

Prague



More than 20 years after the Velvet Revolution and the fall of communism, the popularity of Prague (Praha in Czech) as one of Europe's premier tourist destinations shows no signs of slowing down. And while it's no longer the travellers' bargain it was, the Czech capital's combination of a thrilling history and glorious architecture remains as compelling as ever.

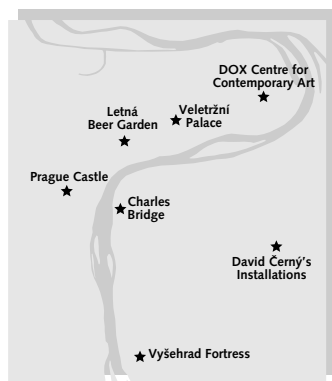
If you're feeling a little overwhelmed and thinking 'Is that it?' during your first hours in Prague, don't be too hard on yourself. The city's charms can occasionally be obscured by too many tourists, congested traffic and tacky commercialism. Packed in among thousands of other visitors, trying like crazy to see the city in three days and worrying about getting ripped off, you may think the city is overrated. Just relax, take a deep breath – or an even longer quaff of the city's famous beer – and resolve to slow down, dig a little deeper and explore a little further.

While the city centre is a *mélange* of stunning architecture – from Gothic, Renaissance and baroque to neoclassical, art nouveau and cubist – beyond the medieval lanes of the Old Town and the Castle District there's an entire other cosmopolitan city to explore. Search out the riverside parks, lively bars and beer gardens, music clubs, museums and art galleries. Harness Prague's excellent public-transport system to explore emerging suburbs such as Žižkov, Vinohrady, Smíchov and Holešovice. You'll be guaranteed cheaper prices, a more local ambience and an assured escape from any more feelings of doubt.

You'll probably even wish you could stay longer.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Rising at dawn to beat the tourist crowds with an early morning stroll across **Charles Bridge** (p87) before strolling up to **Prague Castle** (p78)
- Experiencing Prague's modern face at the **Veletržní Palace** (p98) and the **DOX Centre for Contemporary Art** (p98)
- Enjoying a peaceful picnic on the battlements of historic **Vyšehrad fortress** (p99)
- Creating your own quirky mini-itinerary of **David Černý's installations** (p102)
- Combining a cold beer in **Letná beer garden** (p116) with sublime views of Prague's Old Town



■ POPULATION: 1,184,000

HISTORY

Crossing Charles Bridge may be the quintessential Prague experience for today's visitors, but crossing the river was also the reason for the city's existence. It grew up next to a shallow spot in the Vltava River, a ford where people and animals could wade across (the spot that's now occupied by the Charles Bridge).

Guarded by fortified hilltops on either bank – now Prague Castle and Vyšehrad – the settlement developed into a busy trading centre and later a royal seat. The town came of age in the 14th century, when the Bohemian King Karel (Charles) IV became Holy Roman Emperor. Karel, still revered as the father of the Czech nation, made his hometown the capital of the empire, and funded a building boom that saw the creation of Charles University, Charles Bridge and St Vitus Cathedral. Adding the Nové Město (New Town) to the freshly Gothicised city made Prague one of Europe's biggest cities.

In the following century Prague was the focus of religious conflict that would eventually plunge all of Europe into war. Radicalised by the sermons of proto-Protestant reformer Jan Hus, who was burned at the stake in 1415, the population rebelled against the Roman Catholic elite, and in 1419 nobles tossed several Catholic councillors out of a window in the New Town Hall (p97) – an act that became known as the First Defenestration of Prague. A year later, Hussite forces led by General Jan Žižka successfully defended the city against a Catholic crusade at the Battle of Vítkov (now Žižkov) Hill (p101).

The Catholic Hapsburg dynasty took power in 1526. Later that century Prague became the seat of the Hapsburg Empire and, under Emperor Rudolf II, a focal point for European art and science. But in 1618 religious squabbling began anew when representatives of the city's Protestant nobles threw two Hapsburg councillors out of a window of Prague Castle (at the Old Royal Palace; p81) – the Second Defenestration of Prague – sparking Europe's Thirty Years' War. Prague's Protestants lost early on: in 1620 the Hapsburgs routed them at the Battle of White Mountain (Bílá hora), just west of the city, and they sat out the rest of the war (which had spread to the rest of Europe) they'd started until 1648, when Swedish troops seized Hradčany and Malá Strana.

Eventually, the Hapsburgs moved their imperial seat back to Vienna, reducing Prague to a provincial town. A devastating fire in 1689 led to reconstruction, mostly in the baroque style that symbolised the power and wealth of the resurgent Roman Catholic church. In 1784 the four towns of Prague – Staré Město (Old Town), Nové Město (New Town), Malá Strana (Lesser Quarter) and Hradčany (Castle District) – officially became one city.

In the 19th century, Prague became the centre of the so-called Czech National Revival as Czechs struggled to keep their culture alive under the German-speaking Hapsburg Empire. The movement found its initial expression not in politics – political activity was forbidden by the Hapsburgs – but in Czech-language journalism, literature and drama. A distinctive architecture also took form, and Prague landmarks of this period include the National Theatre (p96) and the National Museum (p94).

As WWI drew to a close Czechoslovakia declared its independence with Allied support on 28 October 1918. Prague became the capital, and the popular Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, a writer and political philosopher, became the republic's first president. Several days after the announcement, the country's new government had to ask Prague's citizens to please stop partying and do a little work, or the fresh-minted country's economy would collapse. But their new-found independence was short-lived.

On 15 March 1939 Nazi Germany occupied all of Bohemia and Moravia, declaring the region a 'protectorate' with Prague as its capital. The city suffered little physical damage during the war; however, its people – particularly the Jewish community – suffered a great deal. In 1942 the Nazi Governor of Czechoslovakia, Reinhard Heydrich, was assassinated in Prague by British-trained Czech paratroopers. In revenge the Nazis executed hundreds of innocent Czech villagers (see the Church of SS Cyril and Methodius, p97, and Lidice, p132), as well as a large number of Prague's intellectuals, almost eliminating the Czech resistance.

But there were enough resisters left in Prague to rise up against the Nazi occupiers, already on the back foot militarily, and on 8 May 1945, the Germans were driven out one day before the Soviets marched in.