

PEOPLE



# The thrill of the chaise

A passion for antique chairs and sofas led one Brisbane collector around the world in her hunt for some beautiful bargains

STORY CHRIS PEARSON PHOTOGRAPHY PAVEL HOŘEJŠÍ



Rebecca Ruben's passion is antique chairs, especially those in need of a little TLC. But her four-legged friends do much more than take the weight off her legs. "They convey so much: they're a feature in a room, they come in so many elegant designs, and are also a fascinating reflection of different eras." Her personal favourite is the Louis XV style, with its sinuous, ornate lines.

It's a long way from her day job as a clinical psychologist in Brisbane, but Rebecca sees the two as a perfect fit. "I'm passionate about my work as a therapist, but thinking about fabrics and shapes brings balance to my life. It's good for me."

She has spent the past 10 years sourcing cherished chairs for her home – yes, Rebecca is particular and they have to be just right – but it wasn't until her friends began quizzing her for information on *their* finds that she realised the extent of her knowledge. This sparked the idea of turning her pastime into a part-time retail business – hence Roost Bespoke Chairs was born.

But how to amass a lot of chairs in a hurry? "The pieces in my home took years to collect, but that clearly wasn't an option for my business," says Rebecca. So she searched the internet for antique-buying tours and discovered the old Iron Curtain had concealed an untapped treasure trove – which can now be snapped up at comrade-friendly prices.

Rebecca chose a buying tour of the Czech Republic and the one-time East Germany through Heart of Europe Tours. Such tours offer two advantages: the homework has been done, with the destinations selected, and the shipping – including shifting the purchases to a central location and packing them into a container – is handled by the organiser.

"Unlike so much of western Europe, the former Communist countries haven't >



**THIS PAGE** clockwise from above Chairwoman Rebecca Ruben; an ugly warehouse in Spomyšl, Czech Republic, was heaven for Rebecca; Bustehrad Collector's Market; with so many lovely pieces on offer, it could be easy to be distracted. **OPPOSITE** from left tour leader Tom Conrad and Rebecca; Czech kitchenalia, including jelly moulds. **PREVIOUS PAGE** located in an old abattoir, this store in Prague was exactly what Rebecca was looking for.

◁ been shopped out," explains Rebecca (see box, opposite page). Included in her tour were tantalising treats such as the Bustehrad Collector's Market near Prague (the largest in the country, it runs nonstop from 8am Friday to midnight Saturday), and the annual Bamberg Christmas Market in Germany.

"The Bamberg market was astounding because of the variety and quality of the goods, as well as its sheer size. People from all over Germany – and beyond – poured in there all day, which just added to its charm," enthuses Rebecca.

Everywhere she went the prices were better than in Australia. She spent from A\$100 for a basic chair frame to A\$1000 for a well-worn sofa.

With such a buyer's bonanza, she had to be single-minded. "I went straight to the unrestored chairs and limited myself to those – sorting through so much stuff, I couldn't be distracted by the other fabulous things. I went by my first reaction – if I was unsure about the potential, I

simply moved on," says Rebecca. "I looked for pieces with pleasing lines and shapes, as well as unusual designs with character and interesting details in the timber. The proportions, too, had to be just right."

The trip proved an eye-opener for her in more ways than one. "I fell in love with Art Deco. I wasn't expecting that; I suppose it was because I was exposed to a broader range of objects from that period than I'd previously encountered. I also saw some amazing German tub chairs, enormous square designs with carved lion's feet."

All up, Rebecca bought 47 chairs – most in the Victorian style – which arrived in a container in Brisbane late last December. Her upholsterer will be flat-chat over the coming months, covering those finds in chic, contemporary fabrics, such as the latest Nina Campbell and Osborne & Little designs. Initially, Rebecca will sell her wares online (she's building a site at [www.roostbespokechairs.com.au](http://www.roostbespokechairs.com.au)). "However, I may eventually consider a showroom by appointment." ▷→

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◁ Her best find? Ironically, it wasn't a chair, but an Art Nouveau tray – she paid the equivalent of AU\$200 for it, but it was worth much more. “It is the most divine piece; I'll definitely be keeping it.”

And, being the keen collector, she could be tempted to keep some of the chairs. “I bought a Louis-style three-seater sofa and two single chairs which would look wonderful in my sitting room, as well as an Art Deco-style piece that would be ideal in my den. But I'll resist keeping them for myself and allow extra for my personal budget on the next trip.”

And the language? “The guide spoke excellent German and could even get by with this in the Czech Republic,” says Rebecca. “But, when you're doing business, a lot can be communicated with calculators and non-verbal language, anyway.”

Heart of Europe Tours also provides a glossary for hagglers – we suspect *obchodní rabat* and *Händlerabbatt* (‘dealer discount’ in Czech and German, respectively) could get a good run. H&G

### CZECH THIS OUT...

The aftermath of the Cold War has generated some hot business opportunities. Heart of Europe Tours, based in the US, offers antique buying trips to the former East Germany and the Czech Republic. Operator Tom Conrad says these countries have “an immense pool of antiques in every price range”. Here's why.

With state-based economies, there was little private enterprise and virtually no trade in antiques, he explains. “Buying and selling antiques simply didn't exist, so furniture and furnishings collected in people's living rooms and attics for nearly 50 years.”

Now those who squirrelled away these pieces are growing old. “Their estates pass to the younger generation but, since one or two children was the norm, the antiques are falling to fewer and fewer heirs, who often don't have the space or inclination to keep them.”

Meanwhile, the avalanche of alluring consumer goods from the West has further devalued these pre-loved pieces.

“The lovely baroque chest, charming country table, artful Biedermeier chair or smart Art Deco desk from the ancestral home is often unwanted ballast for younger families, who adopted an out-with-the-old-in-with-the-new attitude to design and home furnishings after the Berlin Wall fell,” says Tom.

And prices for furniture, art and other collectibles in these countries tend to be lower – sometimes much lower – than elsewhere on the Continent, because rents, labour costs and transportation are less. Buyers from outside the EU are also exempt VAT.

Tom says the shopping expeditions suit anyone with an interest in antiques and design – dealers and designers as well as people who are buying for themselves.

This year, the company offers six escorted buying trips to the Czech Republic and Germany. Prices start at US\$2475. For details, call Heart of Europe Tours on +1 215 991 9892 or go to [www.heartofeuropetours.com](http://www.heartofeuropetours.com).