

Bratislava reborn

Look beyond the nearby star cities of Prague and Vienna to a capital that's in full renaissance

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BRATISLAVA – In Slovakia they have a saying: *Nešťastie nechodí po horách, ale po ľuďoch* (Bad luck runs after people, not through the hills). Ten years ago, on my first visit to the country's capital city, Bratislava, I thought the bad luck – in the form of a crazy old naked woman – was running after me.

It was an early July evening in the city's Old Town, six months after the Velvet Divorce in 1993 that split Czechoslovakia in two. Bratislava was still a tourist backwater, a rather dreary city straddling the dirty Danube. Like Cinderella, it lived in the shadow of its big sister cities, Prague, the Czech capital, and Vienna, the Austrian capital just across the border.

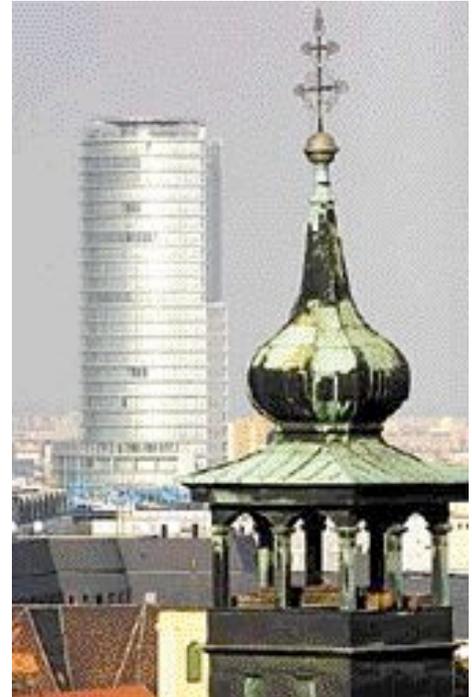
Strolling with a local journalist friend on our way to a concert of Dvorak's mournful Stabat Mater at St. Martin's, Bratislava's Gothic cathedral, I was startled when a woman without a stitch of clothing on passed us quickly at a trot. She had short grey hair matted to her skull. One of her breasts was gone, the scars of surgery flattening one half of her thin chest.

Within seconds, the tiny woman turned a corner and disappeared. We stood there stunned.

The apparition had been ghostly, bizarre, surreal. If this were Prague, it would have been called Kafkaesque. Our host was very embarrassed. The Slovak slogan of independence that year had been "Slovakia must come out of the shadows," and here was a reminder that the country was still stuck in them.

Flash forward a decade. Bratislava is a different place now.

The only people sprinting past anyone in the streets these days are Rollerbladers – in shorts and T-shirt, offending no one.



COURTESY OF BRATISLAVA CITY COUNCIL
Bratislava's split personality: an old church cupola contrasts with the new National Bank of Slovakia headquarters built a year ago

The city has had a makeover. Its Baroque facades now shine in pastel colours, its cobblestoned old quarter – once trod by the likes of Beethoven and Liszt – has been turned into a pedestrian zone. Its sidewalk-terraced restaurants and bargain-priced operas and concerts are now increasingly patronized by German-speaking daytrippers from Vienna, only 60 kilometres away.



Slovakia and its capital in the heart of central Europe

Vienna, only 60 kilometres away.

It's all part of a modern-day renaissance of Bratislava, which in its 1,000-year history of invasion and domination by foreign powers, has been through a lot, including three name changes (it was known for hundreds of years by its German name, Pressburg, and to a lesser extent its Hungarian one, Pozsony, before becoming Bratislava in 1919).

And the revival is no accident.

Slovakia is on what's been described as a charm offensive as it courts the rest of Europe and the world.

In addition to a flurry of trade missions abroad (including a visit to Montreal three months ago by the country's president, Rudolf Schuster), the republic is preparing to join the European Union in May 2004, one of 10 countries to do so.

It's a move that a solid majority of Slovakia's 5.5 million citizens voted to support in a referendum this past May. And when that status comes (along with membership in NATO next year), it will be the culmination of Slovakia's efforts to clean up its international reputation, which was sullied under the authoritarian rule of then-president Vladimir Mečiar in the mid-1990s.

A reform-minded coalition government led by Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda has begun to institute political, economic and judicial reforms, unmuzzle the press, improve its treatment of Hungarian and Roma gypsy minorities and stem the corruption that plagued the early years of independence.

There are still some bumps in the road. Reports last year by Amnesty International and the U.S. State Department say Slovakia is still a hotbed of

illegal human trafficking and is a shipment point for deadly surplus weapons to such violent countries as Angola and Liberia in the developing world.

But to the casual visitor, the country is a pleasant work in progress. And Bratislava – an easy side trip from Vienna, "without the crowds, the prices or the distances," according to Time magazine – is its showpiece.

On my visit last month, I was struck by the changes:

- Outside the ornate National Theatre, where I paid an Old World price of \$8 to watch an excellent performance of Mozart's Don Giovanni, a typical splash of New World commercialism freshened up the summer street: a display of several new, neon-orange Peugeot hatchbacks.
- Across the pedestrian square, there's the majestic 19th-century Carlton Hotel, re-opened in 2001 by the Radisson hotel chain (it was closed under the communists when the floor gave way under a guest while he was soaking in his bath, sending him plummeting). It's now favoured by foreign businesspeople and diplomats paying \$400 a night.
- A few minutes' rattling trolley ride up the city's 60-metre-high hill, inside the medieval castle (originally 15th century, but rebuilt from ruins in the 1960s, and with stairs so wide that 18th-century Empress Maria Theresa was able to ride her horse up them to get home), is the gleaming new Slovak Hockey Hall of Fame. Behind glass: the uniform Peter Stastny wore for the Quebec Nordiques in the 1980s.
- For longer-stay visitors who can afford it – including Canadians and others in the city's burgeoning foreign expat community – downtown landlords these days have started "topping off" their old three-storey apartment buildings with an additional floor. The pricey penthouse dwellings have some of the best views of the city.
- There's even talk of renovating Bratislava's architectural blight, Petržalka, the "workers' paradise" of several hundred concrete apartment towers built in the 1970s on the Danube's south bank that are home to one-quarter of the capital's 600,000 inhabitants. The apartment walls are so thin, neighbours can hear each other's conversations – a fact once appreciated by the secret police.
- And it's not unusual to hear English any more. Bratislava's alternative weekly newspaper, the Slovak Spectator, is entirely in English. And there's a Canadian centre on the busy Obchodná pedestrian mall where students can take English classes, read Canadian newspapers and magazines, and access the Internet.



COURTESY OF BRATISLAVA CITY COUNCIL
A sculpture draws attention outside the popular Papparazzi restaurant in Bratislava's old quarter.

Bratislava's new openness to other cultures is also evident in the city and region's approach to minorities and the fine arts. An underground Jewish mausoleum, where rabbis like the great 19th-century scholar Chatam Sofer are buried, was recently renovated. A new national museum of the history of Hungarians in Slovakia – the country's largest ethnic minority, of whom 28,000 live in Bratislava – opened in May at the foot of the castle.

A Dutch-financed modern-art museum called Danubia was built in 2000 in a politically symbolic location 15 kilometres south of the city – it's on a narrow peninsula where the Danube borders Hungary within view of Austria.

And 10 kilometres farther downriver in Šamorin, better known as a horse-breeding town, an international artists' colony called the At Home Gallery was officially opened in 2000 in an abandoned synagogue – by none other than the Dalai Lama.



COURTESY OF AT HOME GALLERY
The Dalai Lama presides over the 2000 opening of At Home Gallery with owners Csaba Kiss (second from left) and his wife, Canadian-born Suzanne Seet.



COURTESY OF AT HOME GALLERY

The Dalai Lama at the opening of At Home Gallery in 2000

"We like to have a mix of cultures, and this is a space where we can do that," said Suzanne Seet, 36, a Malaysian-Chinese Canadian from Vancouver, who teaches English and runs the place with her husband Csaba Kiss, 37, a Hungarian Slovak who was born in Šamorin.

"There's prejudice in this part of the country," said Seet. "But there's no conflict, really."

For once in Slovakia's troubled history, it seems, good luck is starting to chase out the bad.