

I started writing this travelogue while on a bus going from Karlovy Vary to Prague. It had a stewardess, movies and Wi-Fi! And it was full of folks Czeching it out. They know how to use public transport. Gas prices here are about \$7.50/gallon. Yup, public transport is popular.

This has been another memorable trip to the Czech Republic; from the GitGo. Itinerary on Delta was to fly from San Diego to Salt Lake City, SLC to Paris, Paris to Prague. Right!

Made it to SLC on time. Made it onto the plane to Paris on time. Took off on time. Stopped before lift off with a sudden lurching of the plane just before the end of the runway. Seems that they noticed during takeoff that the pilots window was not completely shut. Not a good thing if flying over 8 hours to Paris at over 30,000 feet and with seriously subzero temps.

The weight and speed of the plane caused the brakes to heat-up so much that four of the tires deflated. The tire repair took so much time that it pushed the flight crew schedule beyond limits so we had to spend the night sleeping on a board (from "Bed and board" where you get two types of board at the El-cheapo hotel they put us up at) in SLC, and departing early the next morning to fly to Detroit, JFK in NYC and then to Prague a day late. To relament, I spent a night at El Crapo in SLC instead of at the Prague Hilton. To lessen the pain and suffering Delta gave us three \$6 meal vouchers (redeemable only at the airport which stopped serving meals before we left for the hotel) and a \$200 voucher for use with Delta. Well, one wonders if such a something is better than nothing?

So I arrive at Prague a day late and a night's sleep short but I did get a most pleasant greeting upon arrival. Martina Houdek is a Czech student in Prague who visited Carlsbad a few years ago representing Karlovy Vary as a winner of a photo contest that we exhibited in our fair city. She heard that someone from Carlsbad was arriving and wanted to show her appreciation for her

treatment during her visit. She showed me how to take the tram/Metro systems from the airport to my hotel (much less expensive than a shuttle), her college of arts where they teach photography and book repair and digital media, a hidden student coffee shop that serves great brew at student prices, and some of the Prague landmarks that I had not yet visited nor even knew about.

The next day the City of Karlovy Vary brought a van to my Prague hotel and picked me up as well as a three-member delegation from their Swedish sister city of Varberg. All three spoke impeccable English, one with a perfect American accent. They were a quite well humored group, which made for a pleasant and informative two-hour drive to Karlovy Vary. Our driver, Filipe, also spoke good English and answered our questions about plants and buildings and cultural oddities.

We checked into our hotel, meals and lodging compliments of Karlovy Vary, and had an hour to prepare for the reception with the Lord Mayor. I had to hustle in order to iron a shirt and unpack the gifts I had brought for him: a proclamation from our Mayor making May 6 Carlsbad/Karlovy Vary Day in Carlsbad, CA; a translated copy mounted in a small frame with a surfboard on the side showing our city logo; a historical picture of the site of the original artesian well with the water so similar to Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad in Bohemia) that we adopted its name; a book and offer from a Carlsbad museum curator who would like to present an exhibit in Karlovy Vary in the future and, most uniquely, six bottles of a first-ever brewing of both dark and amber versions of an herbal style beer infused with Karlovy Vary's own Becherovka (an increasingly popular high proof herbal bitters designed to assist one in healing of body, mind and especially spirit). Whew, it was nip and tuck (the latter being the ironed shirt) but I made it on time.

The Lord Mayor's reception at the classical European style Imperial Hotel was elegant. Since this year marks the 20-year anniversary of our Sister City relationship ("Twinning" in Europe) he presented me

with a specially made Mosher glass vase etched with the commemorative details and we both signed the huge City Book to mark the event. Really! I am in an historical archive for a European city that dates back over 500 years. I can now claim to be rubbing signatures with centuries of European aristocrats, politicians and notables. It is quite possible that I am now legitimately Cool!

He graciously accepted all the gifts and then promptly asked if we could start with the beer? Nice. However I knew he was in jest (see, rubbing signatures with European aristocrats of yore has already influenced my vocabulary) since the beer was not yet cooled. It did, however, show a most cool label designed in collaboration with our Carlsbad Sister City Ambassadors webmaster (Rich Paulson), the Carlsbad brew master Mad Eric, his artist friend Marsha and his explosive group of friends and associates. Truly, they detonate unexploded ordinance from military bases. Hence, Eric created what he calls an explosively subtle brew.

After this delightful repast we adjourned to Karlovy Vary's renovated Music Hall for an evening that honored community celebrities and allowed us to hear their symphony present a selection of French horn pieces and concluding with a most moving presentation of the topical *New World Symphony* (topical since this American was the honored guest of the Lord Mayor because of our 20-year anniversary).

And from here we toddled off to have an evening nightcap at the major site of the thermal springs where the blue evening lighting was punctuated by brass horn fan fare. I noticed I was now walking with a more erect posture and had affected a slightly bemused smile while holding my wine glass with thumb and forefinger and extended pinkie.

The next morning yet another hotel presented a sumptuous breakfast with soft, live music and nattily attired service staff who

were most attentive to needs and glances. Ahem, I must say it was indeed delightful and in quite good taste.

We were escorted just outside the hotel to the waiting Lord Mayor, brightly attired majorettes and a full band. It struck up a march and the Lord Mayor led us in a procession that grew in size as bystanders joined us in our walk to the presenting area. There the visiting ambassadors, the sister city delegations and other dignitaries were introduced and the area's bishop spoke to us. The Lord Mayor announced the official opening of the Spa Season and the bishop and his retinue were off to bless the ancient Twelve Springs of healing thermal waters. He conducted a High Mass and joined us all for a lunch. Foods for the body and the soul. The bishop's demonstrated grace and humility allowed me to add them to my growing inventory of old world qualities.

The afternoon was free time to visit our choice of musical venues throughout the area. I chose, instead, to continue in the spiritual vein; another delegate and I received a tour of the Becherovka museum and were allowed to sample all their uplifting products. This is pretty high proof stuff and I now added an elevated level of exuberance to my already impressive collection of important attributes for any international bon vivant. (Burp!)

Here I am at a disadvantage in describing the evening's events. My usual superlatives are nearly exhausted. I may have to increase my pretensions and dig into a thesaurus or even create some. It was uh, well, errr... really great!!!

First of all is the setting; the Grand Hotel Pupp. And that title is perhaps a bit of an understatement. It is not grand in the over-the-top Las Vegas, The Donald, Mafioso senses. It is grand in the style of old time elegance. I won't further deplete my available list of adjectives in attempting to describe it, allow me to refer you to that James Bond early classic movie filmed there; *Casino Royale*. See for yourself. It's still like that.

The evening's theme was, appropriately enough, James Bond. Each guest got a casino chip in a discreet small black bag, the evening's healthy dose of chilled Becherovka, and a seat at a table featuring a silver candle-umbra with classically dripping candles and a never empty chilled wine decanter. I wore a black tie but eschewed my sun glasses given the candle light and need to better appreciated the bountiful beautiful babes ... ahem, excuse me, but they had this bevy of downright delightful young ladies sitting at blackjack tables and tastefully lounging around the rows and rows of white and red red glasses. I switched between French and British accents.

A jazz, swing, old standards band from Prague provided the evening's music as well as that for the can-can dancers. While discreetly tapping my toes and drumming my fingers to the music I was unable avoid adding an occasional set of raised eyebrows and approving grin. Nice background music for our international, multi-cultural yet urbane discussions. It was now apparent that I should have went unshaven for a week to better affect the Sean Connery look. But making-do is an American trait so I periodically raised my right eyebrow and half-smiled. Did get a return smile from the Peruvian ambassador. True, it was her mother's birthday and they had an evening of drinking already behind them but still, I took it as an approval. Actors take it when and where they can get it.

It was now after 8:00 and we hadn't eaten yet. Drink yes, food no. Then the attendees stirred and our hostess, Jitka, guided the delegates to one of the areas lavishly supplied with hot and cold food choices. Being a vegetarian was no problem given a tasty lasagna and sundry hot and cold veggies and breads and pastries.

Suddenly explosions were heard outside, a sign that a fireworks display was afoot, hmmm... what is the word equivalent of "afoot" in the sky; aleap? We oh so casually moseyed out the door and saw a lengthy aerial display. It was intense in that multiple rockets shot up each moment with some exploding at mid-level and

others at higher levels. There was no gap from ground to sky for quite awhile always with a throbbing James Bond theme pulsing from the park directly in front of us. Christopher, one of the Swedish delegates, had knowledge of how much it cost for a lesser display from his city and estimated that it might have cost as much as \$10K for this extravaganza. It was worth it to us.

During the evening the previous Lord Mayor, Werner Hauptmann, saw me and introduced himself and his wife. We had hosted their visit to our Carlsbad a year and a half ago and added a memorable tour of Hollywood and some other L.A. highlights. Werner is now in Brussels working with the EU on behalf of the Czechs. I had arranged a sunny day of golf with him at our ocean-view municipal golf course. He enjoyed it so much that he wanted to treat me to a round at Karlovy Vary's nicest course. Sounded good to me. His wife is sales manager at the Hotel Thermal, a room was arranged for me that night, I cancelled my room in Prague and we were set to go the next day for what turned out to be a sunny, warm, clear (except for the dirt I raised during my game) round of golf at a lovely forested course just outside Karlovy Vary. But I digress.

After the fireworks we went back to the Grand Hotel for more music, more performance dancing and more delegate and honored guest dancing. We adjourned around midnight and returned with smiles to our hotel. These folks sure know how to present a most impressive *Festive Opening of the Spa Season*. This was my second one and I hope it is the front-end of a continuing series.

So now my stay in Karlovy Vary is complete. I have once again returned to the homeland. I've suspended the swagger, the left hand in the pants pocket and right hand holding a wine glass, the bemused smile and slowly tilting head. In there place I have this big, cheesy grin.

Tommy Hersant, Carlsbad CA, 11 May 2011