

# Ancient, Vibrant Prague

*At once historic and cosmopolitan,  
this jewel of the Czech Republic  
flaunts unspoiled architecture,  
incredible cuisine and friendly locals*

To understand Prague, first consider its citizens. They love beer and hockey and are laid back, intelligent and inquisitive. Picture a college professor who grades exams in a 13th-century pub built upon Roman ruins. In between papers, watch him down a pint and sneak a peek at the HC Sparta Praha (one of two local, professional hockey clubs) game on the high-def TV.

That's Prague. Ancient, vibrant and unfussy rolled into one stunning spectacle.

Prague, however, isn't as old as it used to be.

Long regarded as one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, Prague today is one of the most visited on the continent and decidedly more cosmopolitan than the view from afar.

The city, located in the heart of the Czech Republic and Bohemia, blends an intellectual vibe (bookstores on seemingly every corner) with a storied past that reverberates in its cobbled streets, stone bridges and Gothic-spined buildings, built by some of the world's greatest architects. Throw in some punk rock clubs, boutique shops and ultra-modern five-star restaurants and the real Prague comes into focus.

The city dates back to 880 when Prince Borivoj of the Premyslid dynasty built Prague Castle, the magnificent fortress that has stood watch over the Czech city on the Vltava River. The fortification, one of the largest ancient castles in the world, has survived fires, invasions and World Wars and remains both the symbol of the city and the seat of Czech rule.

by GREG RIENZI









The city grew steadily over the next five centuries, until modern Prague began to emerge in the 14th century, dubbed the city's Golden Age.

The city underwent several dark periods, notably during the 15th century's Hussite Wars, when many historical artifacts were destroyed and the castle was allowed to deteriorate, and again in the 1800s when the city lost some of its prominence.

In a sense, the city was reborn when the Austro-Hungarian Empire fell in 1918 and Prague became the capital of independent Czechoslovakia.

Nazi Germany occupied the city during World War II, but Prague was spared extensive bombing and its character, and many architectural treasures, survived.

The city lived under Soviet-imposed communist rule from 1948 to 1989, a period defined by the utilitarian gray architecture that sprang up in pockets around town. In 1989, Vaclav Havel led the Velvet Revolution, thereby ending a repressive 40-year-period when immigration and tourism were stifled.

The city, in effect, reopened for business.

And business is booming. Tourists flock to the city, drawn by both its beauty and budget prices.

Prague has been nicknamed "the golden city" and "the city of a hundred spires," although by last count there were more than 500 towers piercing the city's sky. Its historic core is spread across four hilly districts: Hradcany (the district that surrounds Prague Castle), the Old Town, the Lesser Town and the Jewish Quarter, which all must be seen on foot—so pack comfortable shoes.

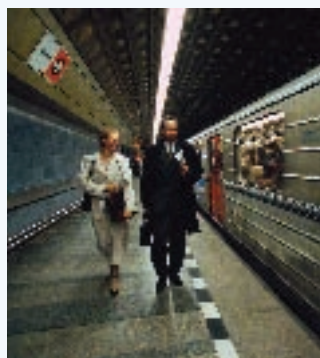
Start with the castle. More than a simple fortress, Prague Castle is a vast complex of buildings crested by Saint Vitus Cathedral, the 14th-century structure that set the scene in Tom Cruise's *Mission Impossible*.

Harold Chambers, a radio executive who first visited Prague in 1999, says it's no coincidence that movie producers seek out the city. "When you see the Saint Vitus Cathedral uplit at night it's like a Hollywood creation. It's beautiful and shimmering and unreal," Chambers says. "It's just so beautiful there and you can feel the history all around you."

Chambers' favorite Prague stomping ground is its Old Town, which sits to the east of the Vltava River. Old Town Square dominates the district and is the quintessential meeting place.

Some come to see the famous Tyn Cathedral or the Astronomical Clock. Others come for the celebrations

## PRAGUE FACTS



**Getting there:** Fly into Prague Airport, the second biggest airport in central Europe. To get downtown you can take a taxi, but many recommend the CEDAZ minibuses, which run every 30 minutes from the airport to major metro stations.

**Getting around:** Prague's public transportation gets top marks and some say it's the best in Europe. The metro and tram systems cover most of the city and are both comfortable and efficient. Pick up a 72-hour travel pass that allows for unlimited travel on the city's transport system (metro, bus, tram and funicular, or inclined railway). It costs 330 CZK (Czech koruny, \$17) for adults and can be found readily at the city's American Express branches and Prague Information Service offices.



**The people:** The city's roughly 1.3 million inhabitants are, generally speaking, a friendly and cultured lot. A word of advice, the locals abhor noise, so keep the gatherings at street corners to a dull roar.

**When to go:** Each season has something unique to offer. Summer has its long days, warm weather and many events. In the fall, the changing colors make an already breathtaking city all the more romantic. Winters in Prague can be harsh and several attractions have reduced hours, but the Christmas markets, white-capped buildings and decorations transform the city into an enchanted place. Spring might be an ideal time to visit, as the weather is still very pleasant,



the city is abloom and the crowds of tourists not so thick.

The temperatures vary from about 14 degrees Fahrenheit in winter (-10 Celsius) to 80 degrees Fahrenheit in summer (27 Celsius), though summer (June-August) highs can soar into the mid-90s F (35C). Expect nightfall around 4 p.m. in December.

**What to do:** Start your journey at the Prague Castle with a guided tour of the grounds and gardens. Make sure to visit Prague Cathedral within the castle's walls. You'll also want to witness the changing of the guard, but don't ask them to smile. Many of the attractions at the castle are free.

Wenceslas Square is a pleasant place to shop, eat and take in the city's history. The square was the scene for both the communist takeover and the Velvet Revolution, which ushered in the end of communist rule. Nearby is the Museum of Natural History, the largest



museum in the Czech Republic, known for its majestic marbled interior courtyard.

A visit to Prague would not be complete without walking over the Charles Bridge, the dark Gothic bridge that spans the Vltava River. The bridge is flanked by a series of giant stone statues, one of which (St. John of Nepomuk) is said to bring good luck to those who touch it.

Down at Old Town Square get in line to observe the Astronomical Clock on the side of the Old Town Hall Tower. The clock, which still functions, dates back to the 15th century and offers accurate data on astrological events. Each hour the clock chimes and a trap door opens to reveal moving wooden puppets. Old Town Square also is home to the ornate Gothic Church and many

and holiday markets. Visit the square during Christmas or Easter season and you'll find throngs of people with a bag of hand-made gifts in one hand and a mug of Pilsner in another. If you're lucky, you will time your visit with a major sporting event, when large crowds of fans descend upon the square to view a hockey or football game on huge screens.

Old Town also features the Powder Gate, begun as a 65-meter-tall tower (214 feet) in 1475 to form one of the 13 entrances to the district. The gate acquired its present name in the 17th century when it was used to store gunpowder. The tower has since turned into a museum, so be sure to climb its steps for great views of the area.

From the gate to the square you can take Celetna Street, named after the plaited bread rolls first baked there in the Middle Ages. Nearby stands the Municipal House, the city's most prominent Art Nouveau building and the site of Smetana Hall, the biggest concert hall in Prague (named after Czech composer Bedrich Smetana).

In terms of music appreciation, Prague rivals Vienna in almost every way. The music scene permeates the fabric of life there. Rock and punk bands crank up the volume to distorted



One of the Czech Republic's most iconic landmarks, Prague Castle is illuminated at night to showcase the intricacies of its Gothic architectural façade, above.



restaurants, bars and cafés.

From Old Town Square, take Paris Street to the Jewish Quarter, where several synagogues house museum exhibits. Along your jaunt you'll want to take in the Statue of Moses, grand architecture and the burial home of the mythical beast, the Golem of Prague.

If you're looking for something old and new, visit the Vysehrad, the old fortress where Prague was founded. Inside its thick stone walls are shops and the National Cemetery, which houses the graves of Prague's most famous citizens. Right next to the Vltava River is the ultra-modern Dancing Building, a unique masterpiece of glass and steel that was modeled after the dancers Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire.

Music lovers will delight at the Rudolfinum, the city's major concert hall and the home of



the Prague National Orchestra.

The Czech Republic is renowned for its spas and one of the best is the Spa at Mandarin Oriental, located in a former Renaissance chapel where you can still see the remnants of the church under a glass floor.

**Where to eat and drink:** Each day begins with breakfast, and where better to go in Prague than the Cafe Savoy, the elegantly decorated restaurant that is now owned by local culinary heavyweights the Ambiente Group. The Savoy serves a reasonably priced lunch and dinner (with many Czech staples on the menu), but many swear by the early-morning fare.

In Old Town, one standout is the Flambée, an intimate restaurant set in a Gothic cellar where candlelight flickers on brick walls. The Flambée features live piano every night in a romantic setting.



One of New Town's best is the Cerny Kohout (The Black Rooster), which specializes in modern Czech, French and international fare.

If a great view is what you're after, dine at the Kampa Park Restaurant. One of the city's finest restaurants, Kampa Park sits beside the river on Kampa Island, right next to Charles Bridge.

On some menus you might find special beer-friendly delicacies under the heading "proti velke zhyzeny" (against great thirst and hunger). Sample the "naakladanee hermeleen," a soft cheese covered in a thin white film and "utopenci," sausages pickled in vinegar, oil, onion, red pepper and spices. Grilled sausages and traditional fried cheese sandwiches can be found at food stands all over town. Wash it down with the drink Czechs are famous



for—beer. Some popular brews are Pilsner Urquell, Budweiser (Budejovicky Budvar), Gambrinus and Staropramen.

**Where to stay:** A good bet is the sleek and attractive Corinthia Towers Hotel. The high-rise offers panoramic views stretching to Prague Castle and beyond.

The K+K Hotel Fenix stands at the heart of the city and just a short walk from Wenceslas Square. The decor is modern and lively, with just a hint of exclusive atmosphere.

Techies might be drawn to the Hotel Icon—located one block south of Wenceslas Square—with its Skype phones, iPod docks and biometric safes that open with a fingerprint.

For a more Old World accommodation, stay at the restored Hotel Paris, which oozes with period elegance and is located near Old Town Square.





levels in a thriving club scene, and even street performances make you consider paying the city a cover charge. Turn a corner, for example, and you might run into a violinist playing Bach or a five-piece jazz band doing a bit of ragtime.

The Prague Spring International Music Festival showcases not just the city's but the world's outstanding performing artists, symphony orchestras and chamber music ensembles. Founded soon after World War II, Prague Spring, as it's called, ranks as one of Europe's major music festivals.

The celebration of music continues into the fall with the Prague Autumn Festival, a three-week series of classical concerts in September, and November's International Jazz Festival, which has drawn the likes of B.B. King, Herbie Hancock and Dave Brubeck. Jazz and Prague, in fact, go back a long way. During the days behind the Iron Curtain, jazz became the unofficial music of the independence movement as the art form was driven underground. The ruling party closed all the city's jazz clubs, except the state-run U Maleho Glena, which is still in operation today.

Architecture lovers should not miss Lesser Town, which resides on the slopes below the Prague Castle on the western side of the river. The picturesque Nerudova Street, part of Royal Way, leads up to Prague Castle and contains many stately homes adorned with emblems of colorful beasts such as the Green Lobster and the White Swan.

The heart of the area is Lesser Town Square where you'll find official buildings, a number of restaurants and historic sites such as St. Nicholas Church. The leading artists of the day crafted the statues, frescoes and paintings inside.

Two other notable destinations in the district are Maltese Square, named after the Knights of Malta, and Kampa Island, known as the Venice of Prague. Kampa Island, formed by a branch of the Vltava called the Devil's Stream, features beautiful gardens, pottery markets and other small shops. No gondolas here, but the view along the river on a

**Mounted on the wall of Old Town Hall, the Prague Astronomical Clock is a tourist hot spot with its hourly display of "The Walk of the Apostles," left. A bird's-eye view accentuates the layered bridges over Vltava River, located in the heart of the city, below.**





lantern-lit boat is just as romantic.

When you're done in Kampa Island, walk over the Charles Bridge, which connects Lesser Town with Old Town. Named after Emperor Charles IV and completed in 1400, Charles Bridge is Prague's most familiar monument.

The Jewish Quarter contains the remains of Prague's former Jewish ghetto. Nearly 6,000 people currently reside in the community, known best for former resident Franz Kafka and the mystical Golem created by Jehuda ben Bezael, also known as Rabbi Loew.

The center of modern Prague is undoubtedly New Town. Less visited by tourists, the area is best known for Wenceslas Square, surrounded by shops, museums, cinemas, office blocks, hotels, restaurants and cafés.

Journalist and writer Mark Baker first moved to Prague in 1991 from Vienna, where he was a journalist for *The Economist*. He stayed in the city for three years before moving to New York. Baker returned to Prague in 1997, drawn back by its distinct character and atmosphere.

"[Prague] is much more relaxed than your typical European city," Baker says. "The pubs and people still seem more real and down to earth. I think it has something to do with Czech



culture. It's very close to the land and that makes Prague feel like a real place."

Chambers said that when he returned to Prague in 2007 he looked forward to reconnecting with the locals as much as touring the city. "They are a very warm and interesting people. I just love to sit in a café and people watch," says Chambers, a Pittsburgh, Pa., native who now lives in New York. "Prague is really one of my favorite places." ■

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