

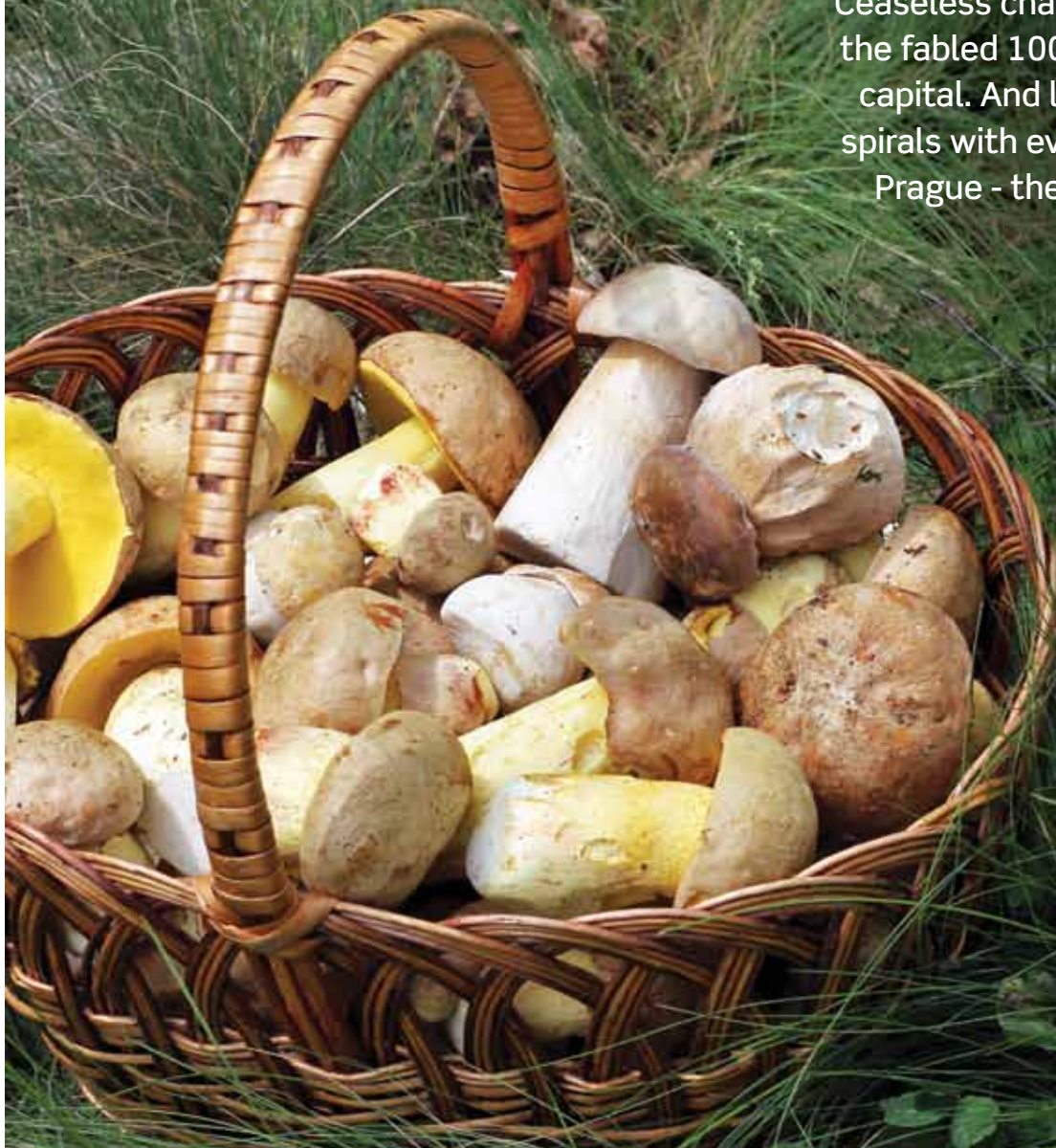


off beat  
**UNUSUAL QUEST**

# Mad about Mushrooms

Ceaseless charm drips from each of the fabled 1000 spires in the Czech capital. And larger-than-life drama spirals with every step one takes in Prague - the 'Mother of all Cities'.

words // Punita Malhotra







Edible mushrooms commonly known as Chicken of Woods, growing on a tree trunk in Prague

**M**agnificent monuments, iconic sights and rich history define this quintessentially medieval European destination that teems with ardent sightseers all year round. But immersing in its Bohemian soul takes more than an awestruck march to the continent's greatest Castle looming beyond the romantic Charles Bridge straddling the Vltava river. Immersing deeper into Prague involves an experience as authentic as the locals themselves. It involves a hunt! For wild mushrooms...

#### TRADITION TO PASSION

In Czech homes, you are guaranteed to find a set of big glass jars on the kitchen shelves, one for each mushroom type. A dinner table laden with rustic dishes, featuring that all-time favourite—fungi. It's a serious game changer, this poor man's meat from tougher times.

In Prague, like the rest of the country, mushroom foraging has evolved from an age-old tradition to a national sport. Correction, passion. Official statistics say that Czechs picked an estimated 41,300 tonnes of wild mushrooms in 2017! Young children learn to recognise edible 'shrooms and know how to cook them. Entire families plan mushroom treasure hunts in forests. The perennial mushroom craze reaches its peak with the russet-gold colours, crisp air and dampness of autumn. This is when the indefatigable Pražák enthusiasm for mushroom meals, mushroom recipes and mushroom expeditions assumes epidemic proportions.

#### FORAGING LIKE THE LOCALS

The official portal of the Czech Mycological Society, headquartered in the capital, is a good starting point for wannabe mushroomers, but a browse is certainly not

enough...because there's a method to the madness. Tips from locals come in handy, like picking a cloudy day to beat the hindrance of shadow play, making an early start at sunrise to hit the sweet spots before others and carrying the essential equipment...a wicker basket (to help mushrooms breathe better), and a folding pen knife. A leisurely, yet demanding hobby.

Nearby wooded areas that locals frequent include Divoká Šárka, Hvezda, Modranská rokle, Kunratický les, Klánovický les and Krský les. Prague's easy access by public transport makes for an enjoyable commute. Lone cars parked along the forested roads and signs of people quietly combing the foliage for wild delicacies set the tone for the offbeat, therapeutic session that lies ahead. And the adventure starts as one sets foot into the earthy

## Insider's view



**Manav Gill,**  
Flight Operations

"No trip is complete if it doesn't give you the feeling of going back to the same place again. Prague is a city that is best discovered without an itinerary in tow. Just hop on a train, tram or bus and let the city unravel its beauty along the way. Start your day with a cruise or a boating ride on Prague's majestic Vltava river overlooking the city's stunning architecture—Charles Bridge and the Prague Castle. Once you're done taking in the gorgeous view, it's time to do what the locals enjoy the most – an uphill ride to Petrin Hill. With majestic old trees and open spaces, Petrin Hill is heaven on Earth."



Enokitake, also known as Golden Needle or winter mushrooms are edible mushrooms with nutritional value

green-and-brown landscape of pine and beech. A rain-drenched carpet of gold, amber, russet, scarlet and maroon leaves. The rhythm of silvery dewdrops glistening on leaves. And a gentle, pulsating thudding...no, that's a heartbeat, so clearly audible in the still silence. In the embrace of a wordless peace that soothes the soul, one has the urge to break into a dance.

It is the joy of stumbling upon an incredible variety that spells pure delight for the nature lover. Gourmet porcini to umbrella mushrooms, champignons to summer truffle, tiny white clusters to large frilly black ones, yellow-orange coral-like creations to fairytale toadstools in red with white spots and huge plate-sized

ones to spongy puffballs...an intensive scavenge can uncover discoveries of all shapes, sizes and colours. One particular rare mushroom even blows air when it is pinched! Interestingly of the 1500 species, only 35 are edible, and most locals limit themselves to a handful which are safe and tasty.

### PICKING THE CORRECT ONES

All edible mushrooms come in forest colours—brown, grey-brown or tan. Vivid greens and reds are typically poisonous. Those with holes or fins on their underside are to be avoided. Extra-cautious or techno-type first-timers can deploy an app named 'Na houby', with a recognition function that works in offline mode, even without internet coverage in deep forests. And finally, there's a code

#### ESSENTIALS

**COUNTRY**  
Czech  
Republic

**LANGUAGE**  
Czech (official)

**CURRENCY**  
Czech Koruna

**TEMPERATURE**  
24°C (max),  
13°C (min)





#### LOCAL TIPS

Walking uphill makes it easier to see the shape of mushroom heads. First sightings are often accompanied by magical Eureka moments, for the hunters.

The practiced mushroomer will use a stick to rake loose leaves and move the branches of low plants away.

Unlike how one picks a flower, the practice is to use the finger to dig it out of the ground. Intact.



You can fly to Prague with Vistara's interline partner Qatar Airways.

of conduct. No stepping over unwanted mushrooms, no littering of stems, no leftover clues to secret mushrooming spots.

The satisfying spree certainly does not end with carrying back a bountiful wicker basket loaded with mouthwatering morsels. A tedious, but essential cut-and-clean process still remains. Bottom

dirty parts are sliced off, they are cut in half lengthwise to ensure that they have no excessive dots or wriggly worms and finally given a soak to wash away the dirt. When dry they go into a jar for use in meals during the year.

#### RELISHING THE REWARDS

Like most other central European cuisines, Czech food is known for its wholesome peasant dishes loaded with meat, carbs, and sauces best suited for the climate. Yet, contrary to popular belief, reigning superstars in the league of lamb goulash, dumplings and sauerkraut face jostling competition from the humble mushroom. All over Prague, gastronomists will find menus overflowing with traditional mushrooms dishes. One can choose from Kulajda (ku-lay-dah), (sour creamy potato soup with mushrooms, dill, vinegar and poached egg on top), Smažené žampiony, (breaded and fried mushrooms), Houbové kuba (mushroom barley risotto), Houbové ízky (deep fried mushrooms) or Hovezí na houbách (meat in mushroom sauce). Delicious dilemmas, one and all. It's time to dig in and *Dobrou chu* (enjoy the meal) after a first-hand dip into the delectable delights of mushroom foraging. 🍄

## Local INSIGHTS



#### PICNIC BINGES

When the weather is just right, the locals come out in large numbers for a day of picnic and revelry in Prague's public beer gardens. Enjoy the local delicacies stacked on picnic trays, food stands and of course, the endless supply of freshly brewed Czech beer.



#### SOUL OF PRAGUE

Rudolfinum, Prague's impressive 19<sup>th</sup> century neo-renaissance cultural venue, is home to the iconic Czech Philharmonic. Attending a concert here, with its magnificent acoustics, will make you feel an instant connection with the city.