

# INTRODUCING PRAGUE



*Interior of the Estates Theatre (p103), where Mozart's Don Giovanni premiered in 1787*

CHRISTER FREDRIKS

Prague can be all things to all people. It's the equal of Paris in terms of beauty. The history goes back a millennium. And the beer? The best in Europe.

The 1989 Velvet Revolution that freed the Czechs from communism bequeathed to Europe a gem of a city to stand beside stalwarts like Rome, Amsterdam and London. Not surprisingly, visitors from around the world have come in droves, and on a hot summer day it can feel like you're sharing Charles Bridge with the rest of humanity. But even the crowds can't take away from the spectacle of a 14th-century stone bridge, a hilltop castle and a lovely, lazy river – the Vltava – that inspired one of the most hauntingly beautiful pieces of 19th-century classical music, Smetana's 'Moldau'.

Modern-history buffs will be riveted by the ups and the downs of the 20th century here, from the country's founding in 1918 to the tragic Nazi occupation of WWII, the communist coup in 1948, the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968, and finally the triumph of 1989 that brought hundreds of thousands of peaceful protesters onto the streets and sent playwright Václav Havel to Prague Castle.

Since 1989 it seems the changes have only become more frenetic. The city's arts and music scenes are thriving once again; the cultural calendar is packed with events and festivals, including the internationally renowned Prague Spring in May and early June. The standards of restaurants and hotels are much improved and unrecognisable from just a decade ago.

And if that's not enough to pique your interest, the beer is pretty good, too.

## PRAGUE LIFE

The summer of 2010 finds Prague in the midst of a hectic, multi-million-euro makeover that promises to finally deliver the city from a once-sleepy Eastern bloc capital into the modern age. The biggest individual project – in terms of impact and euros – is the construction of the Blanka highway tunnel just north of the city centre between Letná park and the Hradčanská metro station. The tunnel will eventually stretch several kilometres underground and form a crucial link in Prague's ring-road motorway system. But for the time being (through 2012 at least) the result is absolute chaos. The area around Hradčanská bears more than a passing resemblance to Berlin at the end of WWII. The warren of tram lines that normally snake through the area have been completely re-routed and re-routed again, leaving even hardened transport veterans wondering from day to day which line goes where.

A second major reconstruction project involves something even closer to the hearts of most travellers: the renovation of the main train station (Praha hlavní nádraží). At the time of research, work was continuing apace to clean up and modernise the building, which just a couple of years ago could easily have taken top honours as Central Europe's sleaziest train station. The first phases have been encouraging: the main hall is filled with new shops, the information and ticketing areas have been vastly improved and the platforms are cleaner and better signposted. The work is expected to continue for a couple more years and is hoped to spur the revitalisation of the entire neighbourhood, which adjoins the top of Wenceslas Square and has been quite run down for a number of years.

While Czechs grumble about the inconveniences, there's a shared sense that the modernisation efforts were long overdue. Both the city's dilapidated road system and its derelict train station were legacies of the communist era. If Prague is ever hoped to take its rightful place among Europe's leading metropolises, it's generally agreed that these were necessary steps and that, anyway, it won't be that long before the tram lines are restored to their traditional routes.



*Old Town Square (p89) bustles at dusk (as well as most other times of the day)*

IZZET KEREM

# THE AUTHORS

## Neil Wilson



Neil first succumbed to the pleasures of Prague back in 1995, beguiled, like everyone else, by its ethereal beauty, but also drawn to the darker side of its hidden history. He has returned regularly for a fix of the world's finest beers,

and the chance to track down yet another obscure monument. He has now worked on six consecutive editions of Lonely Planet's *Prague* guide. A full-time freelance writer since 1988, Neil has travelled in five continents and written more than 50 travel and walking guides for various publishers. He is based in Edinburgh, Scotland. For more information see [www.neil-wilson.com](http://www.neil-wilson.com).

Neil was the coordinating author and wrote the *Introducing Prague*, *Getting Started*, *Excursions*, *Transport* and *Directory* chapters. He also cowrote the *Neighbourhoods*, *Shopping*, *Eating*, *Drinking*, *Entertainment*, *Sports & Activities* and *Sleeping* chapters.

### NEIL'S TOP PRAGUE DAY

I'd start the day at Krásný Ztráty (p185), relaxing with the papers over a cappuccino. Then, after wandering through the backstreets of Staré Město, perhaps stopping to browse the bookshelves at Anagram (p152) and Big Ben (p152), I'd cross the river and spend the rest of the morning strolling through the gardens of Malá Strana (p86), stopping to read for a while on a park bench in either the Wallenstein Garden (p81) or the Palace Gardens Beneath Prague Castle (p81).

For lunch I'd grab a riverside table at Hergetova Cihelna (p164) and then take the funicular railway up Petřín (p85) for a stroll through the gardens to Strahov Monastery (p69), followed by a visit to the Story of Prague Castle (p66) exhibit in the castle grounds. By this time I'd be more than ready for a beer, so I'd walk east through Letná park to the beer garden (Letenský Zámeček; p191) and enjoy a Gambrinus or two with a view over the city.

Finally, I'd round off the day with dinner on the terrace at Terasa U zlaté studně (p164) – so that I could continue to enjoy that city view as the sun sets – followed by live jazz (and more beer) at U malého Glenu (p201).

## Mark Baker



Mark first visited Prague in the 1980s as a journalist for the Economist Group. Those were the dark days of the dying communist regime, yet even then he was hooked by the city's beauty, mysticism and roast pork. He moved to Prague in

the early '90s shortly after the Velvet Revolution, and following a stint as a co-founder-owner of the Globe Bookstore & Coffeehouse and a journalist for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, he's found permanent employment as a freelance travel writer. In addition to Lonely Planet's *Prague*, Mark is co-author of *Romania*.

Mark wrote the *Background* and *Architecture* chapters for this book, and cowrote the *Neighbourhoods*, *Shopping*, *Eating*, *Drinking*, *Entertainment*, *Sports & Activities* and *Sleeping* chapters.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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# GETTING STARTED

## WHEN TO GO

Prague caters for visitors year-round, so there's really no such thing as a bad time to visit. The city is at its prettiest in spring, when the many parks begin to bloom with flowers and the budding leaves on the trees are a glowing green.

The tourist crush is especially oppressive during Easter and Christmas through New Year, as well as in May (during the Prague Spring festival), June and September. Many Czechs go on holiday in July and August, when the weather can be uncomfortably hot – you'll probably want a hotel with air-con at this time of year. If you can put up with the cold and the periodic smog alerts, hotel space is plentiful in winter (outside Christmas to New Year), and the city looks gorgeous and mysterious under a mantle of snow.

## FESTIVALS

Spring and autumn are the main festival seasons in Prague, and are when the big classical music events take place. Other minor festivals and events are scattered throughout the year – for a fuller listing check out [www.pis.cz/en/prague/events](http://www.pis.cz/en/prague/events) and click on Preliminary Outline of Cultural Events in Prague.

### January

#### THREE KINGS' DAY (SVÁTEK TŘÍ KRÁLŮ)

6 Jan

Three Kings' Day, also known as Twelfth Night, marks the formal end of the Christmas season on 6 January. The Czechs celebrate it with carol-singing, bell-ringing and gifts to the poor.

### ANNIVERSARY OF JAN PALACH'S DEATH

19 Jan

A gathering in Wenceslas Square commemorates the Charles University student who burned himself to death in 1969 in protest against the Soviet occupation (see the boxed text, p29).

### February

#### MASOPUST

[www.carnevale.cz](http://www.carnevale.cz)

Street parties, fireworks, concerts and revelry mark the Czech version of carnival. Banned by the communists, this tradition was first revived in Žižkov in 1993, and the rest of the city is now joining in. Celebrations start on the Friday before Shrove Tuesday (aka Mardi Gras), and end with a masked parade.

### March

#### ST MATTHEW FAIR (MATĚJSKÁ POUŤ)

From the Feast of St Matthew (24 February) up to and including Easter weekend, the Vystaviště exhibition grounds (p134) fill with roller coasters, fair rides, ghost trains, shooting galleries and stalls selling candy floss and traditional heart-shaped cookies. The fair is open 2pm to 10pm Tuesday to Friday and 10am to 10pm Saturday and Sunday.

#### BIRTHDAY OF TOMÁŠ GARRIGUE MASARYK

7 Mar

The father figure and first president of Czechoslovakia is commemorated in a ceremony at Prague Castle.

## ADVANCE PLANNING

Apart from booking flights and hotels well in advance in high season, Prague is not a city that asks you to do a great deal of forward planning.

If your main reason for visiting is to attend a major festival such as Prague Spring, check the festival website at least a month in advance, and book tickets for any performances you don't want to miss. If all you want to do is see some opera, listen to live jazz or catch a rock gig, take a look at websites such as [www.prague.tv](http://www.prague.tv) a week or two ahead to see what's on. Most opera and classical concert tickets are sold on the day or so before the performance.

We've mentioned in individual reviews where you might want to book a table at a particular restaurant. However, if you want somewhere special for, say, Valentine's Day, it's best to reserve a table a couple of weeks ahead.

Be aware that the economic downturn might result in some of our listings not lasting the lifetime of the book.

## EASTER MONDAY (PONĚLÍ VELIKONOČNÍ)

In this mirthful rite of spring, Czech boys chase their favourite girls and swat them on the legs with willow switches decked with ribbons (you'll see them on sale everywhere); the girls respond with gifts of hand-painted eggs (likewise on sale), then everyone gets down to some serious partying. It's the culmination of several days of spring-cleaning, cooking and visiting family and friends.

## ONE WORLD (JEDEN SVĚT)

[www.oneworld.cz](http://www.oneworld.cz)

This week-long film festival is dedicated to documentaries on the subject of human rights. Screenings are held at some of the smaller cinemas around town, including Kino Světozor (p205).

## FEBIOFEST

[www.febiofest.cz](http://www.febiofest.cz)

This international festival of film, TV and video features new works by international film-makers. Continues throughout the Czech Republic following the Prague festival.

## April

### BURNING OF THE WITCHES (PÁLENÍ ČARODĚJNIC)

30 Apr

This Czech pre-Christian (pagan) festival for warding off evil features the burning of brooms at Výstaviště (p134) and all-night, end-of-winter bonfire parties on Kampa island (p81) and in suburban backyards.

## SPERM FESTIVAL

[www.sperm.cz](http://www.sperm.cz)

A festival of contemporary art, music and 'visual culture' based at David Černý's avant-garde Meet Factory (p142).

## May

### BOOKWORLD PRAGUE (SVĚT KNIHY)

[www.bookworld.cz](http://www.bookworld.cz)

This major international book festival is held at the Výstaviště exhibition grounds (p134). Though primarily an industry event, it's open to the general public and has author readings, book launches, exhibits, seminars and lectures, mostly in English.

### LABOUR DAY (SVÁTEK PRÁCE) 1 May

Once sacred to the communists, the 1 May holiday is now just an opportunity for a pic-

nic. To celebrate the arrival of spring, many couples lay flowers at the statue of the 19th-century romantic poet Karel Hynek Mácha (Map p78), author of *Máj* (May), a poem about unrequited love. Former president Václav Havel has been known to pay homage here.

## PRAGUE SPRING (PRAŽSKÉ JARO)

Running from 12 May to 3 June, this international music festival is Prague's most prestigious event, with classical music concerts held in theatres, churches and historic buildings. For details, see the boxed text, p206.

## PRAGUE FOOD FESTIVAL

[www.praguefoodfestival.com](http://www.praguefoodfestival.com)

A Friday-to-Sunday celebration of all that is best in Czech and international cuisine, with cooking demonstrations, food stalls, beer- and wine-tastings and children's events spread throughout the gardens on the south side of Prague Castle.

## KHAMORO

[www.khamoro.cz](http://www.khamoro.cz)

This festival of Roma culture, with performances of traditional music and dance, exhibitions of art and photography, and a parade through Staré Město, is usually held in late May.

## June

### PRAGUE FRINGE FESTIVAL

[www.praguefringe.com](http://www.praguefringe.com)

This nine-day binge of international theatre, dance, comedy and music, inspired by the innovative Edinburgh Fringe, takes place in late May/early June. Hugely popular with visitors, now pulling in more and more locals.

## PRAGUE WRITERS' FESTIVAL

[www.pwf.cz](http://www.pwf.cz)

An international meeting of writers from around the world, with public readings, lectures, discussions and bookshop events.

## DANCE PRAGUE (TANEC PRAHA)

[www.tanecpraha.cz](http://www.tanecpraha.cz)

International festival of modern dance held at theatres around Prague throughout June.

## July

### JAN HUS DAY (DEN JANA HUSA) 6 Jul

Celebrations are held to remember the burning at the stake of Bohemian religious

reformer Jan Hus in 1415. They're kicked off with low-key gatherings and bell-ringing at Bethlehem Chapel (p104) the evening before.

## August

### FESTIVAL OF ITALIAN OPERA

[www.opera.cz](http://www.opera.cz)

Beginning sometime in late August and extending into September, this festival features the works of Verdi and other Italian composers performed at the Prague State Opera (p205) – your chance to see quality productions outside of the main opera season.

## September–November

### STRINGS OF AUTUMN (STRUNY PODZIMU)

[www.strunypodzimu.cz](http://www.strunypodzimu.cz)

Stepping into the gap left by the demise of the Prague Autumn festival, Strings is an eclectic program of musical performances from classical and baroque to avant-garde jazz, Sardinian vocal polyphony and contemporary Swiss yodelling. It runs for eight weeks (mid-September to mid-November).

## December

### CHRISTMAS-NEW YEAR (VÁNOCE-NOVÝ ROK)

From 24 December to 1 January many Czechs celebrate an extended family holiday. Revelling tourists engulf Prague, and a Christmas market is held in Old Town Square beneath a huge Christmas tree.

## COSTS & MONEY

Gone are the days when Prague was a cheap destination. A rapidly growing tourism industry and an increasingly strong currency mean that the Czech capital now ranks alongside most Western European cities when it comes to quality hotels and restaurants.

In high season you can expect to pay around €160 (US\$200) a night for a double room in a midrange hotel, while luxury and boutique hotel rooms can be in the €260 (US\$325) range. Backpacker hostels typically charge around €15 (US\$21) for a dorm bed. Dinner for two in a good Malá Strana restaurant can easily be €38 (US\$52) per head with a bottle of wine, and the famously 'cheap' beer is now at least €2 (US\$2.75) per 0.5L in tourist bars.

The good news is that you can still find relatively inexpensive food and drink if you're

## HOW MUCH?

1L of petrol 31Kč

Bottled water (1.5L) 18Kč

Guardian newspaper 95Kč

Beer (0.5L) in tourist/nontourist pub 60Kč and up/30Kč

Pork & dumplings 100Kč to 150Kč

'Prague Drinking Team' T-shirt 200Kč to 400Kč (plus any remaining shreds of personal dignity)

Ticket to Laterna Magika 250Kč to 650Kč

Tour of Municipal House 270Kč

Cinema ticket 100Kč to 170Kč

Vintage car tour 1200Kč (per car)

prepared to venture off the beaten tourist trail – just a few blocks away from Old Town Square there are places where you can eat for under €11 (US\$15) per person, and get that same beer for under €1 (US\$1.30).

As for accommodation, oversupply in the hotel sector has seen room rates fall back to reasonable levels, and it's once again possible to snag a bargain. Search the internet for deals – many hotel websites offer special rates or weekend packages. Or consider visiting out of season: hotel rates can fall by up to 40% in winter.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**All Praha** ([www.allpraha.com](http://www.allpraha.com)) Info for tourists and expats, with local listings (restaurants, bars, etc) reviewed by users.

**Expats.cz** ([www.expats.cz](http://www.expats.cz)) Community site for expats in Prague: listings, articles, forums, bar and restaurant reviews.

**Living Prague** ([www.livingprague.com](http://www.livingprague.com)) Insider guide to the city by a British expat who has lived there for more than a decade.

**Prague City Hall** (<http://magistrat.praha-mesto.cz>) Official website of the city council, with lots of useful background information.

**Prague Daily Monitor** ([www.praguemonitor.com](http://www.praguemonitor.com)) News site with English translations of what's making headlines in Czech newspapers.

**Prague information service** ([www.pis.cz](http://www.pis.cz)) Official tourist information website.

**Prague Public Transport** ([www.dpp.cz](http://www.dpp.cz)) Everything you ever wanted to know about Prague's metro, tram and bus services.

**PragueTV** ([www.prague.tv](http://www.prague.tv)) Useful listings site covering nightlife, cinema, restaurants etc.

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