



THE LESSER TOWN

The houses seem sometimes piled on top of each other, so steep is the terrain of the Lesser Town. Hemmed into a triangle between the Vltava, the Petřín Hill and the massive bulk of Prague Castle, elevated over the rooftops, it is a picturesque, bulging little jewellery box among the districts of Prague. The charming location is undoubtedly the area's greatest asset. However, it also proved to hold its fate.

Thus, to start with, the protection of the nearby Castle proved illusory. When it was stormed in the course of the Hussite Wars, both attackers and defenders alike saw the houses at their feet as a vulnerable hindrance in the field of fire and, by the end of the hostilities, they had almost completely eliminated the nuisance. The area had hardly recovered from this clearance when, in 1541, a fire broke out; the sloping site and density of building provided a constant supply of fresh fuel until, in the end, two thirds of the Lesser Town of Prague were razed to the ground.

Sometimes good fortune springs up from repeated suffering – Vienna lay under siege from

the Ottoman archenemy, and so, as the situation in Prague was more favourable, in rebuilding the Lesser Town, the nobility established an exile befitting their rank in monumental Renaissance palaces. Soon enough, however, the Thirty Years' War threatened new misfortunes here too. By the end of this long struggle, the district had become a pawn of the changing rulers up at the Castle and long wagon trains of plunder had left the gates.

The losses were replaced in a Baroque round dance of new building. With extravagant pomp, the Church and nobility transformed the Lesser Town within a few generations into a prestigious anteroom to the seat of power. Evidence of their flush of victory is everywhere, and there are two axes on which to wander through it. The Royal Way leads away from the Charles Bridge, whose last arches span the island of Kampa and the 'Devil's Stream', towards the Lesser Town Square. Surrounded by Baroque arcaded houses, at its centre is St Nicholas' Church. It is the magnum opus of the Dientzenhofer family of master

The Lesser Town in winter with a view of St Nicholas' Church and Petřín Hill.



builders in Prague, and its verdigrised dome dominates the silhouette of the Lesser Town. From here, the route leads along the Nerudova up to the Castle, lined with an ensemble of palaces and mansions that is at least as breathtaking as the steep climb itself. Here a colourful gallery of the old Prague house symbols has been preserved: violins, suns, wagon wheels – before Joseph II introduced the modern numbering system there were no limits to the imagination of the householders when it came to bestowing a distinctive address on their property.

The second axis leads from the palace of Albrecht von Wallenstein to the Lesser Town Square. A whole district had to make way for the Mannerist complex built for the imperial Commander-in-Chief, who owed one of the steepest career paths of the Thirty Years' War to his extraordinary tactical skill, both on the battle field and in marriage. From there, the route leads on, past the narrow, climbing Vlašská Street with the Schönborn and Lobkowitz Palaces to the pilgrimage church of Our Lady of Victory, the home of the Infant Jesus

of Prague, a world-famous witness to the hard-fought Bohemian piety.

Ultimately, the Baroque building frenzy was followed by: calm. The never-ending bargaining and brawling of the citizens of the other districts of Prague could only be heard very faintly from inside the walls of the palaces. Over the course of the centuries, the power of the old aristocracy began to crumble like the façades. New times and a new moneyed aristocracy were dawning, along with new customs – and passing the Lesser Town by. No longer did those with business to do at the Castle bother to spend time dealing with its old anteroom. And thus it happens here that the lanes and squares away from the tourist trail have scarcely changed since the days when Mozart strolled through them. On Velkopřevorské náměstí, on Sněmovní, on Kampa Island, in Thunovská, Vlašská, in the glorious gardens of Petřín Hill – it was fated that the Lesser Town should remain a small, old-fashioned jewel casket. And somewhat sleepy. Making it all the nicer to spend time here, dreaming of stirring days gone by.

With its impressive dome and 79m high belfry, St Nicholas' Church stands in the centre of the Lesser Town Square. This church is the most significant high Baroque creation in Prague and was built after 1673 on behalf of the Jesuits.



LEFT: St Nicholas' Church. TOP RIGHT: Čertovka (The Devil's Stream) ripples peacefully between Kampa Island and the Lesser Town. BOTTOM RIGHT: The Lesser Town Hall dates back to the 15th century. OPPOSITE PAGE: Standing at the top of the Lesser Town Square since 1715, the Early Baroque Trinity Column by Giovanni Battista Alliprandi is a memorial to the dangers of the plague.





LEFT: Garden and sala terrena at the Wallenstein Palace.

TOP RIGHT: View through the Gothic arches between the Lesser Town bridge towers onto Mostecká.

BOTTOM RIGHT: The long-established restaurant “U Malířů” on Maltese Square.

The Baroque Lobkowitz Palace in the Lesser Town has had a momentous history, right up to the present day. Since 1973 it has housed the German embassy. In 1989, thousands of refugees from what was then the GDR camped in the Palace garden; after dramatic scenes they compelled the authorities to allow them to travel to the West.



Proud citizens and hard-working artisans bequeathed a colourful gallery of old house signs to Prague.



Neruda Lane is an ancient road way from the Lesser Town Square up towards the Castle.