

Brno, July, 2007



As the school term came to an end, eight intrepid travellers from Holy Cross set their sights on Brno, the Czech Republic's second city and capital of the Moravian Province.

Here you see the whole group plus our local friend and guide, Helena Vosmekova, standing in front of the Plague Memorial in Namesti Svobody, or Freedom Square, the square right at the centre of this busy and attractive city. The week was a fast-moving experience which was marked by much laughter, confusion, language problems and of course rain! As usual, the arrival of Neil and Marion in any country brings out the clouds and the rain always falls, no matter where or at what time of year.

I had not brought an umbrella so I had to sneak some shelter under Malcolm's on our little boat trip. The boat was sailing on a lake north of the city and taking us to Hrad Veveri or Veveri Castle.



Here you see Malcolm and Neil standing on the ramparts and looking towards the already partially restored section. This castle is one of many in and around the region which are yet to be fully developed for tourism but which have enormous potential once the development is completed.

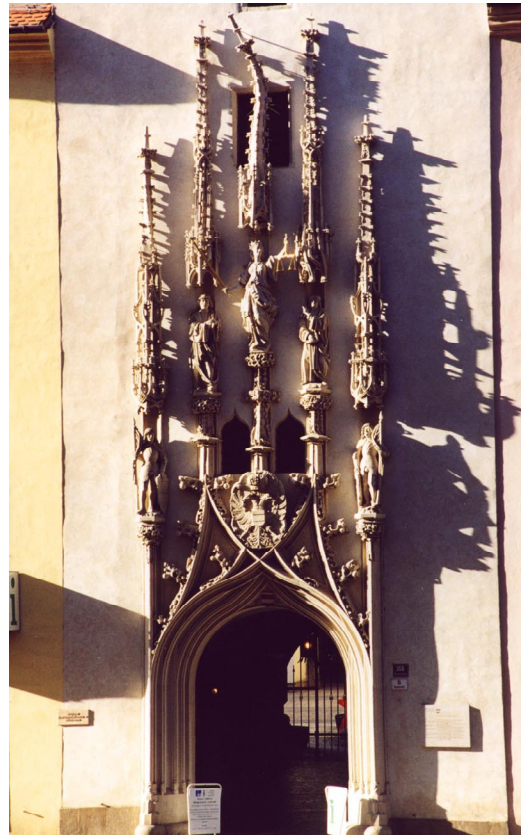
We were all amazed at the value of our ticket. For about £2.50 we spent a good hour on the boat and gained entry free to the castle. It will be interesting to visit again in 10 years to see how things have moved on. We were astonished to read that Winston Churchill had stayed in the castle on three occasions, the last being on honeymoon after his wedding!



Back in Brno, we visited the tourist information office which is in the old Town Hall and where you find the famous Brno crocodile, hanging from the ceiling. It has become a symbol of the city, but I have struggled to find anyone who knows the reason why!

The portal of the Old Town Hall has a strange feature. Here you see one of the pinnacles leaning horribly to the left. Why? The tradition is that the builder wasn't paid properly and so he left a wonky pinnacle as a gesture of contempt!

The big tourist attraction of Brno is its amazing and wonderful Spillberk Castle. You could spend a week here and still not see everything to your satisfaction.



Part of the fascinating features are the castle casemates (from the Italian *dark room*) in which many people have been imprisoned and tortured over the years. Here you see Malcolm modelling for a bit of gentle body stretching, just to please the tourists!

A visit to Spellberk Castle, just 10 minutes walk from the Namesti Svobody, is a delight and it presents brilliant vistas over the whole city from it's vantage points. Here you see the gang without Marion, the photographer.



On the Thursday, we took a train to Blansko. Blansko is 23 kilometres from Brno and deep in the Moravian countryside. There we planned a visit to the famous Moravian Karst and down the really exciting Punkva Caves.

Down, down, down we went, marvelling at the stalactites and malactites and all kinds of exotic shapes. At one point the caves reminded me of an ornate Hindu Temple.

After going down, of course, we had to come back up and the steps were quite steep. Some members of our group had slight mobility issues and I marvelled at the stoic manner in which these large and numerous steps were all taken in their stride! The temperature in the caves was quite low and some members of the group felt the need to put on their coats, even though outside it was about 30 degrees!



Then, just in time for our tired legs, we came to the unexpected pleasure of an underground boat ride. We strained our aching legs to reach down into the boats and take our seats, wobbling quite scarily at first. Travelling at what seemed to be quite high speeds, we swept through the caverns only just avoiding head injuries as we whipped round corners and saw new and strange vistas before and above us.

The caves are fully illuminated and the lighting does show off the caves really well. It's a bit like a

combined visit to the Blue John Caves and the Speedwell Caverns in Derbyshire. Some members of the group bought nice-looking jewellery from the Cave shop and then we were heading down the hill and back to Blansko.



One of the pleasures we experienced in Blansko was meeting up with an old friend, Marta Pernicova, who some of you may remember visiting The Rectory a few years ago with her now husband Jenda? Here you see Marta and Helena at Blansko station, getting ready to return to Brno after our visit.

Marta had made arrangements for lunch in a local café and we all squeezed round the table and had some strange conversations with the waiter. One person spotted a strange item – “haggis” and immediately ordered it. I have never seen haggis on a Czech menu before, and so I wasn’t surprised when the actual dish that was served proved to be something quite different to the Scottish delicacy! It was more like brawn or pressed meats. However, it proved tasty and so the waiter was asked for a “doggy bag” and after calling on our local Czech friends to explain she duly left the restaurant with her haggis under her arm!

With time pressing, Marion, Neil, Malcolm and Helena made a bus trip and then a 2 km walk to Slavkov-u-Brna, or the battlefield of Austerlitz as it is better known to us. Here in 1805 Napoleon’s army defeated larger forces of the Austrian and Russian armies combined. The battle is also known as the battle of the Three Emperors! Here you see Malcolm standing outside the Memorial Hall.



On our final day, we visited The Villa Tugendhat which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Built in the 1920s, it is an early example of “open-plan” architecture and the whole house and gardens feel simply wonderful to be in.

As well as the design features, the position of the house is also magnificent with views over the valley towards the wonderful skyline of Brno.

After this visit we had a drink in a local café and Malcolm made a new friend!

Our final day in Brno was coming to a conclusion and we had to head for the airport where we were met by Helena’s mother to bid us farewell.

Then we hit a problem. The Check-In person questioned one of our group about her travel documents and we had a unnerving few minutes as senior people became involved, then the police. It was all solved after a mobile phone conversation with an officer in London cleared our member for travel and so it was that we counted 8 out and then counted 8 back again, by the skin of our teeth!



If you would like to visit a really excellent central European city with wonderful architecture and trams, and squares and very inexpensive hotels and restaurants, try Brno. We loved it.

Neil Richardson