

PRAGUE

BASIC INFORMATION

Prague is the capital of the Czech Republic, the seat of the President, government and parliament and the political, cultural and economic centre of the country. It spreads out on both banks of the river Vltava in the centre of Bohemia. It covers an area of almost 500 km² and it has 1.2 million inhabitants. The whole city consists of 10 administrative districts. The oldest parts are the Old Town, The Lesser Town (Quarter), the New Town, Josefov, Hradčany and Vyšehrad. Together they make a town preserve which is quite unique. On the other hand Prague is now surrounded by a ring of modern housing estates serving as residential quarters.



HISTORY

A legend connects the foundation of Prague with Princess Libuše of the Přemyslid dynasty who prophesied the future glory which "would touch the stars". The oldest settlement of this area goes back to the Stone Age (25,000 years ago) but the Slavs came to the Prague valley in the 6th century. In the 9th century Prince Bořivoj founded a castle on a hill above the Vltava valley and it became the seat of princes of the Přemyslid dynasty. In the 10th century another castle, Vyšehrad, was built and became temporarily a seat of the Přemyslid Princes too. Prague became the imperial residence of Charles IV (1346-1378) and during his reign it flourished and grew. Charles IV established an Archbishopric (1344), founded Charles University (1348), the New Town with the Horse Market (now Wenceslas Square) and the Cattle Market (now Charles Square), and promoted the construction of Charles Bridge and St. Vitus Cathedral.

In the 15th century Prague was the centre of the Hussite movement - the movement against the church practice, which continued after John Huss's death. In 1419 the defenestration of the counsellors from the windows of the New Town Hall took place. In 1420 Jan Žižka defeated the first anti-Hussite crusade on Vítkov Hill.

At the end of the 16th century Prague regained its cosmopolitan character again when it became the seat of Rudolph II, who invited artists and scientists there (Tycho de Brahe, Johannes Kepler). On November 8th, 1620 the Czech estates rose up against the Hapsburgs and were defeated in the Battle of the White Mountain, near the place where the Star Summer Palace stands until now. A few months later, in 1621, 27 representatives of the uprising were executed in the Old Town Square. The Thirty Years' War, re-catholicisation and germanization followed. The fact that Prague was not the capital of the monarchy any more, preserved many historical buildings from the old times there.

At the end of the 18th century it became the centre of the Czech cultural life when Czech scholars and writers began the process of national revival. In 1918 Prague was the capital of the independent Czechoslovak Republic again. In 1939 it was occupied by German troops and in 1942 severely persecuted after the assassination of the Nazi deputy protector Heydrich. After the Prague

Uprising against the fascists the town was liberated by the Russians on 9th May, 1945. The August occupation of Prague in 1968 stopped the democratic reforms in the country and began the process of "normalization". On 17th November, 1989, the Velvet Revolution began democratic changes in our society. The whole process continued with splitting of former federal Czechoslovakia into two independent states and on 1st January, 1993, Prague became the capital of the Czech Republic.

SIGHTS

PRAGUE CASTLE Without any doubt, the Prague Castle, the seat of the President, is the dominant of the city. From the square outside the castle tourists can admire the city below with the roofs of ancient Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque houses and palaces and hundreds of church spires for which Prague is renowned. The monumental complex of the castle includes three courtyards and over 700 rooms among which the late Gothic Vladislav Hall, and newly decorated Spanish Hall and Rudolph Gallery serve for ceremonial and cultural purposes.

The most impressive building at the Castle is St. Vitus Cathedral. It was completed in 1299, thousand years after the foundation of the first church on this site. The Gothic Cathedral was founded by Charles IV in connection with the establishment of the Prague Archbishopric. The present cathedral is the result of the work of two famous architects, Matthias of Arras and Petr Parléř. The most admired parts of the church are the Gothic St. Wenceslas Chapel decorated partly with semi-precious stones, the coronation chamber where the coronation jewels (St. Wenceslas crown, the sceptre and the orb) are kept, and the Royal Crypt which contains the sarcophaguses of Czech kings and queens. Another place worth seeing is the Convent of St. George, the first to be built in Bohemia (993), containing collections of the Gothic to the Baroque art of the National Gallery. The convent church, the Basilica of St. George, is the best preserved relic of Romanesque architecture in Bohemia. In the castle gardens we can admire the Royal Summer Palace Belvedere, the purest example of Italian Renaissance architecture north of the Alps, and also the Singing Fountain which gained its fame due to the sound made by the falling drops of water. Golden Lane made up of tiny houses with coloured facades originated in the 16th century when craftsmen settled there. In the castle area there is also the graffito decorated Schwarzenberg Palace which houses the military history collection, the Archbishop's Palace with the beautiful 18th century Rococo facade, the 17th century Sternberg Palace, the seat of the National Gallery, not far from it there is Černín Palace built in the style of 17th century Italian architecture, now the seat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Loretto complex near Černín Palace is very interesting too. It is the 17th century Baroque place of pilgrimage, with a carillon in the steeple and the Loretto treasure.



STRAHOV MONASTERY, PETŘÍN In the neighbourhood of the Castle on Petřín Hill above the Lesser Town, the Strahov Monastery is located. Founded in the 12th century, it is a Museum of Czech literature. Nearby the Petřín Observation Tower (the watchtower) can be found. It was built for the Jubilee Exhibition in 1891 as a free copy of the Eiffel Tower. It affords a very nice view of Prague and its environs.

THE LESSER TOWN Along Neruda Street we can go from the Castle to the Lesser Town below. The Lesser Town is a poetic quarter with picturesque narrow streets, stylish taverns, ancient houses and palaces and romantic gardens. The jewel of Baroque architecture is St. Nicholas Church in the Lesser Town Square, the masterpiece of I. K. Dienzenhofer and A. Lurago. From this square we can easily get to Charles Bridge over the Vltava River.

CHARLES BRIDGE This oldest (14th century) and most charming of many Prague bridges has become a favourite place for walks and tourists attractions. In summer it is always full of tourists, souvenir stalls and street artists. It was commissioned by Charles IV in 1357 and built by a famous Gothic architect Petr Parléř. On the both ends of the bridge there are Gothic Bridge Towers. It is 520 m long and 10 metres wide and is decorated with 30 sculptures and groups of statues mainly of Baroque origin (some of them by M. B. Brown and J. M. Brokoff) which together with the Bridge Towers make it a unique work of architecture.

THE OLD TOWN SQUARE Along Charles Street we can get to the Old Town Square, the centre of the Old Town. It is surrounded by beautifully decorated houses with coloured facades and gables of all styles. A monumental medieval tower-like building of the house At the Stone Bell and the Rococo Kinský Palace which now houses a graphic collection are the most remarkable. The best known building in the square is the Old Town Hall. It was near the town hall where 27 representatives of the anti-Hapsburg uprising were executed after the lost Battle of the White Mountain. Tourists come to see an horologe with the statues of the Apostles on the tower. The Astronomical Clock strikes every 60 minutes and is controlled by a very complicated mechanism built in the Middle Ages. In the upper part of the horologe a procession of the Apostles can be seen every hour. The horologe is decorated by 12 medallions representing the course of village life, painted by famous Czech painter Josef Mánes. There are also 12 signs of the Zodiac. The visual dominant of the Square is the Týn church where Danish astronomer Tycho de Brahe was buried in 1601. The centre of the Square is beautified by the John Huss Monument. Not far from the Square there is the Bethlehem Chapel, the most important centre of the Reformation movement where John Huss preached. The Old Town Square was a part of the Royal Route which led along Celetná and Karlová Street to Charles Bridge and the Castle (the coronation ceremony began at Vyšehrad).

THE JEWISH TOWN Two well-known streets lead from the Old Town Square: Paris Street, lined with fine houses built in the late-19th century decorative style, takes us to the Jewish Town. The Jewish community originated in Prague in the 10th century. Now only a few synagogues (the Old-New Synagogue for example) and the cemetery have remained to the present.

THE POWDER TOWER The other street, Celetná Street, leads to the Powder Tower which forms a monumental entrance to the Old Town. The Powder Tower stands on the end of Prague's new pedestrian zone called King's Road.

THE MUNICIPAL HOUSE Close to the Powder Tower there is the Municipal House, in the 14th and 15th centuries the Royal Court. At the turn of 20th century it was rebuilt in the late 19th century decorative style. The best known of its 6 halls is the Smetana Hall in which concerts of the Prague Spring Music Festival and balls are held. The Na příkopě Street, now a pedestrian precinct, takes us to the bottom of Wenceslas Square.

WENCESLAS SQUARE It is the heart of the New Town and present-day Prague. It is a 750 m long and 60 m wide boulevard lined with banks, department stores, boutiques, shops, hotels, restaurants, cafés, theatres and cinemas. The upper end of the square is closed by the Neo-Renaissance building of the National Museum from the end of the 19th century. This museum contains historical and natural history collections. In the upper part of the square there stands the St. Wenceslas Memorial. It is the bronze equestrian statue of Prince Wenceslas by J.V.Myslbek, a favourite meeting place of tourists. From the bottom of the square we can go along Národní Street to the Vltava River.

THE NATIONAL THEATRE On the bank of the Vltava River the most beautiful Neo-Renaissance building – the National Theatre - is situated. It was built from the public money collection of the people in the second half of the 19th century. Before its ceremonial opening in 1881 it was severely damaged by fire and was rebuilt within the next two years. The best artists of the 19th century decorated the theatre (M. Aleš, F. Ženíšek, V. Hynais).

VYŠEHRAĐ Along the river we come to Vyšehrad, once the seat of Czech Princes. Now only a few remains of the castle have been preserved on the rock. The oldest construction on Vyšehrad and in the whole Prague is the Rotunda of St. Martin, built in the 11th century. The Vyšehrad site also contains the Slavín Cemetery, the burial place of famous personalities of our cultural and political life. The original Romanesque Church of Saints Peter and Paul now has a neo-gothic appearance.

THE CAROLINUM It is the oldest building of Charles University founded on 4th April 1348 as the first institution of this kind in Central Europe.

THE CLEMENTINUM - the second largest building in Prague (after the Prague Castle), was built at the end of the 17th century. Now it serves as the largest branch of the state library.

Apart from the sights mentioned above Prague has many more important institutions, charming places, houses and museums. Among them Charles University, the oldest university in Central and Eastern Europe, the House of Artists (Rudolfinum), the second most outstanding Neo-Renaissance building in Prague which once hosted the Parliament, and also the St. Agnes Convent which now houses exhibitions of the National Gallery, are worth seeing.

On the outskirts of Prague Troja, a newly reconstructed Baroque chateau is worth visiting. Zbraslav Monastery, whose church is a burial place of some of the Přemyslid kings, has been changed into a gallery in which a collection of sculptures of the National Gallery is installed.

OTHER INFORMATION

But Prague is not only a historical city. New residential areas have been built on the outskirts. It is an important road, rail, air (Ruzyně Airport) and river transport junction. The majority of Czech universities, colleges and student residences are in Prague.

Prague is also an important centre for sports. There are many stadiums, parks (Letná, Stromovka, Kampa, Petřín) and swimming pools. Prague can also boast of the world's biggest stadium - Strahov.

Prague also has a dense network of local transport which includes trams, buses and the newly built underground (1974), called the metro.

There are many industries in Prague too. The most important kinds of industry are the engineering (ČKD Works, Tesla, Motorlet etc.), food industry (meat-processing, dairies, breweries – Smíchov, Staropramen, confectionery – Orion, bakeries and mills), textile, chemical, printing and film (Barrandov) industries.

The Vltava River flows through Prague and surrounds 7 islands. About 18 bridges stretch over the river

QUESTIONS ON THE TEXT

1. Where is Prague situated? How many inhabitants has it?
2. What do you remember about the oldest history of Prague?
3. What was the most prosperous period?
4. What was the history of Prague after 1526?
5. What events happened or began in Prague after 1918?
6. What forms the dominant of Prague?
7. Which of the sights of the Prague castle are the most visited ones? Say more about them.
8. What are the typical features of the Lesser Town?
9. What do you know about Charles Bridge?
10. Describe the Old Town Square and its environs.
11. What forms the heart of the New Town? How would you describe it?
12. What do you know about the National Theatre and its foundation?
13. What can you see at Vyšehrad?
14. What museums, galleries and concert halls in Prague can you name?
15. What places in the environs are worth seeing?
16. What do you know about present-day Prague? (new residential areas, industry, transport)
17. What other popular sights and memorials are not included in the text?
18. List architectural styles represented in Prague and give some examples of sights in these styles.