



Velvet Evolution



A weekend in Bratislava and Brno June 2005.

It was exactly a month since we'd returned from Tallinn and, as we sat on the Pink Elephant bus coming into Stansted airport, it was as if we'd never been away. This time we were off to a new country for both of us, Slovakia, and then training it to Brno in South Moravia - the part of the Czech republic that English tourists never see but, first of all, we needed to experience the delights (or otherwise) of Sky Europe, a budget airline based in Slovakia. The impetus for the trip was to scoop some cows as Bratislava was hosting [cow parade](#) and, if possible, to get some Slovakian beers in the book. The new "U Richarda" brewpub in Brno was also on the list of "must do's" along with as much of the tram systems of both cities, obviously - as long as the trams were real! There, an introduction written without mentioning the A14 once...!

Saturday 18th June 2005.

Stansted – home sweet home.

I was reasonably whipped up about this trip as it involved exploring a city (and country) which I'd never been to and staying in Pegas in Brno, one of the few "brew hotels" I'd scooped, and also promised very cheap beer all round with the average price for a half-litre being around 40-50p in both countries - quite a relief from the €5 we'd experienced in Helsinki a month ago! Once again, as with our Tallinn trip, both countries had their own currencies so our bag of Euros we'd managed not to spend in Helsinki remained in the drawer for another month. Luckily I had some Czech koruny from my last visit to get us by, but we'd need to get some money at Bratislava airport and I was hoping the cash machine wasn't as militant as the one we'd encountered at Tallinn!

Our first impressions of [Sky Europe](#) weren't good; our flight was listed as 30 minutes late on the departures screen and, on closer inspection, it seemed all of the airline's flights were delayed. Cheers then! The check-in desks seemed to be under a cloud of shambolicness as the 4 desks opened, closed, and changed destinations several times whilst we loitered around before, eventually, the Bratislava flight appeared and we snuck into the front of the queue - result! We were soon checked in and, more importantly, sitting next to each other which I'd had a slight worry about if the flight was very full; when I'd booked the flights there had been a special offer on, but to take advantage of it I'd had to reserve our places separately as, strangely, when I tried to book two seats together the web quoted me £75 rather than the £21.80 if I booked them individually!

The formalities completed we passed through customs where - for once - the soles of my shoes weren't checked! We had our usual double espresso to wake us up before boarding the transit to the stands; those who read my Tallinn article will be pleased to know that, having scooped all my [Stansted transits](#), I'm starting again... my sadness really knows no bounds. We were departing from stand 1 and it turned out to be a very relaxing area with very few other flights departing nearby and being situated at the end of the terminal so there was no passing normals to disturb us. The weather was behaving itself most admirably with a topaz-blue sky and a blazing sun that beat down on the windows with an intensity that made me realise why we don't travel in summer - it's too fucking hot! Our flight was now being shown as delayed by 40 minutes and, at the neighbouring stand, the SkyEurope departure for Budapest left 45 minutes late as if to emphasize the shambles which had befallen our airline that morning.

Eventually, the customary 737 arrived and came on stand to sighs of relief from us and a few other passengers, including a crowd of advancing years who clearly didn't believe the plane would actually arrive, never mind depart anywhere remotely close to schedule. We boarded quickly and were under way after a slight delay due to slots but I was happy enough - a scoop on the plane, airport and airline fronts and only 45-minutes late when it could have been a lot worse... we sat back and enjoyed the view as we descended over Moravia into the small Carpathian foothills and came around Bratislava in a huge circle before being treated to a fairly hard landing. The [airport](#) was fairly small and modern and we were soon in the arrivals hall looking for a cashpoint - hopefully one that spoke English this time!

Spare any change, mate?

After a fruitless search we walked across to the departures building where, after a quick look around, we gave up and asked at the Sky Europe desk. The cheerful girls there pointed us towards a cashpoint cunningly hidden in the outside wall at the far end which, thankfully, spoke excellent English (although I think I'd have

been able to understand enough Slovak) and we were soon in possession of 1900Sk each, around £35 worth, which should last us the two days we were in Bratislava. Now flush with money, we had a good and cheap espresso in the arrivals hall whilst formulating our plan for the day; it was still only 11:00 but already it was very hot and the sun blazed down without mercy – were June scooping trips really a good idea, I thought to myself?

The first thing we needed to do was acquire some change for the bus ticket machine – after checking the machine itself, which is situated over the road from the arrivals hall next to the bus stop, we'd discovered we needed 170Sk each for the 2-day all-zone rover tickets and the largest coin available seemed to be the 10Sk piece! So, we needed 34 10Sk coins – where the hell were we going to get all that shrapnel from? We'd already got our change from the coffee in notes; it seems they have very small notes in Slovakia!

There was a change kiosk opposite the coffee shop so I tried my luck there – using my wit, good looks and charm I managed to get ten 10 Sk pieces in exchange for a 100Sk note; a start but we still needed 24 more! This was ridiculous, I thought to myself, maybe we should just get a 13Sk single into town and buy the rover there? Sue rejected this idea as we'd only have to get 24 10Sk coins from somewhere else so off we went again to the Sky Europe desk to blag some there – if we failed here, there was a small shop in the departures area but I didn't have much hope that it would take kindly to doling out 10Sk coins to foreigners for a bus ticket!

As we approached the desk for the second time that day we were recognised and greeted with smiles and hellos – how very sociable! Luckily, the girls spoke enough English for me to be able to ask them for some change for the ticket machine. After a brief conversation, they swapped our 200Sk note for two 100Sk notes and revealed the secret of getting change at the airport. “The coffee machine under the stairs – you put in the 100Sk note then press cancel and it will give you 10 10Sk pieces!” she informed us conspiratorially, as if imparting top-secret gen. Thanking her profusely, we soon located the coffee machine at the far end of the departures hall hidden behind some stairs and opposite the shop. Gingerly we inserted our first 100Sk note and pressed the reject button – and it sounded like we'd hit the jackpot in Las Vegas! The machine spewed out the required 10Sk pieces and we were smiles all round; this was the strangest way we'd ever had to get the change for a bus ticket! I was a bit apprehensive that the machine would run out of change, but we extracted another 20 coins from it before heading for the bus stop, my pocket weighed down with shrapnel!

We arrived at the ticket machine with some apprehension; surely, knowing our luck, it'd be out of service? Luckily it seemed to be in perfect working order, so we pushed the “48-hodonin” (48-hour) button and started feeding in the first batch of coins. We took it in turns to feed a coin then grab another but it still took time and a queue was building up behind us, although luckily they seemed to be looking on with amusement rather than annoyance at two foreigners grappling with their ticket machine. The worst bit about the bright-yellow contraption (apart from not accepting notes) was that occasionally it would reject a coin, meaning we had to retrieve it from the reject chute and lob it in again with a different amount of force to make the machine swallow it. Eventually, much to our (and, presumably, the by now large queue's) relief, we acquired our two tickets and scurried along to the bus stop. I consulted the timetable but needn't have bothered; the buses (No.61) ran every 10 minutes and one pulled up almost immediately, much to the disconcertment of the remnants of the queue which had built up whilst we were hogging the machine and filling it with stacks of coins!

Cow parade – what cow parade?

The ride into the centre took around 25 minutes through miles of traditional Eastern European Stalin-esque apartment blocks and industrial units, but eventually we arrived at the main railway station, Hlavni Stanica, where we expected to see some of the cows (Sue is a desperate scooper of [Cow parade](#) cows in case you were wondering what I'm on about) but, despite a quick search of the station, we didn't see any lurking where you'd expect to see a cow at a train station. Whilst we were there, we checked the train times I'd got from the web and I was relieved to see they seemed to be correct so, our chores done, we descended the steps to the low-level tram station which comprises a loop just in front of the station where tram routes 1,2,3 and 8 terminate. A tram on route 1 was there so we got on – and were promptly ejected again by the driver as he was running into the pick-up point! So, trams here acted the same as in Praha – disembark passengers at one stop then run to the pick-up stop and load up again. Now we knew, but it meant we'd miss out on scooping parts of the loops... life's not fair when you're a desperate tram track scooper!

We soon discovered that our usual curse of public transport had struck; there was a poster in the tram explaining that the route along the riverside was closed and all the services that used that route were being diverted or changed but, for once, we soon discovered that the shambles was to our advantage as it doubled the amount of trams calling at Kapucinska, the closest stop to where the Ibis hotel was situated. It transpired that the trams which usually did the riverside route were being diverted through the tunnel under the castle (or, as the poster put it, *Hrad tunnel*) so we stayed on our tram, pleased to have spotted our hotel and doubly pleased that, as usual, we'd be able to see trams from where we were staying!

We alighted at Park Kultúry and, after a 10-minute wait in the by now uncomfortably searing midday sun, we caught another brace of trams (Czech [Tatra T3's](#) for those saddos out there) back through the tunnel to Kamonne Namesti where we were astounded to see a massive Tesco's supermarket taking up most of the square but, more importantly, some cows! Sue was very pleased as at least the cowparade was on so, after a few photos of the three cows on the square, we checked Tesco's for scoopable beers but the selection was quite poor (same as at home then!) and we emerged with a [Topvar](#) 13° and a [Zlatý bažant](#) which later turned out to be "nealko" – or non-alcoholic! Cheers then! (Mental note to self: *read the bloody label, you fuckwit! The same thing happened with that can of Koff "porter" in Tallinn, remember? READ THE FECKIN' LABEL!!!*).

After applying some sunscreen from our nifty new pump-action spray bottle, as I could feel my slaphead roasting in the sun, we made tracks back to the hotel via the tourist information office with the hope we'd find some information on the cow parade. Unfortunately, although we acquired a decent city map, the staff had no gen at all on the cows so we wandered off to the hotel via the old town that, indeed, looked suitably old in parts. We managed to find a shop on Klobočnicka close to Tesco's that sold Stein beers (Bratislava's only brewery) so we bought one of each beer available (10°, 12° and tmavý 11°) and tucked them in our packs for later – just like Tallinn all over again!

We were soon at the hotel and, after crossing the busy tramlines, we swiftly checked in. Unfortunately we weren't allocated a tram-facing room, much to our dismay, but at least we could hear them! The tramlines actually came within 5 metres of the hotel's front door before screeching around a vicious s-bend and plunging into the "hrad tunel" so maybe this is the closest hotel yet to a tramline we've stayed in? After a quick cool down in the shower as it was, by now, uncomfortably hot we headed out again for a bit of tourism and walked around the centre which was a lot older and picturesque than the outskirts would have you believe, with narrow lanes and quite a few ancient buildings scattered around; the main square was particularly pleasant, if a bit full of tourist tat stalls although admittedly not as bad as Nové Mesto Naměsti is in Praha these days!

A case of mistaken identity.

We spent a good few hours exploring the centre on foot, seeing a great many cows and lots of soldiers in posh uniforms on parade (we didn't know why) before going for a spin on some trams to rest our weary feet. We took a pair of the newer Tatra T6's (the pointy-ended ones) to Karlova Ves and then some old T3's out to the end of line 9 at Astronomická before deciding that it was time for some beer and food; an extensive search of the internet had only turned up one place which sounded anything like a scooping pub – [1.Slovak Pub](#) at Obchodná 62 – so we did the next pair of T3's back into the centre to the Vysoká stop where we'd decided the pub should be. Imagine our surprise when we saw that it was directly opposite the tramstop; you don't get much closer than 10 metres tram door to pub door – that's almost crawling distance!

As we entered the door of the pub it struck me that it was a strange place to stock the widest range of beers in town, but then I remembered the Ölletorn in Tallinn – maybe it wasn't so strange after all! We ignored a set of narrow wooden steps and entered into the bar proper, but it didn't look anything like I'd imagined it; there were hardly any customers for a start and there only seemed to be 3 beers on draught! I gingerly approached the bar and saw that only Starobrno beers were available – was this another Ölletorn, with a vastly reduced range of beer and useless staff? With the barstaff returning from the gloomy depths of the bar we made a snap decision (very unlike us!) and stormed out quickly; Starobrno isn't my idea of a good time!

Second time lucky.

Back outside, we were momentarily gutted that the only decent bar in town had gone plastic, but then we saw the sign for the Slovak Pub pointing up the narrow stairs – result! We bounded up the flight like mountain goats chasing some fresh grass and entered the proper pub which looked more like I expected – lots of rooms, lots of customers and, more importantly, lots of beer čapované (on draught)! We bagged a table near the door and in sight of the bar and awaited developments which were reasonably swift – a sociable waiter soon arrived and, having ascertained we were English, brought us the appropriate menu. As I can vaguely get by in Czech I always try to speak the language as, in my experience, any attempt from the English is greeted by incredulous and/or bemused looks – or is that just my terrible Czech? I ordered, in my best Slovak, our first two beers which were Topvar 12° and Šariš tmavý 11° and we sat back to scoop our first Slovak brews.

The Topvar was, as expected for a Pilsner-type beer, light and fresh with some grassy hops and some clean maltiness leading to a dry, grassy finish; overall it wasn't as bad as I'd expected. The Šariš was a different thing entirely, being a similar colour to a stout with reddish lights glowing through the ruby/black colour. The flavour was an explosion of taste and instantly reminded me of Mackesons – milk stout in Slovakia? My lords! The aroma and taste were heavily loaded with caramel and toffee with a thick, sweet sugary (maybe artificial

sweeteners?) body and a mellow, substantial caramel-toffee finish with a hint of dryness. Although we had suspicions that some (or all) of the sweetness came from aspartame or the like it was still a good, tasty beer and an excellent, if unexpected, find in Slovakia!

Feeling much better about Slovak beer we ordered two more scoops – Corgoň 12° and Zlatý bažant 12° but, as expected, these two were very average, bland and characterless beers as befits processed “product” from international megacorps with no interest in quality – both plants are owned by Heineken Slovakia. Whilst we’d been scooping we’d been perusing the food menu and pretty decent it looked too so, with our next beers (Šariš Smadny Mnich 12° and Martiner 12°) we ordered the local speciality which seemed to be sheep’s cheese gnocchi with spicy sausage or other toppings. This turned out to be excellent; the tiny gnocchi were coated in a gorgeously rich, sour and pungent cheese sauce and topped with coarse paprika-laden sausages which, together, made a superb meal. Sue had the cabbage instead of the sausages and this too was excellent – which is more than can be said for the two beers; Smadny Mnich was very buttery and sweetish with some hoppiness and a hint of toffee and the Martiner was an instantly forgettable pale thin fluid.

For our last beer, Sue had another Šariš tmavý whilst I tried the “house” beer – Dobré pifko 12° - which, according to the website and beer menu, was unfiltered and unpasteurised. It seemed to have a touch of a haze to it and a strong, inviting lemony-citrus and hop nose. The flavour was quite full and bitter with a long citrusy bitter finish, full of flavour, and although we didn’t know who brewed it we imagined that it would be Stein or one of the smaller independents. I was fairly impressed with the beer’s flavour and I quickly drained the glass with a smack of my lips; we decided that this pub was an excellent find and we’d be coming back here tomorrow unless we found anywhere better – and that looked like it wasn’t going to happen, although we’d seen a bar owned by the Czech Černá Hora brewery just off the main square which looked a good bet for a decent glass of beer, albeit not Slovak but Czech, but at least it was semi-local!

As usual on our trips we’d had a very early start so we unenthusiastically drank up and took a tram back to the hotel, where we indulged in the bottled Stein beers we’d found earlier in the day. I’m glad to report that they were above average, especially the tmavý 11°, which was dry, toasted, roasty and more in the style of a Franconian Schwarzbier than a Czech tmavý but was very nice all the same. The other two pale beers, a 10° and a 12°, had a touch of honey and dab of grassy hop to them and were far better than the multinational crap we’d tried thus far (with the exception of the Mackeson-esque Šariš tmavý) and I was happy that we’d found some decent beer in the city; some of the reports I’d had about the place had warned of nowhere selling independent beer at all! I’ve yet to find anywhere with no decent beer, but I’m sure there are plenty of places... come to mention it, Jerez in Spain springs to mind, but there were other alcoholic diversions there!

Sunday 19th June 2005.

A restricted beer choice.

We spent most of the next afternoon walking around the city; we travelled on all the tramlines in the centre which weren’t undergoing maintenance (and did a few longer trips), we took a trolleybus up to the hrad and gazed out over the city and we spotted more cows along the riverside. The weather was hot and sunny but, thankfully, with low humidity although by late afternoon we were flagging so, after doing one of the old articulated K3 trams to Hlavní Stanica, we did a pair of T3’s back to Poštová and commenced a walk around the most promising-looking areas for bars we’d seen earlier on in the day.

The first signs weren’t promising. Most of the bars seemed to sell Zlatý bažant or other such crap but, after a lot of reading beer lists and walking off in a huff, we saw the Café Ister on Ventúrska with a blackboard outside proclaiming “Corgoň tmavý 11°” so, by now quite thirsty, we decided that even though this was Heineken-owned it would do for a swift scoop and hopefully it would be as good as the Šariš tmavý we’d had the night before. Unfortunately, it was not to be; the waiter went off to get the beers but he soon returned with apologies that the tmavý had run out and did we want Kelt instead? (Kelt is, apparently, a rubbishy Heineken beer from Zlatý bažant). No, we didn’t, so we settled for a coffee and a sit-down for ten minutes as we’d already bagged a table and couldn’t be arsed to move!

After a slight altercation over the bill with the waiter when he tried to charge us 8Sk each for little tubs of “milk” (this is quite common in Slovakia, beware!) which we hadn’t used, we pressed on through the increasingly touristy streets around the main square which sold nothing of beery interest whatsoever. We decided that the 1. Slovak Pub was the best option for a few beers yet again, but first it was time for a preview of Monday night – we settled on the crappy-sounding Piano Bar on Laurinská for a fix of Czech beer as we’d notice the day before it was a Černá Hora bar and, embarrassingly for Bratislava, one of the best beery options in the centre! (I’m not saying that Černá Hora beer isn’t any good, it is, but surely native brews should be more available?)

Time for some decent beer!

We sat on the outside “raised patio” type area and ordered two granáts and two cheese and ham toasties to bide us over until we got to the Slovak pub. The beers soon arrived and I was pleased to see it was as good as I remembered it from a few years back; a deep red beer with a chocolatey nose and a dry, fairly bitter flavour and hints of coffee/chocolate. The toasties were also very welcome as we’d not eaten since the morning, and the beer washed them down most acceptably. We decided against another as time was getting on so, fed and watered (well, beered), we took a pair of T3’s from Kamenné Náměstí to Vysoká and were soon up the stairs like ferrets and seated in the Slovak Pub, albeit a different room from the previous night.

As there were no more beers to scoop in the pub we decided to start with half-litres of the Šariš tmavý which was as sweet and Mackeson-esque as the previous night, although the suggestion of aspartame was inexplicably more prominent in the flavour. We were getting into this beer by now so we ordered another one, which brought on a slightly amusing episode; the barmaid brought us two glasses of what looked (and smelt) like Smadny Mnich! “Tmavý?” I enquired to which she replied “yes, tmavý” which, patently, it wasn’t. She soon realised we knew what the word meant (and it wasn’t pale beer) so the glasses were replaced with the correct black beer and we recommenced our imbibing.

We were soon ordering more of the excellent food to go with the half-decent beer and, as we were hungry, we ordered additional Garlic soups that apparently came in a “bread bowl” (this must be a Czech/Slovak speciality as it’s available in Pivovarský Dům in Praha and bloody lovely it is too). After a few minutes, however, the waitress came back and attempted to inform us of a problem in halting English. “We have only one... erm...” she struggled, turning to some locals at an adjacent table for help. “We have one... erm...” she tried again, and with her hands she moulded the shape of a bowl. “Bowl?” I questioned. “Erm... ah! Bread!” she replied triumphantly. “We have only one bread, will you have the other soup in porcelain?” Dreadful, she didn’t know the English for “bowl” but she knew “porcelain”! We happily accepted and away she went to fetch our porcelain.

The soup was very good and I was glad we hadn’t received two bread bowls as they turned out to be enormous and very filling! After consuming the vampire repellent (well, Transylvania wasn’t that far off) we spent a good few hours eating sheep’s cheese gnocchi and drinking tmavý or the “house” brew Dobré pifko and, when we’d eventually consumed enough, we headed off back to our remaining bottles in the hotel room - but first I decided to enquire where the house beer was from. The barman informed me it was from Martiner brewery and, not speaking enough Slovak to argue, we descended the narrow stairs for the last time and walked the 10 metres to the tramstop. I was now confused; we’d guessed Dobré pifko would be from Stein but now we were being told it was from a closed multinational brewery... if anyone knows any more, please let me know! One thing is for certain though – the beer tastes like an independent producer not a multinational makes it, although I’ve had an email from the bar and they still state it’s brewed by Heineken, but where I don’t know. Confused? You will be!

With the tram diversions still working in our favour, we took a number 1 tram back to Kapucinska and got stuck into our final bottles of Slovak beer. We’d bought some more Stein tmavý as it had impressed the previous night (and, more prosaically, as it was only 20p a bottle!) but first we had the Topvar 14° “Patriot” we’d acquired from Tesco; anything over 12° is quite rare in the Czech and Slovak lands and I had high expectations of this beer but, predictably, it was dry and grassy with a noticeable alcoholic twang in the dry and rather neutral finish. We then tasted the Zlatý bažant nealkohol I’d mistakenly bought at Tesco on the first day that tasted just like unfermented wort! It truth be told it actually wasn’t too bad, but the tooth-rotting sweetness quickly made it undrinkable despite some hoppiness in the finish and down the sink it went.

Stein 10° and tmavý 11° finished off the evening’s session and I felt pleased that we’d found some decent beer in the city despite the warnings of it being a beer desert along the lines of Milton Keynes or North Wales. We did some necessary bag-packing to give us an extra ten minutes sleep in the morning before dossing out aided, no doubt, by the beer! I was already looking forwards to Brno as it promised even cheaper beer and a winning brewpub too – as well as another tram system to scoop. It doesn’t get much better than that when you’re a total saddo - believe me.

Monday 20th June 2005.

An egg for breakfast.

We were up early and out of the hotel by 07:50 as we wanted to scoop the riverside stretch of tramline that should have reopened after the weekend’s engineering work and we also wanted to score the rush-hour only route 17 because... well, we just wanted to. We’re sad, OK? However, as usual we cocked up the move and

managed to miss the last No.17 from Račianske Mýto by a matter of seconds – but we only found out it was the last one as it trundled off into the distance and we consulted the timetable at the stop... cheers then!

The recovery move was to take a pair of T6's on route 11 as far as the old centre at Jesenského then a following heritage T3 pair along the riverbank to Park Kultury where we alighted and contemplated the move. We still required the Náměstí L. Štúra "avoider" line but this could be done via a Tram 1 to the station that, obviously, would be our final move in the city so we had a couple of hours to kill. It was then, when Sue suggested it, I realised that I was starving and breakfast would be a very good idea indeed. Sue suggested a nice café we'd seen on Rybné Náměstí the previous day – this is a square that, presumably, was quite nice before the Communist regime at the time decided to construct a carbuncle of a concrete suspension bridge right through the middle of it. Ho-hum.

We took the next tram to Nový Most and ambled up the dissected square to the old café that we'd had a coffee at the day before. The menu offered a myriad of breakfast options including one that featured an egg; anyone who knows my [Nargis](#) obsession will understand why this sounded favourite! Being a touristy café the prices were a bit higher than I'd have expected but, even so, it only came to about 110Sk each and a right feast was brought out; coffee, juice, cakes, an egg and croissants with jam and butter! After stuffing ourselves with the well-received breakfast we set off for the station and, by a strange coincidence, had the same pair of trams for our final journey as we'd had for our first one and, being a Line 1 tram, we also scooped the last bit of track in the centre we still required via Šafárikovo Náměstí and then onto the Hlavní Stanica!

Carpathia to Moravia – for £4.50!

I'd not been able to get any idea as to how much the train tickets to Brno would ching us up so it was with some trepidation we approached the ticket windows at the station. After a minute of study, I chose the clerk who looked the most likely to speak English (wrongly, as per usual) - a youngish woman – surely she'd be OK? Reaching the ticket window, I greeted her in Slovak and asked if she spoke English.

"I speak a little" she apologised with a smile and I groaned; I'd have to use my rudimentary Czech again!

As an aside here, if you're in Czech or Slovakia outside of the large cities then your best bet for someone to understand you is a young person, usually the younger the better – middle aged citizens will usually speak Russian (a throwback to the communist occupation when Russian was forcibly taught in schools) and the older generations will usually only speak German (don't mention the war and all that – old Czechs *really* don't like the Germans!). Just to prove the Czech's fanatical dislike towards Germans (all the German population was expelled after the war in a manner which, even today, attracts condemnation from human rights people) I have a little tale to tell which will explain all.

In 1991, during our interrail, my travelling companion "Big Jim" and I were on the overnight train from München to Praha and were ensconced in a compartment sharing with a young East German traveller who, in a laudable spirit of European Union, had very kindly cracked open a bottle of industrial-strength vodka, much to our delight. We were trying to grab a few hours sleep when the door was flung open with a slumber-ending crash sometime in the early hours and we all jumped up, rubbing our eyes and blearily wondering where we were. "Passports!" shouted the guard (for it was he) having realised we were interrailers, presumably by the rancid whiff of unwashed clothes as the door was opened. It had been Jim's turn to crash on the floor whilst the East German and me took the seats so Jim and I groggily handed over our passports and tickets to the guard who stared at them, then at us, and finally with a broad smile handed them back with a cheery "Welcome to Czechoslovakia!" in halting English (For it was one country then and the tourist boom hadn't quite kicked in).

The East German received different treatment, however – he soon became involved in a heated argument with the guard who eventually pulled out a ticket pad and proceeded to write out a ticket, much to the obvious dismay of our German comrade. Jim and I stared at each other with astonishment – what had he done to incur this amount of vitriol at 03:00? The German handed over some Czech money, the guard handed over the ticket and finally departed with what I thought was an unnecessary slam of the door. "What did you do?" we asked, to which the East German just smiled benignly.

"I had my feet on the seats!" he explained; "I got charged 20Kc for it!"

I looked at him with incredulity. "I had my feet on the seats too!" I shrieked, "Why didn't I get charged?"

Our East German companion seemed to have been blessed with a monk-like amount of tolerance towards pompous officials, and still smiled broadly (well, the fine had only been 50p!).

"I'm German," he explained with a laugh, "You get used to it. Is there any Vodka left?"

Interrailing taught us a lot about European politics and that Germans really do have a sense of humour – East Germans at least (he also offered to sell us his Trabant for 1 Deutschmark, but that's another story).

Having chosen a non-English speaking clerk, I used my best Czech and managed to purchase two single tickets to Brno, changing at Břeclav, for the grand sum of £4.50 each - sorted! As we still had 40 minutes until the train departed we stood above the tram station and photographed examples of the trams, buses and trolleybuses that passed through the station in a never-ending stream. It was soon time to join the train but first we tried to spend our remaining money – and failed to find anything remotely worth investing in at the station; even the bars were selling multinational crap! Cheers then! The only thing for it was to visit the change bureau that, for us at least, was a very unusual experience but we had around £15 left and we probably wouldn't be back in the near future to spend it. We quickly located the small change room (or should that be cupboard?) where, behind a window, was a jovial-looking character resembling Josef Stalin surrounded by small plastic cups. It looked at first glance as if he had a coffee-machine addiction but, once I'd asked to change our money into Czech, he sprang into life and I saw what the cups were used for – money storage! Fishing through various cups he managed to harvest enough change to issue us with our currency so, the formalities sorted, we headed for the platforms armed with just enough Slovak crowns to buy a beer should one present itself there.

A can of pivo and a spicy sausage, prosim.

The train was already in and, as expected, was standard CŠD compartment stock. We quickly found ourselves an empty compartment and settled ourselves into it; we had an hour's journey to Břeclav and we wanted this compo to ourselves! The accommodation sorted, and with 15 minutes to go before departure, I took a wander outside to gauge the nearest fodder options. As was to be expected there was a snack kiosk on the platform almost opposite our carriage (Czech stations have these little shacks all over the platforms which dispense beer, sausages, crisps and water etc for very democratic prices) so I investigated the victuals on sale. I returned to the carriage clutching a can of Topvar 10° (well, it was all they had and we needed to spend the change...) and an extremely paprika-laden (and greasylicious) fried sausage on a tray with some mustard.

We were soon on our way behind some random wire-scraper and, as I have the Labrador gene in abundance and like to lean out of train windows slavering at the scenery, I pulled down the window as low as it would go; this allowed a howling gale into the compartment which was a great relief as the temperature was slowly increasing as the sun moved higher. Unfortunately, the window seemed to have a mind of it's own and shut with a slam at random intervals until we jammed one of the curtains into the runners, whereupon it still shut itself but far less frequently which, as I was leaning out for most of the trip, wasn't a big problem at all.

We were soon at Břeclav where we had 20 minutes until our connection to Brno was due to arrive – the EC172 Vienna to Hamburg train. The (usually) prompt running of hundreds of daily "Eurocity" trains still amazes me; the logistics of organising carriages and changing engines at borders, not to mention arranging drivers, guards, maintenance and the like is something I can never quite see our railway system being able to cope with! After a quick check of the platform kiosks that turned up nothing local and/or rare on the beer front (I'd been slightly hopeful in a backwater such as this!), we returned to the platform and waited for our train to arrive.

The train soon screeched into the platform and we bagged the front compartment to our great delight – OK, so we were only on the train for half an hour, but I'd imagined it would be really busy and we'd have to stand. The window in this carriage was more under control than the last one and I was able to indulge my Labrador gene to the full as we sped along into Moravia. It wasn't long before we were pulling into Brno, which looks a bit grim as you trundle through the suburbs, but has a fine preserved Stare Město (old town) and is a likeable place with a very laid back air and, more importantly, one of the biggest and busiest tram systems I've ever seen! Although I'd visited Brno a couple of years back and even stayed in the brewery-hotel Pegas which we were stopping at, I'd never had any of the trams and now we'd have almost two full days to experience them – and hopefully to drink some cheap and, maybe, scoopable beers too.

"That's some bloody trek, that is".

First, however, we needed a tram ticket. After a good ten-minute wander up and down the station looking for ticket machines or tram ticket offices we gave up and I tried the usual fallback, the station shop. The girl behind the counter was young (and very nice...) but the question was, as usual, would she speak English?

"Hello! Do you speak English?" I ventured.

"Nemluvim!" (No, I don't speak it) she replied with a smile and looked at me with interest to see what I'd do next. By now, 3 days into the trip, I was getting a bit more into my stride with my Czech so I asked her for two 72-hour tickets and, after a surprised look at an Englishman speaking Cheshire-accented Czech, produced them from a drawer and I handed over 200Kč for the two – around £2.20 each! The young lass, who was obviously impressed with my linguistic prowess, complimented me with "Mluvte Cesky Dobře!" which translates as "you speak Czech well" to which I blushed and shook my head profusely – but I was pleased!

Right – now we were sorted! It was only 13:15 and we were in possession of an all-line rover and the gen on the new brewpub in town, U Richarda in the suburban village of Žebětín, so off we went on tram 1 for its entire length to the terminus at Ečerova. I hadn't realised just how far it was and, as the clock ticked towards 14:00, I hoped the pub didn't shut in the afternoon! After passing the Zoo we finally arrived at Ečerova which transpired to be a huge Stalinesque estate of colour-coded flats perched precariously on hills around the tram loop. I knew we had to change for bus 54 but we didn't know how often they ran so I wasn't unduly bothered when, just as we got off the tram, a 54 stormed away from the bus stop over the road. We were a little put out when we found out the buses ran every 20 minutes – cheers then! Nothing for it but to wait in the shelter shielded from the by now roasting afternoon sun for the next bus, which turned up right on time, so on we piled. We soon left Brno proper and headed off into the countryside for a good few miles before we entered the small village of Žebětín; this really did feel like desperate scooping having travelled almost an hour to get to a brewpub!

We alighted at Křivánkovo Náměstí (the last but one stop) and, as the bus departed in a cloud of clag, we looked around. It was a very quiet village indeed; I hadn't thought siestas were observed in Moravia but I was obviously wrong as the whole population seemed to be indoors. We didn't know where to find the bar so followed the route of the bus through the village lane until Sue soon saw a sign advertising U Richarda on a wall – sorted! Now knowing we were going the right way we trotted along until we found the pub just along the Ostrovačice road, ten metres on the left, and after a quick photo we went to see if it was still open at 14:30!

Massive winners at 38p a half-litre!

Thankfully, the pub was open all day - much to my intense relief! We sat on the patio which fully deserved the oft-used claim of "suntrap" and ordered a half-litre of each of the tmavý and světlé and, as we were by now ravenous, pork steaks with beer sauce and – in what must be a one-off for Czech – no dumplings but some superb chips! After wolfing the excellent food we drained the glasses; the tmavý was a light red colour with a toffee/toast character and dryish finish, whilst the světlé was a hazy brew with some lemony hops over a dry malt body. Both beers were almost totally flat (almost unheard of in Czech) and, for a new brewery, a very credible attempt although they would both benefit from a bit more malty body and hops. I slightly preferred the tmavý although both were very welcome and refreshing after the long hot journey out into the wilds of Moravia!

We snuck in another half-litre of the tmavý before it was time to pay up and head for the bus stop for the 54 back to Ečerova, but before we went I had a quick look at the brewery which was a petite little copper installation sat in the back room of the pub which didn't really look real... but I assume it was as the beer tasted like it was made in a micro brewery and I'm not that cynical to assume they only have the brewing kit there for show... not in this case, anyhow! I can name a few other places I'm not so sure about though if you ask me...

The walk to the bus stop took only a few minutes (it's a lot closer to the pub going back) and the bus arrived right on time. We leapt aboard and we roared off for the 15-minute journey to Ečerova tram terminus where we hoped to pick up a tram 3 back into Brno; the number 3 went via the northern suburbs and meant a shorter journey to the hotel. On studying the map, however, it seemed that only rush-hour 3's went to Ečerova and, sure enough, when we arrived there was a line of No.1's ready to leave for Brno so we decided to take the first one and leap at Vozovna Komin for the next No.3 to Česka. This proved to be a relatively painless manoeuvre and within half an hour we were alighting at the main tram junction in the north of the city just outside the centre where I saw the most trams moving at once I think I've ever seen – eight! Outrageous.

A cultured reception.

Having been to Pegas before it was easy enough to find and we were soon walking through the front doors where, to my relief, I saw it hadn't changed at all and, more importantly, the brewery was still there! For those who aren't familiar with Pegas the reception is on the first floor and you need to take the small lift to reach it, which we did – but we were in for a shock when we stepped out of the lift into reception! I took an involuntary step back and almost pushed Sue back into the lift; the room was packed to the gunnels with arty-looking types sipping on flutes of white wine whilst listening attentively to a bearded character who seemed to be reciting poetry in Czech against a background of (presumably) local paintings strewn across the walls. We both stood and stared – this was a bit of a surprise!

The receptionist smiled and beckoned us across to the desk which proved easier said than done – we had to push through the tightly-packed art lovers who were so engrossed in the spiel being recited that they were reluctant to let us past lest they missed a single syllable. Eventually we covered the 5 metres and arrived at reception where I was a bit concerned – if all this lot were staying would we still have a room? As usual I needn't have worried, as our key was soon produced and we were shown up to the room via the lift which requires you to insert your key in the slot otherwise it won't go above reception – I remember standing in this lift for five minutes the first time I visited Pegas before being shown, with the sort of patience reserved for stupid

foreigners, how to operate the thing. We were soon in the room where we indulged in the luxury of an afternoon shower as the weather was so hot outside but first we had to literally climb into the shower as it was around 2 feet above the bathroom floor for reasons best known to those who installed the thing.

We were soon feeling much more refreshed and decided it was time for a drink; after all, that was what we were here for! The time was approaching 16:00 and, being in possession of our 48-hour tram tickets it seemed a shame to waste the opportunity to scoop some more trams, so back we went to the Česka tramstop and took the first tram to Mendlovo Náměstí, an articulated T6 on route 5, and once again saw what a huge station it was with several distinct boarding areas spread around the square and, just to add a bit of interest, a curious pipe emitting steam stood in the middle of the grass; we stared at it for a few minutes with some amusement and one question – why?

Expected nowt, got three.

Despite us having taken the time to get there I didn't expect much from the Starobrno brewery tap for two very good reasons;

1. I'd already had all their regular beers (apart from some crap I didn't want to drink), and
2. I don't like drinking multinational beers as it suggests my support for their repellent activities.

Despite these reservations we'd decided to go as it seemed a waste not to, being so close and all that, and we required the tramlines... so easily are my principles compromised when I'm after scoops! Mendlovo Náměstí is the site of the original settlement of Brno although you'd never guess that from being there – the monastery where [Gregor Mendel](#) did his groundbreaking experiments with bees and peas which formed the basis of all we know about [heredity and genetics](#) isn't that obvious when you get off the tram or trolleybus, but the Starobrno brewery is! The "old" part has now been converted into a brewery tap and restaurant whilst the "new" bit is further along the road heading out of town – just look for the clouds of steam.

We decided against sitting out in the beer garden and instead went inside the main bar where I was surprised to see the lid of a huge copper looming over the bar; this almost made me believe I was entering the brewery tap of a regional brewer and not an insignificant outpost of a huge multinational conglomerate (Starobrno is owned by Bräu Union, in turn owned by Heineken) but what the hell, here we were and we'd have at least one beer just to scoop the place into the book!

We sat at a table in a plainly decorated room just off the servery and waited for a waiter to come round; I was planning to order a half litre of tmavý and one of the 12° světlé but before we could order I saw a beer list on our table and – more importantly – a board proclaiming beers I'd not heard of! By now I was coming to the conclusion that this may have been a better move than we'd anticipated so, when the waiter arrived to take the order, we had several choices of scoops to select! We ordered a half-litre of the new Kvasnicové 13° and one of the Černoška 12° dark to begin our scooping and settled down with the foaming mugs to see if Starobrno had managed to brew something drinkable.

I must confess I was fairly impressed with both beers but for different reasons; the Kvasnicové (I think it means "yeasty" but if anyone knows better please let me know!) struck me as being a bit like Blue Anchor from Helston with a slightly musty, Brettanomyces character which I'm not sure was intentional but it certainly made it a bit more interesting than usual! The beer was bitter for a multinational (which makes me think, along with the brett taste, it was a testbrew) and was quite dry, grassy, yeasty, bitter and still musty in the aftertaste – overall, an interesting beer which, had I blind-tasted it, would probably have been judged to be from a micro. The second beer was no less interesting; Černoška was red/black with a sweetish caramel nose with notes of red fruits. The taste followed on similar lines with a full-on liquorice and toffee character and a lovely treacle-toffee finish.

To say the beers had exceeded expectations was an understatement! We were so impressed we had another Černoška and a scoop from a bottle – Červený Drak (red dragon) that was a very strange take on red ale with such a pronounced blackcurrant fruitiness I wonder if it actually contained the little purple beasties. The flavour was, however, quite plain and neutral with the 6% alcohol obvious, especially in the finish. I can see the market this bottle is aiming at with its fancy label and weird peel-off lid – the export one, so there is presumably no need to brew a decent beer when an average one will do given its visual attractions. I've had a lot worse in my time and almost certainly will again, but I was glad of the Černoška to wash the Červený Drak down!

Nefiltrované Pivo.

Tempting though it was to have a few more glasses of the Černoška we decided that time was knocking on a bit and we'd better get back to the centre for some Černá Hora and Pegas beers, so we paid up and wandered

back to the mammoth tramstop and caught the first tram going in roughly the right direction; luckily it was a pair of Tatra T3's on route 1 which pulled in just as we were walking towards the stop necessitating a slight quickening of pace in order to catch it! We were soon back at the major junction of Česka where, being rush-hour, trams were stacked up in every direction – I counted around 12 trams waiting for a platform with another 4 moving; that's what I call a tram system! We followed the sadly disused tracks of route 4 down to Náměstí Svobody (freedom square) where I knew there had been a decent cellar bar, Černošský Sklep, owned by the local regional brewer Černá Hora who brew decent, if not thrilling, beer and to my relief it was still there – it's always a relief when somewhere you like is still in location after you've not visited for a few years!

We descended the steps and sat in the small bar area for ease of ordering; the waiting staff aren't that keen on patrolling the tables and you need to grab them whilst you can! I'd been aiming to order a half litre of their chocolatey granát but I happened to see an advert for a new beer called nefiltrované sklepní (4%) which seemed to be an unfiltered version of their 10° Tas brew – this was the drink for me, and only 20Kc a half-litre too! We ordered some of the excellent food to go with our beer, Sue having a massive [smažený sýr](#) (fried cheese in breadcrumbs with chips and tartar sauce) and I indulged in something else which I can't remember but which was bloody lovely and included knedlíčky, the omnipresent Czech bread dumplings. The beer was absolutely superb too; hazy gold in colour, obviously unfiltered, it had a bundle of lemony hops in the aroma and heaps of honeyed maltiness. The flavour was hoppy-dry yet malty-sweet and had a lot of balance with hints of citrus and bitterness to balance the malt in the finish. This shows just how much better unfiltered beers are than their emasculated filtered/pasteurised cousins – they just don't compare, and full marks to Černá Hora for having the foresight to make and, more importantly, promote this excellent style of beer which they make well.

We had another beer (Sue had Granát whilst I had more of the excellent Sklepní) before deciding to have a wander around town to see what else we could see. When I'd last visited with Dave Unpronounceable we had been in a bar somewhere in the centre that sold micro beer from a brewery I can't remember the name of. This may be the vaguest directions to a pub ever but in my defence I claim mitigating circumstances – I was really tired, I was quite drunk and it was around -10°C with snow on the ground so I was more concerned with not falling flat on my arse than looking at street signs. I rest my defence.

“Brno's most improved brewery”.

Despite my vague recollections of the pub being vaguely in the centre we failed to find it despite walking round town twice! We did pass another Černá Hora bar by the cathedral but apart from that we drew a decided blank on scoopable beers, everywhere selling either Starobrno or usual crap such as Gambrinus or Prajdroz. I was a bit gutted at not finding the bar as we now had only one more place to visit – Pegas - and I wasn't too hopeful of the beer there either as the last time I'd drunk it I had been, let us say, less than impressed with all of the beers except for the tmavý which hadn't been great, just a lot better than the others. However, we had drawn a blank with the rest of the city, so Pegas it was.

We were soon ensconced in the cosy beer hall (it's quite German in character but a bit cheaper) and I was fervently hoping for some decent beer to make up for our blank in finding other scoops in the centre. The efficient waiter spoke a little English and we learnt there were only the standard three beers on – světlé, tmavý and Pšenické (wheat) so, not liking wheat beer very much, we ordered half-litres of the dark and light and waited to see what would arrive. The foaming glasses soon appeared (0.4L for 20Kc) and I took a tentative sip of the světlé – then a big gulp; it was 200% better than the last time I was here! The pale, hazy, bitter and citrusy brew had a good flavour with the juicy malt and lemony hops balanced well with the finish that turned dry and reasonably bitter which lingered on the tongue for a long while.

Within no time the glasses were empty (well, they were 0.4L instead of a 0.5L) and we ordered another round, but this time I had the tmavý which, if anything, was even better with a rich chocolate and roast barley flavour balanced by a full malty body with some balancing bitterish hops and some liquorice hints too. I was pleased – both beers were very good and the atmosphere in the pub was boisterous yet relaxed in the way that the English seem unable to emulate. We sat and drained our glasses again and both agreed that these beers were supremely drinkable; they must have been; our 2 glasses had only lasted around half an hour!

We had one more round before calling it a night and taking the lift back up to our room where, on examining the minibar, we found an embossed bottle of světlé for the reasonable price of 30Kc. The 0.5L bottle is imprinted in full colour with the Pegas logo – a great souvenir of our stay in Brno and, to break the mould a little, it's also unfiltered; I only know of the excellent [Svijany](#) brewery from near Liberec in Northern Bohemia (happily now independent again, and apparently thriving, after a dodgy period when they were owned by Bass) who bottle unfiltered, although other micros must do too. It's not yet been sampled so I will update this page when it is!

Tuesday 21st June 2005.

A day on the trams.

The room at Pegas was a treat – quiet with real old fashioned beds made out of wood, the type that don't feel like they're going to collapse under you at any moment (OK, so I've been mentally scarred by my experiences in Tallinn; if I was a Yank maybe I would sue them?) and we reluctantly got up as late as we could and still allow a decent amount of time to scoop some trams in the book. We had the rare luxury of breakfast at the hotel which turned out to be a decent help yourself affair with the usual excellent Czech rye bread, white rolls, preserves, coffee and the like all available. We were soon checked out and walking down to the train station to dump our bags for the day to enable us to travel light; this is our new preferred move for the last day after our bad experiences in Seville a few months back. First, however, we found the bus stop for the airport so we didn't descend into a mad panic later on as it wasn't obvious where it was on first inspection (to the right of the tram station, in the trolleybus loop, before the railway bridge).

We were extremely pleased to find the lockers easy to use and cheap – I think it was 10Sk (25p) for the day! Freed from our encumberous packs, we had a walk around the centre again and took some photos in the glorious (and very hot, so hot we needed a 30p ice-cream!) sunshine before resorting to some tram journeys to see what the outskirts of the city were like. After a few hours of tram-bashing we were feeling extremely peckish to say the least and decided on Pegas for our dinner as the food the previous evening had looked superb. We did a tram to the by now familiar surroundings of Česka and walked the short distance to the pub where we nestled ourselves into one of the snug and cosy tables by the wall and studied the menu.

Extensive was one word to describe the menu; it ran for pages and pages of delicious sounding dishes but, eventually, we both independently chose the Pork in beer sauce and a half-litre of beer to wash it down (Sue chose the chocolatey tmavý whilst I indulged in the bitter, hoppy světlé). The food appeared, as is usual in Czech, very speedily and was absolutely fantastic; the pork was so tender it flaked apart in juicy, flavoursome chunks, the gravy was rich and tasty plus the dumplings were fresh and, importantly, absorbent to allow a full plate-wiping consumption of the delicious sauce. After a few minutes frenzied troughing I sat back with a smile – that was one of the best meals I'd had for a long time and, best of all, it had only cost £2.50 including the beer! I love the Czech Republic...

A most unusual airport.

Sadly, it was now time to return to the station and collect our bags and take the bus onwards to the small airport at Tuřany for our Ryanair flight home. Back at the station we bought a decent-ish looking bottle of Moravian wine for the cellar as, unfortunately, we'd not had time to scoop any in bars owing to my obsession with scooping beers... We then went to retrieve our bags but we were met by a cloud of dust inside the station building and all the fire alarms wailing at full blast! Despite this unwelcoming reception we quickly gathered our stuff from the locker whilst trying not to breathe in too much of the dust owing to it's uncertain provenance...

We'd soon sorted out our bags and took the short walk to the bus stop for the No.76 to the airport which runs at half past the hour, but before the Ryanair flights when it runs 15:00, 15:30 and 15:50 – make sure you check the timetable first! There were a few tourists lurking for the bus in the direct sun but we had more sense – we sat under some trees which gave us a view of the trams and the bus stop – and we still managed to be first onto the bus when it arrived as it seemed the brain-dead tourists couldn't translate "Tuřany Letiště" as Brno Airport!

We piled onto the bus and off we went, following the tramlines for some distance, and picking up even more passengers until the bus became uncomfortably full before we turned off into a dodgy-looking industrial estate and crawled along at ten MPH for a good while past row after row of identikit business units. Eventually we put on a brief spurt along a road through what must be the world's biggest field before arriving at the airport. I'd known it would be small, but this was very small! The check-in procedure was also a bit of a shambles as, although we were some of the first in the queue, we were allocated seats 65 and 66 – cheers then! A bit miffed at having missed the first seat call cut-off, we passed through customs and found the waiting area was of the same proportions as the airport although it has a tiny shop and a bar as well as a great view of the runway and the Moravian plain stretching away to the Malý Carpathians and onwards to Bratislava.

After investing in some water and orange juice from the bar (which was still cheap, despite the usual airport price hikes) I investigated the shop where I was pleased to see, alongside the multinational crap, Černá Hora beers for sale! A quick look at the price soon persuaded me that this was a souvenir worth taking home – 4 bottles in a pack comprising of the rare Kern polotmavé, the granát, 10° Tas and the 12° for 62Kc – around £1.40 for 4 bottles of decent beer! There was also a pack with 2 bottles and a glass but owing to lack of funds and carrying capacity I reluctantly let this one go, although the 4-pack of bottles (which included 2 scoops!) was a great way to say goodbye to the Czech Republic after my 6th visit!

The usual 737-800 arrived on time and, surprisingly, was a scoop too – I seem to have broken my run of bad luck with Ryotscare planes of late – and we were away from the little airport early. As we climbed above the Moravian plain, I looked down and thought how much I liked the Czech beer scene and how much better it was than the Slovakian one, although I'd enjoyed Bratislava as a place and we had found a few decent brews there. Given there are 3 new brewpubs in Praha, I think it's only a matter of time before we're back in Czech to scoop 'em in the big orange book!

The one downer on the trip was, flying with Ryanair, we arrived into their terminal which has no transit connection and had a 10-minute walk to passport control, but overall we had a good time in these two destinations which, despite not being on the beer lover's "approved list", still yielded some good beer and a couple of scoops. After 6 trips in 6 months we now had a 3-month rest whilst the summer heat, queues and baggage handler strikes receded before we were abroad again, but already we were planning trips – Geneva sounded good, and after that Budapest and Berlin; roll on Autumn!

Conclusions.

We had a great time exploring these two cities; I'm starting to like the idea of "fly somewhere, train to somewhere else, fly back from there" as it gets you two places for the price of one and enables you to stretch out a long weekend where there may not be enough to do all weekend in one place – Bratislava is a good example of this, although we didn't scoop all the tram lines so there's something to go back for!

As expected from prior gen from "Beige" Phil and Paul Harrop, both people whose opinions I respect, Bratislava has a low-key beer scene but we managed to find enough to keep us interested for a couple of nights and I'm sure there is more beer to be had in the suburbs somewhere, hopefully some draught Stein! Brno provided us with a new brewpub for the big orange scoops book, some cracking beer in Pegas, as well as the excellent new unfiltered sklepní 10° beer from [Černá Hora](#). All in all I'd recommend this move to anyone and, with our only spending around £50 (without hotels but including all local transport) between us in the four days, you can see why! Add to this the fact that both locations are fairly devoid of tourists (although Bratislava is catching on with "low expectations holidays" tossers) and flights to both cities can be had for as little as £18 with [Ryanair](#) or [Skyeurope](#) - so what are you waiting for?

Overall, if you're after a cheap break that takes in some original and interesting cities and a couple of brewpubs then this is the move; it won't break the bank in any department be it flights, hotels, beer or travel and it's a damn sight more cutting-edge than Prague. True, neither cities have beer as good as Pivovarský Dům in Prague, but we didn't go thirsty put it that way! Carpathia and Moravia, we'll be back!

[Bratislava Gen.](#)

Bratislava's [Stefanik Airport](#) is located 9 kilometres to the northeast of Bratislava city centre and is a modern, airy and impressive entrance point to the city. It has two distinct parts, arrivals and departures, with the all-important cashpoint being on the outside wall of departures, and there's a good (and reasonably cheap) coffee shop in arrivals. From being almost impossible to reach just a few years back it seems as if everyone with a plane wants a slice of the lucrative "city break" market these days; [easyJet](#) fly from Luton, [Ryanair](#) now go from Stansted as do [Skyeurope](#) who also fly from Manchester. Flights can start from as little as £18 single including taxes – but obviously this depends on when you go! Try Tuesday or Wednesday for the best deals or watch for special offers.

City bus [61](#) operates between the central rail station (Hlavni Stanica) in Bratislava and the airport between 05.00 and 23.00; at peak times it leaves every ten minutes, every 20 minutes otherwise. The journey takes approximately 25 minutes through typical low-rise industrial units and *panelacký* apartment blocks and the cost of a ticket is 18 Sk from the coins-only machine at the bus stop opposite arrivals – bear in mind it accepts coins only! There is a shop at the far end of departures or, to get enough for a rover ticket (a 24-hour pass for all tariff zones is 90Sk, a 48-hour one is 170Sk), find the coffee machine under the stairs in departures, insert a 100Sk note and then press the reject button – 10x10Sk coins will be decanted by the machine! If you have large luggage, note that if you don't have a ticket for baggage exceeding 30x40x60 cm the fine is 35Sk! Cheers then!

For an excellent website which will tell you all you need to know about Bratislava's extensive transport system follow the [IMHD](#) link; it even contains a fleet list of all vehicles if you're that way inclined. The transport in Bratislava is excellent and enables you to get near enough anywhere you want if you have a decent map –

make sure you print one from the [iMHD](#) website first as we never saw maps anywhere nor anywhere to get one from! (For a streetmap, see [here](#)). Transport is mainly trams in the centre (all Czech-built Tatra, either the old T3's, newer T6's or the articulated K2's or their refurbished K2R variants) supported by trolleybuses and the usual diesel buses.

To get between Bratislava and Brno it's easiest to take the train – EC trains link the two cities directly approximately every 2 hours and only take 90 minutes; alternatively, you can change at Břeclav and therefore get there every hour and it only takes an extra 15 minutes if you get the right connections – check with DB's online [timetable](#) to ensure you don't get stranded! A single ticket travelling in “standard” class was only just over 250Sk – around £4.50 – so it's not going to break the bank!

As for beer, Bratislava isn't that well endowed with decent bars or breweries. It has no brewpubs (almost unknown in a European capital!) and only one local brewery, the amusingly named [Stein beverages](#), whose beers are almost entirely absent from the centre, presumably due to the money being thrown around by the two giants of the Slovak scene, Heineken and SAB-Miller, who own almost all the country's breweries between them. The beer scene is thus predictably dire with the bland Zlatý Bažant (Golden Pheasant, from Heineken) available almost everywhere. Below, I list the pitifully few places we found which are worth a visit.

1.Slovak Pub, Obchodná 62. Opposite the Vysoká tramstop on route 1 from the main station (Hlavni Stanica) into town, this place seems like it is owned by Heineken but they don't let on. They serve a commendable 10 draught (čapované) Slovak beers, most Heineken products and no Stein, including a good house beer called Dobré pifko 12° which, I have been assured in an email by the pub, is from Heineken! Our pick of the beers were the citrusy Dobré pifko and the luscious Mackeson-esque [Šariš](#) tmavý 11° dark lager. The food is also excellent, especially the garlic soup and sheep's cheese with spicy sausage & gnocchi! Highly recommended.

Piano Bar, Laurinská. Not sure if this place strictly belongs here as it only sells Czech beer, but as [Černá Hora](#) is good stuff I thought I'd include it. Just off the main square and sells the excellent granát.

Café Ister, Ventúrska. Allegedly sells [Corgoň](#) tmavý 11° but it wasn't on when we asked...

A shop on Kloboučnicka (opposite end from main square) sells a decent range of beers in bottle including the [Stein](#) 10°, the excellent 11° tmavý and the 12° amongst most other Slovakian brewers.

Beige Phil has informed me about these –

KGB at Obchodná 52,

Ponorka at Tobručka 7 - this sells very cheap Stein.

There's a big beerhall called the **Mamut** (mammoth) somewhere but it sounded crap so we didn't go.

Apart from these, it's exploration – and let me know if you find anything!

Brno Gen.

Brno is a laid-back engaging city with a surprisingly picturesque centre, a pointy gothic cathedral and lots of cobblestones. It's the second city of the Czech Republic and the capital of Moravia but compared to Prague it's a sleepy backwater. It's [tram system](#) is huge (although line 4 through the centre is now closed) and almost exclusively run by old [ČKD Tatra](#) for those who care about such sad issues and is the busiest I've ever seen, and that includes Vienna; stand at Česka tramstop and watch how real public transport operates! For a look at the city's location, have a look at this great Czech streetmap site [here](#).

Brno [Tuřany airport](#) (Letiště in Czech) is small - and I mean small - and cosy, if an airport can be described thus, and sells [Černá Hora](#) beer to take home from the tiny shop airside for a very reasonable sum (62Kc for 4 bottles)! [Ryanair](#) now fly from Stansted daily which makes a swift visit to Moravia possible or the sort of extended break I've been gibbering on about for the last 12,000+ words if you're up for it.

To find the airport bus stop, leave the station and turn right and you'll soon see a trolleybus turning circle – this is where the **No. 76** leaves from; see the Czech [connection finder](#) website to check times or the very good local regional public transport [website](#). When we were there the buses left Brno station at half past the hour and returned from the airport at 06 past the hour. The airport is in zone 101 (Brno is zone 100) so if you're on a single ticket make sure you have a 2-zone one. The Brno public transport [website](#) is in Czech only (apart from a small English helps section) but does has a very useful [stocklist](#)... for saddos only!

You'll soon see that Brno is a damn sight better off for bars and beer than Bratislava. The beers of [Starobrna](#) ("old Brno") are omnipresent in the city but, unfortunately, their being owned by Heineken means that this isn't necessarily a good thing. Fortunately for beer lovers the brewery tap on Mendlovo Náměstí (which actually is in the "old" part of Brno although you'd never guess, and still contains the monastery, actually the abbey of St Thomas, where [Gregor Mendel](#) did his experiments with genetics) is actually OK. Below, I list the beery places we found with addresses and a review. If you want more Starobrna, just take a wander along any street.

Pivovarská restaurace [U Richarda](#), Ríšově 12, Brno-Žebětín (open all day). A long way out but worth it; take tram **1** all the way to it's western terminus at Ečerova, cross the road, take bus **54** (every 20 minutes) to the last stop (Žebětín) then walk back along Ríšově until you see the pub on the corner of Ostrovačická (coming back, it's easier to catch it from the last but one stop, Křivánkovo Náměstí). Serves 2 beers, the usual světlé and tmavý, brewed on the little plant in the back room. The food is excellent, especially the beer sauce!

Pivovarská pivnice ([Starobrna](#) brewery tap), Mendlovo Náměstí (open all day). This is located in the old brewery buildings at the top (north) end of the square just up from the trolleybus stops – it's the big brewery tower shaped thing in case you were wondering. Has a huge outside patio and plain but cosy inside rooms with the bar being covered by a huge copper kettle lid and dispensing unfiltered Kvasnicové ("yeasty") beer alongside other testbrews and the standard beers, including the rarer "Drak" bottled beers. The food looked very good too and the waiters are very efficient.

Černohorský Sklep, Náměstí Svobody. Cellar bar owned by the local [Černá Hora](#) brewery and selling their full range of above average brews including the new unfiltered 10° sklepní and Black Hill aperitif beer. Again, excellent food to go with cracking beers and very democratic prices right in the heart of the city - highly recommended.

Pegas, Jakubská 4. (Opens early until late). The city's original brewpub, in production since 1992, and a bit variable in quality in my experience but when it's good, it's very good (but the reverse also applies). Brews 3 standard beers, světlé, tmavý, pšeničný (wheat) and sometimes a special, usually Krystal, that is an attempt at a Märzen-type brew. As usual for Brno, the food is magnificent and excellent value with the pork in beer sauce with *knedlicky* (dumplings) being one of the best meals I've had in the last few years! The accommodation is also good value and, being only 10 minutes from the station and 3 minutes from the trams, is an ideal place to stay and explore the city. Rooms are bookable online too – what more do you want?

Brno is well endowed with bars but, unfortunately, most only sell Starobrna or other national brands although there are a few other [Černá Hora](#) bars around. We didn't have time to explore past the ringroad but there must be hundreds of bars, especially near the university, which may sell something more interesting – explore!

Overall, Brno is a good city for a weekend break – very few tourists make it this far and the welcome is genuinely warm and friendly. An excellent tram system makes it easy to get around and there are some excellent bars, not to mention the two brewpubs. Go before it gets popular...