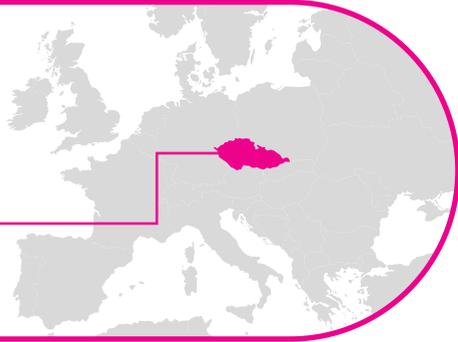




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# WEIRD BEARDS AND BOHEMIAN ODDITIES



Joe Reaney // Roaming Correspondent

**T**he Czechs have given us many great words over the years: from ‘pistol’ to ‘polka’, ‘robot’ to ‘howitzer’. But when it comes to haughty pomposity, nothing beats ‘Bohemian’. A drama student’s wet dream of a moniker, it tells the world you are both somebody with artistic leanings, who refuses to conform to the conventional standards of behaviour, and a pretentious fit. So surely Prague, as the capital of Bohemia, is the world’s least conventional city. Well, if that means it has some weird shit then yes. Yes it does.

## Religious nonsense

In Bohemia, Christian institutions offer more than just war-mongering scripture, cheap magic tricks and kiddy-fiddling clergy – they offer bizarre trinkets too. Wander into one of Prague’s myriad churches and you’re as likely to stumble across the still-fleshy tongue of St. John of Nepomuk, or the bearded chops of LGBT icon St. Wilgefortis, as you are to discover inner sanctum. But of all the city’s weird and wonderful evangelical artefacts, the 400-year-old mummified forearm in St. James’ Church wins, well, hands down.

The wizened extremity, so the story goes, belonged to a thief. He was trying to nab



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jewels from a statue of the Virgin Mary when she suddenly sparked into life and grabbed his arm, before turning back into stone. As the tea-leaf couldn't be freed from the Madonna's pious grip, the limb was lopped off. It was then hung up above the entrance as a warning to all would-be intruders: don't mess with the Virgin. An alternative theory is that bored monks hacked off a tramp's arm for shits and giggles.

### Curious sculptures

Although once home to a mammoth statue of Stalin – then the planet's largest marble despot – Prague today owes its unusual sculptural landscape to a rather different figure: David Cerný. The controversy-courting Czech sculptor is probably best known for his Tower Babies – giant figures of infants crawling up Žižkov Tower – and for Svaty Vaclav – a foam statue of St. Wenceslas riding a toppled, lifeless horse. But, without doubt, his magnum opus of eccentricity is the poetically-titled fountain sculpture *Piss*.



Putting Belgium's most famous pre-pubescent to shame, *Piss* depicts two men relieving themselves over a Czech Republic-shaped fountain. A bit avant-garde, perhaps, although not completely nuts. But wait... there's more. The figures' appendages are mechanised, swivelling to and fro to draw out letters which, when put together, spell out the philosophies of famous Czech figures. Still not weird enough for you? You can also text a number to have the figures write out any message you fancy. *La piss de resistance*.

“...bored monks hacked off a tramps arm for shits and giggles.”

### Barmy architecture

While every city in Europe now boasts self-consciously bizarre modern buildings, such as The Crooked House in Sopot and the Civil Justice Centre in Manchester, the Czech capital's architectural quirks are no new thing. From odd construction practices (using egg yolks to build Charles Bridge) to unconventional decorative features (adoming the old city gates with an arm



Photos // Joe Reaney

slapping a prostitute: a preview of the good times to be had inside) Prague has always been at the forefront of barmy architecture.

At the beginning of the 20th century the city pioneered the much-ignored Cubist architecture movement, and at the end it unveiled the Dancing House: the country's self-proclaimed modern masterpiece. But if location is just as important as design then the Museum of Communism, constructed twixt a McDonald's and a 24-hour casino, must surely be due an architectural award. World's Most Ironic Building, perhaps?

### Fucked up festivals

Visit Prague in April and you can enjoy Witches' Night, where a boil-nosed effigy is merrily incinerated and then everyone gets off with each other under cherry trees. Come in August and you'll be treated to the city's Burčák festival, where locals quaff very young wine and then feel queasy thanks to the internal fermentation. But come in between to experience probably the oddest summer music festival in Europe.

**“the Museum of Communism, constructed twixt a McDonald's and a 24-hour casino, must surely be due an architectural award.”**

On the surface, Mezi Ploty may appear to be a typical music fest – but that's before you've tried chatting to a fellow festival-goer. You see, the event is held in the grounds of a working psychiatric hospital, and the inmates are allowed out to mingle with the crowd. Yes. Really. The organisers claim they're breaking down social barriers while cynics argue it's just a cheap gimmick. Either way, the crowd are mad for it.

