

EASTERN EUROPE TRIP MAY 2014

Mike my brother Richard and I decided to go in the spring with Smartours to several cities in Eastern Europe: Warsaw, Krakow & Auschwitz (Poland); Budapest (Hungary); Vienna, (Austria); Prague (Czech Republic) and short visit to Helsinki (Finland).

NEW YORK CITY - USA

We combined our trip with a visit to New York City. I had always wanted to climb to the "Crown" of the Statue of Liberty. We watched for tickets to go on sale and obtained (3) tickets to visit the "Crown". We arrived in New York City and stayed at the La Quinta Inn Manhattan that was centrally located for sightseeing and near a Metro station. Our room was a nice size, comfortable and quiet. After settling in we took the subway to 'Tender Buttons' a store that sells nothing but buttons. I collect buttons as a hobby and found some nice sterling silver buttons and a few paper mache buttons from Russia. We left and took the subway to 'Obscura Antiques and Oddities' to check it out. It was a weird store full of skulls of animals and people, mummies, taxidermy, postcards of people with diseases ... etc. you name it. Friendly staff.

The next day we met up with my brother, Richard, and we explored Central Park. We visited 'Strawberry Fields' to see a mosaic called 'Imagine' a tribute to John Lennon; then to see the ancient obelisk from Egypt; Bethesda Fountain and Terrace; Grand Army Plaza and sculptures of Hans Christian Anderson, Alice in Wonderland, Christopher Columbus, Daniel Webster and Mother Goose to mention a few. It was a beautiful sunny day and after exploring the park we took a taxi to 'The Plaza Hotel' and had a fantastic pig out lunch at the 'Todd English Food Hall'. We had the best gourmet lunch. They offered so many choices it was hard to decide. I had fried oysters and a hot chocolate lava cake with ice cream for dessert. We ventured across the street to FAO Schwarz's flagship store full of toys and stuffed animals for kids. I wanted to see 'The Big Piano Keyboard' that was featured in the movie "Big" starring Tom Hanks.

The highlight of my trip was to visit the Statue of Liberty designed by French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi. Climbing up the spiral staircase inside the statue we could see the internal support structure created by Alexandre Gustave Eiffel whose buildings we have seen around the world. We left from Battery Park and boarded the ferry to Liberty Island and climbed the spiral staircase to the 'Crown', quite a nice experience. It was foggy with a few showers but that did not ruin our day. The ferry left Liberty Island and made a stop at Ellis Island, in Upper New York Bay, it was the gateway for millions of immigrants to the United States as the nation's busiest immigrant inspection station from 1892 until 1954. Rooms full of exhibits and recordings of stories told by immigrants passing through Ellis Island gave you a feel for what happened at this place. After landing back at Battery Park we went to Greenwich Village to a small eatery called 'A Salt & Battery' and had fish & chips...great food, friendly service.

The last day in New York we rode 'The Roosevelt Island Tram' back and forth and had great views of the city and the East River. We visited the 'Mount Vernon Hotel Museum

and Garden' (1799) owned and operated by 'The Colonial Dames of America' which I am a member of. Constructed in 1799 as a carriage house and converted into a hotel in 1826, the Museum transports the visitor back to the Mount Vernon Hotel, a country escape for New Yorkers living in the crowded city at the southern tip of Manhattan. We headed over to 'Times Square' in the pouring rain and stopped at the 'Carnegie Deli' on 7th Ave. for the biggest, yummiest corn beef sandwiches and cheesecakes in New York City. At night Mike went to B.B. Kings place to listen to Al Kooper a founding member of Blood, Sweat and Tears.

The next morning we took a taxi to the JFK airport and boarded our flight to Warsaw. We met our Smartour group and tour director, Mr. Pavel Cernosek. We stayed at the Sofitel Victoria Hotel in Warsaw. That evening we had our welcome dinner and briefing at the hotels restaurant.

WARSAW, POLAND

The following morning we went by bus on a morning tour of Warsaw and saw both banks of the Vistula River as well as the Old Town with its colorful market square. The bus made stops at the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising monument and Łazienki Park built by Poland's very last king (before the final Partition), Stanislaw August Poniatowski, to serve as his summer residence and provide a place for his citizens to relax. On the edge of the park is a monument to Fryderyk Chopin in a rose garden flanked by platforms where free summer piano concerts of Chopin's music are given weekly.

We had the afternoon at leisure so Mike, Richard and I walked from the hotel to the 'Palace of Culture and Science building'. It was a "gift" from Stalin that the people of Warsaw couldn't refuse. Varsovians call it "Stalin's Penis"...using cruder terminology than that. (There were seven such "Stalin Gothic" erections in Moscow.) We made our way to the observation deck on the retrofitted Soviet elevators to get a bird's eye view of Warsaw. Nearby we ate dinner at a trendy restaurant that made crepes, savory and sweet, for a great price...tasty food & beer. We strolled through the nearby park with its flower gardens and shaded walkways lined with benches where locals gather to relax. At the one end was a pool with a spouting fountain where locals were feeding doves perched on their open hands. Beyond the pool was a long walkway with statues and another very large fountain and sundial. At the end was the 'Tomb of the Unknown Soldier' guarded by soldiers at full attention, in dress uniforms, with the eternal flames glowing.

We made our way back to Old Town Market Square to check out the Royal Palace and the 'Mermaid Fountain'. We stopped and rested at a café and ordered a plate of cheese and meat pierogi and of course beers for Mike and Richard. I wanted to find a store that I saw that had beautiful amber jewelry for sale. I purchased a red amber pendant. As we left Mike had to get himself an ice cream cone at one of the local 'Lady' shops. I saw someone with a tasty waffle topped with whipped cream and strawberries. I stopped at the nearest shop and ordered me one...quite yummy. Our last quest was to find the old Rome walls near the square and the statue of 'The Little Insurgent', made in commemoration of the child soldiers who fought and died during the Warsaw Uprising.

The statue is of a young boy wearing a helmet too large for his head and holding a submachine gun. It is reputed to be of a fighter who went by the pseudonym of Antek, who was killed August 8, 1944 at the age of 13. The helmet and submachine gun are stylized after German equipment, which was captured during the uprising and used by the insurgents against the occupying forces.

We left Warsaw and headed to Krakow. Our driver took us southbound to Częstochowa where we visited the 14th century monastery at Jasna Góra, known as the home of the Black Madonna icon. The Jasna Góra is the most famous Polish shrine to the Virgin Mary and the country's greatest place of pilgrimage – for many its spiritual capital. The image of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, also known as Our Lady of Częstochowa, to which miraculous powers are attributed, is Jasna Góra's most precious treasure. Children dressed in traditional outfits, girls in white dresses, boys with little red hats, arrived in droves with their parents to attend the continuous mass conducted in the monastery. Our group along with other tourists were led in a special route along the wall, right past the main altar where the Black Madonna was on display. We were to be quiet and respectful as mass was being held. The young children were kneeling on one side, adults on the other. It was quite a moving experience.

We left Częstochowa and continued on to visit the somber concentration camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. We arrived at Auschwitz and were met by a lady guide who took us through the monstrous concentration camp. Before WWII this camp was a base for the Polish army. When Hitler occupied Poland, he took over these barracks and turned it into a concentration camp for his Polish political enemies. The location was ideal, with a nearby rail junction and rivers providing natural protective boundaries. In 1942, Auschwitz became a death camp for the extermination of European Jews and others whom Hitler considered “undesirable.” By the time the camp was liberated in 1945, at least 1.1 million people had been murdered here – approximately 960,000 of them Jewish. As you enter the camp you pass under the notorious gate with the cruel message, Arbeit Macht Frei (“Work Sets You Free”). The only way out of the camp was through the crematorium chimneys. Our guide took us on a route down many of the street lined with brick buildings, each with a number by the front door. Every building had a purpose. The most feared place among prisoners was the “Death Block”, from which nobody ever left alive. In the basement we saw several different types of cells. The Starvation Cell held prisoners selected to starve to death when a fellow prisoner escaped. In the Dark Cell up to 30 people had only a small window for ventilation – and if it became covered with snow, the prisoners suffocated. In the Standing Cells, four people would be forced to stand together for hours at a time. Horrible place. Outside was a courtyard with a brick wall where Nazis shot several thousand political prisoners. Another building had display cases filled with belongings of the people taken to this camp. Cases filled with shoes, suitcases and possessions. One case held tons of human hair that the Nazis used to make cloth for their soldiers’ uniforms. Our last stop was to see the gallows where Rudolf Höss was tried, convicted and hanged. This spot that was about a hundred yards from his home where his wife and children lived during his command at Auschwitz. Not far from the gallows was a preserved gas chamber &

crematorium where people met their deaths by the SS dropping Zyklon B through a hole in the ceiling. Terrible vibes in this building.

In 1941, realizing that the original Auschwitz camp was too small to meet their needs; the Nazis began a second camp in a nearby farm field. The original plan was for a camp that could hold 200,000 people, but at its peak, Birkenau held only 100,000. They were still adding onto it when the camp was liberated in 1945. The first sight that greeted prisoners was the guard tower. Train tracks lead past the main gate “Gate of Death” and then dead-end inside the camp at the crematorium. The passengers were unloaded onto the platforms, where they were examined by SS doctors and their belongings confiscated. About 30 percent were chosen to work in the camp; the rest – mainly women and children – were sent directly to the gas chambers, just a short walk away. The scale is overwhelming – prisoner blocks lay out as far as the eye can see. Many of the buildings are gone...all that is left are their brick chimneys. Later that day we arrived in Krakow.

Krakow, the residence of Polish kings for centuries, boasts fine medieval architecture, virtually untouched by war. On our morning tour we saw the Royal Wawel Castle and visited St. Mary’s Church and the splendid Market Square. At the Royal Wawel Castle courtyard I located the corner where a chakra energy field is located. Adherents to the Hindu concept of chakra believe that a powerful energy field connects all living things. Some believe that, mirroring the seven chakra points on the body (from head to groin), there are seven points on the surface of the earth where this energy is most concentrated: Delhi, Delphi, Jerusalem, Mecca, Rome, Velehrad...and Wawel Hill – immediately to your left as you enter the courtyard. The smudge marks on the wall were from people pressing up against this corner, trying to absorb some good vibes from this chakra spot. As I touched this spot I can’t say I had a strong vibe because I was being rushed to join my group but I did feel a slight sensation....try it sometime ‘Let the Force be with You’.

We left to travel to Old Town and went inside the cathedral of St. Mary’s. The elaborately carved 15th-century wooden altarpiece is by the German master carver Veit Stoss. The main altarpiece is behind carved doors which are opened at a certain time by a nun working for the church. Behind the doors is another elaborately carved scene of the Virgin Mary taken up to heaven with the apostles by her side. The vaulted ceiling is decorated in blue with hundreds of painted gold stars. When the ceremony was over I went to locate the iron shackles located on each side of the main entrance doors. This was an area where trouble makers were shackled as punishment for crimes and were on display for others as an example of what could happen if you got in trouble with the law or the church. I shackled my brother to the wall but he got loose and ran away. Around this time we waited for the lone trumpeter to play his tune from the open window of the highest tower. As you listen to him play, we heard the last note get cut off in mid-blow. That was intentional and meant to recall the assault on the city by the Tartars in the 13th century. Legend has it that as the trumpeter at the time was calling the city’s residents to arms, a Tartar marksman caught the trumpeter with an arrow right through his throat. We left to explore the square and had lunch in an open air café and Richard and I ordered goulash and bread and, of course, beers. The square was busy with tourist and locals climbing on the large fountain in the middle of the square. Many booths with handmade

wooden spoons, dolls and large homemade decorated cookies lined the square. Several of the booths were filled with vats of cooked sausages, meats, potatoes, mushrooms, hot sauerkraut and goulash. On the far end of the square once stood 'Cloth Hall', which dated from the 14th century and served as the stalls of the town's original merchants. The original 'Cloth Hall' burned down in the 16th century, and what you see today is a mostly Renaissance building, with neo-Gothic flourishes, added in the 19th century. Today, it's filled with marketers, hawking Polish souvenirs to visitors.

This afternoon we signed up for the optional tour to the renowned Wieliczka Salt Mines outside Krakow. The mine, built in the 13th century, produced table salt. The mine's attractions include dozens of statues, three chapels and an entire cathedral that has been carved out of the rock salt by the miners. The mine produced salt continuously until 2007, as one of the world's oldest salt mines still in operation. The Wieliczka salt mine reaches a depth of 327 metres (1,073 ft) and is over 287 kilometres (178 mi) long. During World War II, the shafts were used by the occupying Germans as an ad-hoc facility for various war-related industries. In 1978 it was placed on the original UNESCO list of the World Heritage Sites.

That night Richard, Mike and I took a taxi to an Italian restaurant called Pesto's, a quaint place located on a narrow cobblestone street in the old Jewish Quarters. We ate at a small table on the street next to the entrance and watched as people strolled by eating very large sausages on buns. Smoke from an outdoor BBQ venue floated by. One local stumbled by with a beer in hand, probably looking for a handout. Next door was a bar with outdoor seating. The chairs were shaped like giant white faces. Every once and awhile a taxi would inch its way down this narrow street pretty close to our table. Mike got tired of waiting for our change so we hailed one of the taxis that dropped off some people and went back to our hotel. Good food, busy day.

BUDAPEST - HUNGARY

Today we left Krakow and enjoyed a scenic drive through the wooded mountains of Slovakia, down the Danube River Valley to Budapest. Slovakia is bordered by the Czech Republic and Austria to the west, Poland to the north, Ukraine to the east and Hungary to the south. After dinner we drove back to Budapest for a one-hour cruise along the romantic Danube River. All of the bridges and buildings were lit up and we enjoyed the cruise with a glass of wine.

Budapest is the capital and the largest city of Hungary, and one of the largest cities in the European Union. Budapest became a single city occupying both banks of the river Danube with its unification on 17 November 1873 of Buda and Obuda, on the west bank, with Pest, on the east bank. We stayed at the NH Budapest Hotel. After check-in we walked down to the Budapest-Nyugati Railway Terminal. The station was planned by August de Serres and was built by the Eiffel Company. It was opened on 28 October 1877. Eiffel is part of the Eiffage group and the descendant of the engineering company Société des Établissements Eiffel founded by Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, designer of the Eiffel Tower, Statue of Liberty superstructure, and other works.

We joined our group on the bus for a sightseeing tour of the city. We enjoyed a panoramic view from Fishermen's Bastion located on Castle Hill where you could get great photos of the Roman Catholic Matthias Church "Church of Our Lady". According to church tradition, it was originally built in Romanesque style in 1015. The current building was constructed in the florid late Gothic style in the second half of the 14th century and was extensively restored in the late 19th century. It was the second largest church of medieval Buda and the seventh largest church of medieval Hungarian Kingdom. We did not enter the church but admired the view of the exterior with its magnificent diamond patterned roof tiles and gargoyles. The church was also a place of the so-called Mary-wonder. In 1686 during the siege of Buda by the Holy League a wall of the church collapsed due to cannon fire. It turned out that an old votive Madonna statue was hidden behind the wall. As the sculpture of the Virgin Mary appeared before the praying Muslims, the morale of the garrison collapsed and the city fell on the same day.

That evening in Budapest we joined our group for the optional folklore dinner show nestled in the hills of Buda. We had a three-course dinner of salad, goulash and a platter of turkey, beef and vegetables. Our waiter came to our table with a strange gismo that looked like an enema bag with a long hose (HA)...it was full of white wine. The waiter would aim the hose and miraculously squirt the wine into your glass. The skill of the procedure was much better than the taste of the wine. The gypsy band and dance entourage was entertaining.

The next day our group went to the town of Szentendre. Szentendre boasts a well-preserved 18th century Baroque townscape. Winding streets lead off from the Main Square packed with architectural masterpieces, museums, restaurants, cafes and souvenir shops. The Mongols in the 13th century than the Turks in the 15-16th century destroyed the town. It was rebuilt in Baroque style in the 17th century and has preserved the townscape since then. After the Turks left mainly Serbian refugees settled down than Hungarians, Slovaks, Germans, Greeks and Romanians. Each ethnic group had established its own town part adding versatility to the townscape. We explored the town and visited several shops. We went inside the Szabo Marzipan Museum where several rooms full of glass-enclosed displays are full of people, animals, flowers and scenes made entirely of marzipan. The life-size Michael Jackson is actually made of a combination of marzipan and white chocolate, while Princess Di is pure marzipan.

We brought along our bathing suits and stuff as the bus driver was going to drop off people at different points of interest that afternoon. We opted for the driver to drop us off at the Szechenyi Thermal Baths, the largest medicinal bath in Europe. Its water is supplied by two thermal springs, their temperature is 74 °C (165 °F) and 77 °C (171 °F), respectively. Components of the thermal water include sulphate, calcium, magnesium, bicarbonate and a significant amount of fluoride acid and metaboric acid. Medical indications are on degenerative joint illnesses, chronic and sub-acute joint inflammations, as well as orthopaedic and traumatological post-treatments. I read about how to enjoy the experience of the baths. We opted for the day ticket for the outer pools and thermal baths

with a changing cabin. The cabin was quite small but Mike and I took turns changing and had a safe place to leave our belongings. You are given a plastic wrist band after paying the entrance fee. You use the wrist band that has a chip inside to enter the facility and to enter your private changing room. Mike and I changed and went to the outdoor pools and found Richard. We tried out the fun pool that has a cool temperature, waterfall and a current pool in the middle that was quite fun. At times the current is turned on and you literally swim like a fish caught in a strong current that pulls you around in a circle with many other swimmers, laughing and having a good time. The trick is getting out of the current water circle and back into the main pool, you kinda just get thrown out of the current circle by force. There are three big pools outside, the fun pool (jets, bubbles, waves, current pool and whirlpool), the lap pool and the relaxing warm water pool where people just relax or play a game of chess. After enjoying the sun and pool outside we went into the adjoining building where a series of mixed-gender indoor thermal pools; each designed for a specific medical treatment are. The water in some of the pools was quite hot – some have very green water supposedly caused by the many healthy minerals. There were several arctic cold water plunge pools that Mike and Richard tried. One of the pools was a warm current pool like outside with screaming and laughing people swirling around in circles. Some of the rooms had beautiful tiles and decorated ceilings. It was a very relaxing day. A couple from our tour group joined us at the pools and later we shared a taxi ride back to our hotel. We ate near our hotel and then walked down the avenue to a pastry shop and had cake and coffee.

We also had a good time at the Central Market Hall the largest and oldest indoor market in Budapest. It is located at the end of the famous pedestrian shopping street Váci utca and on the Pest side of the Liberty Bridge. The market offers a huge variety of stalls on three floors. The entrance gate is with a neogothic touch. A distinctive architectural feature is the roof which was restored to have colorful Zsolnay tiling from Pecs. We had a great lunch of polish sausage, roasted pork and Hungarian stuffed peppers. The first floor had booths of vegetables, spices, meats, poultry and liquor. The second floor was crafts, souvenirs and cooked foods, cookies and drinks. We left the market and hailed a taxi that we had to abandon mid-way down the street as he was ripping us off on the fare. We started then walking down the bank of the Danube to find the 'Shoes on the Danube Bank Memorial'. It was quite hot so we hailed down another taxi and jumped in. He took us to the shoe memorial and we got out. Conceived by film director Can Togay, it was created by him and the sculptor Gyula Pauer on the bank of the Danube River. It honors the Jews who were killed by fascist Arrow Cross militiamen in Budapest during World War II. They were ordered to take off their shoes, and were shot at the edge of the water so that their bodies fell into the river and were carried away. It represents their shoes left behind on the bank. The shoes are made of bronze, at night people insert lit candles inside the shoes as a tribute to these unfortunate people who died here.

We also visited The Dohány Street Synagogue, also known as The Great Synagogue or Tabakgasse Synagogue, a historical building in Erzsébetváros, the 7th district of Budapest. It is the largest synagogue in Europe and one of the largest in the world. We visited St. Stephen's Basilica a Roman Catholic Basilica. It was the sixth largest church building in Hungary before 1920. It is named in honor of Stephen, the first King of

Hungary, whose mummified right hand is housed in the reliquary. (You pay a few coins to light up the box holding the mummified hand). On certain holidays in Budapest the hand is carried through the town in a parade for all to see.

VIENNA - AUSTRIA

Vienna was my favorite city. Vienna is the capital and largest city of Austria, and one of the nine states of Austria. Apart from being regarded as the *City of Music* because of its musical legacy, Vienna is also said to be "The City of Dreams" because it was home to the world's first psycho-analyst – Sigmund Freud. We had an introduction sightseeing trip to the center of the Hapsburg Empire and a tour along the Ring Boulevard, past Emperor Franz Josef's Hofburg palace and the ornate State Opera. We stopped at 'The Belvedere' a historic building complex in Vienna, consisting of two Baroque palaces (the Upper and Lower Belvedere), the Orangery, and the Palace Stables. We strolled through the 'Volksgarten Public Park' the rose bushes were in full bloom and the beautiful Triton and Nymph Fountain was sparkling in the sun. We continued walking down Graben Street in the inner city of Vienna to see one of the most well-known pieces of sculpture called 'The Plague Column'. In 1679, Vienna was visited by one of the last big plague epidemics. Fleeing the city, Emperor Leopold I vowed to erect a mercy column if the epidemic would end. In the same year, a provisional wooden column made by Johann Frühwirth was inaugurated, showing the Holy Trinity on a Corinthian column together with nine sculpted angels (for the *Nine Choirs of Angels*). We walked by the home of the world's classiest chocolate cake, Café Sacher, and went inside to see an example of the famous cake. We passed the famous pastry shop and chocolaterie 'Demel' which we later went by ourselves and had apple strudel and ice cream. Mike and Richard had beers and I had a wonderful mug of hot chocolate served in a tea room setting.

The next day was a day of leisure in Vienna. I had a planned to go antique shopping. There was a district that had streets of antique stores to visit. Our first stop was to Dorotheum a large auction and selling venue. Mike and I looked at the estate sale jewelry and Mike liked a gold bracelet with semiprecious stones and diamonds. When he asked if I wanted it I said YES. I had purchased a red amber pendent in Warsaw as a memory of my trip and now I had a gold bracelet from Vienna. There were so many beautiful and interesting things in this huge store that you could spend all day there...they even had a tea and coffee shop on the premises. We left and continued to go inside other antique shops, stopping along the way for photos of interesting sights. One area in the middle of a square had been preserved to show an area where old roman ruins had been excavated. We found the 'Donnerbrunnen Fountain' situated on the centre of the Neuer Markt square. The four figures that surround Lady Providence represent the four main rivers of the Austrian heartlands: The two male ones those of Upper Austria, the two female ones those of Lower Austria. We went inside St. Michael's Church, Michaelerkirche. The High Altar with the 'Falling Angels' by Carl Merville, 1782 was very impressive. Organ music was being played and the place was practically empty. This was so nice to relax and enjoy this church because of the absent of the crowds. We went back to St. Stephen's Cathedral where earlier our group had gone inside for a walk around. We returned to have time to climb the south tower for great views of the city.

After climbing 343 tightly wound steps up the spiral staircase we had views of the mosaic roof tiles and gargoyles. At the top was a souvenir shop with widows to view the town below. That night our group went to a Strauss & Mozart concert at Kursalon Wien. The orchestra played classical Viennese music of waltzes, polkas, arias and duets accompanied by opera vocalists and dancers. At intermission people rushed to have a glass of white wine included in the price.

DÜRNSTEIN & TELC - CZECH REPUBLIC

Our group then journeyed across the Czech border through rich farmlands to Moravia. We stopped to visit the quaint towns of Dürnstein and Telc en route to Prague. Dürnstein is a small town on the Danube river in the Krems-Land district, in the Austrian state of Lower Austria. It is one of the most visited tourist destinations in the Wachau region and also a well-known wine growing area. The town gained its name from the medieval castle, Burgruine Durnstein, which overlook it...now in ruins. We ran to find the monastic church at Dürnstein, now the parish church, built in 1721-25 by J. Munggenast, J. Prandtauer and others. It is one of the finest Baroque towers in Austria, a prominent landmark of the Danube valley, and a magnificent main doorway in the courtyard. Inside the church on each side were glass enclosed gold gilded cases holding skeletons with remnants of gold and pearl funeral attire still on their bones. Most interesting burial shrines I had seen on this trip. On the way back to the bus I saw an iron gate and thought maybe something interesting was behind it. It was a great find of the Dürnstein Parish Graveyard. Beautiful iron-scroll head markers galore with the graves surrounded by marble slabs filled with wax begonias and assorted plants and small bushes. The graveyard was in a courtyard surrounded by old buildings. Wish I could have had more time in this graveyard but had to run back to the bus so not to be late. Our guide then took us to Telc a town in southern Moravia, near Jihlava, in the Czech Republic. The town was founded in 13th century as a royal water fort on the crossroads of busy merchant routes between Bohemia, Moravia and Austria. Besides the monumental 17th century Renaissance chateau with an English-style park (a rebuilding of original Gothic castle), the most significant sight is the town square, a unique complex of long urban plaza with well-conserved Renaissance and Baroque houses with high gables and arcades; since 1992 all of this has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

PRAGUE – CZECH REPUBLIC

Prague is the capital and largest city of the Czech Republic. It is the fourteenth-largest city in the European Union. Main attractions include the Prague Castle, the Charles Bridge, Old Town Square, the Jewish Quarter, the Lennon Wall and Petřín Hill. On our tour we went to all of these places except Petřín Hill, Lennon Wall and the Charles Bridge which Mike, Richard and I went to see the next day. Prague Castle is the official residence and office of the President of the Czech Republic. Located in the Hradčany district of Prague and dating back to the ninth century, the castle has been a seat of power for kings of Bohemia, Holy Roman emperors, and presidents of Czechoslovakia. Located within Prague Castle and containing the tombs of many Bohemian kings and

Holy Roman Emperors is St. Vitus Cathedral. This Gothic Cathedral had many beautiful stain glass windows.

We stopped by the Prague astronomical clock, or Prague orloj, a medieval astronomical clock and watched the action at the hour. The clock was first installed in 1410, making it the third-oldest astronomical clock in the world and the oldest one still working. The calendar plate below the clock was replaced by a copy in 1880. Original calendar is stored in the Museum of Prague. On the hour four figures flanking the clock are set in motion. Below the clock face on the right side stands 'Death', a skeleton that pulls a rope and raises an hourglass and inverts it. Then the other figure, the Turk, a symbol of lust, shakes his head from side to side. Vanity, on the left, looks at himself in a mirror moving back and forth and Greed, adapted from the original medieval stereotype of a Jewish moneyleader moves his head and moneybag. Twin doors on top open and the statues of the Apostles move in circular motion. The astronomical clock with the sun of Aries is gorgeous.

Next day was a full day at leisure. Mike, Richard and I went to the Charles Bridge and climbed the bridge tower to get a good view of the Vltava River, the town and the Charles Bridge. The Charles Bridge is a famous historic bridge that crosses the Vltava River in Prague. Its construction started in 1357 under the auspices of King Charles IV, and finished in the beginning of the 15th century. The bridge replaced the old Judith Bridge built 1158–1172 that had been badly damaged by a flood in 1342. This new bridge was originally called the Stone Bridge or the Prague Bridge but has been the 'Charles Bridge' since 1870. After crossing the bridge we went down some stairs where another small bridge had hundreds of love locks attached to its iron railings. I brought from home my own love padlock with two old silver spoons attached to the lock. I attached my lock by the others ones and kissed the key goodbye. We continued on down the street to see 'The Lennon Wall' or 'John Lennon Wall'. In 1988, the wall was a source of irritation for the communist regime of Gustáv Husák. Young Czechs would write grievances on the wall and in a report of the time this led to a clash between hundreds of students and security police on the nearby Charles Bridge. The wall is owned by the Knights of Malta, who allowed the graffiti to continue on the wall, and is located at (Grand Priory Square), Mala Strana. Since the 1980s it has been filled with John Lennon-inspired graffiti and pieces of lyrics from Beatles songs. There was a band playing Beatle songs. For a donation you could enter the courtyard to listen, money was being donated to a local charity.

We made our way to Petřín Hill. It rises some 130m above the left bank of the Vltava River. The hill, almost entirely covered with parks, is a favorite recreational area for the inhabitants of Prague. We boarded the Petřín funicular to the top of the hill. Once there we went to 'Petřín Hill Observation Tower' and climbed the 299 steps to the top and had a great view of Prague. The tower strongly resembles the Eiffel Tower. From the tower we went for some fun in the 'Mirror Maze Building.' After you make your way through the maze lined with columns and mirrors you end up in the 'Hall of Laughter' where circus mirrors line the walls and people are laughing at the distorted images of themselves.

We did some shopping for Czech glass buttons at several shops I had researched before going on this tour. At one shop a lady was selling textiles and buttons. I asked for antique buttons and she brought some out for my approval. I purchased some black glass, moon glows and pink glass buttons from her. We went to another store in the antique section that sold mostly clocks. The lady had a few black glass buttons with dragonflies on them that I purchased. She told me of another store that had antique buttons and gave me the address. We went there and a young man, just starting out his store, had the mother load of buttons that I was looking for. I purchased several cards of red and blue buttons with painted flowers and a salesman's card of buttons of different sizes. It rained most of the time we were in Prague but we had a good time anyway. We found a very charming café with outdoor seating and a sturdy tent style roof. We sat down exhausted and had the best lunch in Prague. I had a delicious shrimp appetizer with a wonderful sauce, chicken wiener schnitzel with tasty mashed potatoes. Mike had some broiled fish with roasted potatoes, that he loved, and Richard had pork cheeks with mashed potatoes and gravy. We could not resist dessert; Richard ordered crème brûlée that came with a scoop of orange sorbet, strawberries, blueberries and a cookie. I had to have the chocolate trio that consisted of a dense brownie, a dense chocolate cake and chocolate chip ice cream served with a few strawberries and topped with chocolate sauce. I read in my notes that Kotva Department Store near us had a terrace bar called (Bohe(my)a Lounge & Grill Bar) on top of the building that allowed great views of the city. We went to the store and took a series of escalators to the top and were rewarded with great views. Mike and Richard had to have some beer tasting for the end of the day so we stopped for a few. We had our farewell dinner at the hotel and celebrated with our group.

HELSINKI – FINLAND

The next morning we boarded a short flight to Helsinki and had a short orientation tour on arrival. We did not see much in Helsinki. We arrived at our hotel and got ready for our trip back home. We had a marvelous dinner in the Scandic Hotel where we were staying. Nice to have a good place to eat and not have to venture out. We were told that our flight to New York had been cancelled. Arrangements were made to fly us to Germany the next morning and from there to New York. We had a room reservation in New York just in case we had trouble getting back to the USA. Worked out OK, we got back to New York and then home the next day. Gave us time to rest and get some dinner.

We all had a nice time in Eastern Europe and brought back lots of memories. We hope to get back to Europe for another trip ... Smartours was good to us and we liked our tour operators.

Happy Trails: 2014
Mike, Audrey and Richard