

# Sunday Herald travel

## CZECH SYMPHONY



**VISTA-POINT** A sweeping view of Prague from the Strahov Monastery. PHOTO BY AUTHOR

# Prague paradise

**Adding generous amounts of history to her description of Prague in Czech Republic, KALPANA SUNDER recounts her second visit to the place.**

Artists, craftsmen, buskers and trinket sellers throng the bridge under the watchful eyes of the 30-odd baroque statues that line the bridge. John Nepomuk's statue is the most popular. St John refused to divulge the secrets of the Queen's confessions to King Wenceslaus IV. As a result, he was tortured, his tongue was cut off, and he was tossed off the Charles Bridge. On the base of St John's statue are two small plaques. According to legend, touching the plaque on the right brings good luck and guarantees your return to Prague. I did, and I am in Prague again, after a space of three years. And it is as ethereal. Only more crowded. The first stone of the Charles Bridge in Prague was laid in the year 1357 on the 9th of July at 5.31 in the morning. This exact timing forms the sequence of ascending and descending odd digits: 135797531. Emperor Charles IV believed that this magical combination of numbers would help in protecting the bridge. Today, this medieval bridge, beloved of movie directors, is open only to pedestrians.

### Soaking it in

The trees are cloaked in their red and gold hues, as I walk towards my favourite part of Prague. The Old Town Square is home to the Astronomical Clock and the Church of Our Lady Before Tyn—two of the city's most famous images. Today, it's a tourist's heaven with vendors, horse-drawn carriages and outdoor restaurants. The centerpiece of the square is the monument to the preacher Jan Hus, who was excommunicated and burnt in 1415 for his radical views on the Church. The Astronomical Clock dates from 1410 and its hourly parade of clockwork icons and saints is a crowd puller with thousands of digital cameras at the ready.

Our hotel is in the bustling Wenceslaus Square, the scene of many defining moments in Czech history. Wenceslaus is a common motif over the next few days. He is the same 'Good King Wenceslaus' from the *Christmas Carol*, though his story is full of intrigue, murder and dark moments. His grandmother was killed by his pagan mother in a fit of jealousy and

because Wenceslaus promoted Christianity, he was killed by his own pagan brother, Boleslav, the cruel one.

Prague is a heady historical brew of architectural styles—baroque and neo-classical to modern and cubist. Though separated from the city centre by the river, the 18-acre Prague Castle, a complex of cathedrals, courtyards and palaces which developed between the 9th and 16th centuries, makes its presence known as it looms over the city. We take a walk through history—the old Royal Palace with its exquisite vaulted ceilings where all the Czech kings used to be crowned. Now, Czech presidents are sworn in St Vitus Cathedral, which has some show-stopper kaleidoscopic, Art Nouveau stained glass windows, some of which were sponsored by insurance companies. The touristy Golden Lane looks like the sets of a Walt Disney film—colourful homes with minuscule doors which used to house the guards and later became the home of poor artists and writers.

### Other sights

A more somber side of our visit includes the Jewish Town, which has the oldest remaining Jewish burial ground in Europe and contains almost 20,000 graves in a very small plot of land. The gravestones at different angles present a surreal picture. Today, the Jewish Town is filled with kosher restaurants, Hebrew clocks, stunning Art Nouveau buildings and the swish Parizska Street with high-end boutiques. Every place in Prague has a legend. To protect the Jewish community from being killed, the rabbi constructed a Golem or an imaginary protective guardian out of clay from the banks of the river, and brought it to life through rituals and Hebrew incantations. We still see a picture of a golem embedded on the footpath of the Jewish Town.

In a city inundated with tourists, our 'respite moment' is at the Wallenstein Gardens, which was commissioned by one of the most powerful and wealthiest Czech noblemen at the beginning of the 17th century, Albrecht of Wallenstein. The Palace was to be his residence and to

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overshadow all the other palaces. There are manicured lawns, a loggia with a painted ceiling, swans in a pond, peacocks walking nonchalantly and a bizarre wall with artificial stalactites and hidden creatures made to look like a limestone cave.

### Music and food

The leitmotif of this city is the music—sultry saxophone, folk bands, wine glass musicians, even a ventriloquist musician, all providing the soundtrack to its marvelous architecture. Along with our cultural and historical outings, we experience traditional Czech cuisine at the basement of cellar restaurants with lively music and stunning Art Nouveau restaurants as well as beer halls. Goulash, duck, roast pork knuckles as well as dumplings figure often on the menus alongside fried cheese, garlic soup and huge chunks of potatoes. Czechs are the largest per capita consumers of beer and the golden liquid is omnipresent.

To see a different rebellious Prague, harking back to its dissident past, we head for the John Lennon wall near the French Embassy, covered with 20th Century graffiti. Created in the days following Lennon's Death, it was filled with short messages, lyrics and poems. The Communist authorities of that time saw it as a sign of Western ideals and painted over the wall leading to a clash with the rebellious Czech youth. The wall today is a canvas for social commentary—ever changing with lyrics and bright splashes of colour. In the Kafka Museum forecourt, we see Czech artist David Czerny's provocative sculptures—a stream of water produced by two “peeing” bronze sculptures, with quotes from famous Prague residents.

Our last morning in Prague is spent in a hillside restaurant near the famous Strahov Monastery—there are vineyards, and a picture postcard view of this city of a hundred spires. Milan Kundera's words echo in my mind. “History is as light as individual human life, unbearably light, light as a feather, as dust swirling into the air, as whatever will no longer exist tomorrow.”

## CITY OF GOLD

# Museum without walls

“A wesome grand” are perhaps the best two words to aptly describe my judgment, when I view a jewel-studded gold crown at the National Museum in Seoul, South Korea's ultra-modern capital city. Stored in a glass cubicle, this precious relic belonged to the Silla dynasty emperors who ruled undivided Korea for almost a millennium since 57 BC. Recognised as a national treasure, the coronet was excavated from a tomb in Gyeongju, which was then the capital of Silla emperors. Located 280 km away from Seoul, tourists in large numbers storm there today to see the legacy of a period that has been termed as the golden era of the north Asian nation. I come across many more Silla-period exhibits that testify the glories of the famous dynasty, but more importantly, prepare me well with information for my subsequent visit to Gyeongju, the 2,000-year-old city of great historical significance.

Historians credit the Silla empire for establishing a unified Korea. Prior to their time, the peninsula comprised three separate kingdoms. When Julius Caesar was subduing Gaol, Silla King Munmu established Gyeongju as the capital city which over time became the 'City of Gold'. Aristocracy there pursued high culture and extravagant lifestyles. Writings from early visitors reveal that elite government officials had thousands of human slaves plus almost an equal number of horses, cattle and pigs. Their wives wore solid gold tiaras and ear-rings of intricate and delicate filigree. Buddhism, which earlier migrated from China, gained the status of a state religion.

Gyeongju today is a contemporary city with no shortage of facilities to indulge modern day visitors, including plush accommodation and upmarket restaurants. However, compared to the nation's capital, this metropolis of 3,50,000 people is quieter, slow paced and engulfed with tranquillity. Entering its quarters, I realise almost immediately why this treasure trove is often referred to as 'museum without walls'. Gyeongju holds more tombs, temples, rock carvings, pagodas, Buddhist statues and palace ruins than any other place in Korea. This grand historic ensemble pledges to mesmerise every visitor that walks along its paths, making history as their companion.

The city's National Museum is a good starting point to begin Gyeongju sojourn as it's recognised as a vault of Silla heritage. Galleries are packed with artefacts—sculptures, potteries, jewellery and royal memorabilia—that help draw some pictures of a highly cultured and wealthy period. However, the exhibit that's always surrounded by people is a four metre high, 19 ton bronze bell, which was cast in the late 8th century. Known as Emily Bell, it's Asia's largest and most resonant. It's said that its jingles could be heard 40 miles away. The inscriptions on the bell are a

fine example of Asian calligraphy and carving. Most of the museum's treasures were excavated from the royal tombs, large earthen mounds that looked like grass-covered hillocks from a distance.

Two of the city's must-see sites are the Bulguksa Temple and the Seokguram Grotto, both UNESCO World Heritage sites that proudly testify the grandness of Silla architecture. Nestled among knobby pines and iris gardens that would enthrall artists like Monet and Manet, Bulguksa Temple is not a single edifice, but a sprawling complex comprising well preserved pagodas, prayer halls, large terraces dotted with artefacts and temples with Buddha statues inside. A significant feature of the shrine are several stone bridges. However, the one with 33 steps is highly revered as it represents 33 stages to achieve enlightenment, a Buddhist belief. Crafted in traditional Korean style of the time, all the ancient monuments reflect the extraordinary carpentry and painting skills of the workers. However, the octagonal Dabotop pagoda standing on a cruciform base with stairways on all four sides and the three storied, highly ornamental Seokgatap pagoda draws most attention. Some of the wooden panels have carvings of the Om symbol, signifying the link of Buddhism with ancient Hindu philosophy.

Overlooking the Sea of Japan, the Seokguram Grotto nests a little distance away from Bulguksa Temple on Mt Tohamsan, a holy mountain to the Silla kingdom. This cave is so important and fragile that visitors are allowed only a brief glimpse of the interior and photography is prohibited. The architecture is similar to other rock-carved cave temples in China and India, but stones of Korea being unsuitable for carving, this grotto is artificially made of hundreds of granite stones, held together by stone rivets and no mortar. The layout of the granite sanctuary consists of a rectangular antechamber and a round rotunda hall, the centerpiece of which is a three-and-a-half-metre high Buddha statue, sitting on a lotus pedestal with a serene expression of meditation. Figures of several *bodhisattvas* and colourful guardians surround the main statue. A common ritual at the site is to write religious messages on stone slabs.

The profligate lifestyle of Silla kings is evident when visiting the exotic Anapji Pond, an artificial lake with three islands and modelled mountain peaks which was earlier annexed to a palace. Only a small portion still remains to justify the sumptuousness of the past. This site is close to the 7th century bottle-shaped Cheomseongdae observatory, admired worldwide by archaeologists for its engineering feat. After the fall of Silla dynasty, the prosperity of Gyeongju began declining and today it quietly remains as a library of Korea's rich historical past.

**SANDIP HOR**



**STRIKING** Anapji pond at night. PHOTO BY AUTHOR

## CASCADING

# Slip-sliding away...

As the bus swerved and dipped, the intense heat of Tamil Nadu gave way to a rather mild refreshing breeze. The landscape too changed for the better from dry and dusty plains to a more picturesque valley, the hill sides draped with greenery. I was heading to the Hogenakkal Falls, the popular picnic spot on the Karnataka-Tamil Nadu border, to see the beauty of the falls in all its glory, just as the monsoon waned. Alighting at the town bustling with noise and people, tuck shops, eateries and coffee bars lined the road that led to the falls, a few hundred metres down the fast flowing Cauvery. Eager to get past the frenzy of young and old dabbling in the river, I walked further away to the hanging bridge spanning the



**BREATHTAKING** Hogenakkal Falls in all its glory. PHOTO BY AUTHOR

narrow and deep gorge. A number of waterfalls came gushing down the walls of the canyon on either side. Standing atop the tower that the tourism department had built, I was treated to a picture-perfect view of a longitudinal gorge with numerous falls pouring in and tree-topped craggy cliffs alternating with the white streaks made for a picture perfect view.

To get a better view of its Niagara-like appearance, I had to reach the head of the falls. The only way to get there was to trek a couple of kilometres along the river to the lower plains, cross the stream and walk up back all the way on the other side. As the trail went down through a patch of forest, the walk became all the more exhilarating. Trudging up along the pristine

sandy beaches, the head of the falls was reached. The river, originating many kilometres away, swells along its course, joined by numerous tributaries. Just before it drops into the chasm, it spreads over a vast area like a sea. The impact of water on the rocks is so great that the water vapour rising above and swept by the wind looks like smoke. The falls gets their name because of this spectacular sight (*hoge* means smoke and *kal* means rock). I stood there for a long time, looking at the grand spectacle, clicking away to my heart's content.

Coracle riding is a popular pastime here. Coracles are saucer shaped bamboo boats. It was an exciting experience to sail back in one of them and more so when the oars-

man rotated it violently. Another activity for the visitors at Hogenakkal is the stimulating oil massage, before taking a wash under the battering fall. I also visited the crocodile breeding centre. This was again in a pleasant surrounding, far from the din of the crowd. Taking a peek at the aquarium on the way, I wandered through the breeding centre where numerous crocs of different ages were being raised. These denizens seemed to be dozing, some frozen in action with mouths wide open.

The sun was going down and it was time to leave. Having savoured the beauty of the falls and a glimpse of the crocodiles, I boarded a bus back to the city.

**B V PRAKASH**