

Around Prague



If Prague's tourist bustle is starting to wear you down, take advantage of your growing ease with the Czech public-transport system and strike out on a series of rewarding day trips from the capital. Beyond the phalanxes of Prague's suburban apartment blocks, the landscape morphs into a region of rolling hills, rich farmland, verdant forests and picturesque towns. At the end of the day you'll come back to Prague refreshed and recharged, and ready to dive into doing the cobblestone shuffle once more.

The Czech Republic is endowed with many fine castles, and two of the most glorious are tantalisingly close to Prague. Karlštejn's dramatic hilltop location is matched by the splendour of the surrounding Beroun River valley, and at Konopiště, the lifestyle excesses of Archduke Franz Ferdinand are fascinating and compelling. Both places are thronged on summer weekends, so try and visit on a weekday or stay overnight.

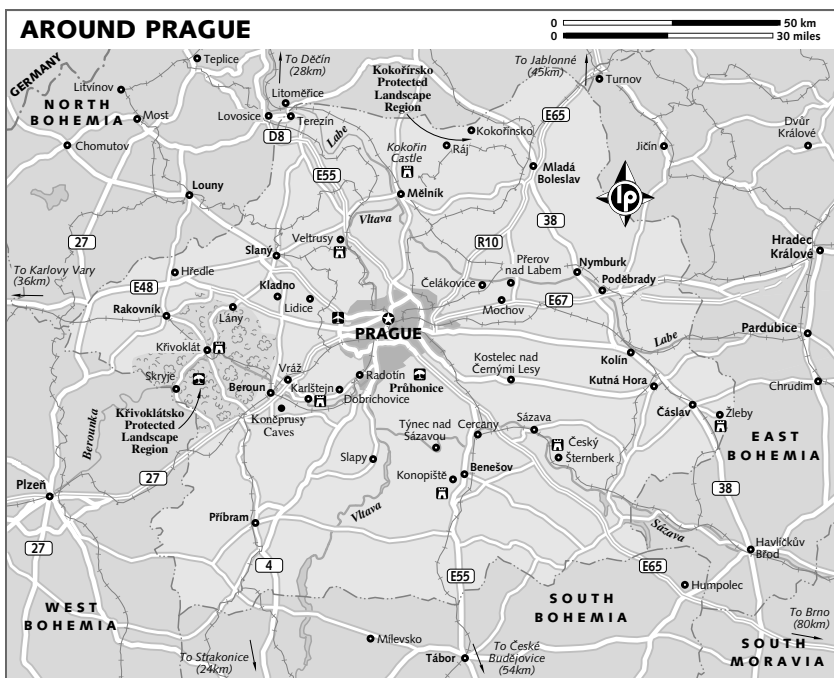
East of Prague, the silver-mining centre of Kutná Hora was once a legitimate pretender to the might of today's capital, and centuries on the town's former wealth and glory is still boldly evident. A macabre counterpoint is the shrine of artfully arranged human bones at the nearby Sedlec Ossuary. Touched with sadness and tragedy are the towns of Terezín and Lidice, both haunting reminders of the 20th century's darkest era.

This area is the capital's versatile backyard, and the preferred location for modern-day Pragueres to hike, bike and canoe on meandering networks of trails and rivers. And after all that honest exercise, a deserved reward for many is sampling the wines in picturesque Mělník.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Being dazzled by the sublime beauty of the Cathedral of St Barbara and coming face-to-face with your own mortality at the ghoulishly compelling Sedlec Ossuary in **Kutná Hora** (p137)
- Feeling like a king (or queen) in the region's best castles at **Karlštejn** (p128) or **Konopiště** (p140)
- Confronting history's darkest depths in the imposing fortress of **Terezín** (p134) and the tragic stillness of **Lidice** (p132)
- Taking in the spectacular castle views while wine tasting in **Mělník** (p132)





Tours

If you're short on time or want a guided tour, Prague-based tour companies have a range of all-day excursions from the capital during summer. Tour operators include:

Marin Tour (Map pp74-5; ☎ 224 212 473; www.marintour.cz; Štepanská 61, Nové Město, Prague; **M** Náměstí Republiky) Tours, available in 26 languages and using headphones rather than guides, include Konopiště (950Kč, five hours), Karlštejn (950Kč, five hours) and Kutná Hora (960Kč, six hours).

Prague Sightseeing Tours (Map pp74-5; ☎ 224 314 661; www.pstours.cz; Klimentská 52, Nové Město, Prague; **M** Náměstí Republiky) Tours include Konopiště (980Kč, four hours), Karlštejn (990Kč, 4½ hours) and Kutná Hora (1010Kč, five hours).

Wittmann Tours (Map pp74-5; ☎ 222 252 472; www.wittmann-tours.com; Novotného Lávka 5; **M** Staroměstská) Runs day trips to Terezín (1250Kč, six hours) with a specialist Jewish focus, and Lidice.

KARLŠTEJN

pop 800

Karlštejn Castle is in such good shape it wouldn't look out of place on Disney's Main St. The crowds come in theme-park propor-

tions as well (it's best to book ahead if you want to be sure of a guided tour), but the peaceful surrounding countryside offers views of Karlštejn's stunning exterior that rival anything you'll see on the inside.

Orientation & Information

From the train station it's a 500m walk to Karlštejn village (turn left out of the station, cross the river and turn right), and then another 800m uphill to the castle past rows of souvenir stalls. Alternatively take a taxi (100Kč per person) or a horse-drawn coach (150Kč per person); both depart from the car park (70Kč per day for parking). Private vehicles are not allowed to drive up to the castle.

There's an information office (with English-speaking staff), public toilets, phones and an ATM at the car park. Another information office with internet access is 300m uphill to the castle on the left.

Note: it's now also possible to book tickets online, an especially worthwhile option during the busy summer months. See www.hradkarlstejn.cz.