

## Transcript of Podcast 062: Czech Beer Press Trip

{Intro:

*Tour Guide at Pilsner Urquell: To create our beer we really only use these three Czech ingredients, plus the unique strain of yeast, and because we still use the same recipe we keep the traditions alive, you know that Pilsner Urquell beer is truly Czech beer}*

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

*Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}*

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

I'm aware it's been a while since a standard podcast episode from me. There have been reasons for this, not all of which have been because I've been busy. Just, well, I have been busy and it's a really good excuse. Kind of ironic too following my previous podcast episode on 'Things I wish I'd known before I started Podcasting'. I'm not a role model, in that respect anyway.

The last couple of months have been very social for me. I started the month visiting some friends in Nottinghamshire, back where I used to live, which, on-brand, partly involved beer. Off-brand, it did also involve kissing with one of them, which as an aromantic asexual is definitely not what I expected. It wasn't what she expected either. But that's all I'm going to say about that.

The weekend following, in related life-structure, I was heavily involved in the UK Asexuality Conference, an entirely on-line affair with panel discussions and Discord chats all about different aspects of Asexuality. I was on the panel for 'Aces and Masculinity', and hosted the panel about 'Aces over 40'. Both of these are available to watch on YouTube so you can see the discussions we had. It had the potential to be stressful, and of course I did almost no preparation or organisation beforehand, but the panels themselves went absolutely fine. It helps to have a rock solid moderator in the background controlling things, of course, who you can off-screen have messages with to plan upcoming questions and ideas. I was also host of an open-mic discussion on Discord about 'child-free aces' but no recording of that was made. It was a really good thing to be involved with - I know asexuality is quite a niche identity, and that makes it even more important that we have such get-togethers and events, even if entirely online, because it's great to know that people like us exist and we're not, well, 'broken'.

Then, the weekend following \*that\*, yes September was a busy month, I physically attended the #Traverse22 Travel Blogger Conference. This is an annual event put on by the Traverse organisation, which aims to bring travel bloggers together for workshops, as well as connecting them with tourist boards and other travel groups. This year's event took place in Brno, in the east of Czechia.

I say 'travel bloggers', In reality it's a place for all kinds of travel content creators; bloggers, yes, but also travel writers, vloggers, short-form video creators, photographers, and even a couple of podcasters. There were a few hundred of us in total, and it's always great to meet up, especially with people we've been talking to on social media but never having met in person.

The conference itself took place over the two weekend days, and consisted of talks and panels by a variety of speakers on subjects ranging from wellness to street photography, SEO to TikTok, thus covering both practical advice and discussions on far wider topics.

Entertainment was also organised in the evenings; on the Friday we all went to an event hosted by the local tourist board, at Castle Špilberk, the focal point of the city of Brno. While there we had demonstrations of local folk dancing, great views, and lots of regional food and drink. The closing party on the Sunday night was at the Sono nightclub (yeh, I know), including a demonstration of 'light painting' by Czech artist Lukero, which looks a lot easier than it is in real life, as many people found out later when they tried it.

It was great to attend - it was the first Traverse conference I'd been to since the one in Rotterdam in 2018 - but my biggest take-out seemed to be not travel-related at all: everyone loved my non-binary stylings (including a couple of people representing the Estonian tourist board!) and personality, and said I would absolutely \*rock\* on TikTok. I never saw myself as a potential TikTok star. Partly because I can't be mythered with video. But then I guess that's another reason I pay my friend V to look after admin for me. And in fact a couple of weeks ago we met up and spent the best part of two days making videos which she's going to edit up and issue, either on TikTok or YouTube Shorts. In all we must have done around 20 short videos, each under a minute, along with a couple of long-form vids for her own YouTube channel. But my vids were a combination of travel 'everywhere is interesting' videos and identity 'what not to say to an asexual' videos, as well as copies of a TikTok dance and a couple of other random things, mostly taking advantage of my dyspraxia. It was reasonably good fun, and we're contemplating launching the video side of my online identity at the start of December, so watch this space I guess. I'm not expecting it to be anything more than a bit of side-fun, and I'm also conscious much of the content there will absolutely not be travel-oriented, but ... I am an enby of many, well, not hats, that's for sure, so lets say, many outfits.

V was also been responsible for making sure I entered the Traverse Creator Awards, which also took place at the very start of this month. Just as last year, I was nominated in one category, and just as last year I didn't win. But to be fair, this year I did lose to someone who does freelance work for the BBC, so I think that's pretty acceptable to even be mentioned on the same list as someone like that.

Finally, the week after, I was at the World Travel Market in London for two days, where I wandered around in a haze of social anxiety, but still ended up having a couple of really interesting conversations with some of the tourist boards there. I had wanted to go into it with a plan and a proper, confident, pitch, but I guess we were a bit pre-distracted by plotting out video content so WTM kind of crept up on us silently and once we realised, it was a bit too late to react.

But let me take you back to September. After the Traverse Conference I didn't go straight back home. Rather, I was whisked away for three and a half days to Plsen, in the west of the country, for my very first Press Trip. Now, Press Trips are fairly standard for Travel Bloggers; a small group are taken somewhere by a tourist board or organisation and given stuff to do, generally for free, in return for their posting content about the trip and the things they do, see, and eat, on their blogs, pods, vlogs, and social media accounts. Sometimes these press trips can raise ethical questions, specifically where some companies and indeed countries pay substantial amounts to bloggers so they can give a positive spin on somewhere or something that, shall we say, needs a bit of an image boost. But that's a subject for a previous pod on influencer ethics.

I did not have these ethical issues.

It will not surprise you to know my very first Press Trip was basically to spend 3½ days being paid to drink beer. Rather a lot of beer. As my friend and fellow press-trip attendee Dave (Man Vs Globe) messaged me a week before: "Just prepping myself for our beer tour of Pilsen, which seems to feature a lot more beer than I expected, despite it being a beer tour". This is a man who used to work for a brewery; if even \*he\* was a little concerned, what hope would I have?!

Anyway. This episode, the first after my unexpected and unplanned hiatus, will be all about beer. As will the next one. Because I seem to have a lot of content. I was originally going to do one pod about both beer in general and then talk about my Press Trip to Plsen, but on writing it I realised the Press Trip alone worked as a pod. Plus of course, it being a Press Trip means I have a certain accountability that I don't normally have, so people will be very interested in my talking about it.

So on that note, let me take you to Plsen and talk about how I drank beer for 3½ days and didn't catch Covid.

*{section separation jingle}*

So. The first task was to, well, meet up with the tourist board rep at Brno railway station on the Monday morning. There were quite a few Press Trips taking place, covering pretty much most of the country; ours had four people on it - me and Dave, and then Jason and Carla, predominantly youtubers from USA. Other trips were going to places like health spas and mountain scenery explorations and old castles. We ... I mean, it's not that anywhere we were going was ugly; I'm sure there is a Czech equivalent of Basingstoke, but we weren't going there; but our whole trip was to drink beer - everything else was a secondary benefit.

Anyway. We caught two trains; firstly a long inter-city train from Brno to Prague, comfortable with a wide aisle and a decent amount of legroom, then a smaller more regional train from Prague to Plsen, eventually destined for Munich. It's sometimes quite weird for me, who lives on a self-contained island and therefore crossing an international border is 'an event', to contemplate that another country is just a short hop away for many people. And yet I've crossed many borders. Mostly legally. But that, again, is a tale for several previous episodes.

Plsen's the fourth biggest city in Czechia, after Prague, Brno, and Ostrava, with just under 170,000 people. This puts it as a similar size to, in the UK, Wokingham or Chelmsford. Bit bigger than Reading, bit smaller than Basingstoke. None of those places are really comparable though; after all none of them have ever had a football club reach the group stages of the European Champions League. Even if Viktoria Plsen didn't set the competition alight this year. Though they did better than Glasgow Rangers, much to the assumed amusement of the people in my tenement block.

But I digress. Obviously. There's been a settlement at Plsen since the very end of the 13th Century, and spent much of the next 700 years being on the front line for many European wars, including a huge siege in the Thirty Years War and being a target for Allied bombing in World War II. Indeed the Plsen area was, much to the subsequent Communist government's chagrin, one of the most easterly cities liberated by the American forces in that war - it lay at the end of General Patton's 'Liberty Road' march through Europe (there's a museum dedicated to him and that whole theatre of the war located in the city centre), and at nearby Rokycany there's an outdoor museum of tanks and other military hardware (just under 200 different pieces, including an anti-aircraft gun) located on the demarcation line where Patton's troops met the liberating Red Army advancing from the East. You can hire a genuine WW2 tank for the day for a few grand, and many film-makers do just that. Also at the museum is a large indoor museum taking you through the preparations for, and activities in, WW2, complete with displays, dioramas, and a couple of interactive exhibits.

But, back to Plsen itself. One of the more important industries in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was vehicle manufacturing, with a large Skoda Factory having been built in the suburbs. The company was founded by Emil von Skoda, who was born in Plsen in 1839. In WW2 this was requisitioned for war work - Skoda built tanks, yes. Despite this, the old town has survived remarkably well. In fact, it reminded me a bit of many cities in Poland, with its huge main square and side-streets of large, pastel-shaded buildings.

A lot of the streets are cobbled, which adds to the mediaeval charm of the place. There's a very small remainder of the old city wall, which was cast down and replaced by a wide promenade of garden separating the old town's centre from the 'burbs, which seems quite radical but what it means nowadays is there's a nice strip of parkland surrounding the city centre, which makes it feel more open and green than most cities you might visit.

The central square, one of the largest in Czechia, surrounds the cathedral, and is a wide space used for markets and, on my visit, at least one political rally - it's always weird to hear political groups meeting and enthusing in a language I don't know because it's never clear if I should be energised or angered that they're there. On three of the corners of the square are water features with what appear to be sculptures of Greek letters (the fourth, the NW corner, has a Marion Column - a statue of the Virgin Mary atop a large pillar, in this case to give thanks that not everyone died in one of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century plague epidemics). Our guide wasn't sure why the water features were there, but research brings up they're called 'Zlatá kašna' or 'Golden Fountains', and they're representations of parts of Plsen history and culture. Highly stylised, it must be said. One is an angel, one a camel, and one a greyhound. Apparently. They were installed in 2010 and public opinion of them has been ... mixed. The greyhound is apparently an old symbol of faithfulness to the catholic church and to the Czech king, while the camel refers to a story that during one of the wars, a sieging army had a camel, which the Plsen defenders pinched, didn't know what to do with, and, I believe, after the war, gave it to the King of Poland. Quite how and why the besiegers had a camel is not recorded.

As an aside, the Plsen city logo is ... I'm going to go with 'hard to draw'. Most places take a couple of historical aspects or symbolic representations and add a few colours; Plsen seems to have gone with 'oh that's important, let's stick it in'. It contains, amongst other things, the aforementioned greyhound and camel, papal keys, a knight in armour, a black eagle (half of), a representation of the Plsen charter, and a golden cross. And a poleaxe. And an olive branch. For a country with one of the lowest levels of religious belief in Europe (a Gallup poll in 2009 found only 21% of Czechs felt religion was important to them, while a 2019 Eurobarometer poll found 56% of Czechs defined themselves as either Atheist, Agnostic, or a non-believer), they have quite a religious historical culture, but a conversation in the cathedral suggested this was the reason – that being on the front line of the historical European religious wars has turned Czech culture away from the whole concept.

Also in the square is are a couple of statues of famous Czech puppet characters Spejbel and Hurvíněk, while on the side of the cathedral, behind a gate, is an angel which people touch a statue and make a wish. This isn't a touristy thing either – we saw many locals go and silently touch the statue, at one point even forming a small queue.

The cathedral itself is dedicated to St Bartholomew, and is the seat of the local bishop. Compared to the surrounding square, it feels weirdly small, although it's apparently always been built that way. It was built in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, but repaired and reconstructed a bit several times since then. Quite a pretty, if standard, cathedral – high ornate ceilings, vibrant stained glass windows, imposing altar.

You can climb to the top of the cathedral tower – at just over 100m tall it's the highest in the Czech Republic, and the climb up definitely feels like it. It's a weird series of staircases, some stone, some wood, some curved, some steep and straight up, almost ladderlike. From the top you can see pretty much the whole city, including the main sites such as the Skoda factory and the main brewery, and out to the hills beyond.

It's not the only important religious building in the city centre. Nearby is the Great Synagogue, a much more (relatively) recent affair, dating from the 'boom years' in the decade either side of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It's the second largest synagogue in Europe (allegedly), able to hold more than 2,000 people and with twin towers rising to around 45m tall. Note that the current Jewish population in Plsen is around 70, for the obvious reasons. It's an odd-looking building; architecturally it's defined as 'Neo-Romantic' but with an Arabic flavour, while the towers have odd domes on the top that hark more towards Eastern Orthodox Christianity. While still owned by the Jewish community, the synagogue is mostly used these days for concerts and exhibitions.

Other buildings dating from the same period include a theatre, a couple of museums, and a hotel; indeed much of the city centre around and just beyond the site of the old city wall was built around this time, a plethora of what I've been told are art-nouveau and neo-renaissance structures.

Now, my description of Plsen is more than just scene-setting. It's not just that the city is a pretty background to the manufacture and drinking of beer, but rather that beer itself is an important and integral part of the city. Beer has been brewed here for pretty much as long as the city itself has existed, initially by monks in a nearby abbey but it wasn't long until the inhabitants of the city itself were brewing. All those pastel-shaded buildings that line the main square and the surrounding streets? They would all have been licensed to brew beer. Now, many of them merely stored and sold it, but still, with so nano-breweries, one imagines a pub-crawl in the 18th Century would have been quite an achievement.

In fact, in a very literal sense, Plsen is a city built on beer. See, under the old town are a connected series of cellars deep underground. These were used to source water for beer making, & store barrels in cold conditions while being readied. They were originally mined out in the 13th-14th Centuries, and while some have subsided and flooded, much of it is still usable even today. In the old days, the houses above had cellars which opened out into these passageways, which of course was convenient when every house was at least a pub, if not itself a brewery, but these days they've all been blocked off.

The passageways cover around 20 kilometres in total, but only a few hundred meters are open for tourists to visit. They're mostly narrow with relatively low ceilings; you're obliged to wear a hard hat and it's not really a place for anyone who suffers from claustrophobia. That said they're not that dark and you can always see where you're going.

You can see several of the wells used to draw water - this plus the several rivers around the city made it historically a very difficult place to siege, and there's evidence of this in the underground as well, with cannonballs, catapult shots, and other objects from that era on display. There's another advantage to the easy access to water, but I'll come onto that a little later - but I'm sure you can guess it already. The tour through the caverns ends at a large water wheel underneath a water tower, part of the old waterworks that were built in the 1530s and rebuilt and extended in the 1840s.

Also in the caverns are displays of objects showing general life and culture in previous centuries. These include examples of glassware, pottery, and tiles from previous centuries, an overview on the importance and provisions of merchant guilds, and the tools that show how the caverns were dug in the first place.

Above the caverns is the beer museum. This takes you on a quick overview of the history of beer in general, and in Pilsen in particular. While some of the individual information signage is merely labels rather than descriptive, this is rendered less of an issue by the fine displays and dioramas that make it clear what you're looking at. There's examples shown a variety of 19th-Century brewing equipment, from boiling to bottling, and even devices to check the quality of the grains. There's also a fair display of old-style beer bottles, which, let's be honest, had a bit more style than modern typefaces and bland imagery. There's even a recreation of a 19th Century bar, albeit behind a screen so no you can't order a beer.

There's also a lot of ephemera around the practice of beer drinking, from historical tableware to information about coasters and bottle-tops. Did you know, for instance, in the 1700s beer came in three sizes here? A mug (500ml), a Pint (1.9l) and, er, 'a bucketful' (46.5l). I won't be asking for one of those in the pub though.

At this point I probably need to point out just how important beer is to the Czechs. It is the country with the highest beer consumption per capita in the world. 140 litres per year, twice as much as the UK, and some 30 litres ahead of second place Austria. It's not just that the Czechs like beer, it's more that the whole concept is central to Czech life. Whereas in other countries you might meet in a cafe or at someone's house for a coffee or a tea, in Czechia you go to the pub and drink a beer together. And there's a lot of pubs in the country; it's almost like being in the UK, but bear in mind the UK has almost seven times the population.

With specific regard to my adventures though, the reason why the Press Trip to sample Czech beer I was on went to Pilsen is not just because the city is built on beer, but because the style of beer that the city is famous for is one of the most popular and important beer styles in the world. I'm sure you've heard of Pilsner. A type of hoppy bitter lager served in almost every pub and bar in the world? Well, this is where it comes from.

Before I talk about it though, it's important to note there's different ways of serving beer, specifically Pilsner, in Czechia. The standard way is known as "hladinka" (Czech for 'level'); it's tapped in one go at around a 45° angle, and leads to a glass about  $\frac{3}{4}$  full of lager and  $\frac{1}{4}$  foam on top. The principle behind it is that the foam 'protects' the beer below it and prevents it from going flat and stale too quickly. This is an alien concept to me as most of the beers I normally drink in the UK are flat by design, but they're not lagers, so.

Another popular way is "Šnyt" ('cut'), which is similar to the Hladinka except the proportion of foam to lager is closer to 50/50. In Czech culture this fulfils the same function as we'd have a 'half' in the UK; either we just need a quick drink or we only want a 'taster'.

There's also a style that's almost completely foam. This is the 'Mliko' (Czech for 'milk'), and is named because when in the glass, it looks similar to a glass of milk. The idea is you drink it all in one go, though I'm not convinced texture-wise I could. Compared to the other types of presentation, it's very smooth and sweet, and is seen as the 'oh but I'm driving' drink, given its low volume of actual beer. Although here note that the drink driving laws in Czechia are somewhat strict; there is no tolerance at all and you are not allowed to drive with any alcohol in your system. It was also traditionally seen as a 'woman's drink', although hopefully those attitudes are disappearing.

The final style is almost the opposite of Mliko. This is the Čochtan (this seems to mean 'Neat', as in 'neat and tidy'), and is occasionally known as 'British Style'. I feel attacked. Anyway it's served with as little foam as possible - ideally none at all. Without the foam on top it goes flat quickly, but it does mean you can drink it

quickly without the foam getting in the way, and it's said to be refreshing. It must be said I never saw anyone pour this.

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the lagers I had on this trip were of the Hladinka style.

Anyway.

The major producer of Pilsner lager is Pilsner Urquell Brewery, and we were given a tour of the brewery plant as part of the Press Trip. Now, as you might expect, the brewery is huge – some 11 million hectolitres are brewed per year & they can package up 120,000 litres in bottles, 60,000 cans, \*and\* 18,000 larger (1.5l, kind of 'growler-sized) bottles. Per hour. The whole factory vibes like a small town. There's a reason the tour takes a couple of hours.

The tour begins in the main reception area, some of which is decorated in the style of a traditional old-fashioned public house. It's only a facade, but certainly later on in the tour you do get to sample the beer, obviously, because what would be the point of going to a brewery and coming out dry. Also in the reception area is a motorbike, with Pilsner decals, which was designed locally and is very bespoke; it's one of two designed in the style of Pilsner Urquell beer, and they're both fully functional – perfect for those beer-loving bikers amongst you. Also in the area are a cabinet of awards the beer has won, as well as some of the original paperwork from the foundation of the brewery itself.

Outside the main entrance is a cobblestone road that leads deeper into the brewery complex, passing the original brewery building and the 50m tall water tower, built at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to provide water to the expanding business. The base of the water tower, incidentally, is seen in the underground caverns. Or at least I think it's the same one. It's hard to judge when you're a couple of meters underground. Also outside are a couple of rail sidings with old wagons, branded and originally used to transport Pilsner products around the city and beyond.

Back inside takes you past the raw ingredients for beer; the malted barley, hops, and yeast which when combined with water make the beer. They're all regionally grown, from this side of Czechia, and the volume and type are particular to Pilsner Urquell. The yeast in particular is specially protected – samples are kept protected in temperature-controlled vials in several spots around the world. I'll come onto the factual aspects of beer-making in a future pod, just to say it's not divine magic, even if sometimes it feels that way. You can sample the malt and the hops if you like – while the malt has the vibe and texture of muesli, raw hops ... the best way I can describe the taste is it's a bit like chewing on a hemp bag. It's dry, textured, stringy, slightly limp, and takes about 10 minutes to get the taste out of your mouth. I'd not recommend it.

Then you go through the brewhouses. In 2004 they moved their brewing operation into a new building, for space and size reasons, however the actual setup is pretty much identical. What you have is a series of copper kettles and mash tuns where the malts are mixed with boiling water and, well, the phrase is 'mashed', which to be honest is also what happens to you if you drink too much of it in one go. Essentially it breaks out the sugars in the malted barley which later go on to ferment into alcohol. Pilsner Urquell do a process called 'triple mashing' which basically means any batch of proto-beer goes through this process three times, which I understand makes the beer darker, slightly stronger, more bitter, and smoother in the mouth. Most breweries don't do this, but then most breweries don't have a huge setup and less time pressure that means they can afford to.

When you walk into the room with the copper kettles, by the way, due to their size, number and their look (they have pipes going off into the ceiling, and their lids are rounded and smooth), it feels a little like you're surrounded by sleeping creatures from a dodgy 1970s sci-fi series. When I stood next to them, the top of the lid was above head-height, and I'm not exactly a small enby, and they're pretty much circular so they're just as big all the way around.

After passing by a couple of exhibits on the people who made the beer what it is today, including portraits of all the head brewers from 1842, the tour goes underground into the beer cellars. This is where the fun begins. Again, as a tourist you only see a very small part of the complex, which stretch in total for around 9km and lie around 15-20m under the town, but even what you do get to see is still quite a bit. The passageways are quite wide, understandably so as they were used to store beer barrels in cold conditions to let the beer mature and condition. This was done through not just the fact the cellars were naturally cool anyway, but also with the

addition of large blocks of ice. These days their usual production is instead held in large cryo-tanks, but even so the passageways still smell of damp and the sound of dripping and running water is never too far away.

I say their usual production. Down here in the cellars they still maintain some huge oak barrels for the original fermentation process. Partly this is done for the tourists, yes, but mainly it's also as a comparison, to make sure that regardless of what changes they make to the production of beer in the factory, the beer itself tastes the same as it always has done, so by continuing small batch production of beer in the traditional way, and because they use the same makeup of malts, hops, and yeast for both, they can easily tell if something they've done process-wise has affected their beer.

And of course one of the highlights of the tour is at the very end, where you can sit at a table in the cellars and drink pretty much straight from the tap – traditional, unfiltered, unpasteurised, Pilsner Urquell exactly the way it would have tasted when the brewery first produced it in 1842. And it's pretty good too. I'm not a lager drinker but this was lush. Very smooth, sweetly caramel, very bitter, and refreshing. Completely unlike ... other lagers I could mention, but won't.

Incidentally, Pilsner Urquell are one of the few breweries left in Europe who make oak barrels by hand in the traditional manner, which is one of those trade secrets passed down from master to apprentice. Currently they employ 8 barrel manufacturers, or coopers, yes that is the origin of the surname, and the barrels they make range from 17 litres for transportation to 4600 litres for storage. The latter can weigh up to 800kg, making them rather awkward for taking home with you.

Now, two questions I've not answered yet are: why here, and why then? Why is Plsen traditionally such a huge beer city, and why did one brewery take over so comprehensively? And while you'd have thought the answer was capitalism, you'd actually be wrong. Sort of.

The city stands where several rivers merge to form the Berounka River, which joins the Vltava near Prague. In addition, the town itself has a number of natural springs and the water table's not too far down, meaning it was easy to dig wells to access fresh water. Importantly though, regardless of origin, the water here is primarily quite 'soft', that is to say, it contains a much lower concentration of dissolved minerals thus tasting more 'pure' and being easier to flavour. In addition, this part of Europe is a great place for growing barley and hops, the two important ingredients in beer. This goes some way to explain why, not long after the foundation of the city, the local monks set up a brewery, and why the populace followed not long after.

However, just because you can, doesn't mean you should. Although a lot of nano-breweries existed in the city, their quality was variable and dubious, because the average citizen wasn't a brewer by trade and didn't have the know-how to make beer consistently well. For a city that prided itself on beer, this was an important consideration. The final straw came in 1839, when a brewed batch was so bad that 36 barrels of it were (allegedly, it must be said) poured out over the town square, presumably in protest. The town council decided enough was enough, and brought in an external consultant, Josef Groll, a brewer from nearby Bavaria (remember, Munich is just a short regional train ride away, and the border with Bavaria is closer than Prague). He was tasked to use his experience to create a decent brew in the city, and by gum he succeeded. Even though he only stayed in charge for a couple of years, his legacy was immense, and from there on in, there was only one beer in town. Groll, btw, is completely unconnected with Grolsch, a Dutch brewery dating back to the early 1600s, although weirdly both are, at the time of podding, owned by Asahi Group Holdings Ltd.

I say 'only one beer in town'. That's obviously not true. Even here in Plsen, microbreweries exist, and as part of the Press Trip I was on, we got to experience several of them. It turns out Dave was right.

Firstly, two caveats. Although microbreweries tend to be more flexible and experimental with their brewing than large macrobreweries, this \*is\* the Czech Republic and even a nanobrewery I'd visited back in Brno said that around 80% of their beer output was a variant of Pilsner Lager. The microbreweries in and near Plsen may be numerous and quirky, but even they know what their audience looks like.

The other caveat is the first microbrewery we visited in Plsen, erm, technically isn't one.

Proud Brewery is located in the old power station on the Pilsner Urquell site, a short way behind the larger brewery, and 100% owned by it. That said, it operates independently and is largely used as a way for the parent

company to experiment with styles and tastes that would be very off-brand and out-of-place under the Pilsner Urquell name. Its name comes from its location – 'proud' is a Czech word that means 'current', as in 'electricity' and 'water', and being sited in an old power station where two rivers meet makes it a logical name to have taken up.

Anyway, as a sub-brand, it's quite a large and elaborate affair for a microbrewery. They're renovating the old control centre of the power station, which would make a great place to put tables and drink on-site to be honest, although it'd be a shame to remove the original tiling and the now-very-retro control panel halfway down. But that room itself is bigger than most microbreweries I've visited. Also in that room, next to a platform on which are four steel beer tanks, are a crucifix and a bell. This seems to be a traditional religious theme that breweries have, to protect themselves from other kinds of evil spirits, but these specific ones have been blessed by a passing pope, who was also given a batch of Proud beer, which I guess makes it count as holy water?

The main brewing area is relatively large for a small brewery too, though research hasn't revealed quite how large. Suffice to say they have enough capacity to produce quite a few beers at any one time, and also spirits. On our visit we were given samples of a number of beers they produce, showing too the variety of their experimentation. Of course we had the Pilsner-style lager, but also a red ale with cardamom and black tea, which was sweet, spicy, and earthy, a Plum Sour beer, which definitely tasted plummy (I'm otherwise not fond of sours that much, which ... hmmm), a West Coast IPA (dry, hoppy, and tropical), and a smooth chocolate coffee stout, which was very dry and smokey. According to my notes, I definitely preferred the stout (obviously), but also the red ale, because it was very unusual.

A more standard microbrewery I visited was Raven, based behind a bar/restaurant. We ventured into the brewery itself, a much smaller & crowded affair with a soundtrack of heavy metal, being led by Filip, an Australian immigrant with a passion for beer. By 'much smaller', it was two or three rooms behind the restaurant and felt quite intimate and crowded even though there were only about 6 of us in there.

They also produce a wide range of beers, and given Filip's background, tend to be more 'English' in styles (think typical IPAs and APAs). They are, however, also quite fond of sour beers, much to my obvious delight. We ended up sampling six beers here, and by 'sample' I mean, it was more than a shot, probably similar to what you might get in a beer flight. These included a very hoppy and tropical IPA, another fruity and vibrant IPA, and four sours – a lemon one, a passion-fruit one, an orange one, and a quite peculiar one called 'brutal lime and salt' that did exactly what it said on the beer vat. That said, drinking that did confirm that it is specifically tequila I dislike.

The brewery has been around since 2015, but in that time has shot up in popularity, having been mentioned in beer literature as amongst the best beer to try in Czechia, as well as proving very popular on the beer app Untappd. They also give back to the wider world; they have a partnership with animal charities, so for example one of their beers at the time of my visit was a Tasmanian IPA and for every beer sold, they'd donate to a charity in Tasmania that looks after injured Tasmanian Devils.

The last microbrewery we visited in Plsen itself was Purkmistr, a quite large microbrewery (over 150,000 litres per year, which makes it apparently the second biggest brewery after Pilsner Urquell, though I don't have any information on the capacity and output of Proud Brewery). On site also is a restaurant, a hotel, and a beer spa. We did not go in the beer spa.

In addition, the brewery is one of the oldest in the country, or at least traces its heritage back to 1341, when beer was first brewed under that name in the town of Domažlice, 50km SW of Plsen and very close to the German border. That brewery seems to have closed in 1996 and this microbrewery sprung up some time later, brewing beers to the same recipes.

The brewery is partly visible from the restaurant, or at least a couple of the beer tanks are, but the majority of it is in a large room behind. By this stage of our trip we'd seen a lot of the inner workings of breweries and there's only so many times you can look at something and go 'oh, that's a beer kettle'. That said, it is interesting to compare and contrast the different breweries in terms of layout and size, and the way they present; Purkmistr felt much more open-plan than Raven and the Efi nanobrewery I'd visited in Brno a few days earlier, which were more subdivided into different rooms.



We sampled their beers, not from the tap directly for a change, but in the attached restaurant over a chef-cooked meal. I have a feeling I had rabbit with potatoes, but obviously you're more interested in the beer. I had a 'flight' (6x100ml) of their beers, including the standard lager, a more malty and slightly sweeter version of the standard lager, a malty chocolatey beer, a lemony IPA, a weissbier that tasted of lavender, and what seemed to be a non-alcoholic beer that tasted entirely of malt. It was very odd and ... that's all I really need to say about that one.

If that had been the end of the Press Trip, it would have been a great experience and introduction to Czech beer. However, it was not. There was one more full day to come.

Some 20km south of Plsen is the small town of Nepomuk. This is home to the Zlata Krava brewery, hotel, and wellness centre, and where we'd be spending the night. Zlata Krava, btw, means 'golden cow', & many of their beers are cow-themed - the rooms in their hotel are named after their beers, so I was in 'choco cow', a beer that wasn't on offer, sadly.

Again, we had a quick tour of the brewery itself, which was pretty much looking at large metallic vats of beer and going 'oh, let's sample that'. It's not a big brewery, but they do make a large range of beers; aside from the obligatory pilsner-style lager we had a smooth hoppy Märzen (March Beer, a German style of brown-coloured lager), a new orange pale ale, a strong sweet stout that had the vibes of red wine, an APA, an IPA, and a lemony cream ale.

But we were here mainly for the 'wellness', which is a statement I never thought I'd be saying. And by 'wellness' I mean the hotel has an on-site spa and sauna, and we had a couple of hours' exclusive use of the facilities. It may not be surprising to hear, but I'd never been to any kind of spa resort before so this was all new to me. I started in the hot tub - a large pool of water, like a hot tub or jacuzzi where we could just chill and relax. It was next to a sauna room which I opened the door of and realised I couldn't breathe.

Next to the hot tub were a couple of small foot spa & stone massage tubs, which was very refreshing; videos will be available on my OnlyFans, obviously ... :D.

A couple of rooms away was the 'Finnish Sauna' - a room with a wooden fire pit where you poured water on to make steam. This was quite intense, & I realised the further up you sat the hotter the atmosphere got. I'm also not quite sure what the difference was between a 'Finnish Sauna' and a normal sauna room, other than I could at least breathe in the Finnish Sauna. Neither came equipped with long twigs to beat yourself with, nor snow, though I'd imagine in the height of winter, snow could be easily available. What little we saw of Nepomuk and its surrounds suggests it's good hillwalking and hiking territory; it would also be a cool place to base yourself for cycling trips, if two wheels floats your, er, metaphor.

All this though was preparation for the 'main event' - the **BEER SPA**. Yes, we went there. So, in a room were four metal tubs, filled with beer (or at least, proto-beer - yeasty hoppy malty water and herb extracts). At the side of each tub was a tap from which you could pour your own beer (the standard pilsner-type lager, but hey, it counts!). And then you can just relax in the beery water and drink to your heart's content. The upside is, well, beer, and it's very relaxing. The downside is my crop-top & leggings stank of beer all evening. I think we were in there for just under an hour, chatting and playing silly games. Yeh, you're in your own tub but you can see the other tubs from where you're lying - it's not a place for privacy but rather it very much feels like a group event, so it's almost certainly better to go along with people you know for the best experience. I'd imagine it'd be quite embarrassing to be there with strangers.

A couple of technical points about beer spas. To fill up a tub takes between 30 minutes and an hour, and the beery water inside is kept at a temperature in the mid-30s°C, similar to the temperature I have my showers, and slightly slower than my friend in Sheffield's hot tub. They're supposed to be good for the skin, given the higher levels of vitamin B in the proto-beer, and one of the reasons the beer tap is next to the tub is because you officially need to stay hydrated. You're also supposed to take a 20 minute rest after stepping out the beer spa, which gives you more time to rest and drink beer in your room I guess - indeed in the rooms at the hotel was a beer tap, so even once you've gone to bed, beer is still easily accessible.

Incidentally, the first beer spa was, of course, set up in Germany in 1997; the first in Czechia followed in 2006 in Chodova Plana, which is a small town near Plsen, obviously.

I never did get the hang of the force of the beer taps so everything I poured had a lot of foam. One might even say I give good head. {pause}

What?

*{end main body podcast jingle}*

Well, that's about all for this episode. Join me next time when I do another podcast about beer. I promise you, I'm not turning into a beer blogger, because I just want to enjoy beer without having to worry about it, it's just it seems there's a lot to say about it! Until then, na zdravi!, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

*{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}*

*{Outro voiceover:*

*Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.*

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*Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}*