

# HOME & AWAY

## Birthplace of Beer

Pilsen, Czech Republic, shares its brewing heritage with the world.

By Katherine Rodeghier

What a sad day it must have been for beer lovers in Bohemia. A crowd watched 36 barrels of beer—bad beer—ceremoniously dumped in the street outside town hall.

From this low point in 1838, brewers in Pilsen rallied, upped their brewery game and gave their town's name to a new kind of brew now enjoyed across the globe.

The first batch of pilsner, the model for what more than two-thirds of the world calls beer, came from this town 50 miles southwest of Prague. Beer lovers make pilgrimages here to tour the Czech Republic's largest brewery, Pilsner Urquell, where they descend into damp cellars to drink unfiltered, unpasteurized lager straight from the barrel. At Pilsen's Brewery Museum, they fill up on the history of beer making. Some even venture to the suburbs for a full-body experience, soaking in a beer bath at a beer spa.

### Roots of Brew

The story of beer in Pilsen—Plzen in Czech—goes to its founding in 1295 by King Wenceslaus II, who granted 260 citizens the right to brew beer in their homes. When a batch finished, a bell summoned townspeople to drink. Quality varied wildly. Medieval brewers had odd notions about what makes good beer. Some added duck excrement to the brew, others the bones of executed criminals.

Such bits of trivia await visitors to Pilsen's Brewery Museum, housed in a 15th-century brewing house nestled against remnants of the city's medieval ramparts. Hops and barley grow in a garden. Inside, exhibits tell the story of beer's beginning, in 4000 B.C. Mesopotamia; show the brewing process in medieval times; and take visitors past a re-creation of the 18th-century pub where Franz Kafka would one day stare glumly into a mug.

The museum also recalls the 1838 incident when Pilsen's town councilors determined much of the local brew posed a health risk and tossed it. A group of brewers pooled resources to build a commercial brewery and hired well-known Bavarian brewmaster Josef Groll. His first batch came out October 1842, a light, bottom-fermented lager that came to be known as pilsner, a style of beer that today accounts for 70 percent of all beer consumed on Earth.

In the museum's cozy, 1930s-style Na Parkanu Taproom, patrons wash down traditional Czech fare with a rare glass of cloudy, unfiltered Pilsner Urquell or the finished clear amber draft.



Pilsen's Brewery Museum occupies a 15th-century house a short walk from the Pilsner Urquell Brewery complex.

Katherine Rodeghier



Copper brew kettles in the Pilsner Urquell Brewery are now just for show. More modern brew kettles are used today, but the recipe and ingredients date to the 19th century.

*Katherine Rodeghier*

#### Soaking Up Beer

They also find the beers on tap at the biggest beer hall in Bohemia, the 550-capacity Na Spilce on the grounds of Pilsner Urquell brewery nearby.

The modern brewery uses the same recipes and ingredients as Pilsen's 1842 incarnation but has grown to stoke the thirsts of beer lovers in 50 countries. With the exception of its brewery in Russia serving the local market, all Pilsner Urquell distributed worldwide comes from this brewery complex 15 minutes from Pilsen's city center. The

brewery makes four other brands, including Gambrinus, the Czech Republic's top seller.

Tours begin in the visitor center, where the story of the first pilsner unfolds. In the courtyard, a circa 1900 railcar that made regular beer runs to Vienna stands permanently parked near a horse-drawn wagon that, for the sake of tradition, still delivers beer to Pilsen pubs.

Twelve copper kettles gleam in the brew house, where a film explains the process of triple mashing—most beers are mashed once or twice—and lagering, aging the beer for 30 days. After a look at the original 1842 brew kettle, buried to keep it from enemy hands during World Wars I and II, visitors head down to the brewery's 5.6 miles of cellars. In temperatures hovering at 39 degrees, oak barrels made by Pilsner Urquell's own coopers hold lager that has yet to be filtered and pasteurized. Spigots turn and anyone of legal age gets a taste.

Twenty minutes outside Pilsen, guests immerse themselves in beer at Purkmistr, a rural farmhouse containing a microbrewery, rustic restaurant, 32-room hotel, bowling alley and spa. In addition to facilities for traditional body treatments, the spa has one double and four single wooden bathtubs for soaking. Its classic beer bath consists of the brewery's own beer combined with wort, yeast and other ingredients. A keg stands within reach for those who want to imbibe while they bathe.

#### Planning Your Trip

For more information:

- Pilsen Tourism, [pilsen.eu/en/tourist](http://pilsen.eu/en/tourist)
- Czech Tourism, [czechtourism.com](http://czechtourism.com)
- Pilsner Urquell brewery tours and Pilsen's Brewery Museum, [prazdrojvisit.cz/en](http://prazdrojvisit.cz/en)
- Purkmistr beer spa, hotel and brewery, [purkmistr.cz/en](http://purkmistr.cz/en).

For help planning your next vacation, contact your AAA Travel agent or visit [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).

*KATHERINE RODEGHIER is a freelance writer based in Western Springs, Ill.*

Published: Oct 20, 2016

<http://homeandawaymagazine.com/Content/Article/5679>