

# SOUTH OF THE BORDER – GEOLOGY, GARNETS, AND GLASS

BY LUCY GORDAN



Monolithic sandstone formations, garnet mines, and blown glass greet visitors across the border in the Czech Republic.

The approximate distance between Dresden and Prague in a straight line is seventy-five miles. In between these two magical art- and music-loving cities of times past and both along the Elbe River, are two of Europe's most spectacular natural wonders, both nature parks: "Saxon Switzerland," Saxony's only national park, starting some twenty miles south-east of Dresden upstream to the Czech border where it becomes "Bohemian Switzerland." Two nineteenth-century Swiss landscape artists, Adrian Zingg and Anton Graff, so reminded of their homeland that they settled in the area, inspired their names. Both "Switzerlands" boast breathtaking views, bizarre sandstone formations dating back to the Cretaceous Period, and heavily-wooded giddy gorges. They are ideal destinations for day-trippers, hikers, and trekkers, especially those setting out from Dresden.

Though, of course, a bit farther away (twenty-five miles



from Dresden and fifty-five miles from Prague), romantic thirty-square mile, ninety-seven percent-forested "Bohemian Switzerland," established in 2000, is the youngest of the Czech Republic's four national parks. I visited here last August on a press trip organized by Czech Tourism in New York City. It is easily reachable from Dresden by a one-and-one-quarter-hour

train ride leaving every half hour to Schöna, still in Germany (\$7). Near Schöna's station, a three-minute ferry ride (on demand for \$1.20) crosses the Elbe to Hřensko, a cute Czech village of pointy-gabled, half-timbered houses crammed into a narrow sandstone gorge where the Kamenice River flows into the Labe, Czech for Elbe. Here we had a delicious lunch of *Borůvkové Knedlíky* or local blueberry and cream cheese dumplings.

Allow five to six hours for the sign-posted nine-mile circular hike, which takes in all the main geological for-

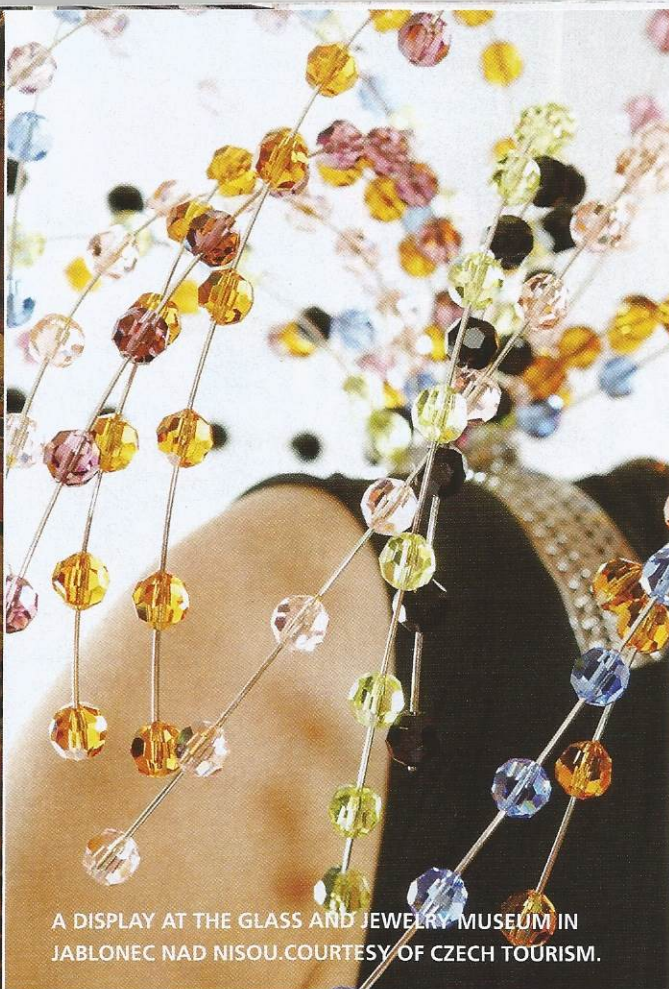
TOP LEFT AND RIGHT: BEAUTIFUL BLUE GLASSES ON DISPLAY IN THE SLARKSKE GLASS MUSEUM IN KAMENICKÝ SÉNOV (COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM). CENTER: A DELICATE GLASS CHAIR ON DISPLAY AT THE SLARKSKE GLASS MUSEUM. COURTESY SLARKSKE GLASS MUSEUM.

MIDDLE PAGE: SPECTACULAR SANDSTONE FORMATIONS EXTEND FROM GERMANY'S SAXON SWITZERLAND ACROSS THE CZECH BORDER WHERE IT BECOMES BOHEMIAN SWITZERLAND. COURTESY CZECH TOURISM.





GARNETS FOR SALE. COURTESY OF CZECH TOURISM.



A DISPLAY AT THE GLASS AND JEWELRY MUSEUM IN JABLONEC NAD NISOU. COURTESY OF CZECH TOURISM.

mations and possibly sightings of rare animal species including the garden dormouse, peregrine falcon, black stork, and lynx. From the Eastern end of Hřensko a trail descends via stairs, ledges, sometimes-slippery walkways, and dark tunnels through the mossy chasms of the Kamenice River Gorge. For those with less time or stamina like me, it is possible to take an entertaining one-half-hour punt ride (\$1.30) through the river canyon poled by a ferryman telling anecdotes. A one-half-mile beyond the punt's terminus, a red-marked trail continues for one hour or so through the forest to a spectacular rock formation Pravčická Brána, the largest natural arch in Europe.

From our comfortable, but elevator- and restaurant-lacking, Forest Garden Hotel ([www.theforestgardenhotel.cz](http://www.theforestgardenhotel.cz)) in Hřensko, where, due to the proximity of their borders, I had the unusual experience of being welcomed by the Czech (where I was), German, and Polish telephone companies on my mobile. Well-worth an eight-mile detour through ramrod pine forests was our supper at the country hotel "Na Stodolci 1881" (which translates as "barn") in the quaint village of Chřibská ([www.nastadolci.cz](http://www.nastadolci.cz)). This rustic hideaway offers riding lessons as well as one of the best meals I have ever eaten. The menu includes



A CRAFTSMAN AT AJETO GLASS FACTORY  
COURTESY LUCY GORDAN.

homemade cheese, honey, paté, chicken livers, fresh-water fish, organic chicken, organic beef cheeks (to die-for!), and Czech homemade pancakes and pies.

Another national park (some sixty-five miles northeast of Prague) with similar sandstone formations is the "Bohemian Paradise," declared in 1955 as the first nature reserve in Czechoslovakia. At first it was some fifty square miles, but today counts one hundred twenty square miles. According to *Wikipedia*, "in 2005, the origi-

nal Protected Landscape Area of Bohemian Paradise was extended with the establishment of the Bohemian Paradise Geopark, which now covers more than four hundred square miles. Its task is to show the [area's] unique geological heritage and the relationship between nature and our existence...It promotes all resources of the region, including the genius loci of many picturesque sceneries, the beauty of unique locations, the wealth of cultural heritage, traditional crafts, regional agricultural products and interesting local cuisine." Approved by UNESCO, the Bohemian Paradise Geopark was declared the first Czech National Geopark in 2010.

Besides its unusual rock formations and forests, unlike "Bohemian Switzerland," the "Bohemian Paradise" con-





AT THE AJETO GLASS FACTORY IN LINDAVA. TOP COURTESY LUCY GORDAN; BOTTOM: COURTESY CZECH TOURISM.

tains many towns, castles (its symbol is the Trosky Castle), medieval ruins, and museums, all within short distances of each other. Besides a perhaps too challengingly steep hike, in the "Bohemian Paradise" we visited the neo-Gothic Sychrov Castle dating to the second half of the nineteenth century and the town of Turnov.

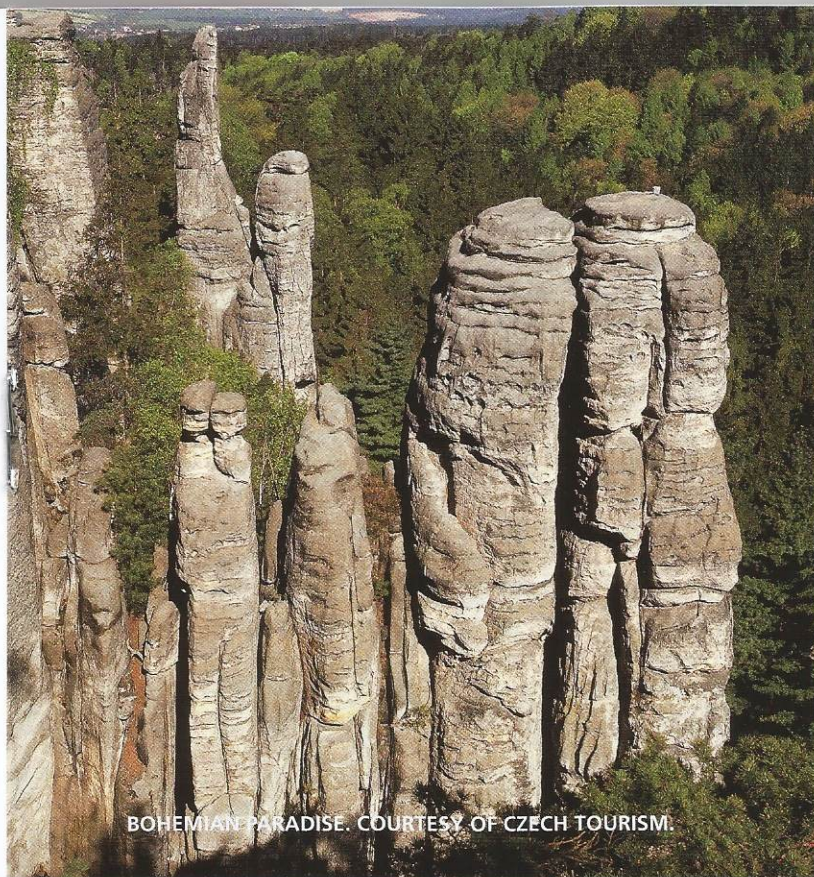
The castle, with its beautifully groomed grounds, was the residence of the French aristocratic Rohan family, exiled by the French Revolution who decided to stay in the Austrian Empire. They bought it in 1820 and lived here until 1945 when it was nationalized and then opened to the public in 1950. Its wood-paneled rooms are magnificently furnished, especially the dining hall. The castle houses the largest collection of French portrait paintings in Central Europe and can be rented for private parties and weddings.

The nearby town of Turnov, an ideal excursion hub, lies in the heart of the "Bohemian Paradise." Since the Middle Ages it has been an important center for jewelry manufacture especially when incorporating the local garnet, which was thought to have magical powers over the health and intelligence of its wearer. The first European technical school for the processing of gemstones, metals, and jewelry was founded here in 1882 and still exists as one of the best schools of this type in the world. Turnov's "Museum of the Bohemian Paradise" ([www.muzeum-turnov.cz](http://www.muzeum-turnov.cz)) has a significant collection of gemstones and jewelry as well as exhibits on geology, archeology, and folklore. Opened in March 2010 a new exhibit called "Treasury" displays artistic decorative objects created in the local jewelry school. Opened six months later, the "Gem Cutter's House" houses a permanent exhibit devoted to the history of gemstone cutting in Turnov. Demonstrations of jewelry craftsmanship are held at the main square's "Galerie Granát" ([www.granat.eu](http://www.granat.eu), [www.granat.cz](http://www.granat.cz)), where purchases may be made at the store downstairs. The three hundred goldsmiths and jewelers who belong to the Granát Co-op, founded in 1953, make all the jewelry on sale here or available on the Internet by visiting [www.granat-shop.cz](http://www.granat-shop.cz). This syndicate is the exclusive owner of the Bohemian garnet mines. It also has a network of retail outlets as well as trading partners in the Czech Republic and abroad.

There are many fakes on the market so it is important to know that Bohemian garnets are small (from 0.3 to 0.8 cm), very fiery because they contain chrome, and with clear refraction. Beware: the larger ones may come from India or Russia, but are more likely colored glass, unless they are antiques. Stores must display a manufacturer's certificate of origin on their door or window, provide the purchaser with a certificate of authenticity declaring the origin of the stones, and the jewelry itself must have the hallmark G (G1, G2).

Besides garnets, northern Bohemia is also famous for glass. The first and oldest glass factory, museum, and school we visited was in the village of Kamenický Šenov. In the sixteenth century, local inhabitants started to decorate glass imported from the nearby glassworks at Chřibská. To reduce dependency on "imported" glass, Kamenický Šenov's first glassworks were erected in 1886. Its glass





BOHEMIAN PARADISE. COURTESY OF CZECH TOURISM.

production school, the oldest in the world, had opened thirty years earlier in 1856 and is still in existence, although in a precarious state. Opened in 1968, its two-floor glass museum documents engraved and cut glass from the seventeenth to the twentieth century ([www.muzeumskla.cz](http://www.muzeumskla.cz)). The collections of the Museum of Applied Arts in Prague and Kamenický Šenov's are considered the best in the Czech Republic.

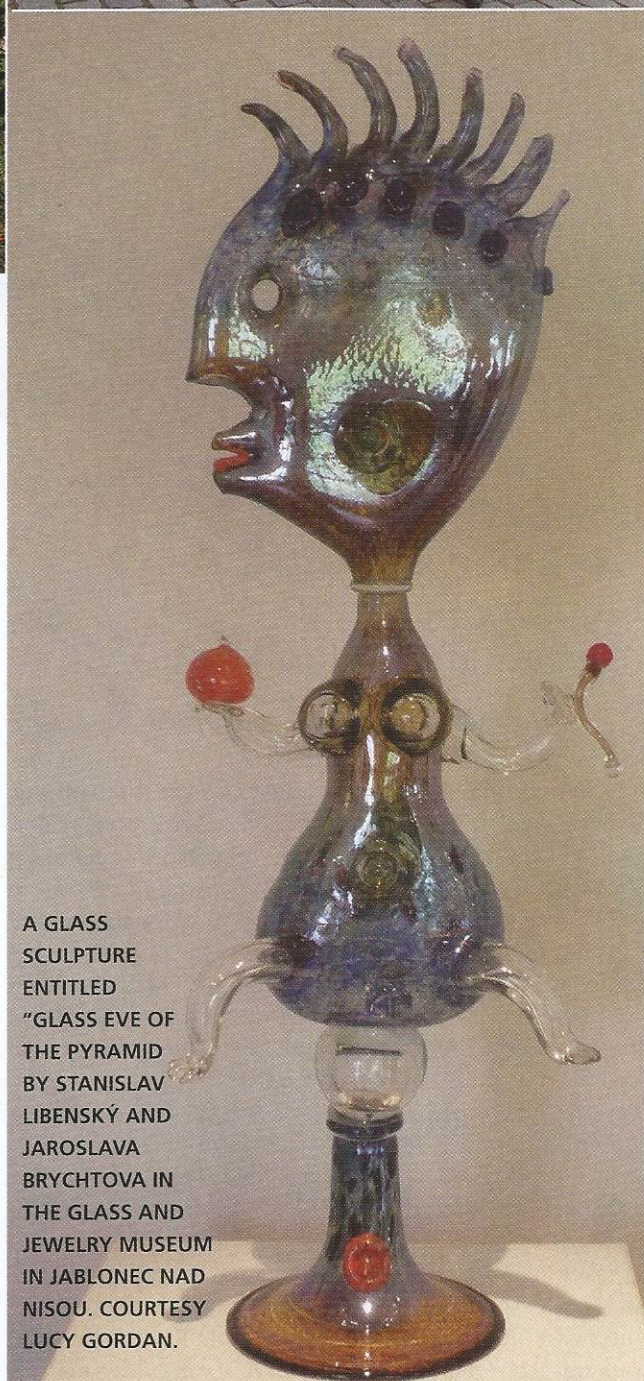
Other glass collections on the itinerary were at the Municipal Museum in Železný Brod and at the Museum of Glass and Jewellery in Jablonec Nad Nisou. The highlights of Železný Brod's collection include a replica of a glass maker's shop from the 1860s; products made of tiny glass beads such as purses, chokers, flowers, and intricate funeral wreaths; and, above all, a gallery dedicated to large sculptures by Jaroslava Brychtová and Stanislav Libenský, world famous glass artists who lived in town. My favorite artifacts were the small figurines of Czech storybook characters made by Jaraslava's father Jaroslav.

By itself worthy of a trip to Bohemia, Jablonec Nad Nisou's multi-award-winning museum, established in 1904, is the Czech Republic's only museum specializing in glass and costume jewelry. Its main building houses two permanent displays with explanations also in English: "The Charming World of Costume Jewelry" and "The Magic Garden. Seven Centuries of Bohemian Glass," both clearly laid out in chronological order.

Those who prefer a hands-on experience to museums can watch glass masters at work at the glass factory AJETO in Lindava near Nový Bor. On its premises, at the refreshment tavern with its own furnace, they can even blow their own glass artifact with the supervision of skillful glass masters ([www.ajetoglass.com](http://www.ajetoglass.com), contact: [krcma@ajetoglass.com](mailto:krcma@ajetoglass.com)). **GL**



A FOLK FESTIVAL IN TOURNOV. COURTESY OF CZECH TOURISM.



A GLASS SCULPTURE ENTITLED "GLASS EVE OF THE PYRAMID" BY STANISLAV LIBENSKÝ AND JAROSLAVA BRYCHTOVA IN THE GLASS AND JEWELRY MUSEUM IN JABLONEC NAD NISO. COURTESY LUCY GORDAN.