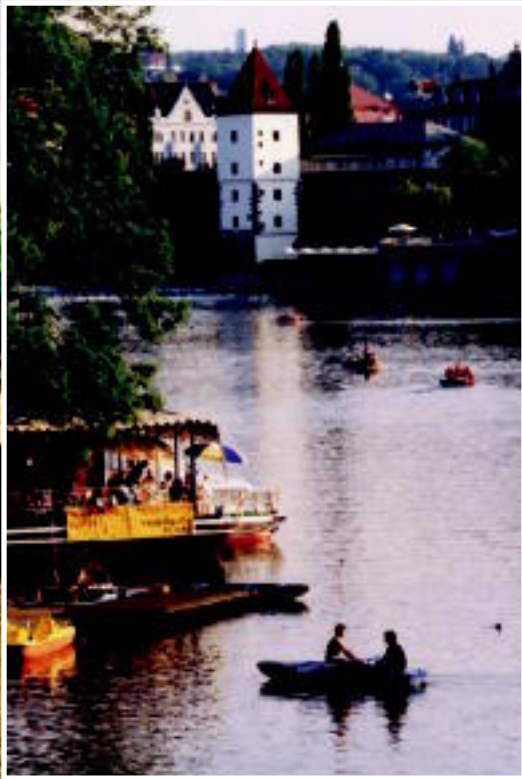


PRAGUE FOR POOFS!

More than just the breeding ground of Bel Ami, Xav Judd explores gay Prague...



ALTHOUGH it only takes a little over an hour to fly from London to the Czech Republic's capital Prague (www.easyjet.co.uk), in some ways when you get there you might feel like you've been stuck inside Doctor Who's Time Machine for the best part of five hundred years. So many medieval church spires, ancient villas and palaces loom over the city's picturesque horizon that it looks like something fashioned by Walt Disney. Considering that Prague survived Nazi occupation (1939-45) and Russian backed Communist rule (1948-89), it's a surprise that the place remained largely intact. Indeed, its different eras of architecture are still so well preserved and amazingly beautiful that it was granted Unesco World Heritage status in 1992. Since the end of the repressive Soviet era, the establishment of democracy has resulted in some positive homosexual legislation (the introduction of the age of consent at 15, etc) and a flourishing gay scene.

The centrally located **Yasmin Hotel** (Politických veznu 12; Tel: +420 234 100 100; www.hotel-yasmin.cz) is a model of urbanity and relaxation with its sauna, fitness centre and exquisite summer terrace. The snazzy boutique Hotel Josef (Rybná 20; Tel: +420 221 700 111; www.hoteljosef.cz) is also worth a stay. It has such enchanting and out-of-this-world décor, that a climb up the lobby's suspended spiral glass staircase will make you feel like Dorothy just before she was whisked along the Yellow Brick Road to the Land of Oz.

Most of Prague's gay bars and clubs are concentrated in **Vinohrady**, a charming leafy-green district a stone's throw away from the centre of town. **Valentino** (Vinohradská 40; Tel: +420 222 513 491; www.club-valentino.cz), the city's biggest LGBT nightspot, is a groovy shindig spread over three fun-packed floors. Just two minutes around the corner is **Club Termix** (Třebízckého 4a; Tel: +420 222 710 462; www.club-termix.cz), an industrial-themed basement hang-out with a small dance floor and a darkroom if you're feeling a bit naughty.

Another place in the same area that's worth 'Czech-ing' (excuse the pun!) out is **Club Stella** (Luzická 10; Tel: +420 224 257 869), a traditional candle-lit cellar bar that usually acts as a chill-out place for guys before they move on somewhere else. Their next destination might well be the bar **Friends** (Bartolomejská 11; Tel: +420 224 236 772). No, it wasn't thus named because you can expect to hear wisecracks from Joey or Chandler, but due to it being a cordial subterranean watering hole full of dishy young Czechs. However, if you haven't had your fill of cute beauties, then you can head-off to **Sauna Marco** (Lublsanská 17;

Tel: +420 224 262 833; www.saunamarco.cz), or even to one of the cities many cruising grounds like **Park Letna** (Praha 7).

Once you've dusted down the highpoints and low points of the metropolis's nightlife, you won't be too disappointed if you decide to go shopping. Prague boasts a host of boutiques and arcades like the **Helena Fejková Gallery** (Lucerna Pasáz; Tel: + 420 224 211 514), that stock the cutting-edge in Czech and German clothes designers. If you're browsing for more specialist items then you have to look in the town's plethora of oddball antique and bric-a-brac shops. Founded in 1911, **Eduard Capek** (Dlouhá 32) is one of the weirdest, and I really had to use my imagination to figure out what I could do with a rusty doorknob, a porcelain toilet bowl and a dilapidated bust of Lenin. If all the travelling around makes you feel a bit peckish, maybe you should drop into gay-friendly **Downtown Café** (Ujezd 19; Tel: +420 257 311 411; www.downtowncafe.cz). It's a funky eatery-cum-lounge bar, where you can enjoy delights like a sumptuous all-day breakfast or just chill in their hip LookBetterNaked lounge.

Alternatively, if you fancy something a bit more exotic, then why not try the Chinese restaurant **Canton** (Saská 3; Tel: +420 257 531 373). And don't be surprised if, once you've tasted their house specialities of stewed pig's trotters and frogs braised in brown sauce, you start oinking and hopping back for more.

A trip to Prague isn't complete without a visit to its famous castle, **Prazsky hrad** (Hradcany; Tel: +420 224 373 368; www.hrad.cz). With parts of it dating from the 9th century, not only is it a stupendous monument in its own right, but it also affords picture perfect views of the whole of the city from dawn to twilight. Indeed, maybe this later time is the best to stroll across the municipality's other major attraction, **Charles Bridge**, when the entrancing baroque statues that line its parapets look like falling angels under a glimmering moon.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Although the Czech Republic doesn't currently have a Pride, Amigos is a bi-monthly gay guide and contact magazine that gives you information about loads of things you can do in Prague. It has a few pages in English: www.amigo.cz. Alternatively, to see more details about what to do in the city: <http://prague.gayguide.net/>



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