

A Journey Through AMSTERDAM & PRAGUE

Text and photos by Bryan Koh

IN MOST of my travels, I try to fit in one or two good meals to round up the trip. Sights, attractions, museums and history – they are like the staple, the expected and bland experience that is highly recommended on TripAdvisor but would be neither spectacular nor mind-blowing. Worse, it may just lead you to busloads of tourists and a handful of pickpockets on weekends.

Food is different. Food gives you a glimpse into the complex dynamics that shape a society, on a plate, which you can taste. It tells you a story – its history, the disparity in social class, the blend of different cultures, the influence of colonisation and the fertility of the lands. It may or may not be on TripAdvisor's top 100 list of must-do, but it is always an experience that you can reflect on, to which people can relate.

My travels this summer brought me to two very contrasting places geographically, socially and politically. Holland, a coastal province in Netherlands, was a colonial superpower ruled by a King, while Czech Republic, previously a colony and communist, is landlocked.

The Dutch capital

When we think of Holland, Amsterdam comes to mind. I had the privilege of spending two nights there, and the experience was unexpected but enjoyable. I always imagined Amsterdam to be a place of vice, where teenagers get high on amphetamines and retirees smoke weed while playing chess by the canal. I imagined it to be a place where couples spend their honeymoons just so they can feel closer to the brink of danger. But I couldn't be more wrong.

I checked into a very quaint and charming hotel and was given, what I believe, the best room available. Occupying the entire attic, the room was clean, decently sized and overlooked the canal. It prodded my imagination and gave



Clockwise from top

The quaint room at Ambassade Hotel, Amsterdam

Mouth-watering dishes enjoyed in Amsterdam

Long wait to visit the Anne Frank House

me a sense of how Anne Frank might have lived half a century ago, even though that vision was rather farfetched. I wasted no time and made my way to the Anne Frank House only to



Clockwise from top left
 Canal view of Amsterdam at night
 Astronomical Clock in Prague
 Human skeletons decorate the walls of the Bone Church, Kutna Hora, Prague
 The fine cuisine savoured in Prague
 Mum and I posing for the camera as we dined
 The crowd taking in the Nightwatch by Rembrandt

find a queue snaking more than a hundred metres long. Not wishing to waste time queuing, I booked myself on a river cruise instead.

The river cruise turned out to be an extremely entertaining experience that celebrated the magnificence and architectural genius of the Dutch in their heyday. The organisation of the canal ring area, the engineering of dunes, dikes and dams to channel water away from the third of Holland that sat under sea level, not to mention Golden Age artists like Rembrandt and impressionists like Van Gogh – such orchestral brilliance is often forgotten, but they ought to be remembered when we think of Amsterdam.

Then the sun set and it was time for dinner. Dry-aged Dutch ribeye steak, Dutch white asparagus with morel mushrooms (seasonal), and cod from the Dutch coast paired with amazing wine. The freshness of the produce, the intricate presentation, the delicate taste and balance of flavours all reflect Holland as a province – precise, passionate and dedicated to their art.

The journey continues

After Amsterdam, my next stop was Prague, the capital city of Czech Republic, known for its baroque buildings, Gothic churches and Astronomical Clock. I stayed at the Jalta Boutique Hotel, which used to be a nuclear fallout shelter and the military base of the Warsaw Pact countries during the Cold War. It is right smack in the centre of Wenceslas Square, next to the National Museum. The city of Prague is starkly different from Amsterdam. The people are more wary, cold and unwelcoming of tourists. This is understandable given

that the Velvet Revolution happened only recently in 1989.

The Bone Church in Kutna Hora, with skeletons of at least 40,000 adults decorating its walls and halls, reminded me of the Black Death and Hussite Wars. Even the Astronomical Clock in the Old Town Square told the story of a clockmaker, Master Hanus, who had his eyes gorged out by the city councilmen just so he could not repeat his work. Similar stories were told about Gothic churches and Jewish synagogues. Living in this century in a place like Singapore, I find it difficult to imagine the tumultuous life that people have led in such a place for centuries. As I marvelled at the beautiful architectural structures and the stories behind them, I couldn't help but pause for a moment to appreciate the country that I grew up in.

As my journey through the two cities came to a close, I sat with my mum, atop the Prague Castle Gardens, in Terasa u Zlate Studne, the best restaurant in Czech Republic. Taking in the scenic landscape, we talked about the history of Czechoslovakia, the mechanics of the Astronomical Clock and the poor quality of seafood in Czech Republic. ■



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