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The Best of Prague

Prague has stood the test of time, but the floods of August 2002 threatened to ruin centuries of culture and history forever. Happily, the waters were no match for the robust landmarks and iron will of the people of this ancient kingdom, and the city is back, better than ever.

Here, the last 1,000 years of triumphs in art and architecture have collided, often violently, with power politics and religious conflicts. While Bohemia has been the fulcrum of wars over the centuries, it has settled into a post–Cold War peace, spiked with a rough transition to a capitalist economy.

While Prague's rich collection of Gothic, baroque, and Renaissance buildings has stood stoically through all the strife, the streets and squares fronting the grand halls have often been the stages for tragedy. The well-worn cobblestones have felt the hooves of king's horses, the jackboots of Hitler's armies, the heaving wheels of Soviet tanks, and the shuffling feet of students in passive revolt. Today they're jammed with armies of visitors jostling for space to experience the aura of "Golden Prague" only to be bombarded with peddlers trying to make a quick buck or mark (or crown when the home currency is stable).

The spaghetti-strand alleys winding through Old Town have become so inundated with visitors during high season that they now resemble an intricate network of trails for scurrying ants. This town wasn't built for mass tourism.

The lifting of the Iron Curtain after 1989's bloodless "Velvet Revolution," one of a flurry of citizens' revolts ending Communist rule in Eastern Europe, has attracted many Westerners, who can finally come search for the secrets of the other side. But the city sees itself as the westernmost of former East Bloc capitals, and Praguers wince when they hear the term "Eastern Europe" used to describe their home.

Conflicts past and present give the city an eclectic energy. The atmosphere continually reminds us that monarchs and dictators have tried to possess this city for much of the past millennium.

THE CITY OF A THOUSAND SPIRES

Viewed from high atop Vyšehrad, the 10-centuries-old citadel at the city's south end, the ancient city of Prague hugs the hills rising from the river Vltava (Moldau, as it is commonly known from the German). Rows of steeples stacked on onion domes pierce the sky, earning Prague the moniker "The City of a Hundred Spires"—an inaccurate title. I've counted many more.

Sadly, in the 4 decades of vacuous Communist rule, the city's classical heart was infected by faceless architecture and neglect. Now, while new owners clean up the grime on decaying masterpieces and rebuild facades on many forgettable follies, the city is recapturing its more avant-garde tastes. Regrettably, a new army of self-commissioned "artists" has laid siege with another weapon: graffiti. The

sprejer (sprayer) problem is the latest chapter in Prague's cyclical battle of moderating freedom against repression—a conundrum Czech expatriate author Milan Kundera recounted in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (see “Recommended Films & Books,” in appendix A).

The Czech Republic was branded an economic miracle in the early years of the transformation to a free-market economy, but an experiment in rapid privatization of Communist-era companies led to a massive wave of corruption, turning the dream into a nightmare for many.

Thanks in part to tourism, Prague has been spared the worst impact of a deep recession in the late 1990s, although you should be forewarned

that the Czech currency, the crown, remains very volatile, and its value fluctuation can significantly affect the price of your stay (see “The Czech Koruna,” in chapter 2).

But while Prague's rebirth has come with labor pains of inflation, traffic jams (with new Western cars), and the ever-present pounding of construction crews, the stately spires of this living baroque and medieval museum rise above it all. Despite the furious development and reconstruction popping up all over, the classical monuments remain the city's bedrock. Prague Castle's reflection in the Vltava or the mellow nighttime glow of the lanterns around the 18th-century Stavovské Divadlo (Estates' Theater) gives the city a Mozart-really-was-here feel.

1 Frommer's Favorite Experiences in Prague & the Czech Republic

- **Having a Cup and a Debate at the Kavárna Slavia:** The reincarnation of Prague's favorite dissident cafe—reopened in the late 1990s after being closed since 1993 in a real-estate dispute—retains its former Art Deco glory. The cloak-and-dagger interactions of secret police eavesdropping on political conversations may be gone, but there's still an energy that flows with the talk and java at the Slavia—and it comes with a great view. See p. 94.
- **Making Your Own Procession Down the Royal Route:** The downhill jaunt from Prague Castle, through Malá Strana (Lesser Town), and across Charles Bridge to Old Town Square, is a day in itself. The trip recalls the route taken by the carriages of the Bohemian kings; today it's lined with quirky galleries, shops, and cafes. See “Sightseeing Suggestions” in chapter 6.
- **Getting Lost in Old Town:** Every week a new cafe or gallery seems to pop up along the narrow winding streets of Staré Město (Old Town). Prague is best discovered by those who easily get lost on foot, and Old Town's impossible-to-navigate streets are made for such wanderings. See chapter 6.
- **Taking a Slow Boat Down the Vltava:** You can see many of the most striking architectural landmarks from the low-angle and low-stress vantage point of a rowboat you pilot yourself. At night, you can rent a dinghy with lanterns for a very romantic ride. See “Sightseeing Options” in chapter 6.
- **Riding a Faster Boat Down the Vltava:** For those not willing to test navigational skills or rowing strength, large tour boats offer similar floating views, many with meals. Be sure to check the direction of your voyage so it flows past

the castles and palaces. See “Sightseeing Options” in chapter 6.

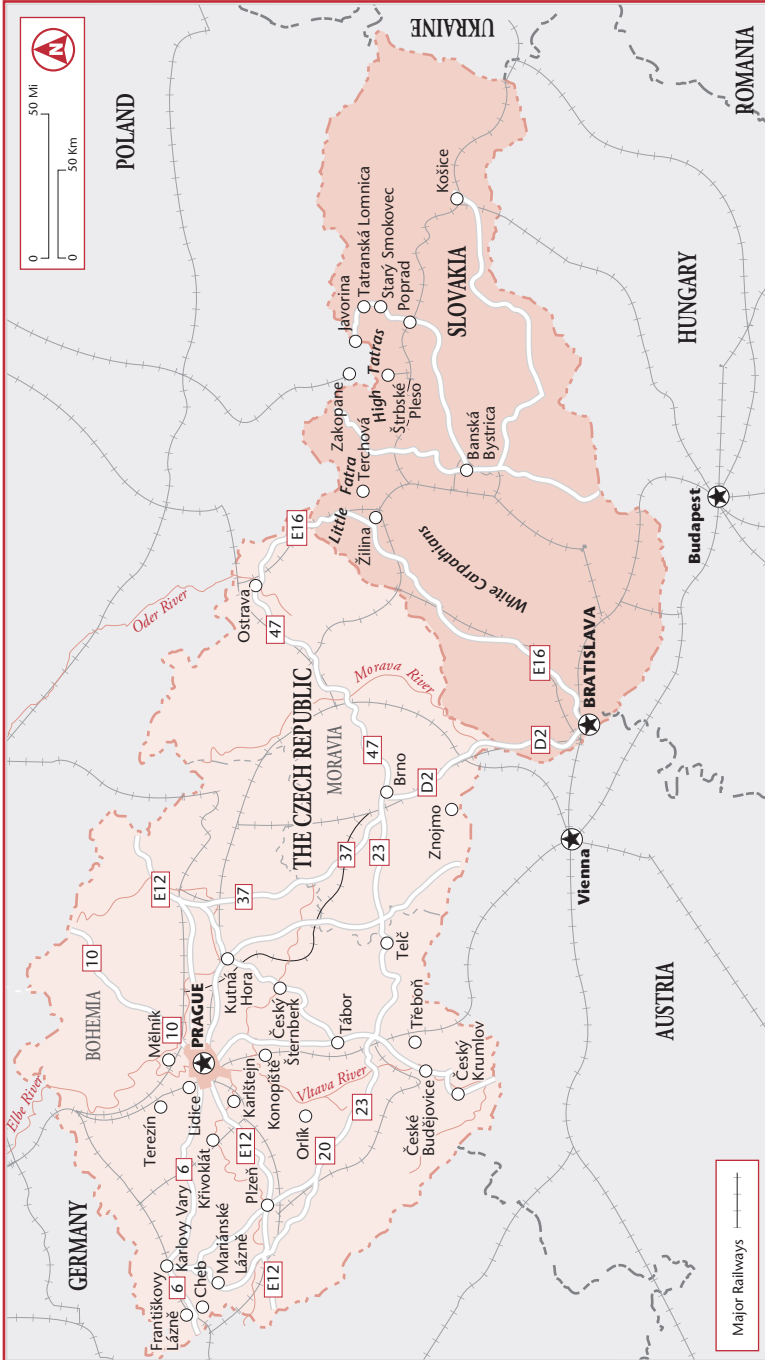
- **Visiting a Large Communist-Era Housing Estate:** Anyone wondering how most latter-day Praguers live should see the mammoth housing blocks called *paneláky*. The size astounds and piques the debate over form versus function and living versus surviving. See “The Art of Prague’s Architecture” in chapter 6.
- **Picnicking on Vyšehrad:** Of all the parks where you can picnic, the citadel above the Vltava standing guard over the south end of the Old Town is the calmest and most interesting spot close to the center. Its more remote location means less tourist traffic, and the gardens, city panoramas, and national cemetery provide pleasant walks and poignant history. See “Other Top Sights” in chapter 6.
- **Sharing a Moment with the Children of Terezín:** On display at the Ceremonial Hall of the Old Jewish Cemetery are sketches drawn by children held at the Terezín concentration camp, northwest of Prague. These drawings are a moving lesson in the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia. See “Sightseeing Suggestions” in chapter 6.
- **Strolling Across Charles Bridge at Dawn or Dusk:** The silhouettes of the statues lining the 6-centuries-old crown jewel of Czech heritage hover like ghosts in the still of the sunrise skyline. Early in the morning you can stroll across the bridge without encountering the crowds that appear by midday. At dusk, the statues are the same, but the odd play of light turns the bridge and city panorama into something completely different than in the morning. See “Walking Tour 1: Charles Bridge & Malá Strana (Lesser Town)” in chapter 7.
- **Romping Late at Night on Charles Bridge:** “Peace, Love, Spare Change” describes the scene, as musicians, street performers, and flower people come out late at night to become one with the bridge. Why not join them? See chapter 9 for more nightlife options.
- **Stepping into History at Karlštejn Castle:** A 30-minute train ride south of Prague puts you in the most visited Czech landmark in the environs, built by Charles IV (Karel IV in Czech—the namesake of Charles Bridge) in the 14th century to protect the Holy Roman Empire’s crown jewels. This Romanesque hilltop bastion fits the image of the castles of medieval lore. See p. 192.
- **Jumping into “4-D” at Orlik:** After exploring Orlik Castle, south of Prague, and taking a relaxing stroll through the gardens, you can jump into the fourth dimension, in a variation of bungee jumping. It’s quite a pick-me-up. See “Jumping into the Fourth Dimension” in chapter 10.
- **Checking Out a Festive Beer Hall in České Budějovice:** Forget touristy remakes. In Bohemia’s České Budějovice, the spirit of

Impressions

Your struggle to preserve what you have inherited, and to reintegrate it into the values and character of the society you are rebuilding, is a struggle you must win, or there will not be much hope for any of us.

—Prince Charles to Prague’s leaders (May 1991)

The Czech and Slovak Republics



8 CHAPTER 1 · THE BEST OF PRAGUE

Masné krámy conjures up the feel of an 18th-century Czech pub, and the brew is as fresh as the bread. See “České Budějovice” in chapter 11.

- **Enjoying New Year’s Eve in Český Krumlov:** At midnight in Bohemia’s Český Krumlov, the Na plášti Bridge at the castle overlooking the town turns into a mini–United Nations, as revelers from all over gather to watch and light fireworks, see who can uncork the champagne the fastest, and just plain celebrate. See “Český Krumlov” in chapter 11.
- **Relaxing in Třeboň:** If you’re looking for a small Czech town

not overrun with tourists, travel to Třeboň in Bohemia. This serene place, surrounded by forests and ponds, is a diamond in the rough, a walled city that time, war, and disaster have failed to destroy. See “Třeboň” in chapter 11.

- **Walking Through the Šatov Wine Cellar:** Some of the finest Moravian wine is produced at the Šatov vineyard, and at this wine cellar you’ll find more than the local product. The cellar’s walls are carved and painted in intricate detail with scenes from Prague Castle and *Snow White*. See “The Painted Cellar of the Šatov Vineyard” in chapter 12.

2 Best Hotel Bets

- **Best Panoramic Views:** The pride of the former Communist tourism industry was the Hotel Forum, which has since been privatized, sold again, and renamed the **Corinthia Towers Hotel** (☎ 261-191-111). Each north-facing room at this high-rise south of the city center provides a wide-angle view stretching to Prague Castle and beyond. See p. 69.
- **Best Malá Strana Views:** The upper floors of the **Hotel U tří pštrosů** (☎ 257-532-410) offer some of the best old-world views over Malá Strana’s red rooftops. The corner rooms are best, providing glimpses of Charles Bridge and Prague Castle. See p. 60.
- **Best Bohemian Country Setting:** The **Romantik Hotel U raka** (☎ 220-511-100), in a secret ravine minutes from the castle in Hradčany, has cozy rustic rooms and a tastefully folksy atmosphere. See p. 56.
- **Best Hotel Closest to Prague Castle:** The **U Krále Karla** (☎ 257-532-869), on the main castle-bound thoroughfare Nerudova, tries hard to provide a stay to

match its Renaissance motif. It’s a few steps above the main turn to the castle, avoiding much of the noise, which has become a nuisance to rivals down the street. See p. 57.

- **Best for Business Travelers:** Just off náměstí Republiky near the imposing Czech National Bank, the new **Prague Marriott Hotel** (☎ 222-888-888) comfortably fits the bill for those who need to get in, use their laptops, cut a deal, and then get out to see the city (especially if your firm is paying the bill). See p. 68.
- **Best Luxury Hotel:** The **Hotel Savoy** (☎ 224-302-430) is an opulent but tasteful small hotel that suggests London more than Prague. Enjoy afternoon tea and a library where you can read by a crackling fire when it’s cold outside. See p. 56. The Savoy also houses the **Best Hotel Restaurant**, the **Hradčany**, with exceptionally delicate and innovative Continental cuisine. See p. 76.
- **Best Luxury Old Town Hotel with the Best View of Prague Castle:** If price isn’t a concern,

choose a room at one of the newest additions to the luxury hotel list, **Four Seasons Hotel** (☎ 221-427-000), with its unbeatable location. See p. 61.

- **Best Moderately Priced Hotel:** The freshly restored **Hotel Cloister Inn** (☎ 224-211-020), in a former convent, offers a comfortable room at a fair price in Old Town near Jan Hus's 15th-century Bethlehem Chapel. See p. 64.
- **Best Romantic Pension:** Although the **Pension Větrník** (☎ 220-612-404) is well outside the city center, this family-run B&B is a very friendly and romantic place, easily accessible by tram or taxi. It's built into an antique windmill amid lush gardens, and you can't beat it for charm and price. See p. 70.
- **Best Throwback to Prague's First Republic:** The restored Art Nouveau **Hotel Pafř** (☎ 222-195-195) recalls 1920s Prague, one of the wealthiest cities on earth at that time. The hotel's beauty oozes with period elegance. It's across from another newly remodeled gem, the Municipal House (Obecní dům). See p. 62.
- **Best-Value District:** Staying in **Vinohrady**, a gentrified quarter above Wenceslas Square, will put you a bit off the Royal Route, but you can find no better price and selection in central Prague, especially if you arrive without reservations. This neighborhood teems with cafes and has easy metro access to the older quarters. See "Vinohrady" in chapter 4.
- **Best for Families:** Consider a **private apartment** from an agency (see "Private Rooms & Apartments" in chapter 4). Larger and cheaper than hotel rooms, these apartments come with kitchens so you can fix your own meals. (For more options, see "Family-Friendly Accommodations," also in chapter 4.)
- **Best Health Clubs:** The **Hotel Inter-Continental Praha** (☎ 296-631-111) is fully equipped with modern machines and free weights and is home to Prague's most narcissistic aerobic classes—an after-work gawking paradise for stockbrokers. See p. 61. The new **Prague Marriott** (☎ 222-888-888) actually has a better-equipped fitness center but it's not yet as clubby as the Inter-Con's. See p. 68.
- **Best Tom Cruise/Leonid Brezhnev Haunt:** The **Hotel Praha** (☎ 224-341-111) was once a heavily guarded bastion for visiting Communist bigwigs. The lingering chintz of the Praha has unexpectedly emerged as a refuge for luminaries who want to lie low, including the star of *Mission: Impossible*. A wacky choice. See p. 71.
- **Best Centrally Located Pension/Hostel:** The **Pension Unitas/Art Prison Hostel** (☎ 224-385-441) is an ideal place for budget travelers who want to take advantage of staying in the very center of Prague. See p. 65.

3 Best Dining Bets

- **Best Spot for an Important Lunch or Dinner:** The **Bellevue** (☎ 222-221-443) has artful Continental fare and impeccable business-friendly service with a cozy atmosphere near Charles Bridge. See p. 82.
- **Best Czech Cuisine:** In an intricate flower-embellished setting, **U modré kachničky** (☎ 257-320-308) brings delicacy to Czech fare, including savvy spins on heavy sauces and wild game. See p. 81.

- **Best Romantic Dinner:** Though for years it took raps for its sky-high prices, the now more-affordable menu of gourmet haunt **U Malířů** (☎ 257-530-000) brings its haute cuisine a little closer to earth. See p. 77.
- **Best Bird's-Eye View:** The food may not be anything to write home about, but you can't beat the panorama of Prague offered at **Nebozízek** (☎ 257-315-329) on Petřín Hill. See p. 81.
- **Best Riverside View:** A tie. You can dine in the shadow of Prague's most famous bridge during the high season at **Kampa Park** (☎ 257-532-685). See p. 80. Or you can look at the river and the other side of Charles bridge while dining at **Hergetova cihelna**.
- **Best Home-made Italian Pasta:** Feel the Italian *ambiente* and enjoy the great taste of southern Europe and its cuisine at family-run **Il Ritrovo** (☎ 224-261-475). See p. 90.
- **Best Pub *Guláš* (Goulash):** Old Town's boisterous **Pivnice Rade-gast** (☎ 222-328-237) dishes out a fine spicy goulash along with its Moravian namesake brew. See p. 95.
- **Best Spot for a Celebration:** With huge portions of hearty Czech food perfectly accompanied by a Pilsner lager, **Restaurant U Čížků** (☎ 222-232-257) feels like a festive Bohemian hunting lodge. See p. 88.
- **Best American Bistro:** With the death of Planet Hollywood and the California-esque Avalon, **Red Hot & Blues** (☎ 222-314-639) remains the last best hope for Yankee food in Prague. The menu is mostly Tex-Mex and Cajun, with a good burger thrown in. See p. 86.
- **Best Seafood:** Old Town's **Rybí trh** (☎ 296-767-447) ships in fresh monkfish, salmon, shellfish, and just about anything else that swims in saltwater, and serves them in an airy space in the courtyard behind Týn Church. See p. 84.
- **Best Fast Food:** Even with McDonald's outlets multiplying like mushrooms, a Big Mac can't match the Philly cheesesteak or Cajun chicken sandwiches at **Cornucopia** (☎ 224-220-950). See p. 91.
- **Best Bagels: Bohemia Bagel** (☎ 257-310-694) at Újezd in Malá Strana and at Masná Street in Staré Město (☎ 224-812-560) has filled what was a curious vacuum. See p. 82.
- **Best Kosher:** Astonishingly, it was several years after the revolution before a real kosher restaurant returned to Prague's Jewish Quarter. The **King Solomon Strictly Kosher Restaurant** (☎ 224-818-752), across from the Pinkas Synagogue, finally gets it right. See p. 85.
- **Best Value:** A friendly, family-run restaurant on a narrow Malá Strana street, **Vinárna U Maltézských rytířů** (☎ 257-533-666) feels like an old Czech home with food that tastes as though *Babička* (Grandma) made it. See p. 81.
- **Best for Kids/Best Pizza:** You can please the kids and satisfy your own cravings at **Pizzeria Rugantino** (☎ 222-318-172), a friendly and energetic Old Town room run by an Italian family that loves kids and dogs. See p. 87.
- **Best Late-Night Dining:** The **Radost FX Café** (☎ 224-254-776) dishes out veggie burgers, burritos, and salads to the trendy post-club crowd until 5am. See p. 92.
- **Best Outdoor Dining:** The terrace looking up at Charles Bridge insures that the grill-fired steaks

and seafood at **Kampa Park** (☎ 257-532-685) are a summer favorite. See p. 80.

- **Best Pancakes (Crepes):** The **Creperie Café Gallery-Restaurant Café** at the foot of Charles Bridge (☎ 221-108-240) is for those who have a sweet tooth. See p. 86.
- **Best Art Nouveau Cafe:** The reinvigorated cafe at the **Municipal House (Kavárna Obecní dům; ☎ 222-002-763)** has recreated the grandeur of Jazz Age afternoons. See p. 93.
- **Best Landmark Dissident Cafe:** Prague's pre-revolution dissident

mecca, the **Kavárna (Café) Slavia** (☎ 224-218-493), across from the National Theater, reopened to presidential fanfare in 1997. Its sparsely elegant Art Deco space beckons those seeking a post-theater literary buzz. See p. 94.

- **Best Student Cafes:** The **Globe** (☎ 224-934-203) pulls in expats with English banter, books, and brownies. See p. 94. True intellectual angst, old furniture, and huge inexpensive cappuccinos await the crowd at **Kavárna Medúza** (☎ 222-515-107) in Vinohrady. See p. 95.