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Prague's spirit undamaged by flood

Life and laughter go on as city finishes cleanup effort

By **Liz Steinberg**
Special To The Sun

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It was just before 7 p.m. in downtown Prague when the electricity in the bar went out. The hum of generators, being used to clean up the neighborhood that had flooded a few days earlier, fell silent.

It was the second outage within an hour. We were sitting in Bright Light Restaurant, a modern-looking bar with clean, geometric lines in the old Jewish quarter. It had been warm, rosy and glowing; now, it was lighted only by the early-evening sun coming in the large front window facing the street.

We ordered another round of Krusovice beer.

People are entering the bar, but no one is leaving, I noted with amusement to my friend Eva, the 24-year-old Czech Republic native I had decided to visit two days after the Vltava River overran its banks Aug. 13 and swept through downtown Prague.

"This is just the Czech person -- relaxed," she said. Despite flood waters that had wreaked havoc on parts of their city, the Czech people were still out socializing, with or without electricity.

Half an hour later, the lights flickered back on. We were somewhat disappointed.

"It was more Prague-like," said Eva of the natural light, and reminiscent of the old Jewish quarter, which is full of mystery and legend.

By the time I arrived in Prague Aug. 24, the Vltava, appeased, had receded from the cobblestone streets of the low-lying old town, leaving behind a score of incapacitated metro stations and \$300 million in damage, according to the Czech news agency.

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In all, 5 percent to 8 percent of the capital city had been under water, Deputy Mayor Jiri Paroubek told the press Aug. 14, the day the Vltava peaked some 25 feet above its normal depth. Nationwide, more than 200,000 people were evacuated.

When the Vltava left the streets, it seemed to take the people with it: Many residents left the city for the last few weeks of summer, Eva said. And tourists stayed away.

Coming to a flooded city, a self-declared emergency zone, is not high on most travelers' list. Originally, it hadn't been my plan, either.

I was working in Madrid when the flood occurred. Initial reports showed central Europe under tons of gallons of rapidly rising water. Within hours, the Vltava had risen beyond all expectations and was on its way to reaching its highest level in 500 years. Concerned, I called Eva.

She was fine. In fact, she was great. She had been let off work, and, like many curious Prague residents, had clustered around the banks of the Vltava. When the guards weren't looking, Eva and her friends scooted past the police line and onto the Manesuv Bridge, one bridge north from the historic 14th-century Charles Bridge, whose stone piers, battered by careening debris, were rapidly submerging. The water climbed to within feet of where she stood.

"My apartment is fine," Eva said, although she had been planning to move into a new apartment that was now under water. She encouraged me to visit.

The center of Prague sits in a valley, she explained, so most of the city - the new sections, the outskirts -- were unscathed. "You should come," she repeated.

I was hesitant. What if the airport shuts down?

"It hasn't so far," she said. And by the time I got there, she added, the water would have started to recede.

So I boarded a plane.

The hum of pumps

The mud men of Prague are tired and sweaty from the clean-up process. The government workers and volunteers march through the old city, through bars, past piles of decaying belongings, bed frames, bicycles, typewriters and printers. They march to the constant hum of generators and pumps, sloughing mud off shop floors, pushing out the final souvenirs of the Vltava.

At the foot of the Gothic castle in Mala Strana, on the Vltava's western bank, the mud men march through narrow streets, where water lines scar pastel buildings a yard or more above their heads. The smell of mildew hangs in the air; not so in the city's new section, where fat hoses snaking from underground metro stations are the only reminders of the mildew a few blocks downhill.

While the clean-up process is expected to last through the end of the year, most of Prague's main tourist attractions are now open, and city officials are encouraging people to visit.

But while I was there, the city was quiet. On the Saturday night I arrived, a handful of people walked through the new town's Vaclavske Square -- "Vinchyslav" to my American ears -- which spans half a dozen blocks and stretches out before the Narodni art museum.

Tourism was down 70 percent, according to news reports: Not deserted by any means, but reminiscent of the Prague of a decade past, still largely unknown to Western tourists.

After leaving Chapeau Rouge, a dark, noisy bar with crowds reeking of pot lingering outside the front steps, we headed to Club Naif on Zelezna Street. The club faces Prague's old theater. We descended narrow steps from the street, passing through mirror mosaics and a vacant dance floor, where we found two of Eva's co-workers nestled into a plush couch.

He wore a suit; she, a dark, sleek top-and-skirt combo. They had come from one of the many charity parties staged in the name of benefiting flood restoration. The couches were all occupied, but the room was empty.

Empty, too were many restaurants in the city. At the elegant Palac Adria, where a rooftop terrace dinner overlooking Narodni Street's cluttered crystal shops costs a moderate 100 to 250 crowns, about \$3 to \$7, we were joined by less than a dozen other diners. The wait staff lounged behind the bar with little to do.

Over the railings of the patio, we looked across to darkened third-floor windows. Even at night, I could see the closed-off metro in the street below.

I told Eva that I had had mixed feelings about taking a weekend vacation in Prague -- out of fear for the damaged infrastructure and out of deference to the people who were suffering from the flood.

"But, see? Things are fine here, just like I told you," Eva replied. "When things happen, you can laugh or you can cry. I prefer to laugh."

Getting there: Czech Airlines flies directly between Prague and New

York's John F. Kennedy Airport. The airline will also arrange connecting flights between JFK and BWI through Delta Airlines. Call 800-223-2365, or visit online at www.czechairlines.com.

For more information about flood damage and the cleanup under way in Prague, or for details about lodging, dining and activities in the city or elsewhere in the Czech Republic, contact the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 212-288-0830; www.czechcenter.com.

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