

Prague



Prague: A City in the Heart of Europe



Prague's charm is not only in the number of its sights, however numerous they might be, but also in its unique character and ambience. Prague is situated on several hills on both sides of the Vltava River. Its natural location, together with over a thousand years of continual, uninterrupted history of building in various styles of architecture, makes Prague one of the most beautiful cities in Europe.

Undoubtedly, Prague has a long tradition of architectural variety; furthermore, its history has always been rich in arts, music, and literature. For centuries, Prague has been an important trading crossroads, and a meeting place of scientists, scholars, and artists from all parts of the world. Prague's university is the oldest in Central Europe; actually, the list of famous personalities who may be associated with Prague in any way would be long enough to make a little book.

Looking at the map, you will see that Prague is, indeed, Europe's true hub, centre, and heart. For centuries, it has been a place where various nations' blood mixed, where national cultures met and influenced each other. Those who have walked in the streets of Prague, have also seen Europe's history, have witnessed Europe's cultural movements, have followed the footsteps of reformers, artists, rulers and warriors, who significantly contributed, in terms of ideas, arts and politics, to creating the present shape of the Continent...

Prague's citizens are proud of their city; however, Prague itself does not live off its great history. As a modern city, it has all that it should have: a variety of cultural and sports events, youth clubs, lively shopping streets, or new administrative centres. The past meets the present, creating a unique case of co-existence.



1. A magnificent view of Prague from the top of St. Vitus' Cathedral at the Prague Castle

2. The Master of Třeboň altar – Christ on the Mount of Olives (14th century)

3. The medieval Old Town Hall Astronomical Clock was Constructed in 1410 by clock-maker Mikuláš from Kadaň. The oldest parts of the clock are a mechanical clockwork and an astronomical face showing positions of celestial bodies

4. Statues of a lion and two angels by I. F. Platzer in the first courtyard of the Prague Castle



Architecture

Fortunately, unlike a lot of European cities, Prague was neither destroyed in the two world wars, nor subject to unwise reconstructions. In the course of time, it grew and changed gradually and systematically; yet each epoch left visible traces in its streets. Prague's historic centre looks like a gallery, rich in all styles of architecture, ranging from Gothic Art and Art Nouveau to Modernism. Walking along the streets of Prague is like walking across centuries or browsing through a textbook on European architecture.

The first mention of Prague dates back to the late 10th century. Even then the Prague Castle was a seat of the ruling princely family; thus Prague has been the capital of the Czech state for over a thousand years. The most significant ruler in the Middle Ages was Emperor Charles IV, during whose rule a stone bridge connecting both banks of the Vltava River and St. Vitus' Cathedral, the main Gothic church in the country, were built.

The Baroque culture in Prague is a unique phenomenon. Without its Baroque churches, adorned with beautiful ceiling frescos, spectacular noblemen's palaces with large gardens, statues of saints, or extended towers (which gave the city the name

"hundred-spired"), Prague would not be what it is today.

If you walk from the Powder Tower, situated next to the Municipal House, cross the city centre and go across the Charles Bridge, you will get to the Prague Castle; this route is called the Royal Way. Czech kings went this way to St. Vitus' Cathedral on their coronation parades. Prague's atmosphere will impress you greatly, as it did important messengers and prominent foreign visitors centuries ago.

Prague's Jewish Quarter, one of the most valuable Jewish monuments in the world, includes the Old Jewish Cemetery, with its several thousands of Renaissance and Baroque tombstones. The Gothic Old-New Synagogue from the late 13th century is the oldest preserved synagogue in Europe; up to this day, it has been

1. The Romanesque Rotunda of St. Martin from the 11th century

2. The view of the Lesser Town

3. The Church of St. Nicholas in the Lesser Town in Prague

4. The St. Vitus' Cathedral

5. The Royal folly of Queen Anne ("Belvedere")

6. The Baroque hall of the Jesuit library



used as a house of worship and the main synagogue of Prague's Jewish Community.

The Prague Castle is the most popular sight visited in Prague. It towers on an elevated hill on the left bank of the Vltava River; its distinctive panorama with St. Vitus' Cathedral dominates Prague's skyline. In the course of centuries, the castle complex has undergone numerous reconstructions; today, it is the seat of the Czech president.

Not only the cathedral, the Old Royal Palace, the Picture Gallery, but also extensive gardens, from which you may have a wonderful view of the city, are worth seeing. If this is not enough, you may climb up the cathedral tower and get a bird's eye view of the whole city.

A visit to the castle may be joined with a visit to the nearby Strahov Monastery and a walk in the Petřín hill park. On top of the hill – where you can get by a cable car – there is an observation tower, built as a small imitation of the Eiffel Tower in Paris in the late 19th century. At Petřín, there are also parts of the Hunger Wall, the city's original medieval fortification.

Furthermore, Prague prides in a number of interesting modern buildings. One of them is the modernist Müller Villa, designed by the famous architect Adolf Loos, born on

1. The Vladislav Hall in the Old Palace of the Castle. From the 16th century the Vladislav Hall served particularly royal state purposes. The Vladislav Hall still partly fulfils the state function: elections of the president of the Czech Republic and ceremonial gatherings connected with important days in the life of this country take place in it.

2. Waterworks and water purification plant, still working in Podolí (1929)

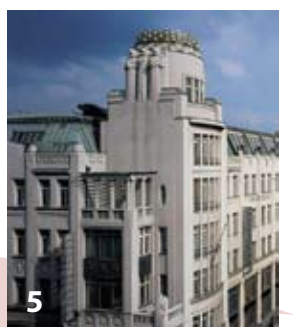


the territory of today's Czech Republic. Together with the historic city centre, this villa is listed in the UNESCO heritage list. Architecture lovers may also admire works of Czech Cubism – structures in distinctive angular style, inspired by Cubist paintings – and numerous functionalist houses from the inter-war period.

The most recent remarkable works of modern architecture include The Dancing House (Ginger and Fred) – a house on the riverside, inspired by Fred Astair and Ginger Rogers, famous dancers active in the interwar years, and designed by Frank Gehry, a world-famous Canadian architect, or Zlatý Anděl, a business administrative centre designed by Jean Nouvel, a French architect. In the Prague Castle gardens, close to Belvedere, a Renaissance summer palace, you may admire a high-profile piece of high-tech architecture – a glass house designed by Eva Jiřičná, a Czech architect based in London.



1. The Dancing House
2. Chochol's house – Cubist architecture (1914)
3. The Church of the Sacred Heart (1932)
4. The Villa Müller by Adolf Loos (1930)
5. The Crown Palace with a tower topped by a crown (1913)





Magical Prague

Prague is a city of mystery and romance. You do not have to believe in magic to be overwhelmed by the mysterious atmosphere of Prague's Old Town and Lesser Town. Crooked streets in both parts of the city seem to be filled with energy, especially at dusk. You may believe you have moved a few centuries back in time, and may almost expect to meet one of the famous personalities of the past round the corner.

You might run into Franz Kafka, hurrying home from his office in an insurance company, his mind focused on his literary characters, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, in a group of actors and singers crawling from bar to bar on the way home, where, early morning, he would sit down at his piano and, just like that, rough-hew a prelude of an opera or a part of a symphony, or one of many other artists, poets, composers, scientists, and inventors who had lived in Prague for at least some time.

Lovers' most popular meeting place is a large park at the slopes of the Petřín hill in close vicinity of the Prague Castle. From the hill slopes, there is a magnificent view of the city and the castle; especially in the spring, with trees in bloom, the park attracts hundreds of couples to take a walk there. In Prague, the lovers' day is not St. Valentine's Day, but May Day. On May Day, lovers go there to put flowers to the statue of Karel Hynek Mácha, the greatest Czech romantic poet. The introductory lines of May, his poem about the tragic love affair of young lovers, Vilém and Jarmila, are well-known to almost every Czech.

Furthermore, the Charles Bridge itself is full of mystery. As early as in the mid-14th century, Emperor Charles IV is said to have acted wisely and to have a horoscope made for this admirable structure; the horoscope proved to be most fortunate as the bridge has served up to this date, being an attraction for almost every visitor to Prague. According to astrologists, the calculation was a line of rising and falling odd numbers; then the foundation stone of the famous Prague bridge was supposedly laid at a magic moment at dawn: at 5.31 am, on 9/7/1357 – 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 7, 5, 3, 1.

1. The Strahov Premonstratensian Monastery
2. The bust on Franz Kafka's birth house
3. Kolowrat Garden at the Prague Castle
4. Evening in front of the entrance to the Rudolfinum
5. The New World – with its tiny houses it is part of the picturesque surroundings of the Prague Castle
6. The Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague is one of the most significant Jewish monuments in the world



Music

“My people from Prague understand me,” said Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart once. In Prague, his work was so popular that people would often whistle some of his arias in the streets. One of his most famous operas, Don Giovanni, had its premiere in Prague’s Estate Theatre, and has been on the programme up to this date.

As for Czech classical music, one of the best-known composers is Antonín Dvořák, the author of the world-famous symphony The New World. Recently, also Bedřich Smetana, Leoš Janáček, and Bohuslav Martinů belong among the most highly appreciated composers. Every year, a number of music festivals and interpretation competitions are held in the Czech Republic, the most famous being the Prague Spring Festival.

The Czech Philharmonic Orchestra ranks among the top world philharmonic orchestras; its seat is Rudolfinum, a palace in Prague’s Old Town. Classical music concerts are also held in the Municipal House, which is one of Prague’s most beautiful Art Nouveau monuments. Almost every day, there are numerous

concerts and performances in the city’s churches and historic palaces.

In addition, lots of music clubs and discotheques in the city offer all types of music ranging from jazz to modern electronic music. For example, Karlovy lázně (Charles Spa), a four-storey music club next to the Charles Bridge, houses one of the biggest discotheques in Central Europe. On top of that, Prague is regularly visited by world-famous music bands and pop music stars.

In the Czech metropolis, music regularly floods river islands, public spaces, clubs, theatres, or music halls, offering unforgettable experiences. Numerous musicians from all parts of the world perform a wide variety of contemporary music, across all genres and styles.

1. The Villa Bertramka, where W. A. Mozart composed his best known opera Don Giovanni in 1787
2. Prague – Collegium Marianum
- 3., 6. Czech cultural events include music festivals of all genres
4. The Antonín Dvořák Museum in Prague is situated in the Baroque Amerika Pavilion (1712 – 1720)
5. House At the Three Fiddles in Neruda Street, one of the famous house signs in the Lesser Town of Prague



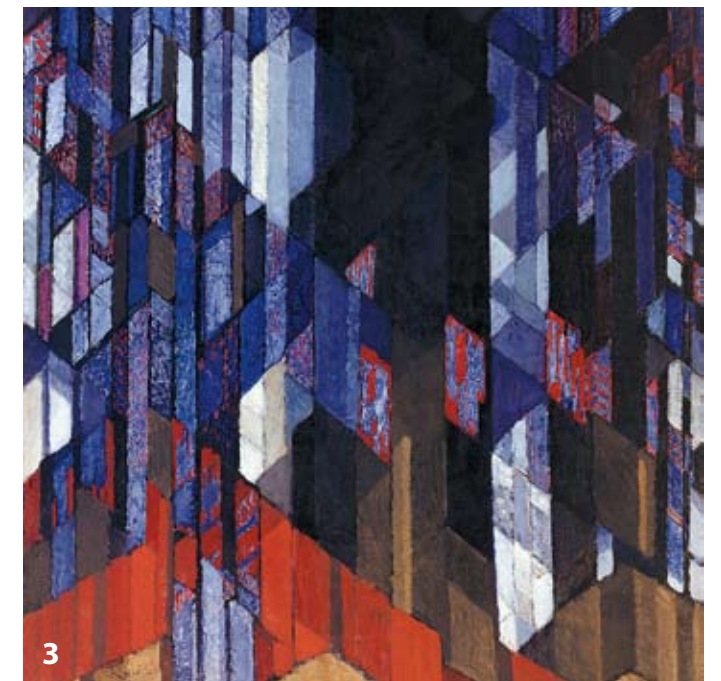


Museums

Apart from artistic gems one may see in Prague's streets and churches, local museums and galleries are worth seeing too. The most extensive art collections are in the National Gallery, which houses its permanent exhibitions at seven different venues; the largest is the exhibition of 20th and 21st centuries Czech and European art in the Veletřní Palace (the Trade Fair Palace). In a selective representative profile, it offers works by Czech painters, sculptors, architects and designers as well as works by major international artists.

Two Czech artists have achieved worldwide fame – Alfons Mucha and František Kupka. Alfons Mucha is a master of Art Nouveau; his elegant decorative style was immensely popular in Paris around 1900. František Kupka, whose major works the National Gallery owns, is considered as a proponent of abstract painting.

Collections of material documents of natural history, prehistory and history are housed in the National Museum, a spectacular Neo-Renaissance building at the top of the Wenceslas Square. Visitors may also see interesting art exhibitions



1. The modern interior of the Kampa Museum – The Sova's Mills

2. The Kampa Museum – The Sova's Mills

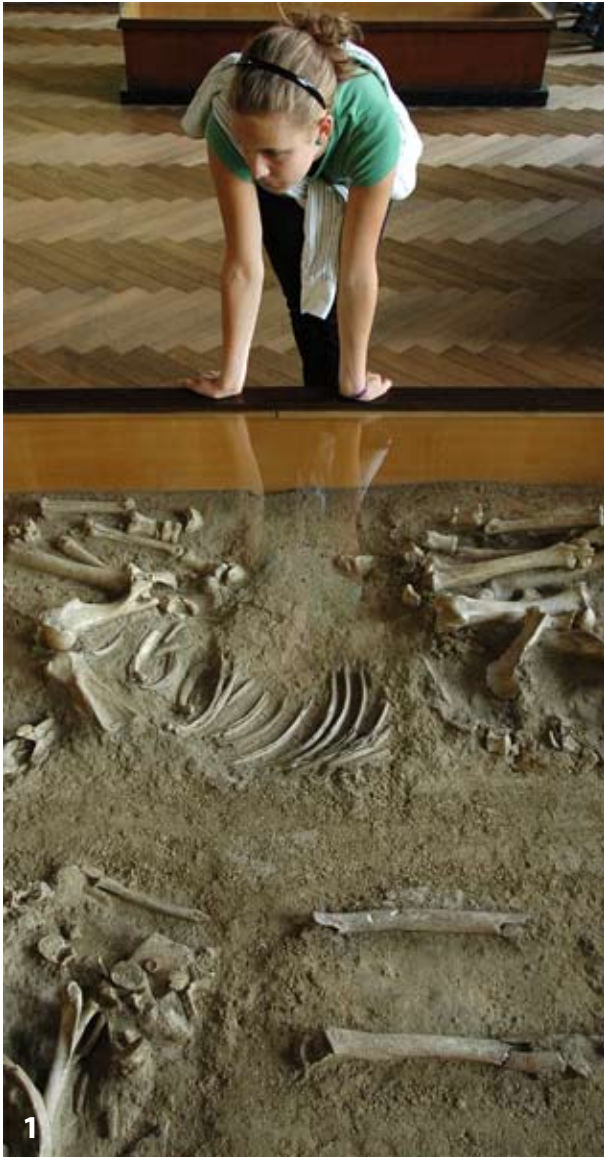
3. František Kupka: The Cathedral (1913)

4. The Trade Fair Palace – National Gallery's collection of modern art

and expositions in the Museum of Decorative Arts, the National Technical Museum, the Museum of the City of Prague, and others. Most museums are open daily except on Mondays.

The Czech lands contributed significantly to technical advance and industrial development in Europe. The National Technical Museum’s collections, admired by people of all ages, children and adults alike, contain material evidence of advancement in the fields of technology, transport, architecture, and science. Due to its current reconstruction and expansion, the museum’s Letná building is currently closed to the public; it will open soon again.

No visitor to Prague should miss the Prague Castle. The castle itself is a most attractive sight; at the same time, other places of interest as the Prague Castle Picture Gallery, an exhibition dedicated to the castle’s history, installed in the medieval underground areas of the Old Royal Palace.



1. Anthropological exhibition – The National Museum
2. The staircase of the National Museum – an imposing area created by J. Schulz (1890)
3. From the archeological collections of the National Museum
4. A Celtic head from Mšecké Žehrovice
5. The numismatic collection, a Dinar coin dated after 1118





Shopping

In Prague, those who prefer shopping to sightseeing will not be in the least disappointed. In the city centre, major fashion boutiques, big international department stores, luxury perfumeries and jewelleries are to be found; furthermore, there are numerous antique shops, art galleries, or shops offering traditional Czech products. Czech crystal glass in particular is world-famous. Music lovers may be attracted by multimedia with Czech classical music, and art lovers by picture-books on visual arts.

The best-known shopping venues are the Wenceslas Square, the Republic Square, and the streets Pařížská, Celetná, and Na Příkopěch.

Smíchov, once an industrial part of Prague on the left bank of the Vltava River, has become a modern shopping centre. Former factory buildings were replaced by new administrative edifices and elegant shopping galleries. On the outskirts, large American style shopping malls have been constructed, easily accessible within thirty minutes from the centre by the underground.



1. The Golden Angel – a building designed by architect Jean Nouvel in 2000
2. One of the passages along the Wenceslas Square
3. Czech Garnets
4. Decorative glass and its unique colours
5. Paula, an Art Nouveau wine glass set manufactured by Moser glassworks
6. The Palladium, a shopping gallery



Food and drink

Those who enjoy eating and drinking will not feel lost in Prague either. They may choose from a wide variety of restaurants offering traditional Czech meals as well as international cuisine. Czech cuisine is a little unusual, quite heavy, but varied and really palatable. A typical national dish is roast pork with sauerkraut and dumplings, a special Czech side dish called “knedlík”. Dumplings are most commonly served with various cream sauces; the most delicious is “svíčková” (sliced beef sirloin served in a cream sauce with a garnish of cranberries and, of course, dumplings). Czechs love beer; sitting in a traditional Czech pub over a half-liter mug of Pilsen Urquell or Budweiser is often part of official visitors’ programmes. The favourite Czech

aperitif is “Becherovka”, a herbal liqueur, which is made in Karlsbad, a North Bohemian spa town, but tastes fine in Prague restaurants too.

Also coffee houses have a long tradition in central Europe; the history of some Prague coffee houses dates back to the time before the first world war. Probably the most famous is Café Slavia, located opposite the National Theatre on the river bank. In the times of its greatest glory, it became a meeting place of artists, actors, and writers. Prague is, most likely, the only European city where you may order absinthe, the legendary Green Fairy, an alcoholic beverage which, associated with bohemian culture, achieved great popularity in the past.

Tea rooms have become a modern Czech phenomenon of recent years. Usually, they are furnished in oriental style, visitors often sit on cushions on the floor. A large selection of teas from the whole world are served and it is possible to order a water pipe; then Europe with its hustle and bustle may seem rather distant.



1. People sitting at the café
2. Sliced beef sirloin in cream sauce (“svíčková”)
3. The Old Town Square
4. A barman pouring beer at one of the traditional pubs
5. Beer is the most popular Czech drink
6. A wine bar and grill restaurant
7. A heart shape in coffee froth



Transport

Prague transport is reliable, safe, and efficient. The underground runs daily until midnight, selected night bus and tram lines run all night. You may use the public transport to any place in Prague. There are direct buses connecting the Prague airport with the city centre and with two underground terminals; the way from the terminals to the centre takes less than thirty minutes.

Tickets are sold at ticket offices at some underground stations, at some news stands, through ticket vending machines, at tourist information centres, at hotel receptions, or in some other places. There are several tourist passes available – a 24-hour pass, a 3-day pass, and a 5-day pass.



Prague Castle	www.hrad.cz
National Gallery	www.ngprague.cz
National Museum	www.nm.cz
Jewish Museum	www.jewishmuseum.cz
National Technical Museum	www.ntm.cz
The Association of Tour Operators and Travel Agents of the Czech Republic	www.accka.cz
Association of Czech Travel Agents	www.ackcr.cz
The Czech Association of Hotels and Restaurants	www.ahrcr.cz

CzechTourism	www.czechtourism.com
Prague Information Service	www.prague-info.cz
Prague public transport system	www.dpp.cz
Prague Airport	www.prg.aero
Train and bus timetables	www.idos.cz
Czech Philharmonic Orchestra	www.ceskafilharmonie.cz
National Theatre	www.narodni-divadlo.cz
Municipal House	www.obecnidum.cz
Prague State Opera	www.opera.cz

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1. The Strážkov underground station by Patrik Kotas (2008)

2. Sightseeing tour in an old Škoda car

3. A tram on the Mánes bridge

4. People at the Staroměstská underground station

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