

SATURDAY, JAN 7, 2012

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**SIGHTS TO SEE:** (Left to right) The illuminated Castle looks breathtaking at dusk. The Minute House is where Kafka spent his childhood. A latte at the famous Obecní kafe and the Christmas market at the Old Town Square are not to be missed

KALPANA SUNDER

I cannot live in Prague... I do not know if I can live anywhere else. But that I cannot live here — that is the least doubtful thing I know,” wrote Franz Kafka in a *Letter to His Father* (1918). Prague’s most famous literary figure who wrote in German talked incessantly about the city in his letters and diaries just like James Joyce did about Dublin. “If you follow the perimeter of Old Town, this narrow circle encompasses my entire life,” he said. In the city of his birth, one catches glimpses of the writer everywhere.

Old Town Prague is a tourist haven with outdoor cafes, cobblestone streets, and the famous Astronomical clock. By the Old Town Hall is the Minuta House. Kafka lived here between 1889 and 1896 and walked with his Czech cook to elementary school. On Charles Bridge and on Karlova Street, his gaunt face is emblazoned on T-shirts, souvenir mugs and key chains.

How did such a beautiful city inspire such dark, surreal tales of everyman protagonists crushed by mysterious authorities or twisted by unknown shames. “Kafka absorbed all of Prague’s humours and poisons and descended into its demonic nature,” explains Angelo Maria Ripellino in his book *Magic Prague*. My guide Georgina explains that Kafka had a deep interest in the city’s history — the

# CZECH MATE

Prague isn't just concerts, cafes and cobblestone streets. Discover its dark side with Kafka as your guide



**TRIAL TRAIL:** (Left to right) Kafka's house on Golden Lane in the Castle district; Grand Hotel Europa where he had a reading; a museum dedicated to the writer and graffiti celebrating his legacy



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an insect in his father’s presence and even stammered when he spoke to him. In his lifetime, Kafka was not known as a writer but as a lawyer who worked for the Workers Accident Insurance Company. We walk to Wenceslaus square, the scene of the most defining moments in Prague’s history — the Nazi occupation, the Communist takeover and the Velvet Revolution. Today it has stylish cafes, bars and glitzy shopping. The beautiful Art Nouveau building of the Grand Hotel Europa was where Kafka had a reading of his book *The Judgement*, the tale of a young man’s conflict with his father. For 14 years, he walked down the road past the Municipal House and the Powder Tower with his briefcase and umbrella. Today, the Art Nouveau Municipal House has a swish restaurant and

hosts musical performances. Prague’s Jewish Town was preserved by Hitler as a ‘museum to a dead race’ unlike other European cities where synagogues and Jewish businesses were destroyed. Urban renewal has changed the face of Jewish Town with swish boulevards like Parizka Street coming up. In Jewish town, I visit the oldest remaining Jewish burial ground in Europe which contains almost 20,000 graves in a very small plot of land. To cope with all the bodies, more earth was brought in and the corpses were layered as many as ten deep. The synagogue in this area was where Franz Kafka attended services. A lot of the grief and



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with a variety of architecture. It is said that Kafka’s *The Trial* took place in the St Vitus Cathedral located within the courtyard of the Castle grounds. Golden Lane, which looks like it’s a Walt Disney set today, is now dotted with quaint art galleries and craft shops. I stop at door No. 22, which is today a book store and has a window display of Kafka’s books and a small room inside where the writer used to write in the evenings.

I spend some time in Cafe Louvre on Narodni Avenue, with marble walls and iron railings, where Kafka and even Einstein once had coffee. At the bottom of Castle Hill is the Kafka Museum with a simple but poignant ‘K’ outside. In the museum forecourt one is greeted by Czech artist David Czerny’s two “peeing” bronze sculptures with quotes from famous Prague residents. Rare copies of Kaf-

## AT A GLANCE

**Take a ride:** Tram 22 runs along the river in the old town and across to the west bank, climbing steeply to the castle.

**Hear hear:** Along with offering a wealth of classical concerts, Prague hosts many rock and jazz gigs

**Grin and beer it:** The Czech Republic is the home of the first Pilsner and the first Budweiser so don’t come back without tasting the local lager at a brew pub

ka’s letters and his books, sketches and photos give visitors another glimpse into the tortured mind of the writer. There are quirky art installations that recreate the moods in his literary creations — like a blue foggy, mirrored room and a strange stairway.

As a 19-year old, Kafka wrote about Prague, “Prague doesn’t let go. This dear little mother has sharp claws!” Kafka never really escaped Prague. He died in a tuberculosis sanatorium near Vienna in 1924, one month short of his 41st birthday. His remains were brought back to Prague for burial.

My pursuit of Kafka ends with a metro ride to the suburb of Vinohrady, where I visit his family tombstone marking the plot where his father, Hermann, and his mother, Julie, are also buried. Close by are the graves of his sisters who died in concentration camps. Kafka had requested that on his death all his works be destroyed. On the wall opposite the grave a simple plaque recalls Kafka’s close friend Max Brod. Kafka bequeathed his writings to Brod shortly before his own death from tuberculosis in 1924, instructing his friend to burn everything unread.

Brod ignored Kafka’s wishes and published most of what was in his possession, including the novels *The Trial*, *The Castle* and *Amerika*. ■



**FULL-BODIED TRIBUTE:** A statue of Kafka riding a suit shows how he abhorred bureaucracy

**On Charles Bridge and Karlova Street, his gaunt face is emblazoned on T-shirts, souvenir mugs and key chains**

beheadings, the anarchy, the horrors of German invasion and tortures. His personal demons too influenced his writing. Kafka is said to have had a dominating father and impotence and rebellion were pervasive themes in his writing. Many feel Kafka’s famous novella, *Metamorphosis*, in which a travelling salesman, Gregor Samsa, wakes up one day to find himself transformed into a giant cockroach, was an autobiographical work — he felt like

# Of bridges and battles

The movie is fictional but the Bridge on the River Kwai stands for real in Thailand and holds its own in history books. **TOI-Crest** takes a solemn walk across, to the tune of Colonel Bogey’s March

SHIVANI SHARMA

The burden of history held by this black iron structure across a quiet, lazy river is not immediately apparent. It is, after all, year 2012 and the place is overrun by tourists in sun hats, armed with cameras and stopping to pose for pictures every minute or so.

Bring out the history books, flip back to years when World War II was raging and you’ll find some horrific details. Instead of tourists, you’d picture gun-toting soldiers in hard hats, pushing Allied prisoners of war to build this bridge and lay the railway line that runs through it, in savage conditions with only basic tools. It is said that every kilometer built cost the lives of 38 workers.

This piece of history changes the perspective with which you walk across the infamous Bridge on the River Kwai that formed the backdrop of the David Lean film. Situated about three km from the Thai town of Kanchanaburi, about 130 km from Bangkok, this bridge is part of what was

deemed to be the Burma-Siam railway — also known as Death Railway — built by Commonwealth, Dutch and American POWs under the direction of the Japanese in 1943.

The first thing you notice as you approach the iron and concrete bridge (no, it’s not wood and bamboo as seen in the movie) is that while most of the structure consists of curved and semi-circular trusses, there are two sections in the middle that are rectangular. This difference has its own story to tell. The original bridge was built with the semi-circular truss spans. However, the Allied forces bombed the area (in airplanes, no one really swam up the river to blow it up) in 1945 and destroyed the center of the bridge. The angular replacement parts were supplied the following year by the Japanese as war reparations.

The place is always buzzing with tourists and is easy to access from Bangkok. One can opt for a historical train ride from Bangkok to Nam Tok, which takes you across the bridge, or plan a day road trip to Kanchanaburi.



Crossing the bridge on foot is easy since the center of the track has been thoughtfully turned into a steel-plated walkway, and there are little platforms on the sides to avoid the train that chugs through a couple of times a day. A walk across the bridge itself does not take more than 15 minutes; it’s the conversations that it sets off that probably make one linger on. You’re also sure to come across tourist groups getting inspired by the 1957 movie and whistling Colonel Bogey’s March

## FOR THE PALATE...

The river itself is flanked by a number of wooden floating restaurants and guesthouses that offer great Thai cuisine. If you have a tour guide, he’ll be sure to have a pre-picked favourite place, but there’s probably only one USP no matter which place you pick — a laidback, peaceful meal in a place where war history drives conversation.



**DEADLY HISTORY:** Every kilometre built cost the lives of 38 soldiers

as they troop across the bridge.

There are other World War II-related sites nearby that complete the story. The Kanchanaburi War Cemetery is the final resting place for almost 7,000 POWs who died during the construction of the Death Railway to Burma. There’s also another smaller cemetery some two km out of town and together these two give a somber reminder of what went on back in the day. s

Near the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery there’s also the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre, which has very moving exhibits that tell the horrific story of the railway construction and route. ■