

Episode 101: Prague

Summary

Nick and Wendy recently visited Prague in the Czech Republic. They talk about what they did there and they also reminisce about their previous trips to Prague in 2000-2001.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you from the Czech Republic, or Czechia as we can now call it. That's the official English short name for the country, which just came in last year. And, in particular, we're talking about Prague, which is the capital city and the most famous place in Czechia. And this is not the first time that we've been to Prague, but it's the first time in many, many, many years, and the first time that we've been together.

Wendy: Yes, because we both went to Prague separately when we were very young and travelling around Europe for the first time. And we had not met each other yet. So for me that was in 2000, I believe, and for you, it was a year later, is that right?

Nick: Yeah, 2001. And so what do you remember from your first trip to Prague?

Wendy: I remember surprisingly little. It's kind of scary how little I remember. Most of my memories are associated with the hostel where I was staying. And I have just vague¹ memories of the city itself. But really nothing definite at all. I mean, I know that I went to the castle. I'm sure that I would have gone to the castle. I would not have gone to Prague without visiting the castle, definitely at that time in my life. But I can't really tell you what I saw there at all.

Nick: Yeah, I remember a little bit more than that. Umm, and it is true, though, I don't remember certain things from places that I went on that trip, because it was so long ago. Umm, but I remember buying a roll of black-and-white film, for my film camera, because I thought that Prague would look cool in black and white, and it does look cool in black and white. And so I put this film in my camera and I took black-and-white photos of the city. And I remember climbing one of the towers, and you get a view over the Charles Bridge, which is the most famous bridge and probably the most famous spot in the city. And, so you can look, basically in one direction you see the Charles Bridge and in the other direction you look over into the old town and you can see all of the domes and the towers of the

¹ vague: unclear or lacking in detail

churches. And so it's a beautiful view, so I definitely remember that. Umm, and that's probably most of what I remember.

Umm, but certainly a place that, yeah, I wanted to go back to, umm, you know, for quite a few years because, you know, we wanted to go together and, uhh, obviously it's a beautiful city. And so finally after all these years, we went back and so we've been in Czechia for the last week or so and we spent four days in Prague.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. And it is a very beautiful city. Umm, it's very touristy, I have to say. It's quite popular and for good reason². And, you know, that's something that's happening all over Europe and all over the world, but I would say in particular in Europe because it's so easy to travel these days. You have lots of low-budget airlines, uhh, that will zip you from one city to another around Europe, usually for much cheaper than what it, uhh, costs to buy a train ticket, and much faster. So lots more people are travelling, which is great. But, yeah, it does mean that it gets very crowded. And that was one thing that really struck me as being different from the way that I remembered it. Granted, my memories are very fuzzy³, but I definitely didn't remember there being so many people, and I'm sure that there weren't so many people back in 2000. Also I was there at a different time of year. I think it was November. And so obviously that was, umm, you know, a much quieter period.

And so the other thing that I remember as being very different is that it's gotten a lot more expensive in the past 18 years, too. Umm, during my first trip, I had been travelling around Europe and mostly Western Europe, and so Prague was really my first foray⁴ into Central or Eastern Europe. And it struck me as being much cheaper than all the other countries that I had been visiting on that trip. Uhh, this is another memory that I have. I remember eating in a restaurant, which was pretty unusual for me at that time, because I was on a very slim budget and I was eating lots of fast food or just grabbing sandwiches that I would sit and eat in a park or a square. It was very, very unusual for me to actually go to a proper restaurant with a waiter and be handed a menu and, you know, sit down and have a nice meal. But in Prague I did it, because it was affordable and it was basically the same price that I had been paying for fast food in the Western European countries. And that's not really the case nowadays⁵.

Nick: No, certainly not. Umm, obviously there's been huge changes in this country and in Europe in general over this 17, 18-year period. And so the Czech Republic or Czechia's in the European Union now and so the prices are going to go up. Umm, yeah, I think maybe you had a bit of a ... your understanding of how many

² and for good reason (fixed expression): and justifiably so

³ fuzzy: blurred, not clear

⁴ foray: initial excursion or attempt

⁵ nowadays: these days, today

tourists would be there was a little bit falsified, let's say. I mean, Prague was really the first, uhh, city from behind the Iron Curtain that opened up. My brother Tim went there in 1997, umm, and so, you know, certainly it's been popular for some time, I would say.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, I know that it has. Umm, yeah, at that time, back, you know, in 2000, when I was on my first trip to Europe, when I thought of Europe, I really only thought of Western Europe. And I really didn't know hardly anything about Eastern Europe. And so when I made this snap decision⁶ to go to Prague, I felt like I was really getting off the beaten track⁷ and going somewhere really remote and exotic where no one had been before. Umm, which of course is not the case, and it's even less the case now.

Nick: Yeah, that's funny. And I needed a visa for the Czech Republic in 2001, umm, but my mother even went in 1969 which we talked about a few episodes ago. Umm, so, in our trip this time, we decided to do some different kinds of things, umm, in addition to, or instead of, some of the usual tourist things, just as a way to get away from the crowds and to see something a little bit different. So we had ... you managed to pick up a pamphlet which had these, umm, walking tours mapped out and they were specifically, kind of, off the beaten track tours, to go away from the main central parts of the old town and the Charles Bridge and the castle. And so we followed a couple of those, or parts of a couple of those, and that was really interesting.

Wendy: It was, yeah. We saw things that, umm, were definitely ... they were actually off the beaten track. Uhh, and we ended up walking through some really quiet and peaceful areas. We walked through some parks and some gardens that also had some really beautiful buildings and even quite historic buildings within those gardens. Uhh, for example, we visited a church that was actually, umm, originally an old wooden village church that had been dismantled⁸ and moved and then rebuilt there in Prague.

Nick: Yeah, I think it was a 17th or 18th-century church, but it's, yeah, exactly the kind of image you have of a church in a forest in Russia, for example. Umm, and so, yeah, originally it had been in a much smaller area and now it's been moved to this very large city but it's in a nice, kind of, park, and so it's in a nice, forested area, so it sort of retains its original appeal. We also went to an area called Vyšehrad - umm, I think that's how you say it - and that was also extremely interesting because it's kind of a citadel, it's the so-called second castle of Prague, but it's about three kilometres south of the city centre, and so not a lot of foreign tourists seem to go there. And so we walked around there. It's these garden area ... this garden area, and there's also historical buildings, but there are a lot of local people, you know, walking their dogs or jogging or just enjoying being in the park.

⁶ snap decision: sudden decision, decision on the spur of the moment

⁷ off the beaten track (fixed expression): away from tourist crowds. See also: Episodes 28 and 91.

⁸ dismantled: taken apart

It was a very hot day, that day, umm, but, you know, you can get some shade under the trees and things like that.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. And then we also went into the casements underground in the castle and we were able to cool down that way because going underground, it's obviously much cooler than it is outside.

Nick: Yeah, they told us it was 14 degrees in the summer, underground, umm, and that day it was 35 degrees Celsius outside, so that was a very, very welcome, kind of, natural air conditioning, going underground. That was really interesting, though. We walked through these tunnels, and then at the end there's this room, uhh, and there's this whole history about what the tunnels were used for. Umm, but what they're used for now is to house some of the statues from the Charles Bridge. And these are the original statues, and they've been replaced by replicas on the bridge. And so one of the reasons that they keep them, uhh, in this area is because of the cooling and things like that, and because basically there aren't that many people who go there - it's quite limited in terms of number of people - uhh, and so it's much better for the preservation of the statues.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, the temperature, the air and just the conditions there underneath the ground are ... make it so the statues are going to be very well preserved, much better than they would be if they were out, exposed to the elements⁹ on the bridge.

Nick: And it also created this very evocative¹⁰ scene because you had these statues and they were in this very large vaulted brick, uhh, room, with not that much light. And it was just, it was really interesting to see them there.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And so that's some of the things we did in Prague. And then we'll be spending a few more days in the Czech Republic and we'll see what else we can discover.

Wendy: Let's see!

⁹ exposed to the elements: without shelter and facing the possibility of rain, snow etc

¹⁰ evocative: memorable, inspiring of feelings

Comprehension Questions

1. What did Nick do when he went to Prague in 2001?
2. What did Wendy remember about her eating experience in Prague from her first trip in 2000?
3. What was their strategy for enjoying Prague this time?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. He was so angry with the way his boss treated him yesterday that he made a _____ to quit right then and there.
2. The Sistine Chapel vault was Michelangelo's first serious _____ into painting. Previously, his focus had been sculpture.
3. I have an idea for a future project but I don't have all the details figured out yet. It's all pretty _____ right now.
4. If you go hiking at high altitude in winter, you'll be _____ and it could potentially be dangerous.
5. Their memories of last night are pretty _____ because they had a lot to drink. They don't really know what happened.
6. Corporal punishment (physically hitting naughty children) used to be fairly common, but _____, it is generally frowned upon.
7. In the 1990s, Prague was just opening up to foreign tourism and it was _____, but these days it's one of the most visited cities in Europe.
8. It took him weeks to finish his LEGO castle, and then his brother came along and _____ it almost straight away.
9. The sight of the Charles Bridge with Prague Castle in the background is an _____ one that often forms visitors' lasting memory of Prague.
10. She was angry with him, _____, because he said he'd pick her up at the airport and then he completely forgot.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever been to Prague? If so, did you like it? If not, would you like to go? Why or why not?
2. Nick and Wendy mentioned going into underground tunnels in Vyšehrad. Have you ever been underground as a tourist activity before? What was it like?
3. In a city like Prague, would you prefer to see the famous sites where all the tourists are or try to go off the beaten track? Why?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. He bought a roll of black-and-white film to photograph the city.
2. She ate in restaurants which was unusual for her at that time but possible in Prague because prices were lower.
3. They followed several walking routes outside the old town to escape the crowds and the heat.

Exercises

1. snap decision
2. foray
3. vague
4. exposed to the elements
5. fuzzy
6. nowadays
7. off the beaten track
8. dismantled
9. evocative
10. and with good reason