
Czech Republic/Prague

Prague is the most spectacular of all European cities. Because The Czech Republic was not of major strategic importance in either of the great wars of the twentieth century, Prague escaped the ravages which levelled comparable cities. The so-called "city of a hundred spires" is largely unblemished, and the river Vltava (or Moldau) is incomparably majestic. In the center of Bohemia, The Czech Republic's westernmost province, Prague is a sumptuous blend of nature and architecture. Like Rome, it is built on seven hills and it is divided by a river which is spanned by 15 bridges.

The city, everywhere dotted with parks, waterways and gardens, overwhelms the visitor with its architecture. As in many European cities and towns you can see layers of architectural styles: Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, Neoclassical, Art Nouveau and Modern. Prague, first the seat of the Holy Roman Empire, then of the Hapsburgs was the capital of the kingdom of Bohemia for centuries. It came into full glory during the reign of Charles IV (1346-78). Charles founded the New Town, built Charles University, reconstructed Prague castle in the Gothic style and initiated the construction of St. Vitus Cathedral.

Telephone and time difference

Though travelling in the Czech Republic has now become much easier telecommunications have not quite been able to keep up and you may still find difficulties when trying to phone from the Czech Republic to the USA. To phone the Czech Republic: 42. Time difference (Eastern Daylight) plus 6 hours

Climate

Prague has cold, damp winters and warm summers, with clearly defined spring and autumn seasons. The average winter temperature is 30°F (-1°C); The average summer temperature, 70°F (21°C).

Sights and Museums

Historical Prague was originally five independent towns. Each of these five districts: New Town; Old Town; Lesser Town; Hradcany; and Vysehrad, retains its individual character, virtually undisturbed since the Middle Ages. The New Town dates from 1348, when it was established by King Charles IV. Wenceslas Square is the center of the modern city of Prague and a logical starting point for seeing the city. Also visit Charles Square, Now a park surrounded by old buildings, it is the New Town's oldest square.

The Old Town contains most of the oldest building in Prague. It dates from 1120. A great many medieval exteriors have been preserved here. Visit the Powder Tower, gate to the old town and once used to store gunpowder; the Old Town Square, the centre of the Old Town. Don't miss Prague's great landmark, the astronomical clock on the Old Town Hall. Prague castle (Hradcany) is today the seat of the government. This castle has been a slav stronghold, residence of the kings of Bohemia, and the seat of the presidents of the 1918 republic. Oblong in shape, the three courtyards progress from the medieval to the more modern, each generation adding to the existing structure.

Theatre and Nightlife

Don't miss going to the Laterna Magika, a unique theatre experience for which it is not necessary to know the language. It includes dance music and film. Concerts can be heard at the House of Artists. Prague is not a big night-club town. (But who knows what will happen now that the iron curtain has come down) The area around Vaclavske Namseti has a number of places with dance floors. The best way to enjoy Prague at night is to go to a pivnice (Beer hall) or vinary (wine cellar) but go early as they close around 11 pm.

Shopping

Shops are open Mondays to Fridays from 8 or 9 am to 6 pm Saturdays from 9 am to 1 pm. Typical Czech items are Bohemian glass and crystal, and crafts such as embroidered clothing, woodcarvings and peasant pottery. Modern applied arts are sold at the Art Centrum and there are many special folk art outlets for hand-painted Easter eggs, Christmas ornaments, jewelry, woven linens etc.

Excursions

City Tour. Any exploration of this beautiful town should begin with a bus tour through the city. See the five original towns, the squares, churches and castles and pick out the ones you would like to explore in more detail.

Kutná Hora, about 42 miles (67 km) southeast of Prague, is a former silver mining town, which boomed in the 13th century, when its rich deposits were used to help create the splendor of the Bohemian court. Here coins were minted by craftsmen imported from Florence. The Vlassky Dvur, a 13th century palace where the craftsmen worked, a fine coin museum, a church whose vault is lined entirely with human skulls, and the unusual Gothic roof of St. Barbara's Church are all here.

The central Bohemian hills surrounding Prague are the backdrop for 14 castles. Some built as early as the 13th century. Less than an hour's drive will take you to Karlstejn, Charles IV's walled and turreted fortress. The chapel is decorated with inset precious stones and a stunning collection of apocalyptic paintings attributed to the famous medieval painter Nikolaus Wurmser. Konopiste in Bebesov is a renaissance palace with a luxurious interior preserved from the days of Prince Ferdinand.

Pilzen. This city of 174,000 inhabitants merits a visit because of the Burgher's Brewery, which has produced Pilsner Urquell beer since the Middle Ages. Start at the Brewing Museum on Roosevelt Street. It has a fine collection of beer mugs, jugs, pewter tankards, and glasses produced during the last six centuries. Also on display is an iron collar (a collar of dishonor) worn by brewers whose beer didn't make the grade. Namesty Republiky, the square in the centre of town, is lined with houses that have Renaissance, Baroque, Empire and Neo-Gothic facades. Two particularly lovely Gothic buildings are St. Bartholomew's Church and the Abbey church of the Virgin Mary.