

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic is a small country in the heart of Europe, and is very popular with tourists. Thanks to its location at the crossroads of various cultures, the Czech Republic has countless cultural and historical points of interest. Despite the complicated visa rules, this destination attracted a relatively high number of foreign tourists even before the velvet revolution.

The country only recently returned to the economic and political freedom of a democratic system. The Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic were founded on 1.1.1993 after the division of Czechoslovakia.

The country is situated in the middle of Europe and is the hub of several major areas including Western and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Scandinavia. The Czech Republic also shares the longest border with the strongest economical power in Europe, the Federal Republic of Germany. The physical land area puts into a category of smaller countries. In size order, it falls into the 21st place, following Hungary, Portugal and Austria, ahead of Ireland, Lithuania and Latvia. The number of inhabitants places the total population of the Czech Republic 14th in Europe after Hungary, Portugal and Belorussia, ahead of Greece and Belgium.

Aside from the Czechs: Moravians, Silesians, Slovaks, Germans, Polish, Roms and other nationalities also inhabit the culturally diverse country.

Bohemia, the official name of the region, is derived from Celtic tribe Boii; who were the first inhabitants of the place we are now call Bohemia. There is also definitive evidence that the area also was once occupied by the Slavs in the 6th century A.D. The long history of Bohemia and Moravia can be traced through Samo's empire, the Great Moravian empire, the reign of the Premysl's, the Luxemburg and Habsburg dynasties, the Catholic expansion leading to the Thirty year war, the decline of the Austro-Hungarian empire up to birth of the Czechoslovakia Republic led by the first president, Tomas Garigue Masaryk. After surviving German occupation and forty years of communist rule, the Czech Republic is now experiencing yet another stage of transition, this time to a completely restructured free-market.

Over the centuries a whole number of Czech men and women have become famous throughout the world - Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV, reformer John Huss (Jan Hus), the "Teacher of Nations" Comenius (Jan Amos Komensky), composers Bedrich Smetana, Antonin Dvorak and Leos Janacek, writers Jaroslav Hasek, Karel Capek and Franz Kafka, Nobel Prize winners Jaroslav Heyrovsky and Jaroslav Seifert, opera stars Emmy Destinn and Jarmila Novotna etc.

The Czech Republic is a country of great historical and cultural importance, a country where historic monuments and entire towns have been included on the World Heritage List. Of course, when discussing tourism in Czech Republic, one can not overlook the overwhelmingly popular tourist destination of Prague. The city is generally considered to

be one of the most beautiful world capitals with an exquisitely preserved historical center.

Many other towns and historic monuments in the Czech Republic are well-preserved and are noted in the UNESCO register as world cultural landmarks: Kutna Hora, Telc, Cesky Krumlov, the Church of St. John of Nepomuk on Zelena Hora, the Lednicko-Valticky area, monuments in Kromeriz, Holasovice village, the castle and historical center at Litomysl and some rare monuments and areas in Brno, Olomouc and Trebic. Some of the towns are also known as glowing assets of the Czech Republic due to the existence of curative mineral spring spas there. Spas like Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad) and Marianske Lazne (Marienbad) acquired their international eminence many years ago. Jachymov, another town in the countryside, is well known for its rare radioactive springs. Terezin is also often explored by tourists, but unfortunately its history is stained by war. Terezin was a fort town from the end of the 18th century which, during the war, was transformed into a Jewish ghetto by the Nazis.

The Czech nation has been through good times and bad, times when it was in the forefront of world events and times when its national rights were denied through foreign oppression.

Czech Republic also has good venues available for congress, cultural, market, incentive and spa tourism.

Prague remains the greatest tourist magnet. It is beautiful all year round, but it is most beautiful in spring, when it comes alive with blossom. With the opening of the Prague Spring Festival, the concert halls and gardens of the city attract music-lovers from all over the world. Czech Republic has much to offer to tourists from all around the world. There is something for everyone here. Prague gets swoons for its architecture. It doesn't take a scholar to appreciate the sense of ornament to the city. Better still, many of the most beautiful buildings are home to even more breathtaking art.

Points of Interest in Prague

Having your guidebook along with you is recommended. Prague abounds with interesting strolls, cafes, museums, shopping, theatres and concerts, etc. Here are a few highlights:

Charles Bridge is the most popular place in the city to come and get your portrait painted, take photos of the castle and just people-watch. The range of entertainment on the bridge is diverse, from blind folk-singers to the man who plays Beethoven concertos on finger bowls.

Old Town Square. For centuries, the beautiful Old Town Square edged by an astonishing jumble of baroque and medieval structures has been the natural place for people visiting Prague to gravitate to. Most of the houses are much older than they look with Romansque cellars and Gothic chambers hiding behind the pastel colored baroque and renaissance facades. The communists spent an unprecedented \$10 million smartening up the formerly grimy square for the 40th Anniversary of the Socialist Republic. The **Old Town Hall and Astronomical Clock** (hall adopted in 1338, Clock has been ticking since 1490) is a popular tourist attraction.

Prague Castle. The roots of the Czech nation take tangible form in Prague Castle at the centre of the Hradcany district. You can't help but be affected by the dizzying heights of its gothic spires and the flying buttresses of St. Vitus Cathedral. The coronation of Charles IV and the Nazi' march through the gates are just two of the moments in Hradcany's 1,000 year history that will give you goosebumps. Nowhere else in Prague resonates with as much national pride and symbolism than having the Castle returned to Czechs in 1989. The castle grounds demand lengthy strolling and you'll be able to access a number of rooms in the Castle, along with the Cathedral and other buildings.

Jewish Quarter. Well presented but profoundly moving museum tells the story of Jews in this region and is considered of the most interesting Jewish heritage sites in Europe.

What to Buy in Prague

The increasingly large selection of goods available in Prague's shops means that everyday items such as food, books, film and toiletries are easily available and you may find that imported clothing is a good buy here. Prague's more traditional products, such as bohemian crystal, china, wooden toys and antiques make great souvenirs. Increasingly popular are the more unusual goods which are sold by many of the street vendors, including Red Army uniforms, dolls, wooden puppets, ceramics and a wide selection of jewelry. In general prices are lower than the west. Bohemian glass and china have always been ranked among the finest in the world. From huge decorative vases to delicate glass figures, the vast election of glass and china items for sale is daunting.

Currency

The Czech Republic joined the EU in 2004 and intends to adopt the euro as the national currency in 2010. Currently the Czech Crown is the currency (and usually a better value than the euro).

Language

Most Czechs living in Prague speak at least some English. While street signs are in Czech, most tourist information and menus are available in English

A Smattering of Czech

Dobry den – good day

Prosim – please

Dekuji (Dack-quee) – Thank you

Kava - coffee

Pivo – beer

Vino - wine

Na zdravil (nah zdrah-VEE) Cheers! -goodbye

Vece (vayt-SAY) - toilet