

## global versus local: the pursuit of uniqueness

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Shuffling round the Louvre on a warm summer day, coping with airport queues, or trying to find respite from the crowds that throng the Vatican museums, you would probably agree with Garcin in Sartre's play *Huis Clos* that "l'enfer, c'est les autres" ("hell is other people"). Apt though that may be, we are always reminded in such situations of Edward Said's comment that in the western world we are all suffering from a "generalized condition of homelessness". Europe has become a continent of wanderers, its cities full of travellers who seem intent on securing home comforts in whatever foreign city they have chosen for this weekend's flying break. The central areas of Moscow, Madrid and Manchester are beginning

the caleche (here in Kraków) is a sure marker of towns that pander to a universal tourist experience (photo © puchan / istockphoto.com)

to resemble each other ever more, as global brand names clamour for their share of tourists' attention and money.

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Travellers, mobile souls who no longer have any real roots, track down a familiar looking club sandwich, sip a cappuccino and demand wines that have global rather than local appeal. "Bring me a glass of Chablis," we heard a man say in a café

in Alsace. He would probably order a *latte* in a little taverna in Greece. Differences between places are eroded by modern mobility. Folk used to go to Dublin to celebrate St Patrick's day. Now you can equally well mark Paddy's day in Dortmund or Denver. Town hall squares across Europe, from Kraków to Tallinn, are being recast into *simulacra* that mimic the notional idealised tourist venue — rides in horse-drawn open carriages, knights in shining armour, peasant girls, mediaeval banquets, restaurants serving outside tables arranged on a slightly raised dais with a nice view over the cobbled square.

One airline in-flight magazine we read recently highlighted for each of two dozen European cities the best deli brunch venue, the best spot for pre-dinner margaritas and so on — reeling through an inventory of opportunities that implied that no matter whether we are in Reyjavík or Rostock we all need deli brunches and pre-dinner margaritas. It is as though,



as we lose our own roots, our notion of home becomes expressed through familiar patterns of consumption. So CNN, crushed ice and New York bagels are as easy to find in darkest Poland as they are in London or Manhattan. Heavens, most New Yorkers probably don't even know that the *bajgiel* was invented in Poland.

As places blur in the haze of postmodernity, we take heart when we find folk eating bagels in Bagelland and drinking Chablis in Chablisland. Surely what is important is not whether we secure a familiar margarita in Moscow but whether we can find something that is utterly distinctive — something peculiar to Moscow. And Moscow alone.

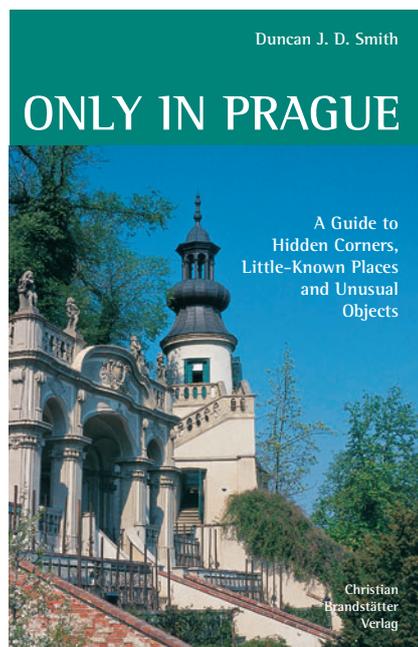
It is with this search for the distinctive in mind that we have much enjoyed a series of books published by Austrian publisher Christian Brandstätter. This handsome series of volumes, four in all thus far, focuses exclusively on aspects

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of cities that are unique to those communities. Very much like *hidden europe* in fact. The four cities already in print are Prague, Vienna, Budapest and Berlin; all four books are written by Duncan JD Smith, an

English writer and urban explorer who now lives in Vienna. A volume on Munich is due out later this year. By homing in on very unusual features of each of his target cities, the author peels back the history of the capital (and often an entire country). So Berlin is mapped by visits to the bell tower at the Olympic stadium, to old market halls, mosques and cemeteries and to what little remains of Spandau prison (where Rudolf Hess lingered for the last four decades of his life). In *Only in Berlin*, Duncan Smith identifies eighty-four places that between them tell the history of the city. And the parallel volumes on Prague, Budapest and Vienna all similarly detail eighty-four places of note.

So next time you go to Prague, forget the tourist margarita, and instead follow Duncan Smith and *Only in Prague* on the trail of absinthe and opium, learn about the Order of the Knights with the Red Star, and pinpoint the



Prague Meridian. In *Only in Vienna*, we relished abandoned gasometers, a socialist swimming pool and some fabulously bizarre public conveniences.

Skip the club sandwich. Remember that the central rite of passage for successful travellers is the pursuit of the unique. No-one will be especially impressed when you return from Budapest with tales of the best deli brunch on the planet. But they may warm to your ingenuity when you come armed with reports of a Transylvanian housing estate or a museum devoted to the history of equipment used by hairdressers. The *Only in* series is a refreshing antidote to the prevailing tide of uniformity favoured by too many travel guides. ■

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preview

In the next issue of *hidden europe*, we explore how ancient currents of cross-cultural exchange find expression in the architecture of mosques across Europe, noting how Islamic ideas about geometry and sacred space have informed some of Europe's most striking buildings. And of course plenty about places: from the coast of Liguria in northwest Italy to a cave city in Georgia. We shall also look at what the European Union's new Eastern Partnerships scheme might mean for six ex-Soviet republics in eastern Europe. *hidden europe 27* will be published on Monday 6 July. ■