Me, Myself & Prague: An Unreliable Guide to Bohemia

At age 39, Australian Rachael Weiss takes a hard look at her life. On the plus side she's published one book; on the negative side, she works temp jobs, has no husband or significant other, and is just scrapping by. Though school counselors deemed Rachel the "gifted" one as a child, her younger sister is a very successful dentist who teaches fitness classes on the side. She's also raising a concert violinist and a miniature Beckham. Her brother achieved partnership in a law firm and has three beautiful, talented kids of his own. What's a gal to do? Rachel decides that a year hanging out in a Paris garret will help her pen the great Australian novel, plus find a handsome foreigner with high cheek bones. But alas, Paris does not fit her budget.

Before you know it, Rachel finds herself in the bland suburbs of Prague. It turns out her father just happens to own an apartment there--he grew up in Bohemia. The floors leak, the sheets are ironed and folded, and when she takes one out, she can never get it back to its former folded glory. To say nothing of the fact that she is hand washing heavy bedding until she finds a distant laundromat. She then hauls them by tram miles away to Prague.

The supermarket checkout ladies treat her with utter contempt. At first, she decides this is because of her weak grasp of the language, but eventually, she realizes it's the Prague character--treat your customers with contempt. Alternatively, a Prague friend will do anything for you.

The food is fatty and potatoey and full of cream and butter, but the beer is the nectar of Heaven. Rachel learns to love the food. She practices Czech with her elderly neighbor, takes language lessons, and finds an expat community.

Soon she takes up the national sport, hiking. A visit to relatives in the country teaches her a lot about her past and about relationships between the sexes today. Apparently the Czech women work full-time, then cook, clean, and fold laundry another eight hours a day.

During the course of the year, Rachel learns much about her adopted country and even more about herself and her own family history. Her light, engaging style draws you in and makes you want to tackle a foreign country on your own. Want to read more about immersing yourself in another culture? If so, try Dreaming in Hindi: Coming Awake in Another Language by Katherine Russell Rich and A Year in Provence by Peter Mayle, and Rita Gelman's Tales of a Female Nomad: Living at Large in the World.
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Posted by Dory L. on Mar 3, 2011

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