



# Global Adviser

▣ CITY GUIDE: PRAGUE



**Inspiring Heights.** Once a drab communist capital, Prague is now a chic metropolis

TWENTY YEARS AGO, demonstrators in Prague staged the Velvet Revolution, a series of peaceful protests that helped bring down the communist regime. Since emerging from the somber shadows of one-party rule, the City of a Thousand Spires has become one of Europe's hippest travel destinations—a cosmopolitan city where culture buffs and pleasure seekers mingle happily in chic cafés and Gothic cathedrals. Whether you're sleeping at a former monastery turned five-star hotel, or dancing in a onetime nuclear bunker, you'll quickly realize that in Prague, the unconventional is conventional: after all, this is Bohemia. Here's how to make the most of your stay. —BY WILLIAM LEE ADAMS

**Step back** Gothic, Baroque and Romanesque buildings flank Prague's Old Town Square

# 10 Things to Do

## 1 La Degustation Boheme Bourgeoise

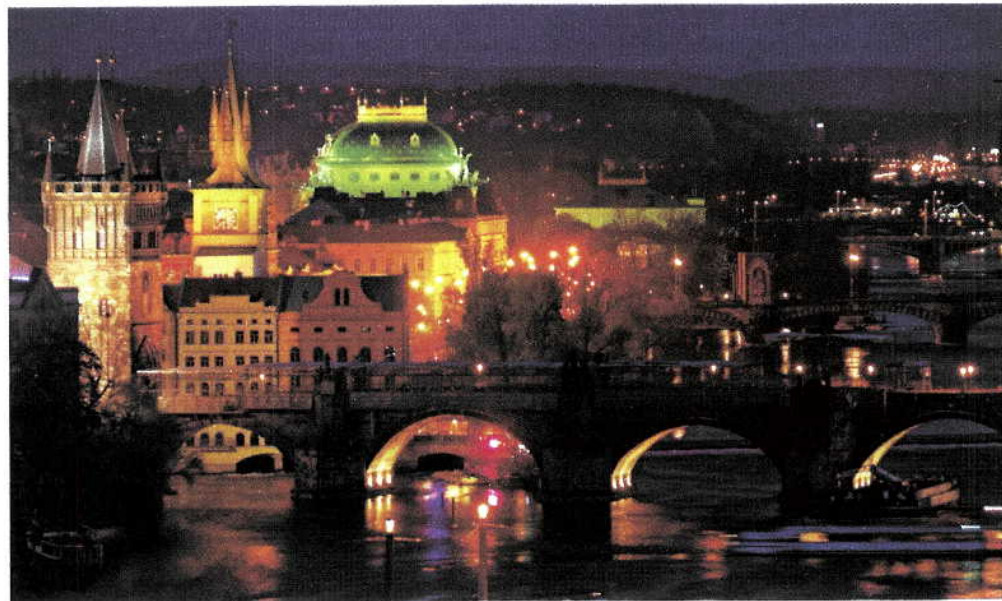
At Czech restaurants, *traditional* frequently implies *heavy*. Fortunately, the chefs at stylish La Degustation, tel: (420) 222 311 234, prepare their Bohemian tasting menus with a lighter touch. Each of the seven courses is preceded with its own amuse-bouche, so allow at least three hours for a meal here. But time flies thanks to the very original fare, based on recipes from an 1880 Czech cookbook. Expect the likes of smoked beef tongue with chickpea puree and pickled shallots, and garlic beef tartare under a crusty pastry. There are also real surprises, like a gelatinous tomato meringue that melts to release honey and balsamic vinegar.

## 2 Charles Bridge

Commissioned by King Charles IV in 1357, Prague's most stunning bridge spans 16 arches and is lined with 30 Baroque statues of religious figures. The bridge's 1,700 ft. (520 m) of cobblestone are used for wholly temporal purposes, however. Each afternoon, painters and hot-dog vendors fight for space with—and custom from—the hordes of tourists who are themselves elbowing each other for the best views of the Vltava River. If you arrive at dawn, you'll beat the crowds and enjoy a glorious sunrise.

## 3 Bunkr Parukarka

The Cold War ended two decades ago, but Bunkr Parukarka, tel: (420) 603 423 140, keeps the celebration going. Housed underground in what was a 1950s nuclear bunker, this quirky nightclub welcomes revelers through a graffiti-covered door that



**All aglow** Just beside the Old Town, the Vltava River flows under the Charles Bridge

juts out from a hillside. Inside, the venue pulsates with avant-garde electro-pop and industrial tracks, spun by some of the city's top DJs. Claustrophobes needn't fret: two ventilation towers and a few emergency exits reduce the risk of meltdown.

## 4 U Medvidku Beer Hall and Restaurant

Serious beer drinkers should head straight to this 550-year-old institution, tel: (420) 224 211 916, to sample its infamous X Beer 33. The dark, bittersweet lager ferments for six months in oak barrels and has an alcohol content of 11.8%, making it the strongest brew in the Czech Republic. Be sure to line the stomach with hearty specialties like larded roast beef in sour cream with white bread dumplings—and remember to pace yourself.

## 5 Communism

Under communist rule, authorities arrested more than

200,000 Czechs and shot 327 others dead as they tried to flee across the border. The simple but stirring Memorial to the Victims of Communism captures that agony with six sculptures of a man in progressive decay. Just as moving are the literal depictions of state-



sponsored terror, told through photos, propaganda and videos at the Museum of Communism, tel: (420) 224 212 966—although here the story

ends on a high note, with galleries on the peaceful Velvet Revolution that ended the nightmare.

## 6 Zizkov

When the sun sets, venture east to Zizkov, a former industrial suburb and the epicenter of Prague's rough-and-tumble nightlife. More than 300 bars dot the neighborhood's two square miles (5 sq km),

which almost certainly represents the highest per capita concentration of drinking venues in any district in Europe. Leave your fancy dress at home. Zizkov is a place of convivial dives, replete with beer served in plastic cups.

## 7 Petrin Hill

For some fresh air, catch the funicular railway from Ujezd to the top of the 1,000-ft. (300 m) Petrin Hill, one of Prague's greenest spaces. The area's eclectic sights include landscaped gardens, a miniature version of the Eiffel Tower, a mirror maze and, quirkiest of all, the Church of St. Michael—an 18th century wooden building relocated here from a village in the Ukraine for national enlightenment.

## 8 David Cerny's public sculptures

The country's most famous sculptor has a knack for simultaneously amusing and offending the public. Many of

## Getting Around. Here's what you need to know

### ARRIVING

Taxis from Prague-Ruzyně Airport will have you in central Prague in 25 minutes and cost about \$30. Public transport will set

you back just \$1.50. Bus 119 travels to the Dejvicka metro station in roughly 20 minutes, from which you can continue your journey into the city center.

### GETTING AROUND

Prague's public-transport system is excellent. For a 72-hour stay, a travel card covering all bus, metro and tram services will cost about \$16.50;



his weird and controversial sculptures remain on display throughout the city, including *Babies* (10 enormous and rather creepy infants that crawl up the Zizkov TV Tower), *Brown-nosers* (visitors climb ladders and peer into the backsides of two oversized statues outside the Futura Gallery to see videos of an actor resembling President Vaclav Klaus eating baby food) and *Piss* (featuring two male figures that urinate in a puddle, spelling out quotations from Czech literature).

#### 9 Prague Castle

Roughly the size of seven football fields, Prague Castle is the largest ancient castle in the world. Built and renovated over 13 centuries, the complex includes churches, gardens, alleyways and royal residences that would take days to appreciate. Don't miss the St. Vitus Cathedral. Besides Art Nouveau stained-glass windows and a wooden depiction of the crucifixion, it houses treasures like the tomb of St. John of Nepomuk—a blinding two-metric-ton vault held up by an army of silver angels.

#### 10 Old Town Square

Despite a number of foreign invaders, Prague's Old Town Square has remained virtually untouched since the 10th century. Today's marauders consist largely of tourists who congregate to eat alfresco while admiring a hodgepodge of architecture—the Rococo Kinsky Palace, the Gothic Tyn Cathedral and the Baroque St. Nicholas Church to name a few. An ever-changing cast of musicians, protesters, dance troupes, punks and vendors make the square as colorful as the buildings that surround it.

## Side Trip Kutna Hora

To immerse yourself in Bohemia's Gothic past, hop on a train bound for Kutna Hora, a well-preserved medieval town one hour east of Prague.

From the 14th to the 16th centuries, several kings resided there, making it the second most important city in the kingdom for a time. Exploiting vast silver mines, they endowed the town with splendid monuments like St. Barbara's Church, tel: (420) 776 393 938, an architectural treasure with impressive double-arched flying buttresses. Fans of the macabre will however make straight for the Sedlec Ossuary, tel: (420) 327 561 143, known locally as "the bone church." In 1870, a woodcarver used the bones of 40,000 people, many of whom died from the bubonic plague, to create unspeakably bizarre decorations and furnishings for the crypt. Skull-and-femur garlands line the walls, and a massive chandelier includes at least one of every bone in the human body.



## Finding the Perfect Souvenir Bohemian Glassware

Bohemia's craftsmen began working with glass as early as the 13th century. Today, artists like Antonin Manto-Mrnka continue the tradition. Working out of a Baroque house in Prague's Old Town, tel: (420) 257 217 913, Manto draws on mythology and animal and plant forms to design crystal chalices with wings, enormous goblets, beautifully asymmetric bowls, and twisting, colorful vases that wouldn't look out of place in the banqueting scene of some fantasy epic. *The Pope and Hillary Clinton own some of his works, but Manto's eccentric creations won't speak to everyone. Still, there's something quintessentially romantic and Bohemian about them.*



one-day passes cost \$5.50. Tickets can be bought from machines at all tram and metro stops, and at hotels, newspaper kiosks and tourist centers.

**TIPPING** Restaurants rarely charge for service, but a 10% tip is customary. At bars and cafés, round up to the next 10 crowns (or 20 if your bill is over \$200).

**SURVIVAL SKILLS** Pickpockets operate throughout the day, particularly in crowded areas like the Charles Bridge, the Old Town Square and Prague Castle

(especially during the changing of the guard), and on trams 22, 23 and 9. Aggressive prostitutes also work in Wenceslas Square at night.



Conversion Once a monastery, the Augustine is now a top hotel

## Where to Stay The Augustine

Prague's newest five-star hotel, tel: (420) 266 112 233, is simply heavenly, fashioned as it is from seven buildings surrounding the cloisters of the 13th century St. Thomas Church and Monastery, and featuring a working community of Augustinian friars living in adjoining quarters. The result is an upscale hotel that conveys ecclesiastical serenity—but not monastic austerity.

Designers have converted the old monastery cells into 101 plush rooms, many with vaulted ceilings and marble bathrooms with heated floors. Heavy linens in papal-inspired shades of purple, red and orange channel a relaxing warmth, while furniture inspired by 1930s Czech Cubism gives the rooms a quirky edge. All suites boast views of Prague Castle, the monastery or garden courtyards. Most impressive, however, are the 360-degree views from the Tower Suite, a three-story penthouse that once served as the monastery's observatory.

The former refectory houses a bar where visitors sip sinful "Archangel" cocktails beneath 19th century Baroque frescoes. And the monastery's centuries-old brewery has been brought back to life in a cavernous cellar; it once again brews an aromatic lager that follows the monks' time-honored recipe. When you tire of gluttony, head to the Augustine spa to cleanse your sins with holistic therapies, including a body wrap—in beer—that nourishes the skin. A divine experience.