enjoy the nearby course at Greensgate Golf & Leisure Resort.

Greensgate has been around for 14 years and has already seen many changes. It hosted the Ladies European Tour for four years, which took it to a certain standard and now, with new owners at the helm, it's been upgraded again with much work done to several of the greens.

The hotel includes 22 rooms and the Granary, a historical part of the building offering a further two suites and a four-person, luxury apartment. The quality of the Granary rooms and apartment is exemplary so if you wanted to enjoy the pilsner along with this excellent golf course, it might be worth

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checking-in here for a night or two.

We teed up on this tight but aesthetically pleasing Par 72, 6,700-yard course that weaves between hills, forest and along by Lake Ejpovice. The course is not long from the visitor tees but it is one of those complicated layouts that doglegs frequently forcing you to back-off on the drives to avoid running into trouble.

If you knew this course, it would be a lot of fun but for first timers like us, it took its toll and was easy to roll into the rough stuff. That's all part of getting to know a golf course and I'd love to give Greensgate another go. The Par 3, 11th is the most memorable with a tiny island green the size of a table-tennis bat, or so it appears from the tee. The 12th is one of the sharpest doglegs of the course - great if you can produce a tight fade or shall we say, 'a controlled slice'.

Karlovy Vary is a sophisticated town at the heart of West Bohemia's spa region with ultra-classy hotels, shops and restaurants. The warm, natural springs of Karlovy Vary have

been used in healing since the 14th century and the town is one of the world's top spa destinations. Tens of thousands of people, especially from Germany and Russia arrive each year to draw water from the town's 12 thermal springs.

It's a great name, isn't it - Karlovy Vary - It is also known as 'Carlsbad'. Coincidentally, the Californian town of Carlsbad, home to Callaway, Cobra and Taylormade, is named after Karlovy Vary. Apparently, Carlsbad, California was big on natural springs; now it's a fountain of golf equipment.

We popped into a couple of courses on our way to the hotel. Cihelny Golf Club just south of Karlovy Vary looks interesting though not on par with the courses we'd seen and played around Prague. The town of Karlovy Vary has its own golf course also, originally a 9-hole developed through the years into an 18-holer and this looks more prestigious and probably the one to play. This and Marianske Lazne Golf Club are in fact, the two oldest clubs in the country.

The town of Karlovy Vary is beautiful at night and worth



WHEN TO COME

The month of April gets nice in Prague and the golfing season stretches well into October. Cooler continental weather comes a bit earlier in the mountains of West Bohemia and October is probably too late to enjoy. June to August can be a bit tourist hectic in Prague though this is the ideal time to explore the outlying areas.

GETTING THERE

Prague is easy to get to from most parts of the world. You can hire a car and self-drive in the Czech Republic but it is easier and not that much more expensive to let a ground-handling company like Abante (www.abante-golf.co.uk) look after the transport. Then everyone can relax and enjoy the wonderful pilsners you'll no doubt run into between and after rounds.

a stroll to find the right restaurant. There are lots of swanky shops and very upmarket hotels. I'd like to spend a bit more time in Karlovy Vary checking out the spa culture and general ambience of the place as it is most appealing.

There are 10 courses immediately accessible to Karlovy. Nearby is Franzensbad Golf Club also known as Františkovy Lázně. Franzensbad is an elevated parkland course with a nice texture to the loam not unlike Scottish heathland courses. It rises and drops, not too steeply but it keeps the game interesting.

Nearby Mariánské Lázně is the second most popular spa town in the region. It developed later than Karlovy but is now just as popular. The Mariánské Lázně Golf Club is an exceptional parkland course first established in the time of King Edward VII who officially opened it in 1905.

It is tree-lined then opens out onto wider fairways with the occasional little lake to watch out for. Both Marianbad and Franzensbad are solid tests, perhaps more in line with resort courses of an older era while those near the city of Prague are of a more modern, demanding standard.

It would definitely be worth bringing your golf clubs however if you were going to take the waters of either Karlovy Vary or Mariánské Lázně and play a little golf while enjoying a few days within these health-enhancing mountains. ☺

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