



Getting the pilgrims out of Prague

A Czech environmental organisation has set up a new scheme that allows holidaymakers to explore mostly untouched countryside in the Czech Republic. As our writer finds out, whether you hike, cycle or horse-ride, the specially devised routes, or greenways, provide a unique opportunity to see a hidden side of the country

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PHOTOGRAPHS / Paul Harris

IT IS TWO in the morning, the street party has decamped to Simona's bar and not one trotter of the four promised spit-roast pigs has yet materialised, but we don't care. Slivovice – the local plum-based *eau de vie* – is flowing, and actor and accordionist Ivan Urbánek is singing Moravian folk songs with gusto.

"*Under the maple tree*," translates our hostess, Tíreč Chmelar, "*through the window, under the eiderdown, there are four feet*!" It's a real dirty song!"

Ivan changes tempo, throwing back his head and swelling his voice around a soul-searing ballad, like his life depended on it. Suddenly Tíreč's husband, Lubomír, finds tears rolling down his cheeks. "This music is very powerful," he says. "It gets to me right here."

Lu hasn't heard these songs since he was a boy. Like so many Czechs, he has lived most of his life in exile. His family left in 1939 to avoid the Nazi occupation, and Lu was educated in Britain before moving to New York. Come the Velvet Revolution in 1989, however, he felt an irresistible pull to his homeland. He returned with British-born

Tíreč, bought a crumbling house in Mikulov, southern Moravia, and, with Czech colleagues, set up Greenways, a non-profit organisation to protect the environment and preserve historic sites.

Using 100-year-old hiking trails and specially created bike routes, they established a Greenway along 400km of glorious unspoilt land between Vienna and Prague. It heads west along the Dyje river of southern Moravia and the Vltava river of South Bohemia, taking in such perfect historic jewels as the towns of Telč, Trebon and Cesky Krumlov, before winding north to Prague.

"What hit me like a pie in the face when I returned," says Lu, "is that this is perfect hiking country. Whereas in America we'd drive 500 miles and still be on the same plain, here you go 200 kilometres and experience totally different regions – granite massifs, deep forests, fertile valleys, rolling open plains – and a wonderful variety of architecture. I always had a passion for long-distance walking, and doing the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela gave me the idea that when ▷

