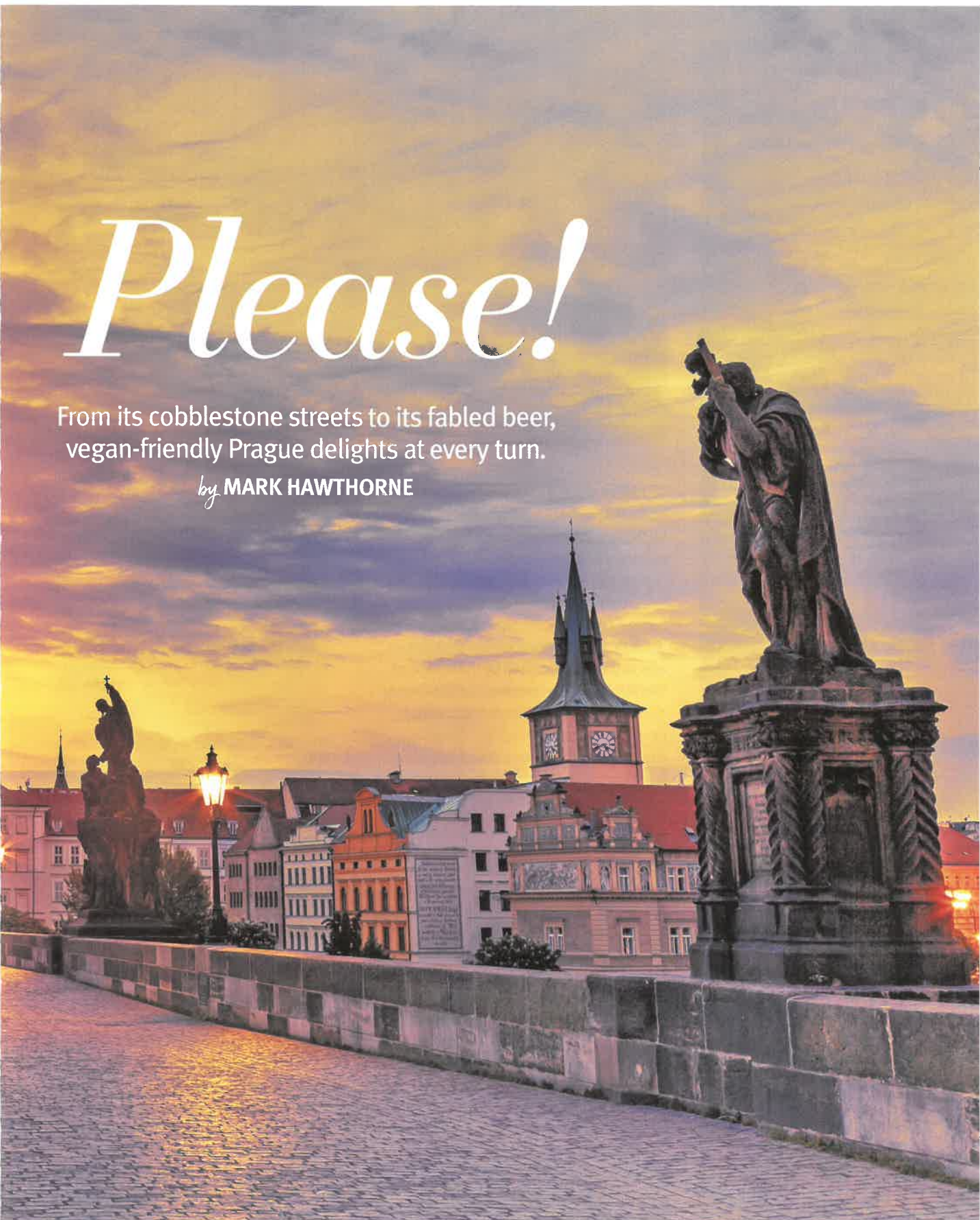


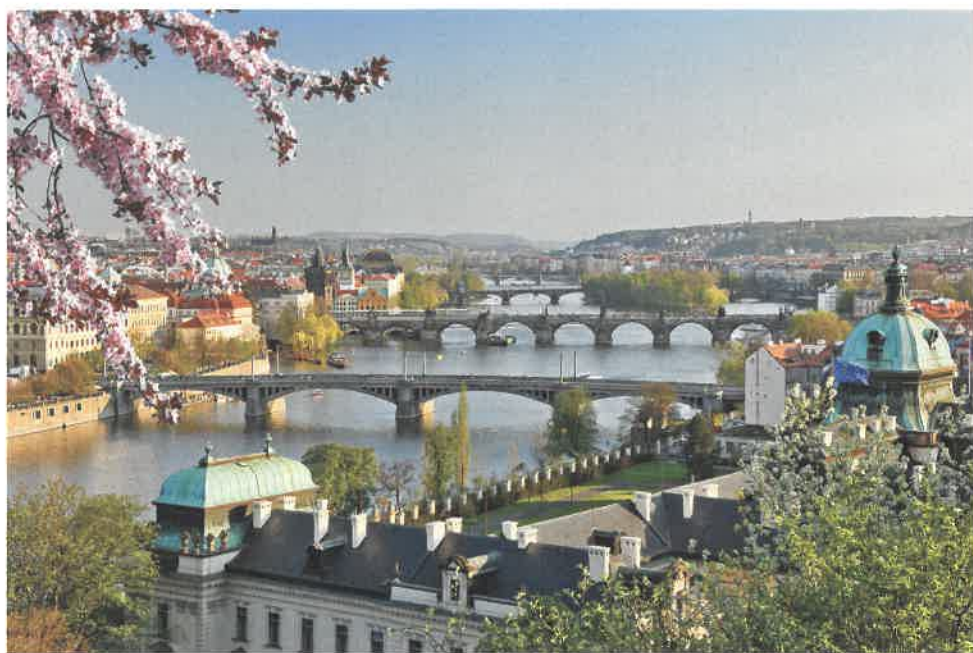


Please!

From its cobblestone streets to its fabled beer, vegan-friendly Prague delights at every turn.

by MARK HAWTHORNE





“Prague doesn’t let go,” wrote novelist Franz Kafka about his Central European birthplace and hometown. More than a century later, this enchanting city still captivates residents and visitors alike with its cultural splendor, thousand-year-old castles, and secluded green spaces. Indeed, because this one-time Medieval kingdom was virtually untouched by the bombs of World War II, it has retained its Old-World charm. After the decline of Communism, Prague reopened to tourism, unveiling a city whose graceful terrain and beguiling lore go hand-in-hand with its unrivaled beer and unabashed love of life.

Views and brews

Known as “the City of a Hundred Spires,” Prague earned its nickname in the 19th century thanks to the more than 500 church towers that punctuate the skyline; one can hardly visit the Czech capital without spending much of the time gazing upward at a wide range of architectural styles from Romanesque to Rococo. But perhaps the best way to appreciate the red-roofed townscape is from above, and, in addition to delivering a millennium of history, Prague Castle provides one of the loftiest scenic lookouts from high on a hill.

Prep for your visit to the castle with a relaxing lunch at Natureza Vegetarian House, near the 12th-century Church of St. Lawrence, where you can dine al fresco



in the garden beneath a leafy canopy of trees. Try the vegan bean chili with smoked tempeh and sour cream or the mouthwatering tofu curry with red pepper, fresh cilantro, and carrots served over jasmine rice, both of which go great with a glass of pilsner, a refreshing pale lager invented in Western Bohemia in 1842. Get to the restaurant between 11am and 2pm and you’ll pay only 138 Czech *koruna* (about \$6) for soup and a main dish.

The castle is a short, slightly steep walk from there, or you can catch a tram and disembark at the Pražský Hrad stop. Admission to the castle grounds is free, as is the remarkable view, but most of the attractions inside charge a fee. The St. Vitus Cathedral, a Gothic landmark that took nearly 600 years to complete, is a

must-see. The interior—with enormous and vivid stained-glass windows, imposing columns, and stunning arches more than 100 feet overhead—impresses with its daunting scale.

Also not to be missed within the castle complex is Golden Lane, a narrow row of charming, tiny homes. In recent years, the dwellings have been transformed into gift shops and museums, but they were built in the late-16th century to house the castle guards. The lane's name grew from the legend that the houses were later occupied by alchemists trying to turn base metal into gold. Many intriguing personalities have called this street home, including Kafka himself, who resided at number 22 from 1916 to 1917.

From here, a 15-minute stroll brings you to Vegan's Prague, which not only specializes in plant-based versions of traditional Czech fare, but offers spectacular views of the castle and city from the rooftop terrace. Try the potato goulash—a vegetable medley with potatoes and onions, garnished with pickled cucumber—or the housemade dumplings and smoked tempeh in a creamy sauce paired with a pint of unfiltered Vinohradská 13° lager, and you've got dinner fit for a monarch. Still thirsty? The U Krále Brabantského tavern, which has been open daily since 1375, is just around the corner and is one of the oldest pubs in Prague (Mozart supposedly tossed back a few here).

Time travel

While the atmospheric castle district is quiet and comparatively sparse, walking across the legendary Charles Bridge—bookended by Gothic towers and enlivened with saintly statuary—to the bank of the languid Vltava River brings you to Old Town. Despite the moniker, things are a bit busier here, with more noteworthy buildings, cafés, and historic sites per block than most other cities could hope for. It's also been wonderfully pedestrianized, making this an ideal quarter to simply meander in.

The heart of Old Town is the main square, a bustling expanse bordered by palaces, pubs, and Medieval burgher houses. Tourists and locals alike mingle with musicians and artists selling their



wares, and soak up the ambiance over a meal at the many eateries with outdoor seating. Among the most impressive structures is the Old Town Hall, whose 230-foot-tall tower is adorned with an astronomical clock called "the Orloj" that attracts large crowds at the top of every hour, when colorful carved apostles activate figures representing Death, a Miser, and Vanity. This enormous horological masterpiece, installed in 1410, not only keeps Old Bohemian time (when the day began at sunset), Babylonian time (sunrise to sunset), Central European time (marked with a sun hand), and Sidereal time (based on the movement of the stars caused by Earth's rotation), it also tracks the position of the celestial bodies.

Radiating from the square are dozens of maze-like cobbled lanes that invite exploration of what is arguably Prague's most wander-worthy neighborhood. Art galleries, boutiques, and even a beer museum seem perfectly at home beside churches, synagogues, and theaters. And in a city known for its selection of vegan restaurants, the Old Town district offers perhaps the greatest assortment. Lunch at Forky's, with its casual atmosphere and upstairs-downstairs seating, is an ideal way to fortify a day of sightseeing. Sure, there are plenty of healthy choices there, including the customizable Superbowl (with quinoa, chickpeas, nuts, and beets)

Beer Necessities

With a brewing tradition that goes back to 993 AD, the Czech Republic imbibes more beer (or *pivo*) per capita than any other country. Do like the locals and enjoy the popular adult libation, but first, fortify yourself with these *pivo* pointers.

- 1 Pubs are generally supplied by a single brewery, though you'll find several types on offer. Just say, "*pivo, prosím*" (pee-vo, pro-seem), meaning "beer, please."
- 2 Servers bring beer to your table and mark everything you drink on a tab. Some pubs expect you'll keep drinking and will continue to bring a new serving until you say you've had enough.
- 3 Expect to pay about \$1.50 for a 16-ounce glass, called *velký*, meaning large. For the 10-ounce glass, ask for *malý* (pronounced mal-eh).
- 4 Czech beers are divided into four main categories: *lehké* ("light"), *výčepní* ("draught"), *ležák* ("lager"), and *speciál* ("special").
- 5 Most, if not all, Czech beers are vegan.



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and the Buddha Broccoli Bowl (rice noodles with tempeh, broccoli, mushrooms, and green beans in a peanut-ginger sauce), but this is a vacation, after all. So go ahead and tuck into the Classic Not Dog or Cheez Burger.

Once you're satiated, a 20-minute walk gets you to Wenceslas Square, scene of some of Prague's most important events including the 1989 Velvet Revolution, a peaceful demonstration that led to the ruling communist party agreeing to hold free elections. Named for the patron saint of Bohemia, the square (actually more of a broad boulevard) is also home to the National Museum and the city's main shopping center.

Botany to birdwatching

Urbanites can easily leave the busy thrum of the city behind in Prague, where an abundance of romantic parks and gardens invite you to experience the tranquility of flora and fauna. One of the most scenic is Divoká Šárka, a nature reserve on the northwestern edge of the city. Though not Prague's largest park—that would be 250-acre Stromovka—Divoká Šárka is still an expansive local favorite that is a genuine oasis. Well-marked trails guide you through a rugged valley landscape of limestone cliffs and primeval forests populated by bats, badgers, and an estimated 80 species of birds, including grey wagtails, marsh tits, and red-backed shrikes. As part of a full-day outing, order a to-go lunch from the Loving Hut at Na Poříčí 25, walk a few blocks west to catch a tram on Revoluční, get off at Divoká Šárka, and then picnic on the park's grassy meadow or lean against an oak tree.

Whatever your travel style—budget backpacker or luxury lover—you'll find Prague as welcoming as it is picturesque. English is widely spoken, though a few words in Czech, such as *děkuji* ("thank you," pronounced dye-koo-yi) and *prosím* ("please," pronounced pro-seem) will show your appreciation for a city and culture the residents are rightly proud of. **V**

Mark Hawthorne (markhawthorne.com) is an author whose veganism was inspired by his travels around the world. His latest book is the 10th-anniversary edition of *Striking at the Roots: A Practical Guide to Animal Activism*.