

# Limping Through the Czech Republic

By Don Mankin



a local café and on the bus. I also gradually tested my knee on short walks through a local village and on easy portions of the trail.

At the end of the first day, I joined the hikers in an ambling exploration of the Chateau Valtice, a baroque castle that is the most impressive of the Dukes' work. At the end of the second day we visited the historic town of Mikulov, once the home of a thriving Jewish community that at one point comprised over 40% of the town's population.

The day ended with a visit to a local wine cellar for, as our guide described it, "wine-drinking, not wine-tasting." For several hours the hearty host plied us with one sample after another from the barrels in his cold, damp cellar.

What's worse than hiking with a bum knee? Not hiking. Not doing much of anything for that matter, other than obsessing about growing old.

That's the prospect I faced the day before the start of a recent weeklong hiking trip in the Czech Republic. After two days of walking around Vienna, the starting point for the trip, my knee hurt like hell and I could barely move.

I was ready to head back home and have my knee doctor operate immediately (as I get older I seem to acquire a doctor for every body part). But after several email exchanges with him and REI Adventures ([www.rei.com/adventures](http://www.rei.com/adventures)), my host

for the trip, we came up with a plan involving ice, drugs and adjustments to the schedule of activities.

The nature of the hiking trip made it easy to make these adjustments. It was guided; most days were broken up into 3-4 mile morning and afternoon segments and we had a roomy mini-bus to shuttle us to and from the trailheads. I could just stay on the bus until my knee healed enough to get on the trail.

While the others hiked on the first day of the trip through the Lednice-Valtice Cultural Landscape -- a UNESCO World Heritage site of 17th Century castles, monuments, ponds and gardens created by the Dukes of Liechtenstein—I hung out in



The cellar grew warmer and more comfortable the more we drank. And we drank a lot. When we finally had enough, we stumbled in the dark back to our hotel.

My knee felt fine. I was ready to hike.

For the next two days, we hiked under clear skies dotted with puffy clouds, through thick, dark forests, alongside agate lakes and golden fields of blooming rapeseed. This is not a wild, dramatic landscape of wilderness and steep mountains and gorges but a peaceful countryside of vineyards, farms and gently rolling hills.



The tranquility of the area belies its history as a border region rife with conflict and intrigue—first, with Austria over the border; then, among the Dukes fighting for control of the land, and most recently, during 50 years of occupation by Nazi Germany, then the Soviet Union.

But this dark history of intrigue, assassination, oppression and ethnic persecution was only a backdrop to our quiet, serene hikes in almost perfect solitude. In the morning, we would hike 3-4 miles on mostly flat trails, ending in a short climb to a castle on a hill. Before diving into a picnic spread of cheese, meat, salad, chips, beer, bread, fruit and cake, we climbed up the castle tower for 360 degree views of the Dukes' domain.

After lunch, we hiked another 3-4 miles to a post card village of medieval squares lined with classic houses dating back centuries. The villages are so picture perfect they could be Disneyland attractions or a set for a Czech remake of the Sound of Music.

The most charming village of all was the UNESCO World Heritage site, Cesky (pronounced Chesky) Krumlove (pronounced Krumlove), the locale for days 5 and 6 of our trip. More town than village, Cesky Krumlove is, after Prague, the second most popular tourist destination in the Czech Republic. What makes the town so picturesque are the huge castle complex and cathedral on a hill in the middle of the town and a fast flowing river that goosenecks through it, affording views of castle, cathedral and river from almost everywhere.

The trip ended on day 7 with a challenging 3 hour, 7.5 mile hike to the well-preserved village of Holasovice. The first few miles involved a steep climb up a forest trail, then a steep descent to the end. My knee did OK on both sections – as did my other knee, my lungs and most of my other body parts.

When I got home, I decided to get the knee surgery I had been putting off for the last several years. I am now four months into my recovery and I figure I have about 2-3 more months before attempting my next hiking trip. It hasn't been fun but what's another operation at this age? I'm just glad I had the option.

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*For more information on the trip and Don's visit to Vienna before the trip and to Prague and Budapest afterwards, go to the blog on his website, [www.adventuretransformations.com](http://www.adventuretransformations.com).*

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