

Warsaw in a bauble

The shimmer of Christmas decorations lifts the gloom off a freezing day in the Polish capital

It's a cold December morning – minus 5°C to be precise – in Warsaw. But sub-zero temperatures are routine in the Polish capital. And it won't come in the way of my post-breakfast visit to the Łazienki Park (Royal Baths Park), the largest in the city. It stands at the end of a wide road with a number of embassies.

It's a winter landscape with layers of snow instead of green grass, adding a new dimension to my idea of a park. As I enter Łazienki, a huge statue of Polish composer Frederic Chopin grabs attention. The sculpture that resembles a claw, with Chopin sitting below it, is surrounded by benches sans backrest. First erected in 1926 and later destroyed during World War II, the sculpture got a new lease of life in 1958. That too because the mould had escaped damage. However, not every Polish in Warsaw holds this relic in high esteem – some compare it to an ugly broccoli. But visual aesthetics are not top priority when you're at this altar of the virtuoso pianist. His legacy ensures that there is always music – his music – in the park. All you need do is press the button on your bench.

Besides the free concerts in summer, Łazienki has other permanent attractions – palaces, for example. Until the 17th century, the park had little other than a bathing pavilion to write home about. It was under King Stanislaw August, in the next century, that it was redesigned to be endowed with palaces, villas and specimens of classical art.

Hot chocolate and the Old Town
Moving from music to matters of the State – my next stop is the Warsaw Uprising Monument. At the corner of the street, the lifelike



Colour central Glass baubles of all shapes and sizes on display at Karina's workshop in WARSAW ARUNA RATHOD

sculptures show tense body movements of Polish soldiers, ready to attack, in a recreation of the Polish resistance against Germans while the Soviets just watched.

The intensity of the moment – induced by the dramatic sculptures – made me more curious about the history of Warsaw's Old Town. And part of that history is E Wedel, a brand of chocolates that has been around since mid-19th century. It is where I get my cup of thick hot chocolate. The more adventurous can choose from a range of flavours – rum, hazelnut, marzipan, cherry or a little bit of all. Wedel's chocolate beverage is fortifying enough to keep me warm through the long walk that follows – to the statue of the armed mermaid that stands tall in the centre of the square (according to locals, the mythical sea creature is the protector of Warsaw); the majestic Town Hall, St John's Archcathedral and the Jesuit Church. These are only some of the structures that led Unesco to declare the city's Old Town a World Heritage Site.

Season's shimmer

Post lunch, I leave the historic town square behind for a rather nondescript building in a nondescript neighbourhood. The business that takes me there is not lacklustre though – making my own Christmas baubles. My teacher, the young Karina, welcomes me into a room littered with shimmers, colours, paint brushes and bottles of glue.

My lesson in bauble-making starts with observing an expert glass blower in action. The process starts with the softening of a hollow glass rod by using a torch flame. Leszek To-

maszewski, who has over 35 years of experience in the profession, cuts the heated glass, heats it more till it turns red hot, and blows into it to make a balloon of sorts. All in a matter of seconds. That's the first bauble of the day. Tomaszewski says it takes him an hour to craft 50 such baubles.

The second bauble he crafts has a different design – he creates a pattern by making incisions on the soft glass. The third is in the shape of a mushroom. Karina injects colour – a silver nitrate solution – into the baubles. She ensures these are uniformly coated by shaking them gently. And then she places the baubles on spikes. Gently again.

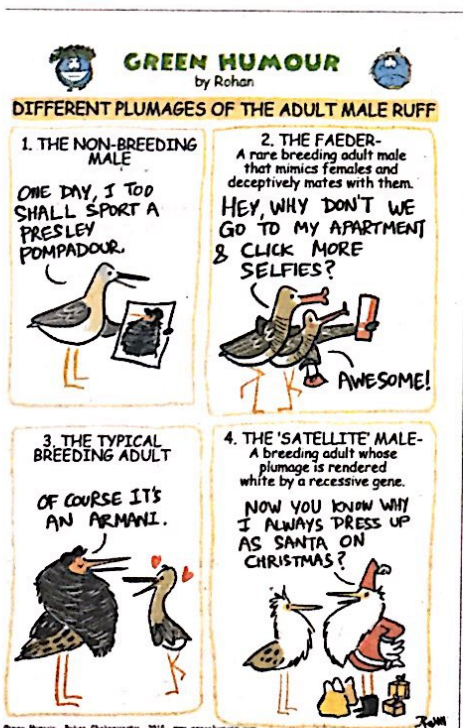
The next part of her job is to ensure that the students for the day – almost always tourists – do not damage the newly-made baubles while painting them. The enthusiasm in the room is palpable as we are invited to take up brushes, paints and shimmers. You are free to paint it as you like. I settle for a standard Christmassy pat-

tern in red and gold shimmer, something I can decorate the tree back home with.

I apply glue first, struggling to balance the bauble in my trembling hands. I hold it from the stem – like an inverted lollipop. The shimmer comes next. And then comes a cardboard box in which you place the bauble. After about 15 minutes, the stem is cut with a small machine and the hook attached.

Karina's personal collection – on display in another room – has baubles in every shape imaginable: Santa Claus, frogs, fish and lozenges. I have to wait years before I can build a collection that comes close.

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