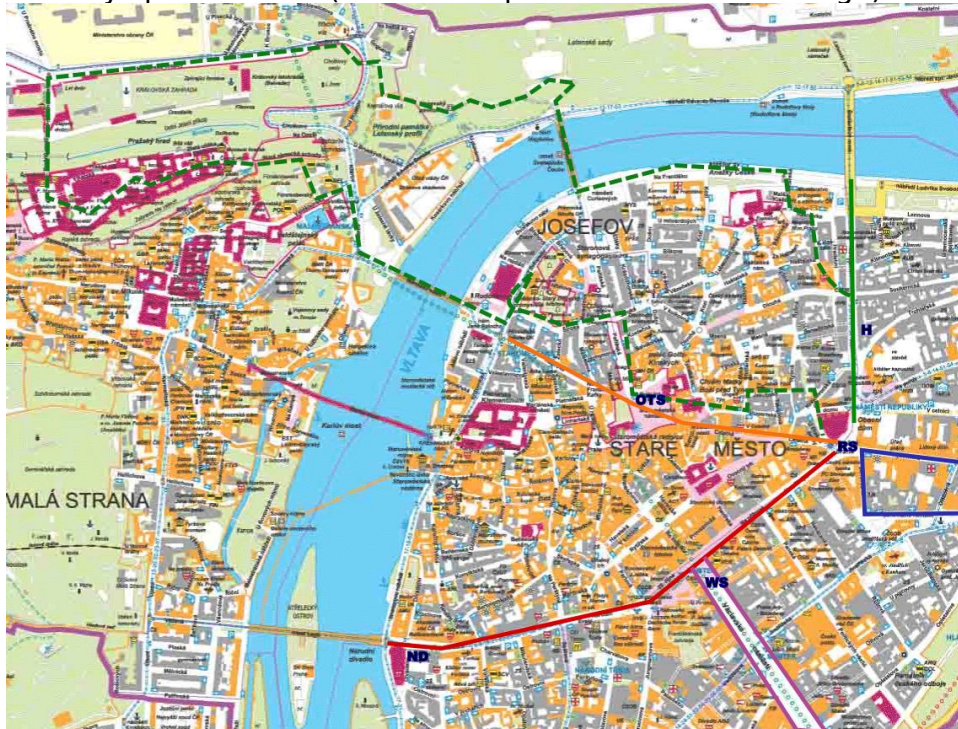


7 March (posted later)



I only have a few hours in Prague before my driver shows up at 11:45. Don't think that I am spoilt with a driver, that's just the easiest way to deal with getting to and from the airport, given language barriers, locations, etc. It isn't very expensive, either.

I have a quick breakfast in the hotel and head out to find an Internet café that's open this early so that I can post my nightly writings. I also want to go check out an Art Nouveau gallery I found last night. Before I go any further, I realise that things will be easier if I give you a map. I really should have done this earlier. This map covers the section of Prague that I actually spent time in (click on map to view full sized image):



The legend is as follows:

H - Hotel City Centre

OTS - Old Town Square (Staromestske Namesti)

RS - Republic Square (Namesti Repuliky)

WD - Wenceslas Square (Vaclavske Namesti)

ND - National Theare (Narodni Davoli)

The lines I have marked on the map show my main paths of travel, from which I would regularly vary into the many little alleys, cul de sac, etc. The main lines are:

Green - Revolucni

Red - Shopping drag (3 separate streets, from west to east - Narodni, 28 Rijna, Na Prikope)

Orange - Path to Old Town Square (Celetna)

Blue - My last morning wandering (partial)

Violet - Wenceslas Square wander (partial)

Green Dash - Wander to Prague Castle and back

I hope this helps to make some better sense out of my reports.

So, this morning I decided that since I had neglected so much of the city I should at least try to find an Internet café off to the southeast of the hotel, instead of my regular haunts. This took me out of the tourist area and into a much grittier section of town. I liked what I saw and

wished I had done this earlier. No regret, though, as I have not regretted any of my journeys here. Just a note for next time.

To say that there was more graffiti here would miss the point. There is a lot of graffiti throughout Prague, which is kind of jarring at first. There is something really strange about looking at a building which has survived so many wars and battles and other national disasters over a period spanning hundreds of years, and seeing graffiti on it. One gets used to it over time, though. So, to say that there is more graffiti is to say that one notices it again. But, there are also butcher shops, fish mongers, hardware stores, etc. All of those ingredients that make urban life possible. Much of this is missing in the more touristy areas. I find a café and post my stories and then go to find the Art Nouveau gallery from last night. I do, and I am impressed by their goods. They are mostly reproduction blown glass pieces, and quite lovely, but are priced rather high for my taste, and I am caught in a Catch-22: If I carry a purchase away with me I can get a refund on the VAT (about 14%) at the airport, but then I have to figure out how to get a several hundred dollar piece of fragile glass home. If I opt for shipping (which is not cheap) I cannot claim a refund on the VAT. I finally decide that although I like these pieces, they are reproductions, and there is nothing to say I cannot get them anywhere, or over the Internet, later. They hold no real value to me as souvenirs.

So, back to the hotel, get ready to leave, and wait for my driver...

My first driver (we never exchanged names) was a Canadian who had come here to teach English shortly after the Velvet Revolution, and never left. My second driver is an Englishman who came to work on a big IT project, shortly after the Velvet Revolution, and never left, having met and married a Czech woman and deciding that happiness was the most important thing in life, so stayed here once his assignment ended three years later.

Dave, his name was, knew right where Milwaukee is. He was here just 18 months ago. For his 50th birthday present to himself he took a months vacation in the US (sound familiar) and rented a Harley Davidson bike and just had himself a jolly good time. He travelled to 3 dozen states on that trip, including Wisconsin. He has taken many young people under his wing over the past 15 years, serving as a parent in absentia for students visiting Prague for semesters abroad, and he keeps up with them. This provided him an invaluable address book to consult as he travelled the US, and he visited 15 or so of these good, young friends during his stay. He loves the US. In particular he loves how friendly and approachable the people are, and how helpful. We talk about the politene, yet standoffish nature of the English, in contrast. When I tell him that I was spending time in London to decide if I should relocate he thinks I'm daft. "Don't do it, doesn't make any sense..." I really like talking with him, and would gladly join him in a bar for a day of story telling, but I have a plane to catch, alas. So long Dave!

A fond farewell to Prague. I really enjoyed myself here, and would love to have a longer visit here sometime. The people were warm and patient. The prices are good, if you get out of the tourist havens, and everything is just so beautiful. The worst thing about the place is that there are just so many tourists (pot calls kettle black...). Here it is early March, and already the streets are teeming — the real tourist season doesn't even start for another several weeks.

Ciao ciao!