

The Best of Prague

Prague has survived many crises, 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 kings' 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 crown.

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 1,000-year-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 Thousand 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

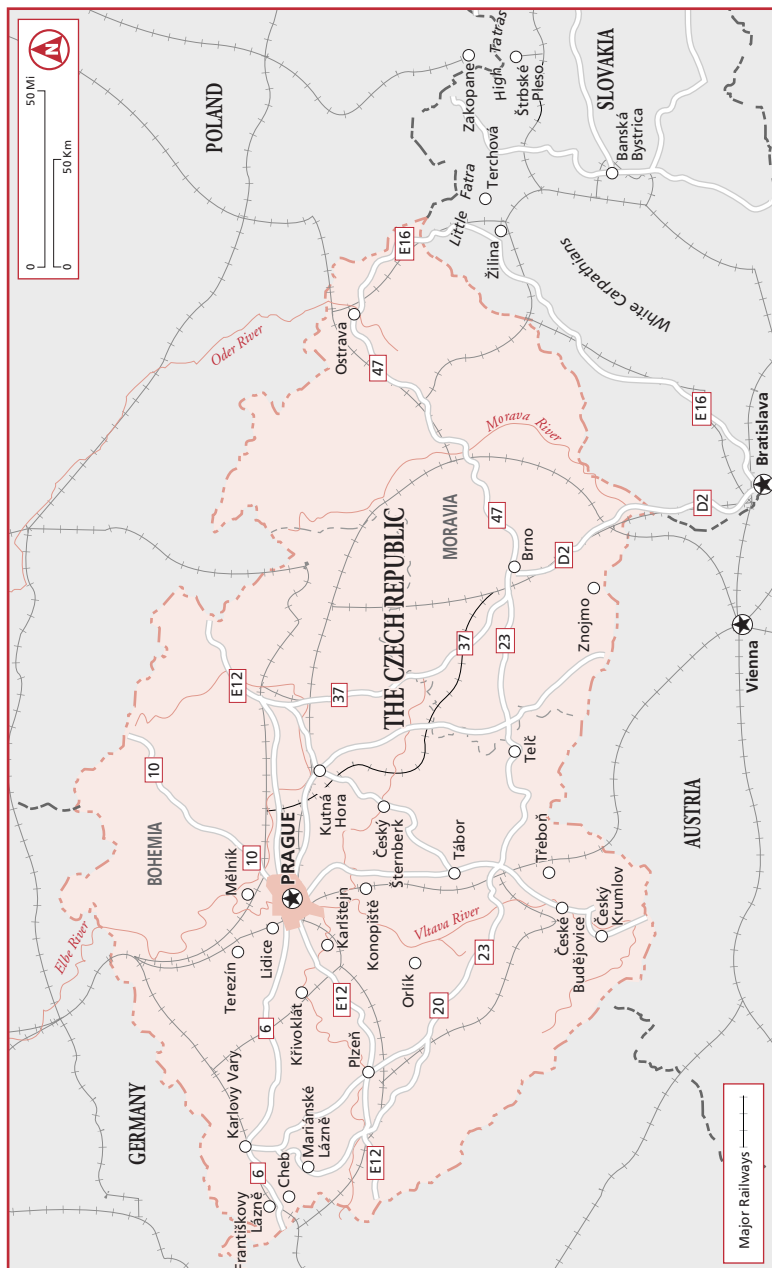
currency, the crown, remains volatile, and its value fluctuation can significantly affect the price of your stay (see “The Czech Koruna,” in chapter 2).

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 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences in Prague & the Czech Republic

- **Strolling Across Charles Bridge at Dawn or Dusk:** The silhouettes of the statues lining the 600-year-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. With the changing light of dusk, the statues, the bridge, and the city panorama take on a whole different character. See “Walking Tour 1: Charles Bridge & Malá Strana (Lesser Town)” in chapter 8.
- **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 chapter 8.
- **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 7.
- **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 chapter 11.

The Czech & Slovak Republics



2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **Four Seasons Hotel** (Veselsavínova 2a, Praha 1; ☎ 221-427-000): The best luxury Old Town hotel with the best view of Prague Castle and Charles Bridge. If price isn't a concern, choose a room at this addition to the luxury-hotel list with its unbeatable location. See p. 67.
- **Hotel Savoy** (Keplerova 6, Praha 1; ☎ 224-302-430): 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. 61. The Savoy also houses the **Best Hotel Restaurant**, the **Hradčany**, with exceptionally delicate and innovative Continental cuisine. See p. 82.
- **Hotel Paříž** (U Obecního domu 1, Praha 1; ☎ 222-195-195): This restored Art Nouveau hotel recalls 1920s Prague, one of the wealthiest cities on earth at that time. It's across from another remodeled gem, the Municipal House (Obecní dům). See p. 68.
- **Hotel Aria** (Tržiště 9, Praha 1; ☎ 225-334-111): A new luxurious hotel opened in the heart of Malá Strana just around the corner from the St. Nicholas Cathedral. Its melodious theme will especially please music lovers. See p. 65.
- **Hotel Josef** (Rybná 20, Praha 1; ☎ 221-700-111): The Josef stands out as the most modern hotel in the capital. Its clean lines and peaceful atmosphere are a welcome addition to the new Bohemia. See p. 73.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **Hotel Cloister Inn** (Konviktská 14, Praha 1; ☎ 224-211-020): This freshly restored hotel 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. 70.
- **Pension Větrník** (U Větrníku 40, Praha 6; ☎ 220-612-404): This family-run romantic hideaway is reachable in about 20 minutes by tram from the city center. Its atmosphere and price are unbeatable. See p. 75.
- Staying in **Vinohrady**, a residential area 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. One example is the **Flathotel Orion** (Americká 9, Praha 2; ☎ 222-521-706). This neighborhood teems with cafes and has easy metro access to the older quarters. See "Vinohrady" in chapter 5.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **Kampa Park** (Na Kampě 8b, Praha 1; ☎ 296-826-102): This is the best bet for summer outdoor dining in Prague. The restaurant has a riverside view, where you can dine in the shadow of Prague's most famous bridge during the high season. See p. 83.
- **U Malířů** (Maltézské nám. 11, Praha 1; ☎ 257-530-000): Though for years it took heat for its sky-high prices, the now more-affordable menu of this gourmet haunt brings its haute cuisine a little closer to earth. See p. 83.

- **Nebozízek** (Petřínské sady 411, Praha 1; ☎ 257-315-329): The food may not be anything to write home about, but you can't beat the best bird's-eye view of Prague offered on Petřín Hill. See p. 86.
- **Kavárna Obecní dům** (náměstí Republiky 5, Praha 1; ☎ 222-002-763): This reinvigorated Art Nouveau café at the **Municipal House** has re-created the grandeur of Jazz Age afternoons. See p. 99.
- **Bellevue** (Smetanovo nábřeží 18, Praha 1; ☎ 222-221-443): This is the best spot for an important lunch or dinner. It has artful Continental fare and impeccable business-friendly service, with a cozy atmosphere and super views near Charles Bridge. See p. 88.
- **Restaurant U Čížků** (Karlovo nám. 34, Praha 2; ☎ 222-232-257): With huge portions of hearty Czech food perfectly accompanied by a Pilsner lager, this spot feels like a festive Bohemian hunting lodge. See p. 95.

5 The Best Museums

- **Šternberk Palace** (Hradčanské nám. 15, Praha 1; ☎ 233-090-570): A permanent exhibition, "European Art from the Classical Era to the Close of the Baroque," has been installed at this newly restored baroque palace adjacent to the main gate of Prague Castle. As part of the National Gallery, it's become the venue with the widest art collection in the country. See p. 117.
- **Alfons Mucha Museum** (Panská 7, Praha 1; ☎ 224-216-415): Posters, decorative panels, objects, and excerpts from sketchbooks, as well as oil paintings from this well-known Art Nouveau master, are displayed at the baroque Kaunický Palace near Václavské náměstí. See p. 118.

6 The Best Things to Do for Free (or Almost)

- **Having a Cup and a Debate at the Kavárna Slavia:** (Národní at Smetanovo nábřeží, Praha 1; ☎ 224-218-493). The reincarnation of Prague's favorite dissident café—reopened in the late 1990s—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. 99.
- **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 10 for more nightlife options.
- **Enjoying New Year's Eve in Český Krumlov:** At midnight in Bohemia's Český Krumlov, the Na pláští 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 12, p. 240.
- **Exploring Antiques Shops:** If you like old stuff, you'll enjoy finding something "out of this world" in many of Prague's antiques shops (*starožitnosti*) or bookstores selling more-or-less-old publications (*antikvariáty*). See chapter 9 for shopping suggestions.

7 The Best Activities for Families

- **Riding a Faster Boat Down the Vltava:** For those not willing to test their navigational skills or rowing strength in their own boat, large tour boats offer similar floating views, many with meals. Be sure to check the direction of your voyage to be certain it travels past the castles and palaces. See “Sightseeing Options” in chapter 7.
- **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 7.

8 The Best Neighborhoods for Getting Lost

- **Losing Your Way 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 7.
- **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 12.

9 The Most Romantic Moment

- **Český Krumlov:** If you have time for only one excursion from Prague, make it Český Krumlov. This living gallery of Renaissance-era buildings housing many galleries, shops, and restaurants is 167km (104 miles) south of Prague. Above it towers the second-largest castle complex in the country, with the Vltava River running underneath. No wonder UNESCO named this town a World Heritage Site. See “Český Krumlov” in chapter 12.

10 The Best Memorable Experiences

- **Jumping into “4-D” at Orlík:** After exploring Orlík 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 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 13.
- **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 present a touching memoir of the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia. See p. 112.

- **Visiting a Large Communist-Era Housing Estate:** Anyone wondering how most latter-day Praguers live should see the mammoth housing

blocks called *paneláky*. The breadth of these estates, which circle the outskirts of the city, is astounding, and piques debate over form vs. function and living vs. surviving. See “The Art of Prague’s Architecture” in chapter 7.