

# Prague

## A stroll through the centuries

> Prague - Dominick A. Merle

This "city of a hundred spires" is fast becoming one of the hottest tourist destinations on the continent, and it's little wonder. Virtually untouched by World War 2, Prague has evolved gradually and naturally for over 1,000 years, resulting in a spectacular display of architecture ranging from Gothic to Modernism. Consequently, a walk through the historical core of the city is akin to a stroll through the centuries.

The crown jewel and the most visited historical site is Prague Castle, which rises majestically from a hill overlooking the city. Built in the 12th Century, it is the seat of the President of the Republic, the historic seat of the Kings of Bohemia and reputedly the largest castle in the world.

In the center of that "crown jewel" is the Gothic Cathedral of St. Vitus with its distinctive twin towers, the most important church in the country. Built over six centuries and finally completed in 1929, it is perhaps the most

photographed site in the entire Czech Republic. A majestic panorama view of the entire city can be seen from the cathedral tower, while underground lie the tombs of the Czech kings. Getting to the castle-cathedral complex can be a treat in itself, especially if you walk across the famed Charles Bridge on the other side of the River Vltava. Trams and car traffic were once allowed on the span, but today it is now a pedestrian crossing. So instead of bumper to bumper, it's shoulder to shoulder as a steady stream of

tourists weave through one another from dawn till dusk.

The bridge is actually part-museum. There are 30 baroque statues of saints on the span, most of them from the 18th Century. The most popular statue is one of St. John of Nepomuk, a Czech martyr saint who was executed and thrown into the Vltava. Touching the statue is said to bring good luck and assure your return to Prague.

Built in 1357, Charles Bridge is also the oldest bridge in the city. Oddly enough, egg yolks ▶



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were mixed into the mortar to strengthen the construction. They must have worked, because the Charles Bridge has survived many floods since then, while other nearby spans collapsed. "That's why we eat a lot of eggs, too," my guide, Olga said with a straight face, "to keep us from collapsing."

The Czechs have a droll sense of humor. "Some mistake it for black humor," Olga explained, "but I think it strengthens us to accept hardships."

And the Czechs have definitely known some hard times. Occupied by Nazi Germany from 1939-1945, the Republic next fell under Communist rule until the so-called "Velvet Revolution" in 1989. Then in 1993, the country split peacefully into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

"Another thing about us," Olga continued, "is that we're straightforward and take words at face value, so mean what you say. "If you say, 'Please be sure to visit me whenever you're in town,' mean it, because we just might show up."

Besides its architectural splendor, Prague has a number of first-class museums along with opera and theatre houses. There are also several interesting day trips from the city center. Karlstejn Castle, a scant 28 kilometers southwest, was founded in the mid-14th Century as a stronghold for the safekeeping of the coronation jewels. In the Chapel of the Holy Rood, where the treasury is kept, is a unique collection of 129 Gothic paintings.

Another recommended day trip would be to Kunta Hora, an ancient mining town that has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Magnificent Gothic construction can be seen here, highlighted by the Cathedral of St. Barbora and the Church of St. James. Both of these attractions can be reached by rail from central Prague, or by one of the many tour buses.

Bidding adieu to Prague, we went by high-speed train east to Moravia and the picturesque cities of Olomouc, Ostrava and Zlin. Often referred to as the "Baroque Capital of Moravia" because of its stunning architecture, Olomouc also has one of the largest universities in the country and vast expanses of greenery and parks.

Not far from the city center is "Holy Hill," an important pilgrimage site that contains The Church of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary, considered a perfect example of Baroque art.

Ostrava, near the Polish border, is the heart of the industrial and mining region. We toured one former coal mine that had been left exactly as it was on the last day of operation. It was a fascinating experience - and a sobering one - to follow the daily hardships in the life of a miner. Originally a Gothic fortress, Zlin was built in the second half of the 16th Century into a Renaissance chateau. But it is best known for being the birthplace of the worldwide Bata Shoe Company. The original Zlin factory, which began operations in 1894, has now been relegated to museum status.

We flew Czech Airlines from Montreal to Prague, roughly a seven-hour flight. No visas

were required, only a valid passport. The Czech Republic still uses the crown as its currency, but plans to switch over to Euros in 2009. For the time being, very few businesses will accept Euros or U.S. dollars.

And as for Prague being called the "City of a Hundred Spires", it is wrong. There are actually more than 500. ■

*(Dominick A. Merle is Canadian Director of the International Travel Writers Assn.)*

(For more information on Prague and the Czech Republic try the website [www.czechtourism.com](http://www.czechtourism.com). For Czech Airlines try [www.czechairlines.com](http://www.czechairlines.com))



Opava Square

ساحة أوبافا



Charles Bridge people

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