

Czech Republic

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Prague** Experience Europe's past, present and future in the capital's vibrant mix of history, art and architecture, and nightlife (p287)
- **Český Krumlov** Enjoy lazy days on the Vltava River and energetic nights in riverside cafes (p300)
- **Loket** Discover this sleepy gem, which winds around a serpentine river (p298)
- **Olomouc** Unearth the easygoing appeal of this Moravian student town (p303)
- **Plzeň and České Budějovice** Create your own beer taste test in the 'Big Two' of Bohemian brewing (p298 and p299)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 78,864 sq km
- **Budget** 700-1000Kč per day
- **Capital** Prague
- **Country code** ☎ 420
- **Famous for** beer, ice hockey, Franz Kafka, supermodels
- **Language** Czech
- **Money** Czech crown (Kč); A\$1 = 14.94Kč; C\$1 = 16.96Kč; €1 = 26.87Kč; ¥100 = 21.13Kč; NZ\$1 = 11.70Kč; UK£1 = 30.32Kč; US\$1 = 20.00Kč
- **Phrases** *dobry den/ahoj* (hello/informal); *na shledanou* (goodbye); *dikuji* (thank you); *promiňte* (excuse me)



- **Population** 10.2 million
- **Visas** none required for most travellers (see p305)

TRAVEL HINT

Base yourself in Prague's up-and-coming Vinohrady and Žižkov neighbourhoods to enjoy Prague without the tourist commotion.

ROAMING THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Experience Prague's buzz before getting active on Český Krumlov's meandering river. After reflective times in Loket, head to underrated Olomouc.

Located in the absolute centre of Europe, the Czech Republic is likely to pop up as at least a through-road in your travels. Try not to rush your visit though, and be sure to venture beyond the obvious attractions. Definitely spend time exploring the beauty, culture and energy of Prague, and a lazy sojourn on the Vltava River around Český Krumlov is also mandatory. But once you've ticked off those 'Must Do' destinations, venture off the beaten path to fully understand the Czech Republic's thrilling history. Castles and chateaux abound, bringing the past to life, and illuminating the stories of families and individuals whose influence was felt well beyond the nation's current borders. The pristine old towns of Loket, Telč and Olomouc provide your best chance to ease off the travel accelerator, and in quickly changing cities like Plzeň, Brno and České Budějovice, you'll soon discover 21st-century Czech life beyond Prague's tourist bustle.

HISTORY

The Good King Wenceslas of the Christmas carol fame was actually a prince, and the land he looked out over was the ancient territory of Bohemia. Beatified as St Wenceslas (svatý Václav in Czech), he remains the country's patron saint.

The tides of war and imperial domination have washed through Bohemia and Moravia for centuries. Events in Czech history have impacted throughout Europe. Two Habsburg councillors were thrown from a Prague Castle window in 1618 (the famous Defenestration of Prague), igniting the Thirty Years War. Hitler's 1938 annexation of the Sudetenland (the western borderlands of Czechoslovakia) triggered the final slide towards WWII.

The two 'Golden Ages' of Czech history were the rule of Charles IV (1346–78), who founded Prague's St Vitus Cathedral, built Charles Bridge and established Charles University; and the reign of Rudolf II (1576–1612), who made Prague the capital of the Habsburg Empire and drew many great artists, scholars and scientists to his court.

The 20th century was notable for the 'years of eight'. Czechoslovakia was created after the fall of the Habsburg Empire in 1918, was occupied by the Nazis in 1938, and fell to a communist coup in 1948. The hopeful 'Prague Spring', when censorship was relaxed and political prisoners were released, was crushed by the Soviet invasion of 1968.

The Velvet Revolution – the bloodless overthrow of the communist regime – didn't happen until 1989. It was soon followed by the Velvet Divorce of 1993, when Czechoslovakia split into separate Czech and Slovak republics, the former led by famous playwright and former political prisoner Václav Havel.

The Czech Republic joined the EU on 1 May 2004. The Czech Republic is currently scheduled to adopt the euro in 2012.

THE CULTURE

The population of the Czech Republic is 10.2 million; 95% of the population are Czech and 3% are Slovak. A significant Roma population (0.3%) is subject to hostility and racism, and suffers from poverty and unemployment.

ARTS

Famous Czech writers include Franz Kafka (1883–1924; *The Trial*, *Metamorphosis*),

Milan Kundera (b 1929; *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) and Bohumil Hrabal (1914–97; *I Served The King of England*).

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904; *New World Symphony*) is the country's best-known composer, and painter Alfons Mucha (1860–1939) is famous for his art nouveau posters.

The films of Jan Hřebejk, *Musíme si pomáhat* (Divided We Fall; 2000), *Pupendo* (2003), and *Horem pádem* (Up and Down; 2004) all cover different times in the country's tumultuous 20th-century history. Buy subtitled Czech films on DVD at Kino Světozor (p296).

ENVIRONMENT

The Czech Republic consists of two low-lying river basins ringed by rounded, forest-clad hills. Acid rain caused by air pollution from intensive industry has damaged the forests in northern Bohemia and Moravia, but the situation has improved since the fall of communism.

Following the Czech Republic entry to the EU, local industries are now forced to adopt stronger environmental codes.

In 2008, the Czech environmental group Friends of the Earth made a formal complaint to the EU that German and Austrian clear-felling of forest just across the border was threatening Czech forests.

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Low-cost airlines flying to Prague from other European cities include **bimibaby** (www.bimibaby.com), **clickair** (www.clickair.com), **easyJet** (www.easyjet.com), **germanwings** (www.germanwings.com), **Jet2.com** (www.jet2.com), **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com), **SkyEurope** (www.skyeurope.com) and **Smart Wings** (www.smartwings.com). Ryanair also connects London with Brno.

Bus

Prague's main international bus terminal is Florenc Bus Station, 600m north of the main train station. The peak season for bus travel is mid-June to the end of September, with daily buses to major European cities. Outside this season, frequency falls to two or three a week.