

Running in Prag

by Susan Dawson-Cook

Prague caught me by surprise,

wasn't the city I expected it to be. The capital of the Czech Republic was never on my top 10 list of places I wanted to go; those places were mostly ocean paradises with few people and abundant beaches, crystal clear waters and sunshine. Prague was just another big city, I thought. But there was this writing workshop calling me to participate, that I was willing to travel half way around the world to attend. Prague would be just another work-related destination, I imagined, until I found myself standing in the heart of the city.

I walked along streets, narrow, wide and steep, the soles of my sandals tilting over the uneven cobblestones. Sometimes I knew where I was headed, sometimes amidst the maze of Baroque, Gothic and Cubist stone buildings, each structure a work of art, I forgot my destination, forgot why it was important to arrive.

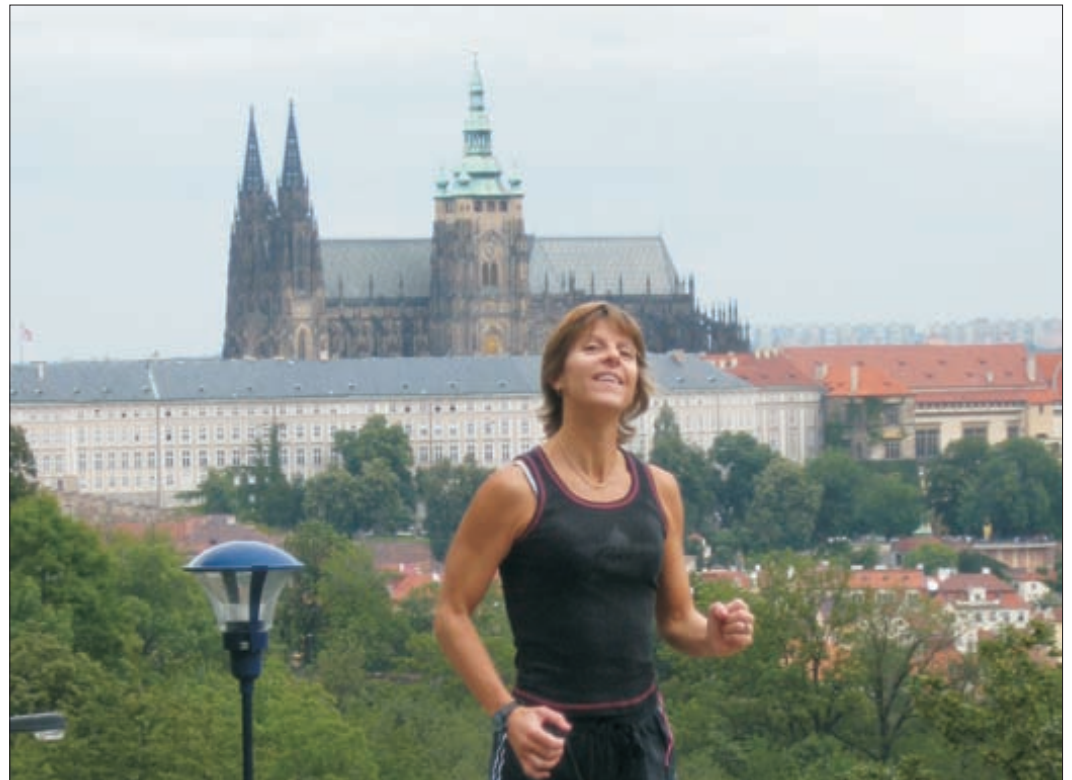
I stared at statues boldly guarding buildings; naked men with rippling muscles, wielding swords or gazing toward the heavens, unclothed women wearing wreaths around their heads. As an athlete, I was impressed by the sheer power of their images. Clock towers were decorated with golden hands, numbers and images. The astronomical clock on the Old Town Hall Tower chimed at the top of the hour while figures of the apostles made their procession from opening doors. On crowded streets and plazas, women wore brightly colored, low-cut tank tops, couples laughed and leaned toward each other, the air smelling of cigarettes, cologne and fresh pastries.

Arching over the Vltava River, the Charles Bridge, with its army of Baroque statues, provided a panoramic view of boats on dark water sparkling under the lazy afternoon sun, of Prague Castle and the St. Vitus Cathedral boldly guarding the city from a hilltop promontory.

Prague embraces my heart so unexpectedly, I barely know it has taken me. I take my belongings out of my suitcase and place them neatly on shelves and in drawers as if I had returned home. While I place my swim suit, goggles and running clothes into a separate drawer, I ponder my exercise plan. For me, exercising is like breathing. It keeps me alive in all the ways that matter. Even in Eastern Europe, I have no intention of giving it all up for Czech pastries and Pilsner beer.

I inquire about the location of the nearest swimming pool. Across the street, my husband and I can swim at the Diplomat Hotel for \$20 per person, a woman tells us. We decide that's too much money to float around in a bean shaped pool, and we're so exhausted from our transatlantic flight, we return to our room and fall asleep without eating supper.

The next morning, I'm awake before the sun rises. My husband is still asleep so I pull on my shorts and a T-shirt and



Susan running on Petrin Hill with view of Prague Castle in the background. Photo by Christopher Ferko

head out alone to run up and down the streets of Prague. I try not to be disarmed by the open-mouthed stares I receive from Czech men who can't believe American women over 40 have the gall to run around the streets in nylon shorts.

On the days that follow, most often I run alone; occasionally I run with my husband or other writers. My favorite running spot is Stromovka Park in Prague 6. An easy access from the student dorm where my husband and I are staying, the park is a maze of paved and dirt paths. In a matter of days, it becomes my "Secret Garden." I'm often the only one there on mornings I venture into its boundaries to escape the city for this paradise of grass and trees.

Ancient towering trees rife with foliage clasp branches over the trail. They remind me of girlhood days in Ohio, when I would retreat to the Olentangy River, a riverside Mecca of sycamore and oak trees where there were no sounds except the tumbling of water over stones and the croaking of frogs.

I feel so free running through the park. Sometimes I run for miles, listening to my MP3 player. On other days, I sprint for short distances and then drop into the grass alongside the lake and listen to the ducks quacking or watch wisps of clouds dance across the pale blue sky. One day I try interval training. I run along the paved path until I reach a gazebo and then stop to

do pushups, sit-ups or an occasional hip hop dance routine. I don't even mind getting caught in the rain. After all, it is July in Prague and if I were in Tucson, I would be greeted with an unwelcome blast of blistering heat.

Alone in the park, my imagination runs as free as the rest of me. I am the protagonist in a Victoria Holt romance novel, wandering through a fairy tale world of magnificent trees and romantic castles. My husband of several years, my knight in shining armor, is nowhere to be found. Where is he? Still in my make believe world, I search the entire city until I see a man with rippling, taut muscles, crouched unclothed on top of a building. Is it him? I wonder until he leaps down from his post and takes me into his arms.

One day we get an invitation to run with a group. Our run — with Ron Grant, one of our workshop leaders and the boys head cross country coach at Sunnyside High School, and Kerstin Lieff, a triathlete and writer from Boulder, Colorado — will begin in the middle of Old Town Square. This means not only will I be running in public but also taking the Metro in shorts. My husband says it's no big deal. I feel differently. It's bad enough to wear clothes that aren't the norm here when I'm moving, another thing to stand still and be ogled. As the metro cars rattle along the green line tracks, I keep my eyes focused on my running shoes.

I'm not thrilled about running through the city. Sure, it will be



A view of Historic Prague and the Vltava River from Prague Castle looking to the south. Susan Dawson-Cook Photo

enjoyable to jog by buildings, churches and clock towers more than 600 years old. I'm worried we'll get hit by a car. But the Prague drivers have no relation to those maniac drivers in Spain and France who will run you flat without an erratic blink. They smile and calmly wait for us to cross the street. Trams are the exception. I almost get flattened by one on more than one occasion. I look one way and begin to cross, only to feel the breeze created by the tram coming from the other direction.

On another day, we start once again at the center of town, this time entering Stromovka Park and then crossing a bridge over the Vltava River until we see the boundary where the city meets the countryside. The surrounding hillsides are lightly decorated with houses, a patchwork quilt of fields and the occasional forest.

For awhile, Ron runs alongside me and we chat about our writing habits — what time of day we write and how long. I confess that my writing schedule is somewhat irregular. But I defend myself saying I have the discipline to make up for that and somehow manage to write nearly every day. Kerstin talks about her triathlon coach. He sounds like a great guy. I imagine what a luxury it would be to have a coach to help me refine my techniques and motivate me to push myself to the next level. Chris isn't one for talking on a jog. At home we usually listen to our MP3 players when we run.

One morning, Kerstin and Ron catch a bug to run hills. "Are you out

of your mind?" my husband asks when I propose we join them. "This is supposed to be vacation." He pours himself a second cup of coffee as I head out the door. I am doubting myself more than him, wondering why I'm giving up a second cup of Chai for an hour of sheer torture.

As we near the base of Petrin Hill, we pass the dismal memorial of metallic figures; men with partially missing brains and bodies who represent the destructiveness of communism. The country feels so comfortable to me today, like a pair of favorite jeans, it's hard to imagine how it felt to be there during darker days.

As the first of too many climbs begins, I recall strolling up this very hill with Chris, watching the American flag flapping in the wind over the chalk white structure of the American Embassy. Passing neat rows of apple and cherry trees on either side of the path, people lay stretched out in the grass, lounging with a book or necking with a lover. The higher we climbed, the more the view reached a spectacular crescendo. The historic city below was an ocean of onion domes and red tile roofs, the Vltava River dividing the historic city into old and new. Old Town (Staré Mesto) nestled on the Far side of the river, Lesser Town (Mala Strana) on the near side at the foot of the magnificent Prague Castle. Seated on a hill adjacent to where we stood, the stone castle showed off its high protective walls, magnificent gardens, turrets and rows of windows.

On top of Petrin Hill is a mini version of the Eiffel Tower, where you



A statue outside Prague Castle.
Susan Dawson-Cook Photo

can climb 299 steps to the top for a spectacular view. The top of the hill can be reached on foot or by a tram that shoots up at a precarious angle from Ujezd. But I'm not thinking of beautiful views as I run up Petrin Hill; the scenery disappears in a blur of discomfort. I am the slowest runner. I have been lazy, spending too many nights drinking Czech Pilsner, too many mornings on my back in the meadows of Stromovka Park, and not enough time propelling my thighs in a forward direction. And I'm paying the price.

My feet pad along below the archway of trees, each switchback leading me up to the flanks of the 14th century stone Hunger Wall which steps down the hill, marking a southern boundary of the city's historic district. I am always the last one to arrive at the top. Ron and Kerstin wait patiently, and when I reach them we jog as a group slowly down the hill to prepare for another head splitting ascent. By the time we finish, I can't recall how many times we have

ascended and descended. When I get back to the dorm, I take a shower and collapse into sleep for nearly two hours.

After that day, I return to my secret place. I want my final workouts to enhance my Prague experience, rather than exhaust me. Once again I am running through this garden world where the trees are hundreds of feet tall and birds are singing and I think of all that transpired to bring me here. My feet traverse this hallowed ground where artists around the world have traveled to glean inspiration and I, too, have become newly inspired. Because writing has become like running, swimming and dancing. And the rising and falling rhythm of my breath. A quintessential part of my being.

Months have passed since my weeks in Prague. Yet whenever I run, I still remember. And on an especially good day, even though my feet are plodding over desert sand, I imagine my cheek is being kissed by humid air, that I'm running beneath trees in Stromovka Park which are locked in an everlasting embrace.



Inside the grounds of Prague Castle. Susan Dawson-Cook Photo

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Workout Options in Prague

Plavecky stadion Podolí

– Podolská 74, Prague 4
A beautiful 50 meter outdoor swimming pool with indoor showers and locker room. You pay based on how much time you will spend there. Once you buy your ticket, you scan it through before you enter the locker rooms and again when you leave. A red light will be illuminated and the turnstiles will not allow you exit without paying more if you have overstayed your time.

Take the green line to the Staromestská stop and then take the tram south along the Vltava River to the Kublov stop.

City Bike

– Královská 5, Prague 1
There is a second location on the north side of Old Town square. Telephone 420 776 180 284, citybike-prague.com

You can rent a cruiser or mountain bike for the day and head out on your own or sign up to take a bike tours in the city. Daily tours at 10:30, 1:30 and 4:30. Bikes for women and children also are available.

World Class Fitness Center Prague

– Wenceslas Square 22, Telephone 420 234 699 100, worldclassfitness.net
A large multi-level facility that has a weight room, sauna and offers fitness classes such as cycling, kick boxing and Tae-bo.