

Prague's creepy, gothic Church of All Saints

by Charlie Price

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I'm not a big fan of Halloween. It's not that I have anything against the holiday, but giving my candy away to complete strangers is far from my idea of a good time. I really don't like scary movies either, or haunted houses for that matter.

Knowing well my aversion to all things spooky, my wife, Amber, and our buddy, Edi, were more than a bit surprised when I insisted during a stop in Prague a few years ago that we visit a creepy Czech church where thousands of skulls and skeletons rest not in peace, but in pieces of art.

The bony remains of 40,000 ancient Europeans, mostly victims of plagues and warfare, can be found artistically displayed in the ossuary of the gothic Church of All Saints. Surrounded by a cemetery in the Czech Republic town of Sedlec, the modest Bohemian church dates from around 1400.

While the church itself is pretty barebones, its subterranean collection of skeletal creations is sure to spark feelings of curiosity and amazement from even the most skittish of visitors.

Like a tree draped in macabre tinsel, skeletal remains cover the entire underground chapel. The four corners of the structure are dominated by colossal piles of bones arranged as bells that reach to the ceiling. Giant bone chalice-type vessels decorate the walls.

The center of the room features a chandelier said to contain every bone in the human body, and the noble Schwarzenberg family's coat of arms, complete with a bony bird pecking at a skull's eye socket, can be found on one wall.

The artist, Czech woodcarver František Rint, even signed his eerie art with, you guessed it, human bones.

The bones come from graves that were disturbed during construction of the church, and legend says a half-blind monk simply stacked the bones in the catacomb-like ossuary around 1511. During an 18th-century remodel of the church above, Rint was tasked with arraigining the bones into the elaborate creations that decorate the ossuary today.

Sedlec is a small suburb of the Czech town of Kutna Hora. Only about 40 miles east of Prague, Kutna Hora makes for an easy day trip from the Czech Republic's capital, and its medieval charm can provide a welcome relief from Prague's overwhelming tourist crush.

A powerful center of silver mining during the Middle Ages, Kutná Hora has earned a place on UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage List and boasts several sites to keep the day tripper busy, including St. Barbara's Cathedral, the Church of St. Jacob and the mining museum.

It's no trick that Sedlec's chilling chapel, coupled with Kutna Hora's old world charm, are a day tripper's treat – make no bones about it.

If you go

On the Web: www.kostnice.cz

Getting there: Flights to Prague from Oklahoma City and Tulsa start at around \$1,400 on several airlines.

Staying there: Rooms at Prague's Mandarin Oriental range from about \$700 to \$3,500 per night – www.mandarinoriental.com/prague.

Alternative accommodations: Residence U Trí Bubnu in Prague has rooms starting at about \$100

per night – www.utribubnu.cz.

Not to be missed: The ossuary's chandelier and coat of arms.

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