

The Best of Prague & the Czech Republic

“Bests” by their very nature are highly personalized affairs. One person’s best might be a classical concert in a baroque church, while another person might relish a night of jazz in a club that’s been around since the 1950s. Fortunately, Prague has a wide of selection of bests that are sure to cater to a range of interests, whether they be in music, art, architecture, nature, or just a glass of very good beer. Here are some of our suggestions below:

1 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Stroll 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.
- **Make 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. (If you want more exercise, start in the Old Town and walk up to the castle.) 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.
- **Take 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. Make the trip in the evening and rent a rowboat with a little lantern. See “Sightseeing Options” in chapter 7.
- **Get Lost in Prague’s Old Town:** It happens to everyone, even people who have lived here for years. You think you’re taking a shortcut down a back alley, and soon you’re on a street you’ve never seen before and have no idea where you are. Old Town’s winding lanes were carved out long before cities had rectilinear street grids, and that’s a big part of the city’s charm. See chapter 7, “The Art of Getting Lost,” p. 120.
- **Catch a Performance of Smetana’s Moldau Symphony:** Or any other piece of classical music, for that matter. Prague’s Gothic spires and baroque cupolas provide the perfect backdrop for a classical concert, opera, or ballet, and the city’s symphony halls and churches are just as beautiful as the music itself. See chapter 10, “Prague After Dark.”
- **Have a Cold One in the City That “Invented” Beer:** We’re not talking about Prague here, but the western Bohemian city of Plzeň (Pilsen) that’s the birthplace of clear, golden modern lager. It’s why we call beer “pilsner” or

simply “pils.” They’re still making beer there and you can tour the brewery. If you can’t make it to Plzeň, stop in at just about any pub in the country for some of the best beer you’ll ever drink. See chapter 12, “The Best of Bohemia.”

- **Step into History at Karlštejn Castle:** A 30-minute train ride southwest 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, though the exterior is more impressive than inside. See chapter 11.

2 THE BEST SPLURGE HOTELS

- **Four Seasons Hotel Prague** (Velešlavínova 2a, Prague 1; ☎ 221-427-000): Arguably the number-one luxury hotel in Old Town, with many rooms having a river view of Prague Castle and Charles Bridge. The house restaurant, Allegro, has won a Michelin star 2 years running, a first in all of central Europe. See chapter 5, p. 74, and chapter 6, p. 95.
- **Hotel Savoy** (Keplerova 6, Prague 1; ☎ 224-302-430): This opulent but tasteful small hotel suggests London more than Prague. Enjoy afternoon tea in the library, where you can read by a crackling fire. See p. 68.
- **Hotel Paříž** (U Obecního domu 1, Prague 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. 76.
- **Hotel Aria** (Tržiště 9, Prague 1; ☎ 225-334-111): This reconverted baroque townhouse plays on Prague’s musical heritage, with each one of its beautifully appointed rooms named after a composer or performer. Some rooms look

out over the Vrtbovská garden. Don’t leave without having dinner or a drink on the rooftop terrace. See p. 72.

- **Hotel Josef** (Rybná 20, Prague 1; ☎ 221-700-111): For fans of clean lines, white walls, and minimalist chic, the Josef was Prague’s first real boutique hotel and still arguably the best. See p. 75.
- **Hotel Mandarin Oriental** (Nebovidská 1, Prague 1; ☎ 233-088-888): This local branch of the international luxury chain occupies a sublime location in a converted monastery in a quiet corner of Malá Strana. This is no cookie-cutter chain; each room is funky and wonderful in its own unique way. See p. 72.
- **U zlaté studně** (U zlaté studně 4, Prague 1; ☎ 257-011-213): This reconstructed 17th-century townhouse sits just below Prague Castle, and many of the rooms afford stunning views out over Malá Strana and Old Town. Rumors were swirling in April 2009 during U.S. President Barack Obama’s visit to Prague that he and Mrs. Obama were going to dine on the restaurant’s terrace. He ended up staying (and eating) at the Hilton, but this would have been a more presidential choice. See p. 68.

3 THE BEST MODERATELY PRICED HOTELS

- **Hotel Cloister Inn** (Konviktská 14, Prague 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. 77.

3

- **Pension Větrník** (U Větrníku 40, Prague 6; ☎ 220-612-404): This family-run romantic hideaway is reachable in about 25 minutes by tram from the city center. Its atmosphere and price are unbeatable. See p. 82.
- **Czech Inn** (Francouzská 76, Prague 10; ☎ 267-267-600): This place calls itself a hostel, but “budget boutique” would be more accurate. Great breakfasts, an upscale modern interior, a bank of convenient computers in the lobby for surfing, and friendly receptionists make this a great choice if value is a prime consideration. See p. 75.
- **Castle Steps** (Nerudova 7, Prague 1; ☎ 257-216-337): These beautifully restored rooms in a series of town palaces along Nerudova in Malá Strana are quirky in the best sense of the word. You won’t get this location—or drop-dead gorgeous chambers—for less money, but you may have to share a bathroom. See p. 73.
- **K+K Hotel Central** (Hyberná 10, Prague 1; ☎ 225-022-000): Okay, it’s absurd to put a four-star luxury hotel in

the moderate category, but this stunningly restored Art Nouveau palace frequently discounts rates over its website, so it’s always worth a click to see what’s available. See p. 79.

- **Hotel Absolutum** (Jablonského 476, Prague 7; ☎ 222-541-406): This is a sleek, modern hotel, with designer-style rooms at very reasonable prices. The location, across the street from the Holešovice train and metro station, won’t win any beauty contests, but it’s super convenient for getting to the center or for checking out Holešovice, one of Prague’s up-and-coming neighborhoods. See p. 81.
- 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 **Orion** (Americká 9, Prague 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, Prague 1; ☎ 296-826-112): On a warm evening in summer, Kampa Park’s idyllic riverside setting will be etched in your memory for a long time to come. The food and service are pretty spectacular too, but give the place a pass if you can’t book on the terrace since there’s better value to be had elsewhere. See p. 89.
- **Pálffy Palác** (Valdštejnská 14, Prague 1; ☎ 257-530-522): This renovated baroque townhouse restaurant is a Prague institution. The hardest part may be deciding where to sit: the luxurious main room feels like a dinner with Louis XIV, but the outdoor terrace

floats just below Prague Castle and has striking views. See p. 93.

- **La Degustation** (Haštalská 18, Prague 1; ☎ 222-311-234): How could you ever forget a full seven-course meal that seems to unfold without end over a long evening, interspersed with unexpected appetizers and bottles and bottles of wine? It’s a meal you’ll talk about for years to come. See p. 96.
- **Kavárna Obecní dům** (náměstí Republiky 5, Prague 1; ☎ 222-002-763): This reinvigorated Art Nouveau cafe at the **Municipal House** has re-created the grandeur of Jazz Age afternoons. See p. 104.

- **Bellevue** (Smetanovo nábřeží 18, Prague 1; ☎ 222-221-443): This is the best spot for an important lunch or dinner. It has artful international fare and impeccable business-friendly service, with a cozy atmosphere and super views near Charles Bridge. See p. 95.
- **Angel** (V kolkovně 7, Prague 1 ☎ 773-222-422): Star chef Sofia Smith will have you coming back again and again for her alchemistic concoctions of Asian spices and central European staples such as lamb shank, pork belly, and duck. Angel's 2008 opening was the culinary event of the year and it's only gotten better since. See p. 96.
- **Bakeshop** (Kozí 1, Prague 1 ☎ 222-316-823): Yes, it's pricey for a bakery, particularly one in central Europe, but who can resist those loaves of sourdough bread, muffins straight from the oven, cookies, and brownies, not to mention the range of lunch items like sandwiches, salads, and big bowls of chili? Eat at the counter along the window or take it with you. See p. 100.

5 THE BEST MUSEUMS

- **Šternberk Palace** (Hradčanské nám. 15, Prague 1; ☎ 233-090-570): The country's best collection of European art, ranging from Byzantine-era icons straight through to Rembrandt, El Greco, Goya, and Van Dyck. See p. 122.
- **Alfons Mucha Museum** (Panská 7, Prague 1; ☎ 221-451-333): Posters, decorative panels, objets d'art, 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. 125.
- **St. George's Convent** (Jiřské nám. 33, Prague 1; ☎ 257-531-644): I never thought I'd have a weakness for 19th-century landscape paintings, but these are spectacular. While the Czech Republic lacks rugged mountains (not to mention a seashore), it's blessed with some of the most beautiful rolling countryside in Europe, and the painters displayed here knew how to capture that. See p. 122.
- **Veletržní Palác** (Veletržní at Dukelských hrdinů 47, Prague 7; ☎ 224-301-111): Prague's museum of art of the 20th and 21st centuries is an underrated gem, filled with masterworks by Klimt, Munch, Schiele, and Picasso. But the real treats here are works by the Modernist Czech painters from the 1920s and '30s. See p. 122.
- **Jewish Museum** (U Starého hřbitova; enter from Široká 3, Prague 1; ☎ 221-711-511): This "museum" is not just one building but a series of preserved synagogues and the Old Jewish Cemetery, which together bear witness to 7 centuries of Jewish life in this tiny part of Prague. The admission fee is regrettably high, but the memory of all those jagged tombstones jutting upward in that crowded plot will last a lifetime. See p. 119.
- **Museum of the Ghetto** (Terezín; ☎ 416-782-225): This is a sobering space that tells the shocking tale of how the Nazis deceived the world into thinking their "Final Solution" was actually building vacation homes for Jews. How did the Nazis get away with it, and how did the world allow them to? See p. 218.
- **Bone Church (Kostnice)**, (Sedlec, near Kutná Hora; ☎ 728-125-488): Three words: creepy, creepy, creepy. Thousands of human bones from the Middle Ages were used in the 19th century to construct this "gothic" interior of a rather ordinary looking (from the outside) church not far from Kutná Hora. You'll finally understand the term "bone chilling." See p. 212.

6 THE BEST THINGS TO DO FOR FREE (OR ALMOST)

- **Having a Cup and a Debate at the Kavárna Slavia:** (Národní at Smetanova nábřeží, Prague 1; ☎ 224-218-493). The reincarnation of Prague's favorite Communist-era dissident café 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. 104.
- **Crossing the Charles Bridge at Night:** At night, the bridge takes on a completely different persona. The crowds thin out (a little) and musicians, street performers, and flower people come here to sit under the statues and sing or just hang out. 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. 250.
- **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, "Prague Shopping" (p. 173) for shopping suggestions.
- **Have a Beer at Letná:** In summer, you'll find the city's best beer garden on the far eastern edge of Letná Park, across the river from Old Town. While the beer's not free (too bad!), it's not all that expensive either, and you're free to sit at one of the picnic tables or along the park benches. The views down to Old Town are simply superb. See "Other Top Sights" in chapter 7.
- **Treat Yourself to a Svařák:** *Svařák*, short for *svařené víno*, is the Czech version of mulled wine, a traditional Christmastime treat that's best drunk outside in the freezing cold from a plastic or Styrofoam cup. Vendors on Old Town Square start selling the stuff in early November and *svařák* season lasts through the new year or longer. Okay, it's not free, but a good-size cup of the stuff will only set you back about 40Kč.
- **Drop in at St. Vitus Cathedral:** Most of the Castle complex requires an expensive combined-entry ticket to visit, but not the biggest site of all, St. Vitus Cathedral. Be sure to take in the amazing stained glass windows and the St. Wenceslas Chapel. See p. 109.
- **Feed the Swans:** Okay, the bread won't exactly be free, but it's worth a couple of crowns to buy some rolls and head down to the river (for the best swan sightings, try the banks on the Malá Strana side just south of the Malostranská metro station along the street U Lužického semináře). The Vltava is home to hundreds of white swans (if not more), but be careful with the bread, since the birds might bite.

7 THE BEST ACTIVITIES FOR FAMILIES

- **Ride a Big 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.

- **Picnic at 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 Sightings” in chapter 7.
- **Spend a Day at the Zoo:** Prague’s zoo has improved immensely in recent years, after the 2002 flood severely damaged the grounds and even killed several animals. There’s been lots of new investment and the setting by the river is great. Check out some of the biggest collections of giraffes and great apes in Central Europe. See “Other Top Sightings” in chapter 7.
- **Gaze at the Stars:** For budding astronomers, Prague has two treats in store. A real live observatory on Petřín Hill is open on clear nights in summer or winter for checking out the moon, Jupiter,

Saturn, and even some other galaxies. The planetarium in Stromovka park is an indoor stellar spectacle. See “Other Top Sightings” in chapter 7.

- **Hop Aboard the *Oldtimer*:** That’s Prague’s endearing name for Tram 91, a vintage streetcar from a bygone era that still plies the rails on Saturdays and Sundays during the summer. Hope aboard at any stop, buy a ticket from the conductor, and ride for as long as you want. See “Sightseeing Options” in chapter 7.
- **Visit the Technical Museum:** Older kids will enjoy a visit to Prague’s National Technical Museum, a kind of miniature Smithsonian Institution, crammed with planes, trains, and automobiles. It’s been closed now for several years while undergoing refurbishment, but was set for a grand reopening in 2010. See “Other Museums & Galleries” in chapter 7.
- **Get Lost in a Mirror Maze:** There are lots of offbeat attractions on Petřín Hill in addition to the mock “Eiffel Tower.” The mirror maze is an old-fashioned house of mirrors—more disorienting for adults than it is for kids! But fun for all. See “Sightseeing Options” in chapter 7.

8 THE MOST ROMANTIC EXPERIENCES

- **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.
- **Holding Hands on the Charles Bridge:** This is a no-brainer, but the real trick is to choose the right moment. In summer, shoot for an evening stroll just as the sun is setting behind Prague Castle. In winter, pray for snow, and then go out at night as the flakes swirl around and muffle the sounds of the city.
- **Take a Ride on the Metro:** There must be something in the air down there or about those long intervals between stations (especially along the C line), but

Czechs (particularly young couples) love to hold hands, kiss, and generally push the PDA envelope on the metro. As they say, “when in Rome . . .”

- **Dine on the River:** Several of the Prague’s best restaurants are perched right next to the Vltava or command stunning views out over it (see chapter 6, “Where to Dine in Prague,” for some suggestions). Or do the ultimate romantic thing and actually dine *on* the river. Buy a bottle of “Bohemia Sekt” (domestic sparkling wine), a picnic lunch from Bakeshop (p. 100), and rent a paddle boat from one of the rental outlets on the island across from the National Theater.
- **Visit Your Local Pub:** I know that it’s bad form to kiss in a pub. Not only does

the beer play tricks with your judgment, you risk the rest of the bar jangling their keys (a polite enjoiner to “get a room”). On the other hand, if you’re lucky, the setting and the beer will conspire to create a moment that seems so right, the only logical response will be an amorous one. See chapter 10, “Prague After Dark,” for a list of good Czech pubs.

- Spend an Afternoon at **Stromovka Park:** This is Prague’s most secluded park and no one will look askance as you spread out your blanket, uncork a bottle of wine, and start whispering sweet nothings into your partner’s ear. In fact, look around, everyone else seems to be doing the same thing. See “Other Top Sights” in chapter 7.

9 THE BEST CZECH BEER

- **Pilsner Urquell:** I can hear the catcalls already. Yes, this is the biggest brewer in the country (it’s a little like choosing “Budweiser” as the best American beer), but Pilsner Urquell really might be the Czechs’ best. It still wins lots of national beer prizes and the signature bitter taste and smooth follow-through of its main 12-degree lager sets the standard for beers around the world.
- **Budvar:** Possibly my personal favorite, since I like beers to have a slightly sweet (but not too much so) taste. By the way (and no slight to the good folks in St. Louis, Missouri), this is the original “Budweiser” and hails from České Budějovice (known as “Budweis” in German).
- **Staropramen:** Prague’s home brewery would never have made this list in the old days—the quality was too inconsistent. But “Staro” is now owned by the giant InBev group (which also owns Bass Ale and Stella Artois, among other big names) and surprisingly it’s gotten better, not worse.
- **Kozel:** This bitter brew has long been a favorite of Prague’s rowdy expat drinkers, who admire the brand’s signature label depicting a goat just as much as the taste. Now Kozel is owned by the Pilsner Urquell group and has lost a little of its cachet. The standard Kozel golden lager seems to be getting harder and harder to find, but the very good Kozel dark is available at nearly all Pilsner Urquell pubs.
- **Krušovice:** This is another decidedly bitter brew that seems to divide beer drinkers down the middle between those who love it and those who can only tolerate it. Count me among the former. It’s brewed in the middle of hop country and seems to taste all the fresher for it.
- Naturally, this list could go on and on and doesn’t even begin to crack the smaller regional breweries, of which there are nearly 100 around the country. To find a good selection of hard-to-find bottles from smaller brewers, check out **Galerie Piva** in Malá Strana. See “Wine & Beer” in chapter 9.