

Destination Czech & Slovak Republics

What is it about Prague? The proliferation of Gothic spindles and spires? The romantic mist rising from the Vltava River? The legacy of literary heroes such as Kafka and Kundera? For all those reasons and more, millions of travellers arrive annually in the Czech capital, with expectations high. But the truth of the Prague experience is two-fold: the place is gorgeous *and* while there you'll run into at least some of the tourist hoards and the traps set for them. Dig deep, though, and you can get to the heart of this world-class city. But be sure to step out into the greater Czech Republic where many similar attractions – amazing architecture, towering castles, great beer – are easily accessed on a smaller, dare we say friendlier, scale. In addition to approachable old town squares, neighbouring Slovakia has abundant natural attractions and folksy villages. So, by all means, explore Prague, but also go beyond.

Renaissance, Gothic and baroque buildings galore await among the 18 Unesco World Heritage-listed sites in these two compact countries. Here you can also hike up 2000m-plus peaks, see the world's best pilsner made, soak in hot-spring spas, climb eerie sandstone formations and watch swordplay by firelight in a medieval fortress. Want to meet the locals? Dance with the younger set at city discos. Or heft a cold one with the folks at the colourful summer festivals in the villages. Make friends and you might even get to down a shot of *slivovice* (plum brandy, aka firewater) at a dinner at someone's home – a true highlight of any visit.

Although the Czech and Slovak peoples use related Slavic tongues, the countries' historical influences have been quite different. Before WWI, Czech lands were under the control of the Austrian Empire and Slovakia was part of the Hungarian Kingdom. In 1918 the countries were united as Czechoslovakia for a mere 85 years before splitting into two independent nations. Ironically, border stations put up at such expense in 1993 were dismantled just over 10 years later when both the Czech and Slovak Republics joined the European Union.

Life post-EU has not been without political turmoil for either nation. The first parliamentary vote of no-confidence recorded in the history of the Czech Republic happened on the eve of the country's assumption of the EU presidency in 2009. An interim government took power until elections could be held in 2010, indefinitely postponing the adoption of the euro. The Slovak government successfully brought their country into the Euro zone in 2009. But that same year, a series of backroom-deal scandals led to revolving-door ministries and ruling coalition infighting. The global economic downturn of 2008 and 2009 created 4% deficits in the budget of the Czech Republic and 6% in Slovakia, which didn't help political stability. Nor did the sagging economy stem rising anti-Roma racial tensions in both countries.

Prague's continued popularity has been a financial godsend for the Czech Republic. The expense of visiting the Golden City remains high. Lodging prices fell from all-time records in Bratislava, but getting value for money is another reason to travel out of the capital cities. Costs can be as much as 40% less in the regional cities and towns. And the rewards you can reap go far beyond this – both figuratively and literally.

FAST FACTS

Population Czech Republic/Slovakia: 10.3 million/5.5 million
GDP growth: -4.4%/ -5.3%
Inflation: 2.9%/2.5%
Unemployment: 8.5%/12%
Average monthly wage: 18,833Kč/€704
Area: 78,869 sq km/ 49,035 sq km
Total combined railway system: 13,130km
Per capita annual beer consumption: 157L/89L

Getting Started

Taken together, in many ways the two republics are a dream destination: distances aren't immense and both human-made and natural beauty abounds. Age-old architectural gems shine in the Czech Republic, while mountain scenery and folksy ways hold sway in Slovakia. The streets of Prague and the trails of the High Tatra mountains may be well trod, but it doesn't take too long to get off the beaten path in these compact nations. Though no longer bargain-basement destinations (Prague especially, is *not* cheap), you can still plan an itinerary to suit any budget – bunking in a student dorm and eating sandwiches to go, or splashing out with trendy dining and top-end digs.

If you're visiting in July and August, or at Easter and Christmas holidays, you'll need to plan and book ahead. Some advance preparation for Prague any time will always help ensure you find reasonable lodging.

Note: in this book whenever you see two italicised words separated by a slash (/), this indicates the Czech and Slovak terms, respectively. Prices are noted in Czech crowns (Koruna Česká; Kč), and euros (€) for Slovakia.

WHEN TO GO

For the majority of Czech and Slovak destinations, the best time to visit is in May or September, when the weather is mild and the crowds have thinned out. A large percentage of village museums and castles are open only during high season (May to September). Attractions may be limited in April and October, but you'll benefit from cheaper rooms and the temperature won't differ all that much.

Like residents of the rest of Europe, most Czechs and Slovaks take their holidays in July and August. Crowds at this time, particularly in Prague, can be overwhelming. On the other hand, most festivals occur during the summer months. The supply of cheap sleeps in university towns increases as student dorms are thrown open to visitors.

Summer (June to August) receives the highest temperatures and heaviest rainfall. The cold, bitter winter months of December to February often see temperatures reaching as low as -5°C in the cities and -10°C to -15°C in the mountainous areas (-30°C at higher altitudes). The mountains receive about 130 days of snow a year (at the higher elevations, the powdery stuff can hang around til June), but other areas get snow coverage as well. Spring (late March to May) brings changeable, rainy weather and sometimes flooding. Autumn is also variable, but temperatures can be as high as 20°C in September.

COSTS & MONEY

Neither in Prague nor in Bratislava can lodging be considered dirt cheap. Restaurant prices, too, have risen to rival those of other European cities. (OK, London is still more expensive...) Outside the capitals and the second cities (Brno and Košice), guest houses and eateries are much, much more reasonably priced.

How much you spend will depend on how you travel. In the capitals, if you're a budget backpacker who likes to stretch your koruna as far as it will go, 1000Kč/€35 per day will get you from one place to another, a bed in a dorm, entry to a museum or castle, two cheap meals and three or four beers. Those who like a little more comfort, or who travel solo, can expect to pay around 3500Kč/€120 per day for a guest house, train trips between cities, lunch and dinner at a decent restaurant (including coffee and/or wine) and entry to a big-ticket attraction or two. At the upscale end, you can spend as

See Climate Charts (p363) for average temperatures and precipitation.

HOW MUCH?

Domestic draft beer
(0.5L) – 45Kč/€1.30

Street snack – ice cream
30Kč/€0.40

Midrange meal (pork and
potatoes) – 300Kč/€7

Average night in a
dorm – 400Kč/€17

Average night in a guest
house double –
2000Kč/€80

1L petrol – 50Kč/€1.20

much as you like, but 8000Kč/€250 should be sufficient to get you a night in a top-end hotel, car hire and a fancy meal. Expect costs to be 20% to 40% less in the provinces.

A surprise cost in both countries is having to fork out as much as 100Kč/€4 to take a camera or video into museums, castles and caves. Throughout this book we generally provide the adult and concession admission prices; the

TOP PICKS



ARCHITECTURAL EXCELLENCE

- King Karel's Gothic building frenzy in Prague – from Charles Bridge (p87) to St Vitus Cathedral (p80)
- Bratislava's 1911 Blue Church (p282), with all its ornately organic charm
- Renaissance facades never looked as good as they do in Unesco-listed Telč (p251) in Czech Republic and Bardejov (p351) in Slovakia
- The East Slovak Spiš Castle (p342) may not be complete, but four hectares worth of ruins is still impressive
- What's not to admire about the baroque buildings and Renaissance fortress in the classic old town of Český Krumlov (p150)?
- Slovakia's largest and finest carved altar sits within Levoča's Gothic Church of St James (p340), below the Slovak High Tatras
- Over-the-top 18th-century baroque plague columns grace more than a few town squares; the most impressively ornate are in Olomouc (p226) and Banská Štiavnica (p307)

PARTIES & PARADES

The following are our favourite festivals. For a year-long calendar of major events see p365. Small-town celebrations are covered in the relevant destination chapters.

- Czech Beer Festival (Prague), May (p104)
- International Festival of Spirits and Ghosts (Bojnice), May (p309)
- Ride of the Kings Festival (Vlčnov), May (p267)
- International Folk Festival (Strážnice), June (p266)
- Východná Folk Festival (Východná), June/July (p322)
- Karlovy Vary Film Festival (Karlovy Vary), July (p186)
- Salamander Festival (Banská Štiavnica), September (p308)
- Bratislava Jazz Days (Bratislava), September (p283)

FICTIONAL FAVES

Immersing yourself in a Czech or Slovak novel is a good way to get a sense of the people and the place. The following page-turners have garnered critical acclaim worldwide. For more information, see p37.

- *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, by Milan Kundera
- *Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka
- *Closely Watched Trains*, by Bohumil Hrabal
- *Babička*, by Božena Němcová
- *Year of the Frog*, by Martin Šimečka
- *Bringing up Girls in Bohemia*, by Michal Viewegh
- *Utz*, by Bruce Chatwin
- *The End of Freddy*, by Peter Pišťánek

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- A healthy thirst – Czech *pivo* (beer) and Slovak *vino* (wine) are top attractions.
- Low cholesterol – all the fried meats are bound to raise the level a bit.
- Learning to say *děkuji* (Czech) or *ďakujem* (Slovak); the residents are quite polite, so a 'thank you' will go a long way.
- Flip-flops or shower shoes if you plan to go to a thermal spa or stay in a hostel.
- A telephoto camera lens for capturing all those architectural details and far-distant castles.

discount is good for seniors aged over 60, students and children aged four to 12. Little ones under four are generally free. Unless otherwise noted, churches have at least an antechamber where viewing is freely accessible during daylight hours.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Tens of thousands of hikers pass through Czech and Slovak Republic parks and protected areas every year – try to do your bit to keep them pristine. Wherever possible, use restroom facilities instead of burying waste, carry out your rubbish, stick to established trails (this helps prevent erosion) and do not disturb plants.

The train and bus network is extensive, reasonable and (fairly) efficient in both republics; we highly recommend using it whenever possible to cut down on carbon emissions.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Bratislava Guide (www.bratislavaguide.com) Loads of in-town listings.

Czech Tourism (www.czechtourism.com) Get to know the Czech Republic.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Information on both republics; you can ask questions before you depart or dispense advice when you get back via the Thorn Tree forum.

Prague TV (www.prague.tv) Insider's perspective on the city, including entertainment listings.

Slovak Tourist Board (www.slovakia.travel) Amazingly comprehensive guide to sights nationwide.

Me, Myself, Prague, by Australian writer Rachel Weiss, is a memoir about moving to Prague and finding a home.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

Take in the high-lights – Gothic architecture, amber ales, alpine peaks and plenty of old-town cafes – in both the Czech and Slovak Republics; you'll cover about 1460km if you make it a round trip.

TWO WEEKS, TWO REPUBLICS

Two Weeks / Prague to Poprad

Spend three days searching out the 'magical and mystical' in touristy **Prague** (Praha; p67); see Charles Bridge at dawn, laze about a beer garden and explore beyond the Old Town. On day four, take a day trip out to either turreted **Karlštejn Castle** (p129) or medieval-cum-neo-Gothic **Konopiště Chateau** (p140). Moving on from the capital, spend two days admiring Renaissance and baroque buildings, and canoeing the river at **Český Krumlov** (p150). Next, a day spent strolling beside medieval fish ponds and across narrow bridges in **Telč** (p251) can be your first taste of South Moravia. From there, hilltop **Znojmo** (p255) awaits as a base for exploring the region's wine country.

Then transfer trains in Brno and be on your way to two days of sidewalk cafes and meandering old-town streets in the Slovak capital of **Bratislava** (p275). Your final three days should be spent among the rugged alpine mountain landscape in the **High Tatras** (p323) where you can ride the cable car to the top of **Lomnický štít** (p331). Finish up in nearby Poprad.



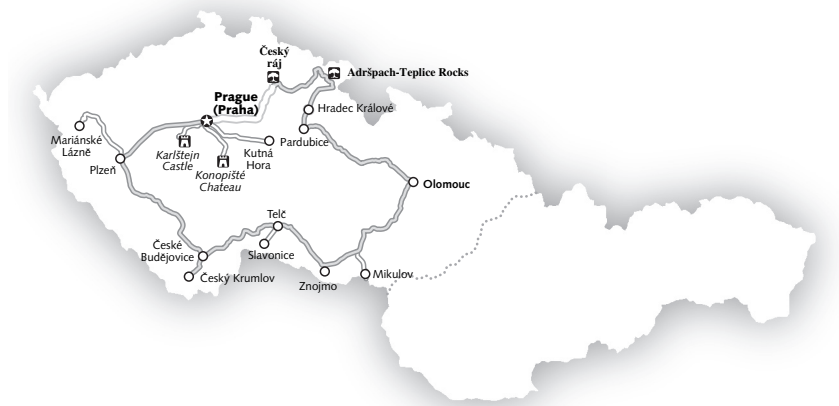
BOHEMIAN & MORAVIAN RHAPSODY Two Weeks / Prague to Prague

Spend three days seeing the sights in and around **Prague** (p67); don't forget the day trips (see opposite) and add in the historical splendours of **Kutná Hora** (p136). Then head west to **Plzeň** (p189) where you can tour the hallowed Pilsner Urquell brewery. Detox by taking a cure the next day in the nearby spa town of **Mariánské Lázně** (p177). You could make this a real beer-flavoured tour by stopping by the Budvar brewery in **České Budějovice** (p144) en route to the Renaissance and baroque splendour of **Český Krumlov** (p150). Consider canoeing here as well.

On day seven it's on to two nights in **Telč** (p251), where you can walk medieval lanes one day and take a day trip to see the pretty and pristine town squares in **Slavonice** (p172) the next. From there it's not far to head out and explore the South Moravian Borderlands from hilltop **Znojmo** (p255), which is a good base for wine tours, and from **Mikulov** (p260), which is known for its Jewish heritage and baroque beauty.

On day 11, you're on the road again to **Olomouc** (p226), which has a great old town and a large student population that makes the eating and drinking fun. This is one of the best-value towns in the Czech Republic. Next, peek at the Renaissance facades of **Pardubice** (p210) and overnight in the architectural mix that is **Hradec Králové** (p206) before spending the last two days in one of the 'rock towns'. Choose from the dramatic sandstone shapes and spires of the **Adršpach-Teplice Rocks** (p218), or the slightly easier to reach formations in **Český ráj** (p215). After you've had your fill of rock climbing, it's back to the capital and your transport home – if you can bear to leave.

This 1040km route circumnavigates the Czech Republic, from the capital to West Bohemia, south and east to the gentle hills of South Moravia, and back north to Bohemia's rock towns.



A SLOVAKIAN SOJOURN

10 days / Bratislava to Košice

A day or two spent wandering the old-town streets of **Bratislava** (p275), pausing in cafe after cafe, is such a pleasant way to start a sojourn. Make sure you take in the views from the castle walls (or communist New Bridge)... If you're craving more history, your next stop, **Trenčín** (p296), will oblige. Search out the 2nd-century Roman graffiti before you hike up and up to the remarkably restored castle. This university town is quite lively at night, too.

Continue on to the **High Tatras** (p323) for altitude hiking and splendid vistas of rocky mountain peaks. Spend at least two nights – in the turn-of-the-20th-century resort town of **Tatranská Lomnica** (p331), or in the more folksy surrounds of the Belá Tatras in **Ždiar** (p333).

Next it's on to the walled city of **Levoča** (p340), where the Church of St James is treasured for Master Pavol's magnificent Gothic altar. From there the impressive, **Spiš Castle** (p342), stretching over 4 hectares, are just 15km away. Make sure you spring for the English audio guide so you get to hear all the castle's legends.

If it's day eight, it must be **Bardejov** (p351). The mural-inscribed, Gothic-Renaissance burghers' houses make for a pretty picture. The next morning, travel a mere 3km north to the leafy spa town of **Bardejovské Kúpele** (p353), to sign up for a mineral bath and tour the *skanzen* (open-air village museum). On your last day, head down to the city of **Košice** (p347). If it's summer, you're in luck – there always seems to be some street festival or other going on then. From Slovakia's second city you can easily catch a bus, train or plane back to Bratislava.

Travelling from Bratislava to West Slovakia, up to the High Tatra mountains, through the Spiš region and east to Bardejov, you will cover 700km.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

THE OUTDOORSY EAST

One Week / East Bohemia to East Slovakia

The Labe River plains to the east of Prague are pretty boring. So you'd hardly expect the bizarre rock formations of **Český ráj** (p215) to pop up just north of there. Use the town of **Jičín** (p217) as your two-day base for exploring the area's castles and trails. The biggest area 'rock town' – a maze of sandstone features, caves and passages – is **Prachovské Skály** (p216).

If you don't have a vehicle, it might be easiest to backtrack through Prague before continuing to **Žilina** (p310), Slovakia. This university town with reasonable restaurants isn't all that special, but it's a gateway to **Malá Fatra National Park** (p312), which is. Spend a couple of days hiking the forested mountains of Vrátna Valley, aided by a fine system of trails, chairlifts and a cable car.

There's even more assistance for hiking at **Slovenský raj National Park** (p343). The one-way (uphill) gorge trails here are outfitted with metal and wooden ladders and other climbing aids. Base yourself in the village of **Dedinky** (p346) to start exploring the waterfall-filled park. **Zejmarská Gorge** (p345) is a half-day hike, but most trails suit those who are in-shape and love the outdoors.

Hard to reach by public transport, the most off-the-beaten-path national park in the republics is **Poloniny** (p359). You're so close to the EU border here that customs officers perform random checks of cars. **Nová Sedlica** (p360) is literally the end of the road. A trail leads from here through pristine beech and birch forest to Kremenec (1221m), a peak near the convergence of Slovakia, Poland and the Ukraine.

Getting off the beaten track and out into nature is easy to do if you head east in either republic. From **Český ráj** to **Poloniny National Park** is 720km one way.



TAILORED TRIPS

WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Unesco has recognised 18 sites within the republics. The entire historic centres of **Prague** (p67), **Český Krumlov** (p150) and **Telč** (p251) have been listed. But specific sights are noted in other towns including the Gothic cathedral and creepy bone art at Sedlec in **Kutná Hora** (p136), the star-shaped St John of Nepomuk church in **Žďár nad Sázavou** (p251), the contemporary Villa Tugendhat in **Brno** (p238) and the Holy Trinity column in **Olomouc** (p226).

Czech castles that made the cut include the baroque chateau at **Kroměříž** (p269), the Renaissance castle at **Litomyšl** (p213) and the **Lednice-Valtice Cultural Landscape** (p262), a compendium of castles and grounds. **Holašovice** (p149) was awarded listing as a fine example of a baroque village, and the Jewish quarter and St Procopius' Basilica in **Třebíč** (p254) were added as well.



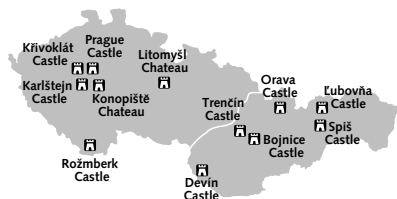
In Slovakia the folksy, mountainside village of **Vlkolínec** (p322) made the list because of its old log dwellings, and the mining town of **Banská Štiavnica** (p306) for its uniform Renaissance architecture. The sprawling ruins of **Spiš Castle** (p342) epitomise a medieval castle, and **Bardejov** (p351) is a supreme example of a fortified medieval town. **East Slovakia's wooden churches** (p354) garnered Unesco's favour in 2009. And the caves of the **Slovak Karst** (p346) share recognition with those of the adjacent Aggtelek Karst in Hungary.

CLASSIC CASTLES

Prague Castle (p78) is in the record books as the world's largest ancient castle, but it's more like a town than a fortified dwelling. Close by, **Karlštejn Castle** (p129), with its stunning exteriors (and immense crowds), and **Konopiště Chateau** (p140) are stand-alone wonders. The nature around **Křivoklát Castle** (p131), which once belonged to the Přemysl Dynasty, is part of the attraction there.

On the romantic side: lovely **Rožmberk Castle** (p159) is said to be haunted by a pining White Lady. The intricate *sgraffito* design and arcades of **Litomyšl Chateau** (p213) may be too fussy for some tastes.

In Slovakia, **Bojnice Castle** (p309) is by far the most ornate and Disneyesque (it hosts the fabulous Festival of Spirits and Ghosts for a week in May), but **Orava Castle** (p317) comes a close second. Both are fairly complete, as is **Trenčín Castle** (p296). Less perfect, and more evocative in some ways, are the partial ruins of **Lubovňa Castle** (p339) and **Devín Castle** (p289). **Spiš Castle** (p342) is the granddaddy of them all, spreading across 4 hectares. The view looking up from below the ruins is one of the most photographed in Slovakia.



Castles are generally open from May to September; to see the interior you may have to take a native-language tour, which may include an English summary.

FOLK LIFE & ART

The colourful local folk culture has been preserved in Moravia and Central and East Slovakia. The best place to see it is at a *skansen/skanzen*, an open-air museum where folk buildings have been collected and preserved. The best ones even have an operating pub – a village staple.

The **Moravské Slovácko region** (p265) is filled with villages that have a strong folk flavour; **Strážnice** (p266), for example, has a *skansen* and hosts the country's biggest folk festival. In North Moravia, walk among beehives carved with faces straight to the *hospoda* (pub) at the **Wallachian Open-Air Museum** (p233).

In Central Slovakia, a few villages stand out as living examples of folk art. The dark log cabins with white geometric designs in **Čičmany** (p312) are highly photogenic (one is a museum). Up in the mountains, the log houses in Unesco-listed **Vlkolínec** (p322) are mostly plastered, with some painted in pastels.

Slovakia has several open-air museums, including the country's largest, the **Museum of the Slovak Village** (p316) in Martin. The dark log homes of **Orava Village Museum** (p317) are arranged along a creek, true to the layout of a proper mountain village. Thousands of people gather in late June at the *skanzen* of the **Museum of Ukrainian-Rusyn Culture** (p356) in Svidník for the annual folk festival.



SPA LIFE

Once considered purely medicinal, spas in the Czech and Slovak Republics are focusing more on relaxation treatments these days and so may interest a short-stay traveller.

Františkovy Lázně (p175) is the prototypical quiet, leafy spa town where after you soak, you stroll. There's a bit more life to **Mariánské Lázně** (p177), West Bohemia's prettiest spa town, which also has the requisite treatments and drinking cures. The spa cures at **Karlovy Vary** (p182) have been known for centuries; the town still attracts hoards of international visitors today. Further southeast in **Planá** (p181), Chodovar Brewery has its own spa. Yes, you too can take a beer bath.

Piešťany (p294) is Slovakia's biggest spa town, a complex of neoclassical and modern communist buildings that contain pools, baths and treatment rooms for signature mud wraps. **Bardejovské Kúpele** (p353) is a spa town where the drinking cure is big (but soaking opportunities are by appointment).

For your general-admission pleasure there are several outdoor and indoor mineral pools at **Bešeňová Thermal Park** (p322). The baths at Aphrodite in **Rajecké Teplice** (p311) look like a surreal Roman dream. Though water parks at heart, **Aqua Park Tatralandia** (p318), in the Low Tatras, and **Aqua City** (p326) in Poprad do use natural thermal springs and both have spa and sauna zones.



Czech Republic



Slovakia



The Authors



LISA DUNFORD

Coordinating Author, Slovakia

Lisa's fascination with the region began when she learned her grandfather was born in the Carpathian mountains that were part of Hungary, then Czechoslovakia and are now in Ukraine. After graduating from university with a degree in international affairs, Lisa arrived in Bratislava looking for work. Random projects led to a job at the US Agency for International Development. Living and working in Slovakia, Lisa learned the language and made life-long friends. She eventually gave up a more diplomatic path to pursue a freelance life. Though Lisa, her husband and dogs reside on a riverfront in southeast Texas, personal ties and travel assignments take her back to Slovakia annually. It still feels like going home.



BRETT ATKINSON

Czech Republic

On Brett's third Lonely Planet trip to the Czech Republic he caught up with old and new friends, dived into Prague's emerging modern-arts scene, and timed things exactly right to take in the Olomouc Beer Festival and Prague's Czech Beer Festival. And like his earlier Czech sojourns, it was the lesser-known places that charmed him most, from the stillness of Slavonice to the beautiful vistas around Znojmo and the Dyje River Valley. When he's not penning guidebooks for Lonely Planet or exploring the world as a freelance travel writer, Brett lives in Auckland and writes about the bars and restaurants of his home town. That means he always knows the best place to get a chilled Budvar.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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