

## BOHEMIAN FAIRYTALE

By Kalpana Sunder

HE road to Cesky Krumlov winds through rolling hills and forests of birch where Czech people with baskets go about their autumnal occupation of mushroom gathering.

The UNESCO World Heritage town in the Czech Republic gets its name from an old German expression (thanks to its proximity to the Austrian border) for 'crooked meadow' because of its topography — the babbling Vltava snakes around in curves between the wooded hills of southern Bohemia.

The red roofs, towers with conical witches' hats and angled cobblestone lanes of this medieval town have an intriguing mix of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architecture where neither a Pizza Hut, nor a McDonald's has intruded. Cesky Krumlov's advantage is that it was considered a backwater and therefore spared the devastation of wars and remained in a slumber during the heyday of communism.

Our Hotel Ruze in Cesky Krumlov was an old 16thcentury Jesuit monastery and its atmospheric interiors are still like those of a Renaissance palace the hotel is studded with knightly armour, coats of arms, stag's heads, and stunning views of the river and castle from its windows.

The circular streets are peppered with buildings that have ornate gables, Renaissance murals and alchemistical symbols. Japanese tourists walk around in hired medieval attire, holding their cameras like ancient daggers.

The central Svornosti Square, was the site of book burnings and trials of women considered 'witches' today it is surrounded by multi-hued burgher houses and an ornate plague column erected as a

thanksgiving for the town having escaped the 'Black Death'. Many heritage properties are today attractive shops, selling garnet and amber jewellery, glassware, porcelain wooden toys.

The glittering centerpiece of the town is a gargantuan, picture-perfect castle on a rocky promontory, which has been owned by a succession of noble families over the ages. It's the country's second largest castle

with five courtyards and more than 40 buildings. The exotic castle tower, reminiscent of a minaret, is awash in pinks, reds and yellows. There is an illusion of windows and alcoves - all painted on, like medieval wallpaper!

Obese brown bears still live in the moat, looking disgustedly at the visitors who peer at them from above. Keeping bears in the moat has been an ancient

tradition. Legend has it that the first bears were a gift to the Rozmberk family from the Italian Orsini family. It is said that the Rozmberks adopted the bear on their coat of arms as The powerful Rozmberk family

owned the castle for over three centuries and the town has their family symbol. We trekked up to the castle for a private tour of its opulent interiors. The Gothic

courtyards are decorated with 16th-century frescoes and a Renaissance-style 'sgraffito' where an outer layer of plaster is scraped off to reveal a darker layer beneath.

The ornate rooms are a feast for the eyes: stucco decorations, intricately worked wooden cabinets, ceramic heaters that sometimes doubled as 'medieval microwaves', one of the largest collections of Belgian tapestries

UK's peerless department store,

Knightsbridge neighbourhood,

located at the uber-wealthy

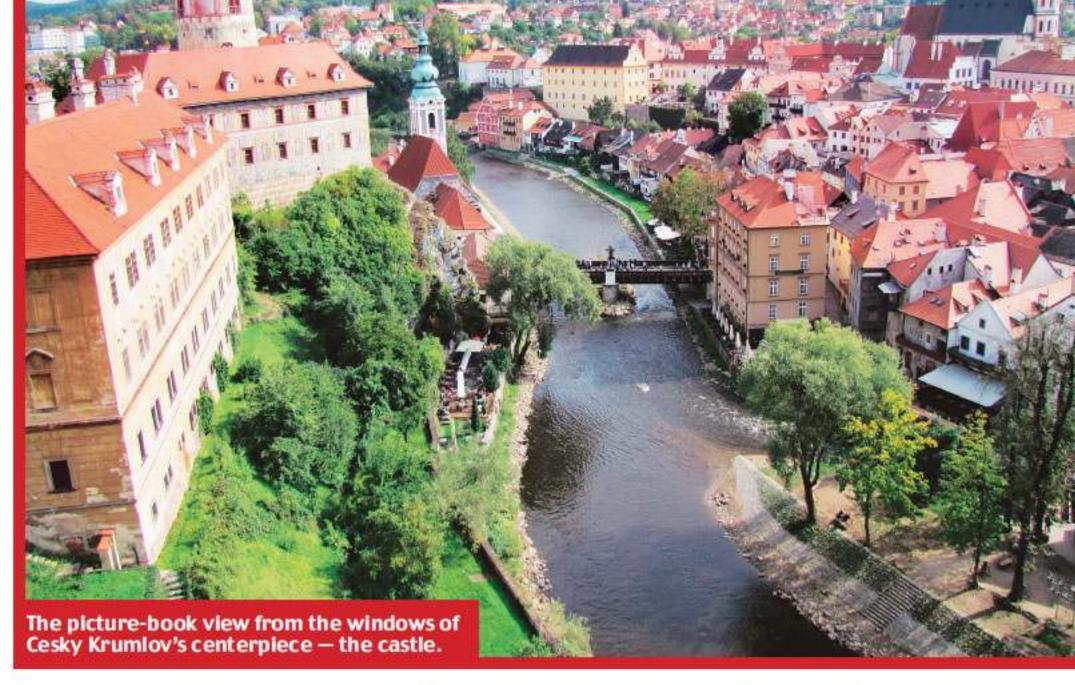
boasts of one million square

feet of selling space spread

across 330 departments.

covering the walls and bear rugs on the wooden floors. The piece de resistance is an over-the-top gold-gilded carriage made of nut wood belonging to the Eggenberg family, which was used to deliver gifts to the Pope in Rome. As I enjoyed the panoramic sweep from the castle windows, I felt like the lord and master of all I surveyed!

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Mail Today, New Delhi, Sunday, November 13, 2011

By Angshukanta Chakraborty

Alexander MacQueen & Amy Winehouse: We begin our alphabetical survey by paying tribute to two of London's most genuinely talented people. The recent deaths of these two superstars have left a dent on the city's radical charm, but they aren't going.

Brick Lane: It is home to the Bangladeshi community and of the original Sylheti settlers. Soak in the flavours of the community, dig the dishes at the curry houses to revive your palate, and visit the Jamme Masjid or Great London Mosque.

Cycling: With Prime Minister David Cameron and Mayor Boris Johnson showing the way,

it's the rage in London. Join cycling enthusiasts and partake of events such as the World Naked Bike Ride, Mayor of London's Skyride and Critical Mass.

Docklands Light Railway: Bearing a cute resemblance to a toy train, this automated light metro system opened on August 31, 1987, to support the re-development of the Docklands region in London's East End. The DLR is now 31km long with 45 stations along its Edgware Road: Known for its

delectable Middle Eastern cuisine, it is teeming with Moroccan, Lebanese, Egyptian and even Greek restaurants. Late night bars and shisha cafes frame this aromatic stretch, which was once a hub of French Huguenots fleeing religious persecution.

Fish & Chips: The omnipresent London snack has just got a makeover. The

once de riqueur (and now threatened) cod or haddock is increasingly being replaced by basa, the catfish from Vietnam known locally as the Mekong river cobbler.

Greenwich Mean Time: GMT became the central time zone when, at the height of Britain's impe-

rial power in 1884, an international conference decided that this spot was the location of the zero longitude, or the Prime Meridian.

Harrods: UK's peerless department store boasts of one million square feet of selling space spread across 330 departments.

Islington: One of the most dynamic boroughs of London circling the famous Angel tube staAs the 2012 Olympics draws nearer, here's our alphabetical list of the reasons why London is the mother of all cities

tion (it has the London Underground's longest escalator), it is famous for its cluster of cafes and clubhouses, has featured in works of literature such as Charles Dickens's Our Mutual Friend and Douglas Adams's Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy.

Jack the Ripper: The unidentified serial killer from Whitechapel made headlines in 1888 as he disembowelled slum-dwelling prostitutes. These surgical mutilations have gone down as history's unsolved mysteries, complete with the 'From Hell' letter that had 'Jack the Ripper' as the undersigned.

Knightsbridge: Home to some of the world's richest people, this road running the south of Hyde Park has some of the most expensive addresses, including the

department stores Harrods and Harvey Nichols, and the flagship outlets of Jimmy Choo and Manolo Blah-

and

after

Robert Sidney, 2nd

consider the nik . **British art of** Leicester queueing as an Square: This pedestrianised almost extinct practice square is the even though public soul of the city's nightlife politeness continues dining out scene. to be the norm Named

Some

in London Earl of Leicester, this area has many attractions, including a 19thcentury statue of Shakespeare, Tom Cruise's handprints on a pavement tile and several the-

atres that comprise the legendary West End.

Multicultural London English: MLE, a.k.a. Jafaican in the local parlance, is an eclectic mix of elements from the Caribbean, South Asian and West African lingo. MLE is mainly spoken in Inner London and has inspired a slew of literary works, notably Gautam Malkani's Londonstani.

**Notting Hill Carnival:** The largest street festival after the Rio Camival, the highlight of this annual event is the presence of vivacious dancers in colourful costumes of Caribbean origin, especially from Trinidad and Tobago.

Olympics: With the 2012 Summer Olympics, officially known as the Games of the XXX Olympiad, London will be the only city to have hosted three Olympics, including those in 1908 and 1948.

Pubs: London's vibrant drinking culture has drawn famous people. Keats, Shelley and Byron had their pints at The Spaniard Inn in Hampstead Heath, Karl Marx loved The Flask on Highgate, and Dove was the favourite of Ernest Hemingway and Graham Greene. Queue Please: Some say that the British practice of queuing is a dying art, but not many agree. This seamlessly executed tradi-

hallmark of British life, along with the special brand of literary humour, Earl Grey tea and complaining about the weather. Rock: The 'British Invasion' of American popular culture began when the Beatles exploded on the world music scene. Ever since, British Rock has been spawning sub-genres, including beat music

(Rolling Stones), hard rock (Jimi

tion of public politeness is still a

Hendrix), heavy metal (Led Zeppelin), punk (Sex Pistols), psychedelic rock (Pink Floyd), new romanticism and (Duran Duran). Soho: Known as the entertainment district for much of the 20thcentury, it is now the heart of central London, teeming with late night cafes, sex shops and even religious institutions such as the

T.S. Eliot: This quintessential 20th-century poet gave the city much of its reservoir of urban

Hare Krishna temple.

metaphors, such as 'yellow fog', and 'hollow men', as he made poetry out of music hall language and cockney

ure their lives with coffee spoons." Underground: Also known as the 'Tube', this smooth-as-clockwork rapid transit system is the oldest underground railway in the world. Its first section was inaugurated in 1863 and electric trains were put in place as early as 1890.

voices. Most Londoners still "meas-

Victoria & Albert Museum: Located in South Kensington, the V&A houses as many as 40,000 art works, garments and objects of South Asian origin, making it the Mecca of Indophiles and those of us who just want to feel proud of our past accomplishments.

Wembley: Hotspot for football and music enthusiasts, and a South

Asian hub where Indian restaurants are as famous as the Wembley Stadium, which opened in 2007 as a 90,000-capacity venue built on the site of the old 1923 structure.

Xmas: The most beautiful time to be in London is Christmas, when the entire city is dressed in rainbow colours of joy offsetting the white-

ness of the abundant snow. Youth Hostels: A paradise for visiting students and backpackers, London offers several cheap motels to crash for the night and wake up to a

typical English breakfast.

Zara: It may be of Spanish origins, but London's hip youngsters have adopted Zara, making it the emblem of high street fashion in the city. It is better stocked and more current than the outlet at DLF Promenade in the city.

## Magical past comes alive in this quaint town

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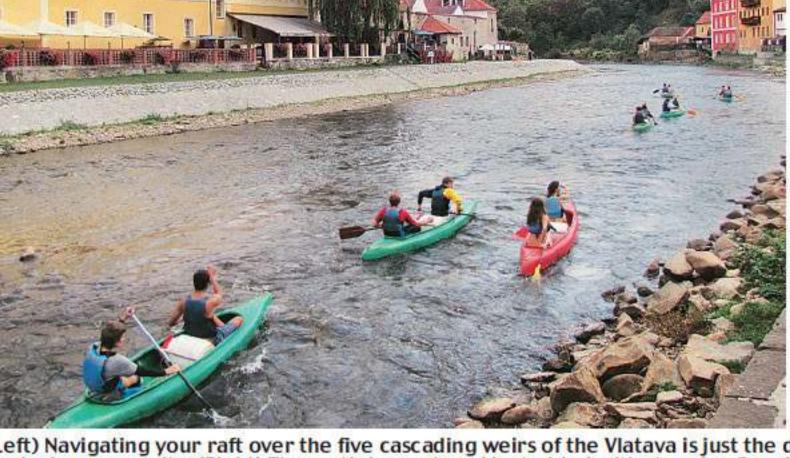
The castle also boasts of an intact Baroque theatre with ancient props, original costumes, more than 50-odd special effects machines and backwhere stunning performances are still staged. Our guide tells us why few Baroque theatres survived — all the special effects using gunpowder, candles and explosives often burnt down the wooden buildings!

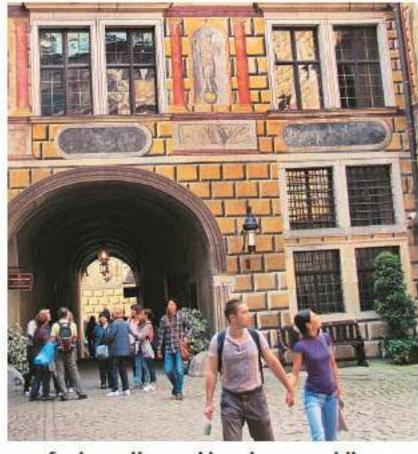
The show-stopper was the magnificent mirrored masquerade hall with bright Rococo-style frescoes. There are eye-catching illusionist paintings covering every square inch of the walls with dancing lords and ladies, faux balconies and balustrades with men leaping over them, presenting a surreal picture, where one is not sure what is real and what is not.

When we suffered from sensory overload, we took to the water. Rafting and canoeing on the Vltava river is very popular; if you want something lazier you can choose to float on a rubber tube. Navigating our raft over five cascading weirs was just the dose of

adrenalin we needed. Carp leapt up in the waters, fishermen tended their lines patiently along the picturesque

banks in bucolic bliss and the





(Left) Navigating your raft over the five cascading weirs of the Vlatava is just the dose of adrenalin you'd welcome while exploring a new city. (Right) The castle's courtyard is studded with stunning Renaissance-style frescoes and 'sgraffito'.

stunning architecture kept us captivated. Cesky Krumlov is not just time warp — it's a paradise for the outdoorsy. Major biking trails run through the town and you can even get a bird's eye view from a hot air balloon.

This town of 15,000 takes pride in celebrating its fabled past. We heard about the Celebration of riverside cafe gorging on traditional Czech cuisine, consisting of the Five-Petalled Rose, a three-

every year. Its main feature is a historical procession of jesters and fire-eating acrobats that passes through the old town. jousting tournaments and theatrical performances over glasses of mead. We spent a lazy afternoon in a

day festival taking place in June

with daisies and dumplings with crushed poppy seeds along with copious amounts of pilsner. Come night, the town takes on an incredibly romantic look — the

a millet casserole, potato soup

castle is all lit up, the lamplights glisten on the uneven cobblestones, strains of lilting music float in the air, and groups of

tourists on a myths and legends

tour visit sites where witches were burnt and alchemists lived. Standing on the wooden Lazebnicky Bridge that connects the town with the castle, it's easy to fantasise about fair maidens in long-trailing gowns and fierce lance-wielding knights walking down the twisted lanes.

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