

Travel and Adventure: 'Must-sees' in Prague, Vienna and Budapest are in the eye of the beholder

by Preston Turegano

Prague, Vienna and Budapest are a string of historic and cultural pearls in central Europe.

These capitals of the Czech Republic, Austria and Hungary each are about 1,000 years old. They have architecturally beautiful landmarks, and they're situated on diverse terrain divided by a river.

Many locals of the trio share a love of beer and cigarettes, fattening cuisine (with heaps of french fries no matter the dish), and American pop music. They don't like to talk about World War II, Soviet occupation or lands lost as a result of wars and treaties.

MOVING MEMORIAL - Near Budapest's Parliament Building, metal-cast shoes commemorate Jews who were shot by Nazis and thrown into the Danube River during World War II. CNS Photo by Preston Turegano. **A SIGN OF FAITH** - On Prague's Charles Bridge, a statue of St. John of Nepomuk is among 30 religious sculptures that line the pedestrian-only crossing. CNS Photo by Preston Turegano. **THE GLORIOUS GLORIETTE PAVILION** - In Vienna, the Gloriette pavilion sits majestically on a hill overlooking the back of the Schonbrunn Palace and its gardens, once the pride and joy of the Habsburg dynasty. CNS Photo by Preston Turegano. **LET'S DANCE** - Prague's 'Dancing Building,' also known as 'Fred & Ginger' gets its moniker because some viewers imagine Fred Astaire is holding Ginger Rogers at her waist, causing her skirt to flare out. CNS Photo by Preston Turegano. While tour operators and guide books have "must-see" lists of major sites in the three cities, one man's "must" is another man's "so-what." As inveterate travelers, my companion (a travel agent) and I have seen a lot, sometimes on group tours, and other times on our own. Here's what we noticed and decided about some Prague, Vienna and Budapest attractions.

PRAGUE

Prague Castle is on Hradcany hill on the west side of the Vltava river. The castle complex is dominated by St. Vitus' Cathedral, which rather than a ninth century relic is an 18th century concoction replete with stained-glass windows, flying buttresses and fierce gargoyles. Lacking lots of ornate, royal trappings, the castle palace is not among Europe's most celebrated properties.

At the Matthias Gate west of the cathedral, a courtyard is the setting for a changing of the guard ceremony (noon daily) that attracted hordes of looky-loos when we dropped by.

Advice: See the cathedral, but don't bother with the palace and lame changing of the guard. The guards looked more like cops or railroad conductors than soldiers. Also, instead of schlepping up an esplanade of steps from Mala Strana, take tram No. 22 (immediately outside the Malostranska subway stop) to the castle hilltop.

At the bottom of castle hill is the pedestrians-only, 14th century sandstone Charles Bridge, which was mobbed by tourists, vendors, street musicians and, most likely, pickpockets.

Advice: You can't avoid the bridge if you want to get to Old Town Square on the east side of Prague by foot. The views of the castle are postcard-perfect from the bridge.

We enjoyed other great views of Prague while walking along Rasinovo Nadrezi street on the east bank of the Vltava. The Frank Gehry and Vlado Milunic-designed glass-and-steel (Fred & Ginger) "Dancing Building" where Rasinovo meets the Jiraskuv bridge was a delightful discovery and stood out conspicuously among classic medieval, and 18th and 19th century architecture.

Advice: Start the walk at the Karlovo Namesti subway stop. As you proceed north toward the National Theatre, check out the views from Slovansky ostrov island. No crowds! No vendors! No pickpockets!

VIENNA

As the city's top tourist destination and former playground of the Habsburgs, the 18th and 19th century Schonbrunn Palace was jammed with visitors gawking at dimly lighted, preserved rooms while they held listening devices translating facts in their respective languages. (Where are Tokyo's subway butt pushers when you need them to clear a path?)

Advice: The palace wasn't so great, but the gardens, Gloriette pavilion and the view of Vienna from Gloriette hill were worth the price of palace admission (about \$10 to \$40, depending on tour).

Open just on Saturdays, Kettenbrückengasse flea market was a bizarre array of old and new merchandise. A pedestrian avenue of restaurants and fresh-food stalls from Karlsplatz (plaza) to the Kettenbrückengasse subway stop was as intriguing and senses-stimulating as the flea market.

Advice: Go. Who knows? Maybe that 1983 Rita Coolidge recording of "All Time High - the Octopussy Theme" will still be available.

In an elegant arena, the famous Lipizzaner horses perform on Sunday mornings at the Spanish Riding School near Vienna's Hofburg Palace. We bought our tickets - about \$100 each - over the Internet months in advance. Nonreserved, standing-room tickets are much cheaper, but if you opt for these you'll have to get to the venue at least an hour early to secure an upper-tier viewing space not obstructed by a pillar.

Advice: Don't miss it. It's the best show in town, and it's the real thing. The Lipizzaner show that tours the U.S. "emulates the Spanish Riding School in Vienna," according to the Web site of White Stallion Productions, which presents the tour.

BUDAPEST

Budapest is so big and spread out (two sections - Buda and Pest - divided by the Danube River), a four-hour city tour (for about \$30 per person) covered the basics: Heroes' Square and St. Stephen's Basilica in Pest, and Castle Hill, Fishermen's Bastion and the Citadella in Buda. (Bring your rosary or worry beads if traffic jams and crazy drivers scare you.)

Advice: It was worth the effort. Our tour operator, See Budapest, used a bus that sat no more than 12. That, and an excellent English-speaking guide, made our venture enjoyable.

The facade of the Central Market built in 1896 looks like a rail station. Inside, it's cavernous, accommodating all kinds of food stalls on the main floor and merchandise upstairs. In the basement, we found Match, a U.S.-like grocery store. A cashier slapped our hands when we tried to help ourselves to plastic grocery bags, which we learned cost about 10 cents each.

Advice: If you don't go to the Central Market, you won't see the real Budapest.

See Budapest's day-long Danube Bend Tour (about \$84 per person) included a minibus, a charming English-speaking guide and lunch. The itinerary took us to the countryside northwest of Budapest, with stops at the Estergom basilica, the 11th century Visegrad castle, and the "artist colony" (really just a tourist trap of tiny stores and shops) in Szentendre.

Advice: Book it. The panorama of the Danube - where it turns southward toward Budapest after its long west-to-east flow - from Visegrad castle was the highlight of the tour. Because the weather was good, we took an hour-long boat ride from Szentendre back to Budapest. And the "beautiful blue Danube" was blue.

IF YOU GO

Prague tourism: www.pis.cz/a/.

Vienna tourism: www.wien.gv.at.

Budapest tourism: www.budapestinfo.hu.

Spanish Riding School Vienna: www.spanische-reitschule.com.

See Budapest tour company: www.seebudapest.hu.

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