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Left: Martin Janecky prepares to blow a work of glass. Below: A glass sculpture waves to travelers in the Czech town of Novy Bor.



## TRAVELOGUE

# Glassblowing in Prague

**Peter S. Green** heads out into the Czech countryside to watch molten daubs turn into shimmering works of art.

**C**ome closer. Don't be afraid," says the man whipping a baton tipped with a glob of molten orange crystal just a foot from my face. I'm at the Ajeto glass-blowing workshop in Novy Bor, an hour or so north of Prague, and a 34-year-old Czech-born artist named Martin Janecky is teaching me to blow glass. He briefly rolls the glob on a small steel plate called a marver and hands me the rod.

The heat from the oven is intense, but the blowpipe is surprisingly cool. I'd watched Janecky raise the rod like Gabriel's

trumpet on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, but I don't dare. I tilt it downward, pucker my lips and blow gently into the rounded mouthpiece. The leaded crystal expands like a thick soap bubble, and I turn it slowly, trying desperately to keep it perfectly round, the way I'd watched the craftsmen at Ajeto do it earlier that afternoon.

Glass has a mind of its own, Janecky is telling me. "It wants to stay round." I wish I had that problem. The bubble I'm making keeps threatening to drop off the rod and onto the concrete floor,

as I desperately turn the whole mass clockwise and blow slowly.

"Keep blowing, keep turning," Janecky says, "you were born for this." The bubble grows bigger and ever more lopsided until Janecky takes the rod from me and holds it over a metal bin, tapping it with a steel blade until my misshapen glass balloon cracks and falls into the waste heap. A few hours later, it will be thrown back into the furnace and melted down again in a ceramic crucible filled with 1,100 pounds of glass glowing like the sun at more than 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

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Glass runs in this country's veins, as any visitor to Prague can tell you, walking from Wenceslas Square to Prague Castle, past shops filled with cut crystal vases and colored geegaws. German glass blowers first brought their art to Bohemia as far back as the 12th century, attracted by the local sands and the forests of oak they used to fire their ovens. The industrial revolution of the 19th century transformed the region into one of the world's great centers of glassmaking. Now, 25 years after Communism's collapse, which took much of the industry with it, artisanal glassblowing and glass art are making a revival in the modern Czech Republic.

Janecky's just moved back to Prague after a decade of traveling, working and teaching abroad, including stints at the Pilchuck Glass School near Seattle, the Corning Museum of Glass in New York state

and seven consecutive winters in Fairbanks, Alaska, in a hot shop—a glass atelier with a furnace loaned to him by a local artist tired of the polar winter's endless nights. To show me his craft, he's taken me back to Novy Bor, a small town of Germanic half-timbered houses and Communist-era apartment blocks where he studied glassmaking at the local vocational high school and worked at Ajeto.

"Glass is a very specific medium," Janecky explained earlier as we drove north from Prague into the rolling foothills of the Lusatian Mountains. "You really have to know your craft before you can begin translating your ideas into material."

For the Czechs, glassblowing has traditionally been a craft in which the artist and the craftsman have separate jobs. The artist sketches out an idea on paper then sits down with the gaffer, a master glassblower, who leads a crew of as many as six glassblowers to plan the production. Often a mold may need to be made out of metal or aged pear wood, preferred for its hardness and kept in a bucket of water so it doesn't burn on contact with the hot glass. The artist will watch the process while the gaffer instructs his crew (nearly all the glassblowers in Bohemia seem to be men) to heat the glass and add strips and shapes, blocks and bars of color, and pull and pinch at the

**"GLASS IS A VERY SPECIFIC MEDIUM. YOU REALLY HAVE TO KNOW YOUR CRAFT BEFORE YOU BEGIN TRANSLATING YOUR IDEAS INTO MATERIAL."**





Far left: The furnace and café at Ajeto Glass in Novy Bor. Left: An ornate goblet and horse on display in Ajeto's museum.

glass with special pincers and pliers to match the artist's sketch.

Prague has a way of making even the casual tourist feel inspired by the sheer beauty of its sculpted façades, winding cobbled lanes and riotous green hills. To prepare for our trip, I visited Prague's Museum of Decorative Arts, known by its Czech nickname

"UPM" (for Uměleckoprůmyslové museum v Praze), which has one of the country's best public collections of Czech glass. An 18th-century goblet caught my eye, and I set about thinking up a design for the piece I was going to make in Novy Bor. In my mind, I sketched a chalice with glass wings and a shimmering blue foot, the perfect size and shape to hold a glass of Czech plum brandy.

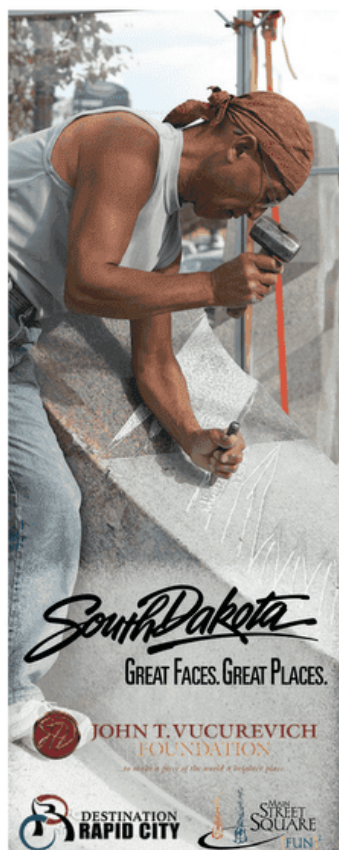
My dreams of a grand and beautiful goblet are crushed when I tell Janecky of my plan. "You'll need like 10 years to learn how to do that," he replies. Forget the art, I tell myself, just try to blow something that won't end up in the trash. After I attempt to blow even a simple goblet two more times, Janecky throws up his hands in mock despair. Seeing my evident disappointment, he has Dan Kobr, the gaffer of the crew whose oven we're using, pull out a

mold from a pile on the floor.

I take my glowing daub of molten glass from the oven, blow into it gently as it cools and becomes less viscous, then set it into the mold for a vase and blow gently. A rectangular flask begins to emerge. Janecky holds what looks like a pair of scissors and cuts the neck of the piece, shaping it with a pear wood paddle as it cools.

Over a beer in Ajeto's Glass Bistro—a handful of tables separated by a windowed wall from Ajeto's four furnaces—we eat an early supper of mushroom goulash and sweet new potatoes as we watch Kobr and his crew blow vases and pitchers on contract for a Czech exporting company.

Janecky says I didn't do too badly for a novice. Czech glass is known as "short glass," he says, because the mixture of sand and soda ash cools quickly, requiring



# ART IN THE MAKING

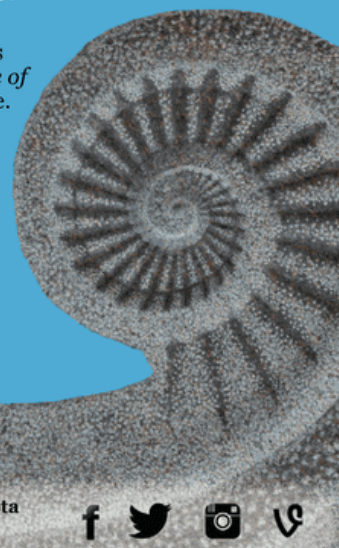
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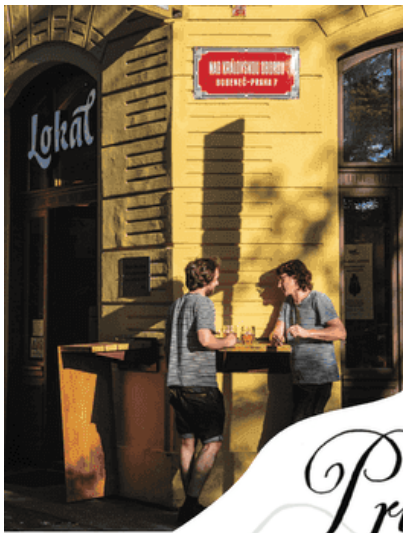
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Grabbing a few pints at the Lokál U Bílé kuželky pub in Prague.



workers to move swiftly and constantly reheat the glass to keep it pliable.

Venice's Murano glass is a "long glass," it cools more slowly and is easier to work at lower temperatures. Across the table is Ajeto's 62-year-old founder, Petr Novotny, who started his own clandestine capitalist glassmaking operation in his home in the early 1980s, working by day for Cristalex, the state-owned glassmaker. Artists, Novotny says, were seen as "bad insects" by Cristalex, so he helped them at his home furnace and dreamt of opening his own hot shop.

A quarter-century later, Novotny is the country's most respected glass artisan. "I'm just a stupid glassmaker, he is the artist," Novotny says, pointing to Janecky, one of his star pupils.

Janecky is the most prominent of a new generation of Czech glassmakers trained in the craft of blowing and shaping glass, but who make their own art. For several generations, Czech glass artists, including such masters as Stanislav Libensky, René Roubíček and Pavel Hlava, worked on paper and used craftsmen, like the workers at Ajeto, to turn their ideas into objects. Janecky's genius is combining glassblowing with sculpting. His own favorite artist is the 18th-century Austrian sculptor F. X. Messerschmitt, famous for his lifelike cast heads. Janecky is now making human forms, blowing large glass bubbles that

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he and a team of assistants warm and stretch for six hours at a time, turning them into extraordinarily lifelike human figures.

Janecky takes me upstairs to Novtomy's private glass museum, the size of a large classroom, where the work of leading Czech glass artists is laid out on tables and in display cases. Half a dozen of Janecky's own pieces are there, including a magnificent jaguar head in maroon glass, sanded for a matte effect, with glistening glossy fangs.

Glassmaking only emerged as an art form in the Czech Republic after World War II, as artists became teachers at specialized glass schools where they could spread their influence to a young generation, hidden from Communist censorship, says Helena Koenigsmarkova, the director of the UPM, over coffee in her office near the Vltava River.

"Making free art was difficult for painters and sculptors, so the artists found their expression in glass," Koenigsmarkova says. Success at international glass exhibitions won them greater freedom to make their work in the state-owned glass factories, where their work was regarded



## Puzzle Answers

### Easy KENKEN

3	3+		1--		
3--			12X		
2-	1				
			12X		

### Hard KENKEN

3+	1--	3--	3--	3--	
12X			12X	1	
3--	3--	3--	3--	3--	

### Easy Sudoku

7	1	2	8	5	4	9	6	3
3	8	4	6	7	9	5	2	1
5	9	6	3	2	1	8	4	7
4	6	9	5	3	7	1	8	2
2	3	5	9	1	8	4	7	6
8	7	1	4	6	2	3	9	5
1	2	8	7	9	3	6	5	4
9	5	3	2	4	6	7	1	8
6	4	7	1	8	5	2	3	9

### Hard Sudoku

3	5	7	9	6	4	8	1	2
2	4	9	8	1	7	5	6	3
8	1	6	2	3	5	4	7	9
4	7	5	3	9	1	2	8	6
9	2	8	4	7	6	3	5	1
1	6	3	5	8	2	9	4	7
6	8	2	1	5	9	7	3	4
7	3	4	6	2	8	1	9	5
5	9	1	7	4	3	6	2	8

M	O	M	A			O	R	B	S		I	B	I	S	
S	N	A	R	K		R	E	A	M		T	A	P	A	
G	O	T	T	I		A	F	R	O		A	N	A	T	
				F	E	N	C	I	N	G	B	L	A	D	E
U	N	C	I	V	I	L					L	I	N		
R	O	L	L		N	E	E	D	L	E	C	A	S	E	
S	T	O	M	P			M	U	T	E		S	E	X	
U	F	W		S	E	A	B	I	R	D		P	E	P	
L	A	N		A	X	L	E				S	A	L	S	A
A	R	A	B	L	E	A	D	E	R		M	I	T	T	
		R	U	M				L	E	A	N	T	O	S	
C	R	O	S	S	W	O	R	D	E	S	E				
Z	E	U	S		O	B	O	E			I	S	I	A	H
A	N	N	E		R	E	V	S			S	I	N	G	E
R	O	D	S		N	Y	E	T			A	N	E	W	

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Glassmaking is not an art form for loafers and layabouts. "That's the thing with glass," Janecky says. "If you're a painter, you get high and paint like Van Gogh. If you're a glass artist, you have to work so many fixed hours to pay for the furnace, you have to pay your gas bill, and work eight hours a day."

"There's no other medium like glass," Janecky says as we drive back toward Prague. "You can't touch it, but it's magic the way it moves, and it drives me crazy!" He pulls up his sleeve to show me a burn mark near his wrist. Burns are a mark of pride for glassmakers. Nearly all bear scars of their work in the furnaces. "It's unforgiving." ▽

#### IF YOU GO:

**GLASSBLOWING AND VIEWING:** **Ajeto Glass** in Nový Bor offers classes and tours. Classes are also available at **Hut Frantisek** in Sazava. To view some of the world's best works of glass art, try the **Museum of Decorative Arts** in Prague, the **Nový Bor Glass Museum**, the collection at **DOX Centre for Contemporary Art** or **Veletřný Palace**, a modern art museum in a magnificent building. [ajetoglass.com](http://ajetoglass.com), [aysofglass.wordpress.com](http://aysofglass.wordpress.com)

**WHERE TO STAY:** Prague's luxurious **Mandarin Oriental** hotel features rooms on the banks of the Vltava River. **U Zlate Studne** (Golden Well Hotel) is a luxury boutique hotel on the old side of Prague. And for a cool compromise between high-end and budget, there's the **Hotel Yasmin** on Politických Věznu, a quiet street in the center of Prague.

**WHERE TO EAT:** **Lokál U Bílé kuželky** serves traditional Czech food in a pub setting, **Café Savoy** is an elegant Belle Époque café and **Sansho** features Asian fusion cuisine from a former Nobu chef. [lokal-ubilekuzelky.ambi.cz](http://lokal-ubilekuzelky.ambi.cz), [cafesavoy.ambi.cz](http://cafesavoy.ambi.cz), [sansho.cz](http://sansho.cz)

#### ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

##### Page 22

Timothy Horn (1); Redswapt/Shutterstock (3); Erik Tomasson (4); City of Chicago (5); Conor Buckley (6); Featureflash/Shutterstock (7).

##### Page 87

Ceca Photography/Getty (Shipwreck attraction on Zakynthos, Greece).

##### Page 88

Clockwise from upper left: Brett Stevens/Getty (Greek chicken souvlaki); Greece National Tourism Organization Archives (caldera view in Santorini, the Oracle in Delphi); Courtesy of the City of Athens Convention and Visitors Bureau (Acropolis at night); Ingolf Pompe/Getty (Mykonos).

##### Page 89

Clockwise from upper left: Thanasis Zovoilis/Getty (man with grapes); Richard Nowitz/Getty (tavern in

Greece); [www.monemvasia.gr](http://www.monemvasia.gr) (Monemvasia).

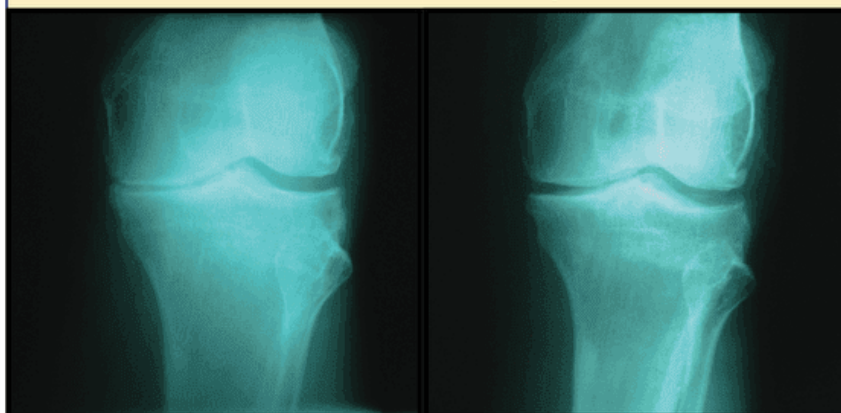
##### Pages 70-71

**Drinking Buddy:** Ryan Lavine (City Tap House); **Urban Explorer:** Jacqui Depas Photography (Urban Chic); Sam Kittner/Capital Bikeshare (woman on bike); **Art Connoisseur:** National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection (Woman with a Fan by Mary Cassatt); Benjamin Resine (Tryst); Greg Powers (Minibar); **Global Eater:** Sripfoto/Shutterstock (coffee); Brian Liu/Toolbox DC (Daikaya); Scott Suchman (Rasika); **Family Tripper:** Sam Kittner/Newseum (Time Warner World News Gallery).

##### Pages 112-113

**Explorador Urbano:** Sam Kittner/Capital Bikeshare (woman on bike); **Expertos en arte:** Max Hirshfield/Phillips Collection, Washington, DC; Greg Powers (Minibar); **Gastrónomo mundial:** Sripfoto/Shutterstock (coffee); Scott Suchman (Rasika).

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