





PRAGUE

Straddling the banks of the Baltic-bound Vltava, Prague is compact and achingly beautiful. Just dive into the back streets, says Duncan Smith, and let its Bohemian reputation captivate you

Legendary travel writer Bruce Chatwin dubbed Prague 'one of the most curious places in the world' and it's a description of the Czech capital that many endorse. The iconic skyline says it all, for the 'golden city of a hundred spires' (there are in reality nearer a thousand) was created by a roll call of colourful characters from evil emperors and firebrand clerics to royal alchemists and obsessive astronomers. And the city's later brush with Surrealism, Cubism, Facism and Communism only added to this heady historical brew.

Although Prague's modern suburbs today extend right into the rugged Bohemian countryside surrounding the city, most visitors

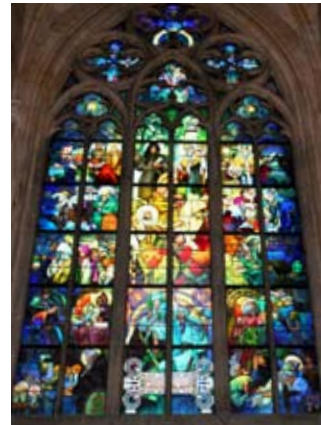
will find quite enough to detain them along the ancient alleyways of the Castle District (Hradčany) and Lesser Quarter (Malá Strana) on the west bank, as well as in Old Town (Staré Město), the Jewish Quarter (Josefov), and New Town (Nové Město) on the east.

Saints and sinners

Most visitors start with the city's two great architectural icons, the Charles Bridge and Prague Castle. And while no visit would be complete without seeing them, if you don't time it right you'll be sharing the experience with a vast throng of visitors from all over the world. Visit in early evening, however, and you'll be gifted with a sight of these ancient structures in their full splendour. ➤



For me, there is nothing better than a stroll around the castle precincts at night. It really is the only way to tap into the magic of the place.



Prague Castle is in reality a walled royal palace complex at the centre of which stands the venerable Cathedral of St Vitus, bristling with Gothic gargoyles and containing the Czech crown jewels. A full day's ticket is quite expensive but it does guarantee access to some stunning buildings, including the Vladislav Hall, the largest Gothic vaulted space in Central Europe, and the Basilica of St George, which predates the cathedral itself. Golden Lane, a street of tiny artillery men's houses built against the ramparts, is interesting, too, but permanently overrun with tourists. For me, there is nothing better than a stroll around the castle precincts at night. It really is the only way to tap into the magic of the place.

Exploring the city districts

Malá Strana nestles in the lee of the castle and was founded as a mercantile quarter during the ninth century. South of Mostecká street is peaceful Kampa Island, a low-lying

piece of ground created when a canal was cut to power medieval waterwheels. One can be seen at the northern tip of the island and was owned by the Knights of St John, whose rebuilt monastery can be found in nearby Grand Prior Square. Along the monastery's perimeter is the John Lennon Wall, a graffiti free-for-all inaugurated by anti-Communists after the peace-loving Beatle's death in 1980.

During the seventeenth century, the area north of Mostecká was transformed by Catholic aristocrats into a glittering Baroque district. Although the royal court and its nobles eventually relocated to Vienna their ornate palaces remain. Most magnificent of all was the home of General Albrecht von Wallenstein, hidden behind a garden gate on Letenská. An extraordinary feature is the grotto smothered with artificial stalactites and stalagmites.

Josefov, Prague's Jewish Quarter, can be reached by crossing the Mánesův most

bridge back onto the east bank. Jewish settlers arrived here in the twelfth century, where they remained until the area was cleared in the 1890s. What remains today is a cemetery, and a seemingly disconnected handful of synagogues, one of which, the Old-New Synagogue, is Europe's oldest working example.

Pařížská, a Parisian-style boulevard that will delight shoppers, feeds directly into Old Town Square. From here you can head east along Celetná to the Gothic Powder Gate and Art Nouveau Municipal House, or west along Karlova back to Charles Bridge. The real delights, however, are in the back streets, whether it be the astronomical tower at Mariánské náměstí 4, the birthplace of surrealist Franz Kafka at U Radnice 5, the subterranean art museum at Husova 19-21, or the Bethlehem Chapel on Betlémské náměstí, where Protestant national hero Jan Hus railed against the Catholics in the fifteenth century.

7 GREAT WAYS TO AVOID THE CROWDS

Magical Mystery Tour

Most visitors make for Prague Castle and they do so en masse along Nerudova, once part of the 'Royal Route', the traditional coronation road used by the kings of Bohemia. Very few use the Stag Moat, an unexpected ravine running along the north side of the castle from an unassuming doorway at the top of the Old Palace steps. Pass beneath a trio of Gothic cannon towers and through an eerie tunnel to eventually reach Nový Svět (or 'New World'), a charming ensemble of ancient houses every inch as fascinating as Golden Lane. * Na Opyši

Hidden Baroque Garden

The Vrtba Garden is well concealed behind an inconspicuous gateway. This Baroque floral gem is a stunning example of Italianate aristocratic gardening, laid out ingeniously across the hillside in a series of terraces. A mere 3,100 square metres in size it seems much bigger and is crowned with a shell-encrusted gloriolite. It is difficult to imagine that under Communism here was a children's playground! * Karmelitská 25

Prague in Black and White

Tucked well away in the courtyard of this apartment building stands a simple wooden bungalow. Now a small museum and gallery, this modest structure was from 1927 until 1958 the studio of Josef Sudek, the father of Czech photography. Despite losing an arm during the Great War, Sudek produced some of the finest panoramic images of the city. * Ujezd 30

Quiet Gothic Cloisters

Founded by the daughter of the first King of Bohemia, the Convent of St Agnes is Prague's first Gothic building. Thanks to an authentic restoration necessitated by the great flood of 2003, its plain and simple stonework demands contemplation, and provides a striking riposte to the city's over-ornate Baroque churches. The surrounding streets are worth exploring, too. * U milosrdných 17

Old Town's Literary Hideaway

One of Old Town's best-kept literary secrets is Týnská literární kavárna, a literary café and bookshop, where local writers and students congregate in a series of cosy arched rooms, as well as in a quiet courtyard in summer: it is easy to forget that the bustle of Old Town Square lies just beyond its walls. * Týnská 6

The World's Largest Horse

The working class district of Žižkov just outside New Town has more bars per head of population than anywhere else in the world. It is also where, in 1420, a charismatic, one-eyed Hussite general famously saw off a superior Catholic force on behalf of Protestant Bohemia. Reinvented under Communism as an anti-Western hero, an oversized statue of the general was erected on Vitkov Hill in 1950. It remains the largest equestrian statue in the world. * U památníku

Down in the Sewers

It might not sound like fun, but a trip to the Eco-Technical Museum can be surprisingly exciting. Installed inside an abandoned wastewater treatment plant, designed by an Englishman a century ago, its chief attraction is a descent into the labyrinth of brick-vaulted tunnels below. You may not wish to be reminded that until 1967, this is where all of Prague's sewage ended up. * Papírenská 6



Myths and revolution

Emperor Charles IV, the 'father of the nation', laid out Nové Město in 1348 and its original grid plan, fanning out eastwards from Národní třída and Na příkopě, continues to exert an influence on the city's streets. A case in point is the old horse market, now occupied by non-stop Wenceslas Square. Sights abound, from the Peterkuv dům, Prague's first example of Art Nouveau architecture, to the flamboyant Grand Hotel Europa opposite – its Titanic restaurant a copy of the legendary White Star Liner's tea salon. At the top of the square is the brooding National Museum fronted by a statue of tenth-century Duke Wenceslas I, the 'good king' recalled in the evergreen Christmas carol.

A stroll northwards along Jindřišská reveals several Prague peculiarities, such as Maso Tomáš Turek, an intact pre-revolutionary butchers' shop stacked with cheap cuts. Just beyond is the Gothic-style

Henry Tower on Senovážné náměstí, and the glorious façade of the recently-renovated Jubilee Synagogue. There is also the Main Station, now marooned on the wrong side of Wilsonova, a divisive carriageway driven through Nové Město during the Communist era. Scheduled for restoration, the station's elegant foyer is crowned by a stunning Art Nouveau rotunda.

Returning back along Opletalova, brave Wenceslas Square once again and head south down Štěpánská. A great way to explore this part of Nové Město is by means of its maze of covered 1920s shopping passages (Pasáže). The pasáž Lucerna, for example, was a part of the city's first concrete building, the Lucerna Palace. Its centrepiece is the Moorish-tinged first-floor lobby of the Lucerna Cinema, now a stylish bar. Another pasáž connects nearby Vodičkova and Jungmannova, and includes a magnificent stained glass advertisement for Czech

7 UNUSUAL PLACES TO EAT AND DRINK

Palffy Palác

Hidden away on the first floor of an aristocrat's palace this is Prague at its most romantic. Book a candlelit corner in one of the high-ceilinged chambers or else take to the summer terrace with its glorious views of the recently restored Baroque Palace Gardens. You will eat like a king, too, from a menu featuring the likes of carpaccio of ostrich sirloin and creamy cinnamon risotto.

* Valdštejská 14

U Rozvarilů

Meaning literally 'overcooked' this is a perfect example of a pre-revolutionary Automat, a fast-food canteen serving cheap and cheerful Czech standards. Favourites include hearty onion and potato soups (polévka), goulash (guláš), dumplings (knedlíky), fried cheese (smažený sýr), and open-faced sandwiches of meat, smoked fish, and cream cheese (chlebíčky). Defiantly Czech service from the white-aproned staff completes the experience.

* Na Poríří 26

Peklo

Occupying the twelfth-century wine cellars of the Strahov Monastery, this subterranean restaurant offers Czech dishes and, not surprisingly, an extensive selection of Czech wines. The unusual setting is heavenly despite its name meaning 'hell', in deference to the so-called Paradise Gardens above.

* Strahovské nádvoří 1

Au Gourmand

This enticing French bakery offers a welcome respite from the usual, calorie-laden Czech pastries and occupies a former butcher's shop, hence the pig's head tiling on the walls. Freshly baked quiches, pissaladières, and baguettes are definitely de rigueur here, and there's a delicatessen, too, selling pâtés, preserved fruits, and Champagne.

* Dlouhá 10

Zvonice

Dining rarely gets more unusual than here in the upper storeys of Henry Tower, central Europe's tallest freestanding Gothic belfry. Customers share the restaurant with giant timber roof trusses and an impressive sixteenth-century bell. The views from the top of the tower are magnificent.

* Senovážné náměstí

Kavárna Slavia

It may not attract many dissidents and artists any more, but this Grande Dame coffeehouse opposite the National Theatre is still a must. The composer Bedřich Smetana lived above, where he composed 'The Bartered Bride'. More recently, former President Václav Havel came here to plot the downfall of Communism. Over coffee and a Prague Ham sandwich consider Viktor Oliva's beguiling painting *The Absinthe Drunkard*, a warning to those tempted by the notorious 70% proof Bohemian tippel.

* Smetanovo nábřeží 2

U Rerného vola

'At the Black Ox' is a tiny traditional beer hall that has the feel of having been around for ever. Opened after World War II, both staff and visitors have held out against the not inconsiderable powers that have commercialised so much of the surrounding area since 1989. This is in part down to a civic organisation, which donates money to a nearby music academy for the blind in return for the town council agreeing not to privatise the Black Ox. And, yes, the beer is great, too.

* Loretánské náměstí 1



electronics company Tesla. Quite unexpectedly the passage opens out into the Franciscan Gardens, an oasis of calm and one of the few remaining medieval monastery gardens in Prague.

The southern reaches of Nové Město are perfect for idle wanderings, drinking in the delights of the U Fleků beer hall at Křemencova 11, and the well-stocked Globe Bookstore & Café at Pštrossova 6. After swotting up on defenestration – that uniquely Bohemian way of dealing with religious opponents – outside the New Town Hall on Charles Square, jump on the south-bound Metro C to Vyšehrad. Never anything more than a fortified gateway into Prague, Czech legend insists that this rocky bluff was the seat of Bohemia's earliest rulers. Abandoned in the 1860s, it was reinvented as a symbol of Czech cultural revival, its leafy cemetery now filled to bursting with the city's great and good.

Sit back and relax

Having explored central Prague, why not sit back and let Tram 22 take you a little

further afield? Traversing the entire city it can be picked up outside the National Theatre on Národní třída. On its way through Malá Strana it passes the church of the Virgin Mary Victorious, where a tiny miracle-working effigy of Jesus has been attracting pilgrims for the last 400 years. After winding its way up Chotkova the tram takes in the Belvedere, a curvaceous Renaissance summer palace commissioned by Emperor Ferdinand I as a love token for his wife, and then ascends even further to the Strahov Monastery, with its pair of fascinating Baroque libraries.

Hold on tight as the tram navigates a fast downhill stretch westwards, past the Břevnov Monastery on the right – Bohemia's first – before grinding to a halt alongside White Mountain. More of a chalk hillock, it was here in November 1620 that Czech Protestant forces were vanquished by those of the Holy Roman Emperor in a Catholic victory that would soon be manifested in stone, creating the sea of triumphant Baroque church steeples that still identify Prague today.

WHERE TO STAY

ANDEL'S HOTEL AND SUITES PRAGUE

A contemporary design hotel offering state-of-the-art accommodation, with the main sights a short tram ride away. Mozart's Villa Bertramka is just a few streets away.

* Stroupežnického 21, +420 2 9688 9688

THE GOLDEN GATE HOTEL

Nineteenth-century grandeur in New Town, with Wenceslas Square within easy walking distance.

* Zitna 8, +420 225 999 999

