

Czech out the capital’s bohemian little brother

It sits in Prague’s shadow, but Brno has a more youthful, creative and relaxed vibe than its sibling, finds *Yvonne Gordon*

We are sitting in a wooden booth: to the left there’s a large painted wheel on the wall, each coloured segment listing a cocktail number and the inspiration behind its creation. “Welcome to Panda,” says the waitress. “To choose your drink, you can spin the wheel of fortune.”

I approach the giant disc, nervous at what my cocktail future might hold. One of the drinks has been inspired by “a trip to the forest”, another by champagne. I know which one I want to land on.

I spin the wheel and end up with No2: a coconut-oil infused gin with fino sherry and lemon juice, served in an ice-filled short glass with coconut meringue on top. Lenka, the local guide who has taken me to Super Panda Circus (cocktails from €6.60; superpandacircus.cz) – a funky bar arrived at via an unmarked doorway hidden in an alcove partially obscured by a metal shutter – tells me she came here for her mother’s birthday and the cocktails came with helium balloons. “We had fun losing our voices,” she laughs.

Lenka Zajackova Cerhova is the brains behind Brno Day Trips and we’ve worked up a thirst walking around the city. Brno (pronounced bur-no) is the second largest city in the Czech Republic, but before this, I didn’t know much about it, probably due to the fame of its sibling, the more touristy capital Prague, 200km north.

Prague may have been the historical capital of Bohemia, but it is Brno, where students comprise about 90,000 of its 380,000-strong population, that has the more youthful, creative and laid-back vibe. Brno does have castles (the 13th century Spilberk) and cathedrals (the baroque and gothic revival Cathedral of St Peter and Paul), but walking around, you quickly realise that spending time here is more about enjoying the relaxed



social scene and artistic atmosphere than ticking off monuments. Most of the city centre is pedestrianised, and there are plenty of bright, open squares, so it’s easy to navigate. It has several universities – hence the students – and this young population is attracting tech start-ups.

At the Dobro Kava coffee cart (dobrokava.cz) at the Vegetable Market – a square that has been used as a market since the 13th century – a small crowd gathers, chatting and laughing. It’s good karma rather than cash that buys you caffeine here: you get a free coffee if you promise to perform a good deed. The deal is that you think of a specific action and tell them what it will be, and in return you get a cuppa – they trust you to do the deed. For those who are stuck, a blackboard supplies suggestions. From the list, I decide to use less plastic for the rest of my trip. Radim Simik, who works on the cart, tells me they serve about 100 coffees a day. Not everyone gets a free coffee if they aren’t into the idea, while others come every day – racking up a lot of good deeds.

Underneath the city is fascinating, too: there is a labyrinth of passages under the market, where food and wine was once stored, and a short distance away is the 10-Z Bunker (€5.85 entry; 10-z.cz), which

Overlooked by the gothic towers of its cathedral, top right, Brno has plenty of heritage on display, and its Mies van der Rohe-designed Villa Tugendhat, above and top, shows off the city’s modernist credentials; ice-cream carts cater to vegans with dairy-free offerings, right

“Everything social went to hell behind the Iron Curtain. We’re trying to recover it



YVONNE GORDON



Espresso Bar, where Adam Neubauer has won Czech barista of the year many times. Even the ice-cream sold on the street goes beyond the ordinary. Served from a selection of pastel-coloured vintage carts, the delicious desserts from Bozsky Kopecek (facebook.com/tuttifruttibрно) are vegan, with heavenly flavours such as raspberry and cardamom, sour cherry, and salted caramel.

Just outside the city, another marvel is Villa Tugendhat (one hour tour €11.70, garden ticket only, €1.95; tugendhat.eu/en). Designed by German-American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and completed in 1930, this Unesco world cultural heritage site is a modernist masterpiece: the three-storey villa looks more like a house of the future than one

THE BRIEF

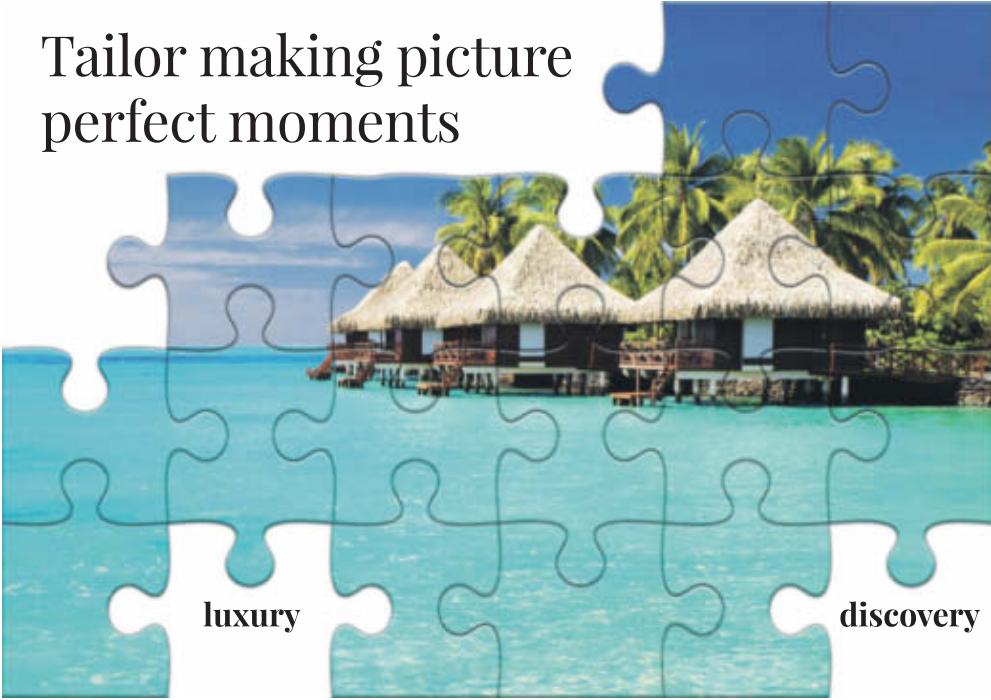
Both **Aer Lingus** and **Ryanair** fly daily from Dublin to Prague — Brno is about two hours’ drive from the capital. Brno is also 1½ hours by road from Bratislava in Slovakia (Ryanair flies there from Dublin) and two hours by road from Vienna (Aer Lingus and Ryanair both fly to the Austrian capital from Dublin). Ryanair flies direct to Brno from London Stansted.

For details about trains and buses, download public transport app idos.cz. For more information about Brno, visit gotobрно.cz and czechtourism.com, and for walking tours of the city, surrounding national parks and heritage sites, see brnodaytrips.com (three-hour walking tour from €25).

from the past. It stretches over 900 sq m (the living room alone is 237 sq m), and many of the rooms are “freely floating” open-plan spaces containing original furnishings designed by the architect. It is popular, so you will need to book the tour three months before you go.

After a visit here, and a stroll in the gardens that overlook Brno’s skyline, I head back to the city, excited at what else the wheel of fortune or good karma has in store.

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