

## Europe: Czech Republic

# Princely perfection in privacy

There's no better way to see the most exquisite European works of art than on a private tour with a knowledgeable guide, finds Julian Allason



Top Prince Lobkowitz with Canaletto's masterpiece *The Thames on Lord Mayor's Day, 1750–52*. Left *Christ and the woman taken in Adultery, about 1730*, by Lucas Cranach the Younger. Above The courtyard of Nelahozeves Castle, one of the four castles still owned by the ancient Lobkowitz family

PRINCE LOBKOWICZ is examining an unusual detail of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's masterpiece *Haymaking*. Across the canvas of this panorama of rural medieval life stride three women, rakes in hand: the youngest and prettiest looks right out of the picture, as if smiling at him. William Lobkowitz smiles back. For the painting is his, as are two Canalettos, a Rubens, a luminous Veronese, two atmospheric Panninis, and many more. It is an astonishing private collection, displayed at the Lobkowitz Palace at Prague Castle. Equally extraordinary are the works not exhibited to the public at three other castles restored to the family after the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Next spring, these will also be shown, albeit to a select few.

After an extended courtship, the British art historian Lord Charles FitzRoy has persuaded the Prince to open not only the

private apartments, but also the great library at the magnificently restored Castle Nelahozeves. It's a 40-minute drive from Prague, a little less if one travels by train, disembarking at the *château's* own railway station opposite the village house in which the composer Dvorak was born. Fumbling with keys and keypads, the 6ft 5in Prince stoops as we enter a suite of vaulted chambers guarded by the highest of high-tech security. As well it might be, for the library, still in the process of being catalogued, houses a collection of about 700 illuminated manuscripts and some 4,500 musical sources, including autograph scores corrected by Haydn and Beethoven in their own hand, many dedicated to their patron, the 7th Prince. William, an energetic 50-year-old Harvard graduate brought up in family exile in Massachusetts, opens an ancient volume almost at random—into it

are bound woodcuts by Dürer. We gaze at this seminal moment in art history, but only for a minute or two, as the 600-year-old pages are sensitive to light.

It is but a taste of what clients of Lord Charles's company, Fine Art Travel Ltd, will be shown when they visit in April. They will also be tasting Czech *grande cuisine* from the days when Lobkowitzes served as high chancellors of Bohemia at a musical evening hosted by William and his wife, Alexandra, to be held in the magnificent surroundings of the palace. 'Important as many of these are as works of art, they need to be seen in context to make sense,' muses the Prince. 'They represent seven centuries of often opportunistic collecting by my ancestors. The 6th Prince met Canaletto in London through the wife of the Italian Ambassador. Canaletto needed money to pursue his passion for her.' He inclines his head towards *The*



*Thames on Lord Mayor's Day* with a grin.

Viewing pictures of a quality to inspire awe and envy in curatorial breasts is a pleasure in itself, but seen in the very settings where they were admired by emperors and immortals is a richer, more memorable experience, especially when one is being guided both by a knowledgeable owner and an art historian with a gift for bringing the past to life. Prague, almost the last European capital unspoilt by modern building, is surely the place to enjoy it. Participants in this grand tour will stay at Rocco Forte's Augustine Hotel, enviably situated in the Malá Strana historic district in the 13th-century monastery of St Thomas. Indeed, a dozen Augustinian friars remain neighbours of this sympathetic hotel and spa. The 101 guest rooms retain a distinctive sense of place, being decorated with textiles and artworks inspired by Czech Cubism, and its brasserie offers a light interpretation of classic Bohemian dishes, such as ox cheek braised in St Thomas beer.


The grand tourists will be guided through key sites in the capital, often after hours, building an image of the country's chequered past from an assemblage of sculpture, painting and architecture that can hardly fail to delight even those with the most

limited knowledge of art. Not surprisingly, the demand for such privileged access is growing, inspired by a handful of enthusiastic scholar-showmen with impeccable connections to the *ancien régime*.

Lord Charles, who sometimes takes clients to tea with the Borgias in Umbria, may be the doyen of contemporary grand-tour guides, but there are others with comparable expertise—and privileged access—in their fields. They include Anthony Sattin, the authority on Nile temples, and art historian James McDonough, recently back from an exploration of *yalis* and *harems* in Istanbul.

In Florence, Mr McDonough guides guests around the Palazzo Ginori, a picture-perfect Renaissance palace owned by the Marchese Ginori and housing one of the finest private art collections in a city of treasures. Likewise to Villa Medici, Lorenzo the Magnificent's favourite retreat, and to lesser-known gems in Rome, such as the Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne and Palazzo Sacchetti, privately owned and closed to the public.

Superior levels of scholarship are not required to appreciate such privileged access when accompanied by owners and guides of this calibre. In Palermo, I was as entranced by the account of Visconti's filming of *The Leopard* in the Palazzo Gangi

as I was by the glittering ballroom itself, a scaled-down version of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Such was their interest in accuracy that the Sicilian nobility took the parts of their ancestors in the famous ball sequence. Participants in the forthcoming private visit to the Lobkowitz Palace in Prague will have a similar opportunity as they assemble for cocktails on a terrace commanding this most romantic of cities, capital of a country of 2,000 castles. 

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