

Romance, revolutions – and beer

Prague's culture, cafés and fairytale architecture make it an ideal winter getaway, says Adrian Bridge

THE PERFECT BREAK

Why go?

Despite 45 years of communism, Prague maintained its medieval heart and an architectural legacy that incorporates gothic and baroque, rococo and art nouveau. It has a fairytale castle and a wonderful river setting (which certainly inspired the Czech composer Smetana). It is a city of great classical music and old-world café society. Then, of course, there is the beer.

This is an exciting time to be there, as the Czechs mark the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution this month. In December, the city's Christmas market will be in full swing – and where better to get into the spirit than the home of Good King Wenceslas? In January and February, the city is cold but very romantic: there will probably be snow, and it'll be far less crowded.

Travel by...

Plane. Wizz Air (www.wizzair.com) has flights to Prague from Luton and Liverpool from £12.99 one way (including taxes). British Airways

(0844 493 0787; www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Prague from about £170 return, including taxes.

Stay at...

The neatly renovated Unitas Hotel (00420 224 230533; www.unitas.cz; doubles from 99 euros). It offers good value, four-star comfort, a central location (walking distance to Charles Bridge; right next to a baroque church); and a fascinating bit of Prague history: in previous

incarnations it was a convent and then a place of detention used by the communist secret police. Former inmates include one V Havel, who went on to become the country's president (his basement cell can still be visited).

Another (albeit pricier) venue with a difference is the newly opened Augustine Hotel (00800 7666 6667; www.roccofortecollection.com), a five-star conversion of an Augustinian monastery in the lovely Malá Strana district of town. Doubles (excluding breakfast) from 210 euros.

Spend the morning...

At the castle. It is Prague's landmark attraction: an extraordinary collection of palaces, galleries, curiosities and the magnificent Cathedral of St Vitus (don't miss the gargoyles). The Castle was immortalised in Franz Kafka's book of the same name, and the author himself produced some of his work from a house in the picturesque little alley here known as the Golden Lane. Start at the top; enjoy the views over Prague, then work your way through and down to the Malostranska metro and the river.

Have lunch...

In the Municipal House (www.obecni-dum.cz), close to Prague's other landmark sight (complete with 15th-century Astronomical Clock), the Old Town Square. The name may sound unpromising, but for any lovers of art nouveau architecture, the Municipal House is as good as it can ever get. Lots of people simply



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come here for coffee and cake and to drink in the gorgeous interior

designs. It also houses two very good restaurants; one French and, in the stained-glass adorned basement, a Czech one where you can enjoy specialities such as *svickova* – slices of beef with cream sauce, dumplings and cranberries – and goulash with slices of sausage. About £10 a head, and just the job on a cold winter's day.

Spend the afternoon...

At the Jewish cemetery. Sounds a bit morbid, but visiting this ancient burial site, in use from the 15th century until 1787, is an extraordinarily moving experience. The cemetery got so crowded that people were buried one on top of another and the now leaning tombstones are packed tightly together in clusters. You can walk around the cemetery and then take in other parts of the formerly Jewish district of Prague known as Josefov – including its many synagogues and the Franz Kafka Museum.

Time for some lighter relief? Take a pew for one of the many 60-minute classical concerts performed daily in Prague's finest churches (they are advertised everywhere).

Dine out at...

La Degustation (www.ladegustation.cz; 00420 222 311234). This is the place to have all your preconceptions about stodgy Czech food blown away. Seven-course "tasting" menus include dishes such as Prague ham with autumn apple foam, freshly smoked beef tongue with yellow pea purée and south bohemian rabbit with chestnut purée, barley dumpling and savoy cabbage.

There are plenty of other fine dining establishments in Prague (including, in the Four Seasons Hotel, the Allegro, offering Italian cuisine – the first restaurant in the former Eastern Bloc to win a Michelin star – and, right on the river, Kampa Park). But La Degustation is the first to apply the top-end gourmet touch to Czech specialities. Alas, it has also applied top-end gourmet prices: expect to pay about £100 for a seven-course "degustation". Or try the shortened "*après le theatre*" menu

for about £35.

More reasonably priced options, offering nice variations on the beer and dumplings theme, include: Bredovský Dvůr (www.bredovskydvur.unas.cz), U Medvidků (www.umedvidku.cz), Pivnice u Pivrnce (www.pgc.cz) and Kolkovna (www.kolkovna.cz).

Stay out late at...

The Reduta jazz club, a venerable Prague institution where Vaclav Havel took Bill Clinton to perform an impromptu performance on the sax. For programme details see www.redutajazzclub.cz.

Shop for...

Wooden toys and puppets. The Czechs make them really well – and the toys are both attractive and durable. There's a great selection of both in Pohádka (Celetna 32), close to the Old Town Square.

Revisit the Velvet Revolution by...

Taking a walking tour of the main sights connected to what happened 20 years ago (www.guide-prague.cz). The Museum of Communism (www.muzeumkomunismu.cz) provides some good insights into the communist era.

At all costs avoid...

Charles Bridge. It sounds strange to say that about one of the city's most famous sights but the bridge is suffocatingly crowded at the best of times, and at the moment passage is further restricted due to renovation works. Cross the river further south at the Legii Bridge – far fewer people and equally good views.

Further information...

www.czechtourism.com; www.inyourpocket.com

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**Bohemian rhapsody:
the Charles Bridge
across the River
Vltava. Below, the
Tyn Church in
Prague's beautiful
Old Town Square**