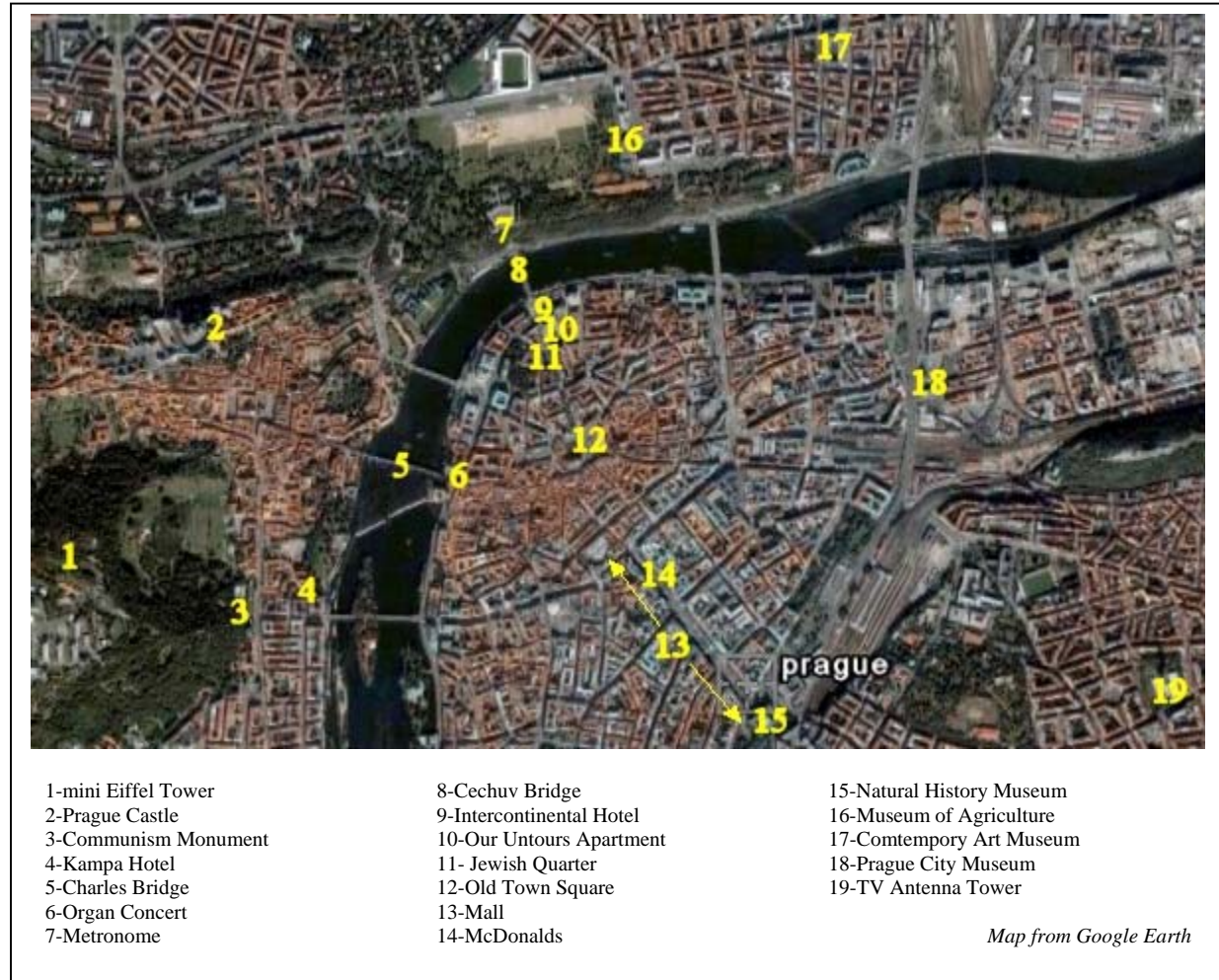


Prague
1st Week of an Untours Sampler
September/October 2006
Simone and Tony Baker

Untours, a travel agency, hosted this trip. Basically, Untours rents you an apartment and provides local travel at your destination. What you do is your choice. They also meet you at the airport and transport you to the apartment. We made our own air travel reservations.

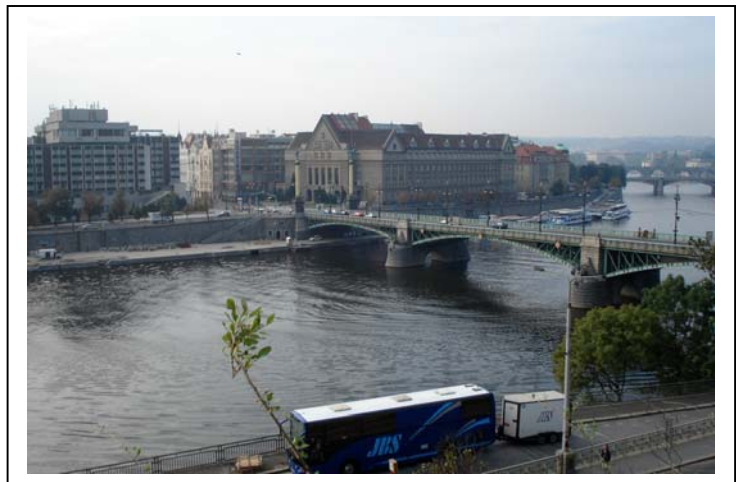


Tuesday (9/26) We departed Denver at 8:15 pm and arrived London at noon on Wednesday. We departed for Prague at 3:00 and arrived around 5:30 pm. We were quickly processed through immigration, but there was a bit of wait for our luggage. We passed through customs without being stopped and out into the public part of the airport. Elaina, the UnTour representative was waiting for us. We quickly got some Korunys (Chez money) from the ATM and then Elaina put us in a hired car, which drove us to our Untour apartment.

Our apartment house was classic European with businesses on the ground floor and apartments on the upper floors. It is the building on the right and our apartment was located on the second floor. One of the visible second story windows in this photo was in our living room. The building on the left and in the back is the Intercontinental Hotel, which was the build during the USSR days.



The Intercontinental Hotel backs up to the Vltava River. In the photo, it is the building across the river and on the left. Our apartment is just on the other side of the Hotel. We often walked across the Cechuv Bridge in the image to get to one of the tram stops we used.



It was deep twilight when we arrived at the apartment. A young lady, who I believe was the daughter of the apartment owner, met us at the door and escorted us in. There was a key to the front door of the apartment house and a second key for our apartment, which was on the second floor.

Inside the apartment the three of us sat around the kitchen table as she gave us the cook's tour. She gave each of us a universal pass to the subways, trams (electric trolleys), and buses and told us how to use it. She told us there was an Untours orientation meeting the next morning at 9:00 at the Kampa Hotel and we needed to use the trolley to get there.



She showed us the living room and TV with DVD player. Unfortunately, the TV could only receive three local stations, which were not in English. We had brought movies on DVDs from the US that we had checked out from the library, but they wouldn't play on this Czech DVD player. I since have learned that the European DVDs are formatted differently than the US ones. Fortunately, we had the laptop so we watched the movies on it in the subsequent evenings. I did discover a classical music station on the radio that was excellent.



After the young lady left, we stepped out to find some supper. We walked several blocks and found a pub where we had an excellent meal of duck, ham-hocks, sauerkraut, and dumplings (flour and potato). We didn't care for the potato dumplings. Also, the sauerkraut was sweet, which we didn't like as well as the sauerkraut we get in the states. As the days passed we occasionally order meals similar to this one because it seemed to be a traditional dish in both Prague and Vienna. The sauerkraut remained sweet wherever we ate it.

By 3:30 Thursday morning (9/28) I could no longer sleep. My body had not caught up with the time change. So, I got up and went for a walk across the Cechuv Bridge to find the tram stop we would use later in the morning to go to our orientation meeting. I returned to the apartment, put on my running gear, and went for a run. By 6:30, Simone was also out of bed, so we walked next door to the Intercontinental Hotel for a cup of coffee and to check out the Internet connectivity. I had already learned that there was no connectivity in the apartment. T-Mobile provided wireless connectivity at the Hotel for \$8 per hour. We didn't use it. We did drink a cup of coffee, which turned out to be on the house.

Even though it was several hours before our orientation meeting, we decided to get on the tram and start in the direction of the meeting. We got off the tram at the Charles Bridge and walked out on the bridge to check it out. It was built in 1400s to replace an earlier bridge that had washed away in a flood. After WWII it was made a pedestrian bridge. Today, it is the biggest tourist attraction in Prague. If we had been there in midday, this image would display wall-to-wall people.



We returned to the tram and traveled two more stops and got off. We walked several blocks and arrived at the Kampa Hotel (Best Western). Since it was still an hour until the meeting started and the Hotel's breakfast buffet looked fabulous, we decided to eat breakfast there. This breakfast turned out to be the best we had the entire trip and the sausage links were the price winner.



Elaina who had met us at the airport conducted the meeting. She told us about many places to visit and how to get there. She also offered us a chance to attend an organ concert the next evening, which would be paid for by Untours. I really didn't think I would enjoy the concert, but we said we would go because it was an ideal opportunity for Elaina to give us our train tickets to Brno. We had tweaked Untours itinerary so we could spend a day and night in Brno, which we arranged and paid for ourselves.

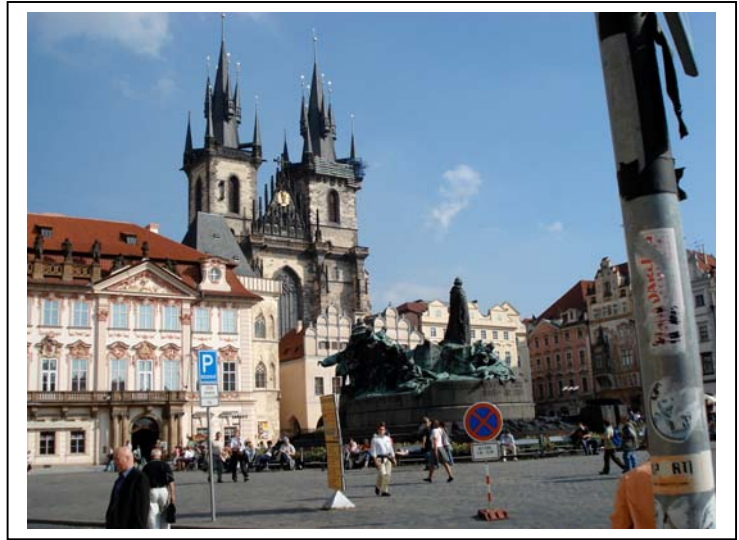
We left the meeting, crossed a bridge near the Hotel, and started walking toward the apartment and looking at the architecture.

At the apartment we had a sandwich and drank a beer, both of which had been provided by Untours. After a short nap, we decided to go to the Modern Art Museum. We again walked across the Cechuv Bridge and caught the tram. This time we travel west a number of stops and arrived at the Veletrzní Palác, which gave one the impression of a stark white warehouse. However, it was full of wonderful modern art. There were four floors and we enjoyed them all. Unfortunately, we apparently made no photographs.



That evening we ate at a restaurant, which was also within easy walking distance from the apartment. The ambiance was better than the previous night's pub but the food was not. Simone had chicken and mushrooms and I had rabbit. Simone watched a DVD movie and I went to bed.

Friday (9/29, 6:00 am) I went running the same route as Thursday morning, down the east bank of Vltava River crossing at Charles Bridge and returning up the west bank. However, this morning I made a wrong turn and became lost. I knew basically where I was, which was in a large park on the hill north of the Cechuv Bridge, but I didn't know the direction back to the Cechuv Bridge. I finally had to ask a person in the park who gave me the directions.



After I showered, Simone and I ventured out to locate the church where the evening's organ concert would be held. Ironically, I had ran by it earlier that morning since it was located at the east entrance of the Charles Bridge. From the church we turned east and walked the narrow streets away from Charles Bridge and soon found ourselves in the Old Town Square. It was early in the day so it was still quiet. The UPrince Hotel was serving a breakfast buffet similar to the Kampa Hotel of the previous morning, so we decided to eat. As we sat down by a window that looked out on the Square, the waiter informed us it would be \$20 per person. We thought this was a bit steep, but decided to remain. The breakfast was average and the sausage was definitely a cut below the Kampa.



We walked east from the square and found the tourist area we named the mall. It was a huge boulevard about half a mile long with all possible forms of shopping from souvenirs to groceries. High end eating places to McDonalds were intermixed with the shops and the people, mostly tourists, were everywhere. We walked to the far west end where the National Museum was located. Again, no photographs of the Museum, which was a beautiful building on the outside. The exhibits on the inside were dated, probably older than I was. I made note of the head of a woolly mammoth, hanging on a wall, with long braids of shag dangling down around him. He really was a sight. I wished I had paid the camera fee at the ticket counter so I could have taken this beast's photo.

We rode the subway back to the apartment, ate a sandwich and drank a beer, and took a nap. We then walked back to the mall and went to McDonalds because they offered wireless Internet connection for \$2 an hour. Besides reading our emails we tried to get Skype (Internet telephone) to

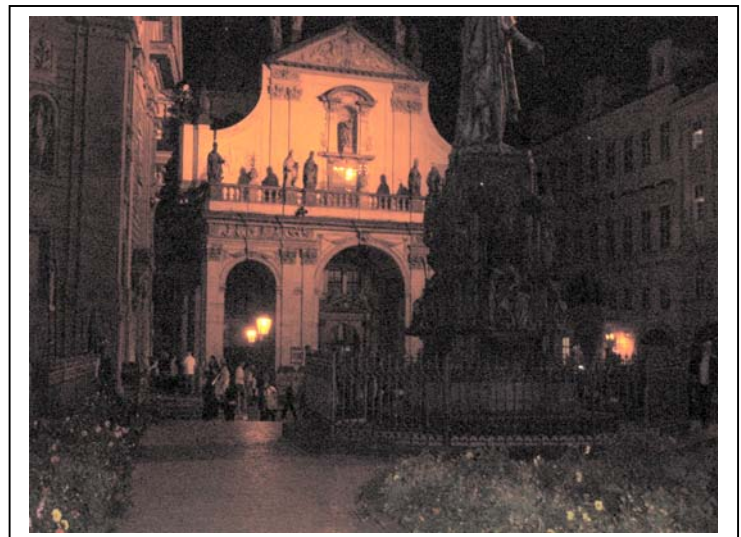
work so we could call home. We were unsuccessful with Skype. On the way back to the apartment we stopped at a supermarket and bought some crackers, mayonnaise, lunchmeat, cheese, and beer.

Walked next door to the Intercontinental and this fellow was sitting on the beach in front of the Hotel. We primarily went there to see if we could get Skype to work on their expensive wireless service. We sat in the bar and ordered a couple glasses of wine and I fiddled with the Internet. I finally determined I had to put an advance of 10 Euros in my Skype account before it would allow me to make calls to land line phones. After making the deposit we talked to our kids and Simone's mother. (We continued to use Skype almost daily for the rest of the trip and manage to consume only 0.26 Euros of 10.00 in my account.)



Around 6:00 pm we left the apartment to find supper and then attend the Untours hosted organ concert. About midway between the apartment and Charles Bridge we found an inexpensive café. The two of us ate for a total of \$17 in comparison to the \$40 we paid for breakfast that morning in the Old Town Square. We both had a drink and salad. I had thin porkchops and fries and Simone had a good tasting, thin steak.

We met Elaina (Untours) outside the church where the organ concert was to be held. She gave us the train tickets for our travel to Brno and on to Vienna at the end of the week in Prague. While we were waiting for the concert to begin, we had a chance to visit with some of the other Untours travelers since we all sat together. They gave us the impression that our apartment was the "pick of the litter." The performance evolved three performers; an organist, violist, and a soprano. They performed Mozart music together and individually. I am ashamed to admit that it put me to sleep and I was thankful it was only an hour.



Saturday (9/30) I finished writing my poem for class that was already two days overdue. Simone woke at 7:00 and by 7:30 I was on my way to McDonalds to get on the Internet and post my poem and read my email. I returned by 8:30 and the two of us walked two blocks towards the Square and had breakfast at a place that catered to the America tourist. We ordered “ham and eggs” which consisted of two eggs fried on top of several slices of lunchmeat, potatoes and toast. It cost us about \$10 total.

We walked back passed the apartment and across the Cechuv Bridge and up the hill immediately to the north of the Bridge. We were planning on visiting the Museum of Technology. However, we discovered it was closed for renovations and would not reopen until 2008. So, we went next door to the

Museum of Agricultural and checked it out. It had a permanent exhibit of mostly old tractors and equipment. Their temporary exhibit was about the history of growing grapes in the Czech Republic. Back outside the Museum, I noticed for the first time the Soviet’s influence on the many buildings in this area of town. When one gets away from the downtown tourist area, it stops looking like France or London and starts looking like the cities I have seen in Russia and Kazakhstan.



On the way back to the apartment we discovered, from our elevated position above the river, a tower in the middle of the city. It was the tallest thing on the horizon and looked like a rocket ship that was ready to launch. We sat down and got out the map and guide book and decided it must be the city’s TV tower (Televizni Vysilac). It was also suppose to be art, so we decided to visit it later in the day.



We separated at this point and Simone headed back to the apartment. I wanted to get a closer look at the structure on the strategically high point, directly above the Cechuv Bridge. From the street in front of our apartment it looked like a large crane on the highest point of the hill. As I approached it, I saw bunches of kids on skateboards and rollerblades utilizing the over excessive amount of concrete surfaces that surround it. There also was graffiti on many of the vertical surfaces. The crane turned out to be a long pole that moved back and forth like a metronome driven by an electric motor. However, the metronome gave of appearance of not having run for many years.



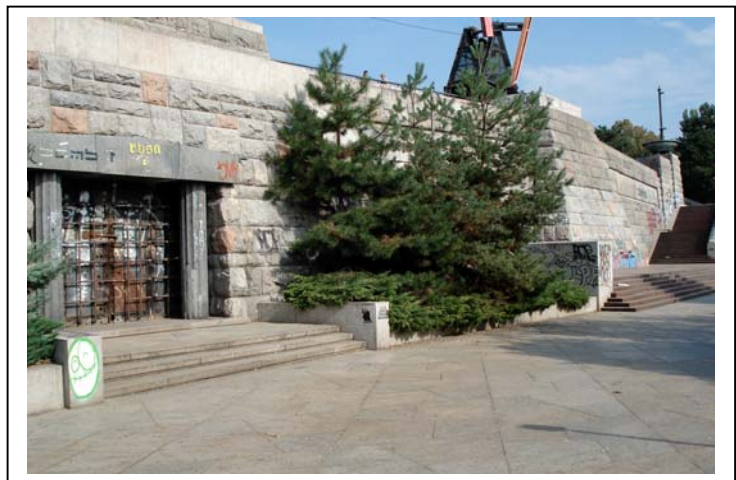
This place seemed such a contradiction to everything else we had seen in Prague that it inspired me to write the following poem.

Prague

From around the globe business suits, muffin tops with peaking tats, and unending tours of cameras come to wander your face. A facade of crystal and chocolate shops on cobbled streets with sidewalk tables and Internet cafes applied too thick.

A full-length mirror reflects a different image. Decaying monuments with polychrome graffiti testify to your younger communistic years. Is this neglect intentional? Or does it have the same explanation as your mosaic walls with missing tiles?

Now, now, don't cry. Old is not ugly like a toothless lady who pees herself on the street corner, but a fact. Your true beauty is your long and glorious life that spans from Erectus to 9/11 and beyond.



I discovered in my guide books, several months after returning home, that the metronome location was indeed special and that my poem had more meaning than I could have ever guess. To my surprise, the metronome was built as late as 1991. Prior to the metronome, the largest statue of Stalin in the world stood there from 1955 to 1962. It was destroyed with explosives on orders given by Nikita Khrushchev. I found this image, of the monument before it was destroyed, on the Internet.

<http://www.radio.cz/en/article/66095>



After lunch and nap, Simone and I set out to see the TV tower (Televizni Vysilac) we had seen earlier in the day from the Metronome hill. Conveniently, we could use the same subway line that we had been using. There were no transfers required.

One of the things that had caught our eye that morning about the TV tower was the write-up in our guidebook. “Prague’s tallest landmark, and – depending on your tastes, either its ugliest or its most futuristic – is the 216m-tall Televizni vysilac, erected between 1985 and 1992.” So we were curious about what made this tower so controversial. As we approach the tower on foot, we began to see why. Not only did it look like a launching of the space shutter in the middle of a residential neighborhood, there were babies wandering about on the sides of the tubes. There were ten of them and they had coin slots for faces.



We rode the elevator up to the observation deck of the tower and then spend time trying to locate the various landmarks with which we were familiar. Surprisingly, this was quite difficult. The first landmark we ultimately found was the Metronome and from there the rest were easier. We then rode to elevator to the restaurant level and had a beer and watched the city.

We returned to the subway and started back to the apartment. Along the way, we stopped and did some grocery shopping in the mall area. The subway stop nearest our apartment was the Staromestska and the walk from there to the apartment caused us to walk by the Museum of Decorative Arts (Umelecko-Prumyslove). Each time we had previously walked by the place, Simone had said she wanted to go in there before we left. Well, this afternoon, we decided to check it out. As I suspected it was full of glassware and linens. But, to my surprise there were also clocks and watches. I saw the most beautiful pocket watches I had ever seen. They were nicer than any I had seen in the books. So this placed turned out to be a gem for me.



We returned to apartment and walked over to the Intercontinental Hotel for a glass of wine and to call home to the family on Skype. For supper, we walked a half of a block to a seafood place. I had mediterranean seafood paella and Simone had shrimp cooked in a coconut batter. This meal was about \$25 for the two of us. We returned to the hotel and watch a DVD and went to bed.



Sunday (10/1) I went running before Simone and I went to breakfast at a café in the Old Town Square. The only egg on the menu was an omelet, so I had some bratwurst sausages with fries. Simone had a chicken sandwich that looked similar to a Subway sandwich. This meal cost around \$22.

Next we headed for the Prague City Museum. There was some archaeology there and I learned *Homo erectus* was in the Prague River Valley. I should have known this because he was also over at Brno. There was a large-scale model of City of Prague during the 1850s, which held our attention for a while as we again tried to locate the few landmarks we had discovered.



In the afternoon, Simone returned to the Old Town Square to visit the Cathedral (1st picture on page 5), and also do some shopping.

I chose to walk up the Petri Hill and see the miniature Eiffel Tower, both of which are located in a gorgeous park that required a tram ride from the apartment. When I got off the tram at the edge of the park, encountered this life size monument to the people who suffered during the years of Communism influence. The nearby dedication plaque was also in English and read as follows:



THE MEMORIAL TO THE VICTIMS OF COMMUNISM IS DEDICATED TO ALL VICTIMS, NOT ONLY THOSE WHO WERE JAILED OR EXECUTED BUT ALSO THOSE WHOSE LIVES WERE RUINED BY TOTALITARIAN DESPOTISM



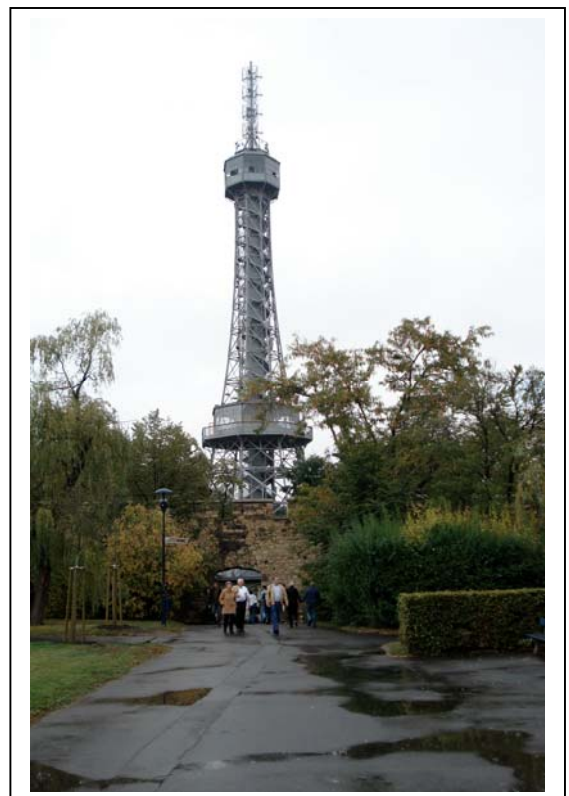
There was a cable-car that ran from the bottom near this Memorial to the top of the hill for people who chose not to walk up the hill. For me, I could not imagine why anyone would not want to walk to the top in this beautiful park.



The walking trails wandered back and forth across the face of the hill as they go up. On the south side of the wandering one encounters a stone wall that runs from bottom to top and divides the park. My tour book says this wall (The Hunger Wall) was built by the poor in exchange for food in 1362. The workmanship in the wall is amazing.



This miniture Eiffel Tower was at the top of Petri Hill. I paid the fee and then climbed to the top of the tower. Back at ground level, I drank a beer and then slowly walked back down the hill. Caught the tram and returned to the apartment.



Simone was at the apartment and she wanted double “A” batteries. I wanted to return to the Jewish Quarter where I had noticed some cheap Russian pocket watches for sale in a curio store. So we headed off in that direction, which was only two blocks away. We found the batteries and looked at some small, decorated brandy glasses she was wanting to purchase, but she found nothing that interested her. My foray into the pocket watches ended up with me making an agreement to purchase a used wristwatch for 100 Euros that came out of the salesman’s pocket. It was not part of the inventory of the store. Since, I had no Euros, we agreed on Korunys at the current exchange rate. I still didn’t have that many Korunys so we left to find an ATM machine.

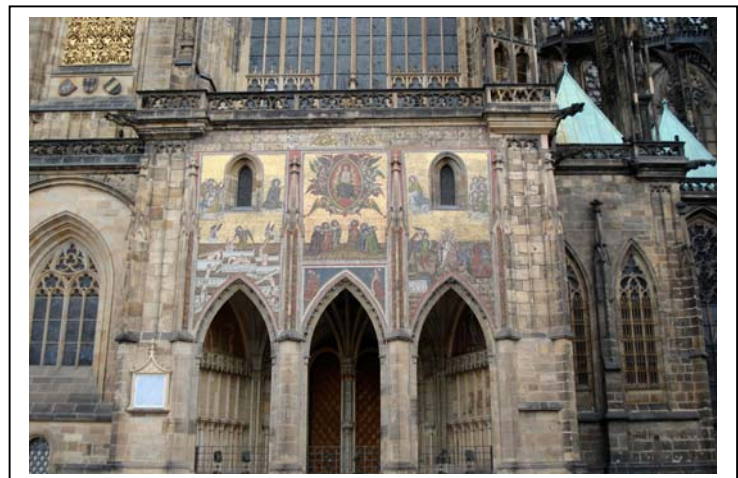
We found a ATM a few blocks away and got the Korunys. For some reason we remained there for a few minutes talking. A stranger who had used the ATM machine after us said something to the effect that “it was good to hear American English.” We visited with him a couple of minutes and the three of us decided to go have a beer. I hurry back to my under-the-counter watch salesman and got my watch. I then met Simone and our new found friend at the outdoor bar and we ended up drinking two beers and having this picture taken



by one of the bar attendents. Then we parted. Simone and I walked a couple blocks and found a Chinese food restaurant. After supper, we came home and went to bed.

Monday (10/2) I did my usual running and internet chores. We have a rule to never eat at the same place twice. This morning we broke the rule and returned to the same restaurant where we ate two eggs fried on some lunchmeat. This morning we had ham and cheese omelets and they were not very good.

We took the tram to the Prague Castle and arrived just as it was opening to the public. We immediately took this photo of the church, which is void of people. The tourists were spewing in so rapidly that 15 minutes later this photo would have been impossible. Simone purchased a ticket to see a portion of the Cathedral and some other stuff.



The Cathedral was the main attraction at the Castle and, since I usually don't do churches or cathedrals, I chose to leave and spend my time walking through the Castle garden and then the parks on my way back to the apartment. The garden was extremely peaceful. The flowers were mostly gone because of the time of year, but the junipers and other trees were lovely. I had to remind myself that I was on another continent and the vegetation I was seeing, most likely, didn't grow at home. Yet, it looked very familiar to me. From the garden I walked to metronome park, down the hill, and across the bridge.



At suppertime, we walked to an Irish pub located on the Old Town Square. I had bangers and mash, and Simone had a hamburger. Simone usually enjoys the foreign cuisine, but ironically, she said her hamburger was the best meal of the trip.



We returned to the apartment, packed our bags in preparation for our move to Brno and then on to Vienna.

Tuesday (10/3) We awoke at 5:00am in spite of the fact we were packed and the Untours driver was not due until 6:30. Our personalities prevent us from waiting until the last minute, so we are always the first to a party, the airport, or any event that has a firm starting time. The driver showed up at 6:15 and drove us to the train station in 15 minutes. Then, we had a two-hour wait before we boarded the train to Brno. What can I say?



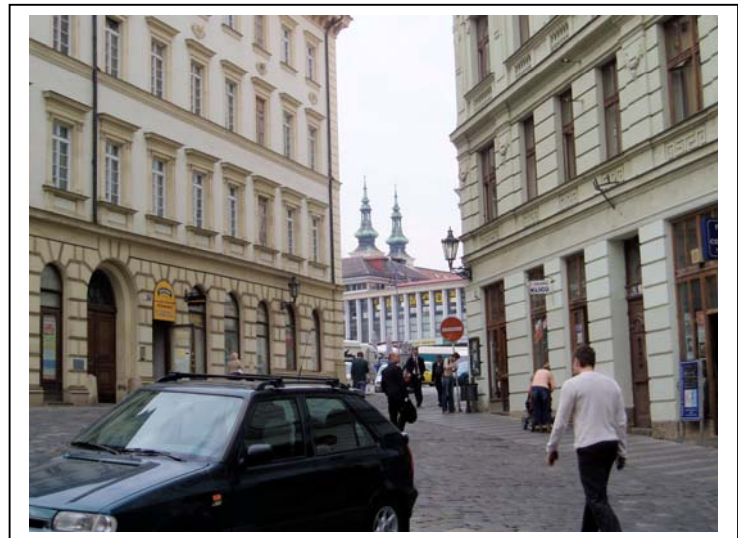
We had tweaked the Untours travel schedule so we could leave Prague a day earlier than normal and spend a day and night in Brno. Brno, the second largest in Czech Republic, is a business and industrial city. Population is about 500,000 people. We wanted to stay a day there to visit the newly completed Paleolithic Museum. We had made reservations several months before this trip to stay at the Grand Hotel. We did this on the internet and got a five-star Hotel for a three-star price. It was also located immediately across the street from the train station, so we didn't have to hassle with a taxi.



We arrived Brno around 10:30am and check into the Hotel. We then caught the tram out to the Museum and ate lunch in the Museum's snack shop. Here we had our first hot dogs that were stuffed in a hole in the end of the bun instead of the bun being sliced. The museum took me an hour at best to see it. It was devoted exclusively to Paleolithic archaeology from the surrounding region. There were no English translations of any of the written material, but fortunately I knew enough about the subject that I was able to appreciate most of the exhibits. I purchased three casts of paleolithic portable art from the area, which were a man's head, a mammoth and a bear.



We returned to our Hotel, which was located in the downtown shopping and tourist district. After a nap, we went walking and soon separated.



I wanted to locate an internet café since the Hotel wireless charges were way too expensive. After finding a café and checking the emails, I set out to find a watchband for the used watch I purchased in the Jewish Quarter at Prague. Simone found her way to the Petro Cathedral and went inside. She said the stain glass windows were its claim to fame.

For supper we found a lovely Czech restaurant with real table cloths. We had fried goose livers for an hors d'oeuvre. My main course was duck breast with red and white cabbage. Simone didn't write down what she had and can't remember. We returned to the Hotel and went to bed.

Wednesday (10/4) I woke before daybreak and did my usual running and then over to the internet café. We had breakfast at the Hotel since our room charge included a continental breakfast, which in Europe includes eggs and meat. We then walked our breakfast off and went back to the room to pack. At noon we walked over to the train station and caught the train to Vienna. This was the same train that was transporting the other Untours travelers from Prague to Vienna. We arrived Vienna around 2:00.



The week in Vienna is detailed in the Vienna pdf file.