

6-page sample from
Gerard Ward's

**'Do it now: Before
it's too late!'**

(Due for release in mid-2010)

© Gerard Ward 2010

Prague is the Euro-Middleground

The sun was disguised behind thin clouds in the sky, revealing only the glow of the yellow star, without the glare most sunglasses prevent a percentage of. The mountainous Hungarian villages that zoomed past through my train window puffed smoke from the chimneys, most likely for cooking and warmth from the chilly atmosphere. The sun was not shining bright enough to show much of the town at the bottom of this small village, but at the top, a castle with a golden shine from the sides of that thin cloud for a moment gave the impression it was built in that exact place to distil the feeling of status, importance and power.

My blank stare outside was interrupted by three old fellows stumbling into my train carriage. The wonders of a simple observation turn to grunts and off-key breaths of those who had just jumped on board from the last stop. My personal haven in my isolated room was destroyed, and I re-arrange my baggage lying around the place, and get back to my book. "From one distant land to another," I thought, reading about Harry Potter's first year at Hogwarts.

As the end of the train ride approached I started wondering if my stop was the last on the line, or whether I needed to keep my ear out for Praga Main.signal to hop off before the train continued on to Germany. My ears perked up like a canine, listening to every Hungarian notice from the speakers, trying to hear "Praga". At this

stage only the German man sat in the same room. I finally asked him with my deepest apologies for not knowing German, and he assures me it is the last stop.

Train stations can be glamorous or practical, but rarely neither. Prague's train station is the latter, with architecture that seemed to make sense, without the bells and whistles that offer more glamour to the transportation hub. I slugged my backpack on my shoulders and headed for the metro, keeping my eyes peeled for an bank machine. It wasn't Hungarian money I needed now, it was Czech crowns. I pondered how frustrating travellers before me would be dealing with new currency in every country in Europe.

When I finally found a machine, I was puzzled when I saw withdrawal amounts in the hundreds. Whenever you see 800 somethings from an ATM, you tend to freak out a little. I didn't know the conversion to Australian dollars, but judging from the amounts on offer, it was near the middle. I would later find out it would be around the \$45 mark.

My accommodation's location was close to the Narodni Trida station I had to go to, and was "only 100 metres away" according to the directions. The sun was almost completely left sight of the sky, and thinking back to previous hostel directions, I kept my mind focused for slight understatements in the directions. Hostel Downtown made a big understatement. I walked 100 metres, then 100 more. I turned around and wondered if I passed it. Trekking back, I noticed a small 'Hostelling International' sticker on of the dark doors, which was hard to see at that time of night.

I signed in and eventually found my room after processing what the receptionist meant by "floor two". Being tired can have a large effect on hearing, and what I heard sounded like "two floors" and finally made it after shaking my head, thinking I should have tried having a nap on the train instead of a six hour book marathon with the wizard. I could hear the two Australian accents before I even opened the door. Right there and then I realised how well travelled a lot of Aussies are. One sounded so stereotypically Australian, I was expecting to be asked where I was from. As I expected, the welcome to the room was warm and I jumped to sleep in peace.

The morning came as a surprise as the large curtains covering the wall of windows actually kept in light, which was a shock to my experience of window curtains being purely decorative. Peering

through the curtains, I saw Prague's calming grey colour in the sky that gave the impression it was 10am, but it was only 8am. I got up and headed off to find some breakfast and go for a wander. A supermarket was around the corner from the hostel, and remembering what Chris the short buzz-cut Australian diplomat in Room 201 told me, went down a set of escalators. I felt like I had walked into a department store, walking past perfumes, hair colour treatments and cough medicine. In the distance hidden in the corner near the women's bras was a market the size of a small petrol station stop. I bought my ingredients for a nice ham sandwich with a yoghurt drink and headed off west. West is always a nice direction to go first, and the fact that the river was west was a good enough incentive.

One of Prague's charms is the ability to be within it all, or to escape to the many parks situated around the city. I found the number one park of the city after crossing a bridge of traffic, and the cool and crisp morning air hit me with a refreshing sensation that I can only describe as a pleasant walk through nature, without tourists.

Maybe it was because of the timing of the day at that point, but the only other park dwellers were a few owners of dogs walking about. I planted myself on a bench right in front of a water fountain and made my brunch.

To my right was a small incline to a funicular – which is a 45 degree tram – that scooted up the hill, taking tourists to the top for the hill to the Observation Tower, or the 'Eiffel Tower' of Prague. Alongside it was a path people could take to not pay for that ride. You can guess which way I took.

The walk was as calming and relaxing as it was amazing. I walked around the place for an hour and only bumped into four people. And at the top were the combinations of beautiful gardens and remains of structures surrounding Petrin Hill. From the luscious colour of the flowers to the steel observatory and stone fort walls giving the old military base some cover, the place had a lot to offer. There were mounds of school children swarming the place in the central area surrounding the top of the tram ride. It looked as if five lots of school kids were all taken to see this place.

My walks usually don't have much historical background, so I tend to bypass the real importance of some buildings. Just seeing

the amount of people here could only hint that this place was more than a spot to sell postcards and trinkets.

In the distance I saw the large Prague Castle and headed my way down the hill and up another to reach it. These walks weren't uninteresting because along the way were churches, orchestra halls and just shops with enough to keep the interested wanderer entertained.

Prague Castle isn't exactly a typical castle, but rather made up of a lot of buildings put close together. I made it in time for the changing of the guards at one of the royal buildings, dodged the vintage cars zooming on the old brick roads offering tours around, and something new: People leading others with a coloured umbrella. Their tours are known as 'Umbrella Tours', and their colour related to the language. I didn't know what language represented the guy holding Obi-Wan's lightsaber - unless it was in Wookiee - but I kept my thoughts buzzing on the possibilities.

With enough wandering around in an almost blissful mindset, two hours pass quicker than you can fathom, and I ended up in the city centre. I had no complaints, because like every other day - amongst plenty of well-maintained buildings and cobblestone roads - the place was buzzing with tourists, locals, and horses clamped to carriages. Prague, I thought, is going to take a while to see.

I had dived into a random restaurant to try some authentic cuisine, and ended up in what seemed to be a glorified cafeteria-style setup, and without the thought of turning around passing my mind, I grabbed a tray, piled a bunch of different foods ranging from dumplings, roast beef and gravy, and sat down at the only available table in a packed room. It wasn't exactly as stereotypically romantic a setting as I had planned, but the grub was really satisfying. My travels so far had taken me a fair bit off-course in comparison to the initial itinerary. I never would've thought I would just choose to go to Budapest after Oktoberfest. But travel can sometimes surprise you, and usually at the most unplanned of times, hence it being a surprise. I can see the simplicity in that observation, so allow me to pat myself on the back. Sitting among an oak-coloured dining area made me chuckle to myself.

I had met some fantastic people in Prague among the halls of the hostel and kitchen/internet space from Australians to these two Swiss girls who seemed to be the type to go visit the nightlife with,

but as I returned from lunch and sat down on a chair waiting my turn to use the computer, I caught the gaze of a pair of eyes. Those eyes were part of an expression of disbelief. Then I hear: "Hey, are you...Gerard?"

The girl with red hair and that same unfathomed void expression of shock was now also pointing at me. "Gerard Ward?" I was stunned. Who was this woman? How does she know me, and by full name? Could it be possible that my MySpace blog had exceeded the boundaries of my ring of friends?

"Were you at Oktoberfest?" she asked. From that moment, it felt like cycling a thousand mental images of the blurry few days I spent in Munich with steins and sing-a-longs. I pulled my camera out of my pocket, cycled through my actual pictures, walking towards the girl -

"Is that you?" I said, equally shocked.

There Nicolla was, the same girl pointing at me now, dressed in traditional Bavarian clothing she had hired for the occasion. I had somehow by chance bumped into someone I sang songs with at the hazy moment of the Lowenbrau tent. "That's so strange!" I told her. "I mean I went to Barcelona, Budapest and now Prague."

"What are the odds that we would meet up here?" she said, telling me her itinerary had taken her in the opposite direction.

With a familiar face to share the experiences, Nicolla and I went on a walk around Prague's city centre, discussing those intellectual concepts of the traveller's psyche. I couldn't get over these constant surprises of being a backpacker with such an unplanned mentality, and yet bumping into friends like I would at a local supermarket back home.

I had caught up with Chris when we returned, and he suggested we check out a biergarten he visited the last time he visited Prague. Across the bridge at night was a whole other atmosphere. The cluster of tourists swarming around the street – or bridge – entertainers were gone, and all that was left was a magnificent view of lights from the buildings along the river, and couples smooching away with a slight breeze to make the wavy hair effect just right.

"See those statues?" Chris pointed, and I noticed the two copper wire men with very large 'hoses' peeing into the water calmly. "You can SMS your name to a number, and they write it in the water."

I gave a laugh, hinting that after a few beers, you could dare me to

do the same thing for free, and have the added bonus of seeing me get arrested for public urination. "YouTube would love that," I laughed. "And my family."

"Fame comes at a price mate," Chris pat my shoulder with a laugh before pointing out the pub we were heading to.

The temperature outside was warm enough with the heaters blaring to sit out, and we took the opportunity. Two menus and a bench dining table later, we scanned the beers, and I struggled to figure out whether the beers on the menu were low in alcohol content, or just incredibly cheap. "They're all cheap mate," Chris assured us, and then indicated the wooden stand at the edge of the table holding four large pretzels. "It's those that they'll charge you an arm and a leg for, without telling you until the end."

We headed back to the hostel to find the two Swiss girls drinking beers and watching TV. Being in an already sociable mood, we invited them out for a drink. Chantal, the blonde-haired girl who spoke almost perfect English, became the translator for her dark-haired friend Aicha. Considering it was two guys and two girls, we were quick to pair up with one another when we left the hostel to chat while we searched for a bar. "Je ne parle pas bien Francais," I managed to say without too much hesitation to Aicha, who then laughed and assured me: "iz okay. I speak a little English."

I had heard a nightclub in Prague that sported five levels, all with different house music. I went with the Swiss girls to "Czech it out", and what shocked me about the place as we lined up in the cold to get in was the packs of sixteen year olds who had no trouble getting in through the doors, all drinking out of the same beer glass as if they have never had bought a drink before. Next to them were the 40 year old men staring at these younger ladies, who would be buying them more drinks later on thinking this was a perfectly acceptable way to hang out. This was not so different from home in a way, but then again it's Europe, so most sights looked strange to me. As expected, I attempted to dance to keep the interest of Aicha, who seemed to have an interest in me but was constantly depleting as I struggled to look cool. Even with Chantal telling me Aicha liked me, I figured I would enjoy the moment, then make my way the next day.

(end of sample...)
