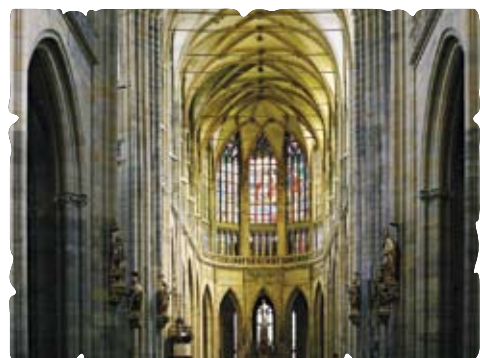# Prague: city of history and beauty

PRAGUE, THE CAPITAL OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC, HAS A POPULATION OF 1.2 MILLION PEOPLE. IT IS NOT ONLY THE GOVERNMENTAL HEART OF THE COUNTRY, BUT IT'S ALSO A CITY FULL OF CULTURAL EVENTS, ARCHITECTURE AND HISTORY. JOIN US ON A JAUNT THROUGH PRAGUE!

At the beginning of the 19th century, Bernardo Bolzano, a famous mathematician and philosopher, counted 103 towers and spires in Prague and that's how the city got its nickname "City of a hundred spires".

Prague history

The city, established in the 9th century, was the seat of Czech **princes** and later kings of Bohemia and became the political heart of the Czech State. Charles IV (1316 – 1378), Bohemian King and Holy Roman Emperor, chose the city as the capital of his whole Empire. He founded Charles University, St. Vitus Cathedral, Charles Bridge and the New Town. Many of the most beautiful things we associate with Prague **can be traced back to** Charles IV.

Many important figures have passed through Prague, and many events have occurred in the city as well. Prague is connected with the Czech **religious reformer** Jan Hus and the Hussite movement. Prague was also where the Thirty Year's War began **with the uprising of the Czech Estates** in the early 17th century. The Czech **National Revival** in the 19th century restored once again Prague's prominence and the National Theatre was built to express this feeling of national pride for Czechs. The building itself was financed from money collected by the Czech people. In 1918, the city became the capital of the independent Czechoslovakia and after the peaceful **division** of Czechoslovakia in 1993, it became the capital of the Czech Republic.

A variety of architecture can be seen all over the city from the Gothic St. Vitus Cathedral to the **Art Noveau Municipal House** and even modern designs like the Dancing House.

Before the St. Vitus Cathedral was built, there was a rotunda founded by Wenceslas I, Duke of Bohemia. Charles IV ordered the bulding of the gothic cathedral, and it took almost 600 years to complete – it was finished only in the 20th century.

Prague districts

The old centre of Prague consists of five historical districts. Old Town, New Town and Josefov (the former Jewish Town) are situated on the right **bank** of the Vltava. The Lesser Quarter and Hradčany (the Castle District) are on the left bank.

The Old Town

Charles Bridge **ranks among** the greatest monuments in Prague. Its construction began on 9th July 1357 at 5.31 a.m. According to astrologists at the time, it was the best date and time **for laying the foundation stone**. While the bridge was being built, the builders added eggs to the **mortar** to make a strong substance to hold the bridge together. People from all over the country gave eggs to help the cause. Legend has it that one village didn't quite understand the concept and sent the eggs to Prague **hard-boiled**!

Charles Bridge is 516 meters long and 10 meters wide. It is an open-air gallery of unique Baroque statues. In about the middle of the bridge stands the statue of St. John of Nepomuk. He lived in the 14th century and held the position of **General Vicar**. He was also the **confessor** of the Queen of Bohemia[1] and refused to **give away** any of the Queen's secrets. John angered the King when he confirmed the **appointment** of the new **Abbot** of Kladruby **Monastery against the King's will**. For this, John **was tortured to death** and his dead body was thrown into the Vltava River. Later, he **was proclaimed saint**, and today he is **venerated** by many believers.

The Old Town Square is another significant historical spot. It used to be the most important market place in Prague and the scene of many historical events. Its main monument is the Old Town Hall with its world-famous astronomical clock. There are also two famous churches on the Old Town Square: the Gothic Týn Church and the Baroque St. Nicholas Church.

The **Estates Theatre** is near the Old Town Square. The world premiere of Mozart's opera Don Giovanni took place there in 1787. Mozart visited Prague a few times. He stayed mainly at Bertramka in Smíchov as a guest of Czech **composer** F. X. Dušek and his wife Josefine. The house has now been converted into a Mozart museum where it is possible to see the composer's personal **belongings**, letters, music **manuscripts** and old musical instruments.

The Lesser Quarter

Near Charles bridge lies Kampa Island, separated from the Lesser Quarter by

a small canal called Čertovka. In the past there used to be many **mills** on Kampa and two big wooden **mill wheels** are still preserved today.

The Church of St. Nicholas, at the center of the Lesser Quarter, is one of the most outstanding examples of Czech Baroque architecture. The 1,500 square meter **fresco** on the ceiling is one of the largest in the world.

Another important part of the Lesser Quarter is Nerudova Street with its characteristic **house-signs**. The three **fiddles** sign has been preserved on one of the houses, signifying the three generations of **violin** makers who used to live and work there. The famous composer Ludwig van Beethoven is believed to have once played a violin made in this

workshop. The most important house is probably No. 233, also known as At The Two Suns. This is where the well-known Czech writer Jan Neruda used to live. Today the building is a famous pub.

The Castle District

The Cathedral of St. Vitus is the biggest church in Prague and holds the treasury of the Czech **coronation jewels**. There are many interesting parts to the cathedral: It has the oldest **reticulated vault** in Europe and the southern Golden Gate has an amazing **mosaic** decoration. St. Wenceslas **Chapel** was built to protect the **relics** of the most important Czech saint and national patron – St. Wenceslas. Its walls are decorated with frescoes and Czech **semi-precious stones**.

Another well-known place in the Castle District is the Loreta. The most fascinating part is its Treasure Chamber with a diamond **monstrance** decorated with 6,222 diamonds.

Other places of interest

Vyšehrad

Vyšehrad Castle is situated on a rock **overlooking** the Vltava River. Legend has it that Czech Princess Libuše **prophesied** the glory of Prague from here. Vyšehrad has an important place in Czech history and the Czech national cemetery was founded here. Writer Karel Čapek, **sculptor** J. V. Myslbek, composers A. Dvořák and B. Smetana, poet J. Neruda and artist M. Aleš are all buried here.

Petřín Hill

Prague's skyline is defined by Petřín Hill. There is a 60-meter tall viewing tower on the hill, which was built in 1891. It was modelled on the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Apart from the tower, there's a **mirror labyrinth** and the Prague Municipal **Observatory**.

The house At the Black Madonna in Celetná Street in Prague 1, built in 1912 and designed by the architect Josef Gočár, represents a unique example of cubist architecture in Prague.

Cultural life

Prague's cultural events offer something for everyone. The National Gallery houses a collection of modern art, various dance performances can be seen at the National Theatre and classical concerts by Mozart, Dvořák, Smetana and other famous composers can be heard at the Rudolfinum and the Municipal House. Modern dramatic productions include many theatre plays as well as the special **black light performances** in The Laterna Magica.

Both Czechs and visitors alike **cannot fail to be charmed** by the beauty and magic of this old-new city on the Vltava.
Hana Gavranová (CR),
Jacy Meyer (USA)

Note:
1 She was Žofie Bavorská, the wife of Wenceslas IV.

Legend has it that if you touch the statue of St. John of Nepomuk on Charles Bridge and make a wish, it will come true.

→ Vocabulary

jaunt [dʒɔːnt] - procházka
prince [prɪns] - kníže
can be traced back to [treɪst] - se dají vysledovat k
religious reformer [rɪ'lɪdʒəs rɪ'fɔːmə] - náboženský reformátor
with the uprising of the Czech Estates [ʌp'raɪzɪŋ ɪ'steɪts] - povstáním českých stavů
National Revival ['næʃ(ə)n(ə)l rɪ'vaɪv(ə)l] - národní obrození
division [dɪ'vɪʒ(ə)n] - rozdělení
Art Nouveau [ɑːt nuː'vəʊ] - secese, secesní
Municipal House [mjʊ'nɪsɪp(ə)l] - Obecní dům
bank [bæŋk] - břeh

ranks among [ræŋks ə'mʌŋ] - patří mezi
for laying the foundation stone ['leɪɪŋ faʊn'deɪʃ(ə)n] - pro položení základního kamene
mortar ['mɔːtə] - malta
hard-boiled - uvařená natvrdo
General Vicar ['dʒɛn(ə)r(ə)l 'vɪkə] - generální vikář
confessor [kən'fɛsə] - zpovědník
to give away - prozradit, vyzradit
appointment [ə'pɔɪntm(ə)nt] - jmenování
abbot ['æbət] - opat
monastery ['mɒnəst(ə)ri] - klášter
against the King's will - proti králově vůli
was tortured to death ['tɔːtʃəd] - umučen k smrti
to proclaim saint [prə'kleɪm seɪnt] - prohlásit za svatého

to venerate ['vɛnəreɪt] - uctívat
Estates Theatre - Stavovské divadlo
composer [kəm'pəʊzə] - skladatel
belongings [bɪ'lɒŋɪŋz] - věci
manuscript ['mænʊskrɪpt] - rukopis
mill - mlýn
mill wheel - mlýnské kolo
fresco ['frɛskəʊ] - freska
house-sign - domovní znamení
fiddle, violin ['fɪd(ə)l vaɪə'lɪn] - housle
workshop ['wəːkʃɒp] - dílna
coronation jewels [kɒrə'neɪʃ(ə)n 'dʒuːəlz] - korunovační klenoty
reticulated vault [rɪ'tɪkjʊleɪtɪd vɔːlt] - síťová klenba
mosaic [məʊ'zeɪk] - mozaika, mozaikový
chapel ['tʃæp(ə)l] - kaple
relics ['relɪks] - ostatky

semi-precious stones [sɛmi'prɛʃəs] - polodrahokamy
monstrance ['mɒnstr(ə)ns] - monstrance (ozdobná schránka na hostie)
to overlook ['əʊvəlʊk] - shlížet na
to prophesy ['prɒfɪsaɪ] - předpovědět
sculptor ['skʌlptə] - sochař
Prague's skyline is defined by ['skaɪlaɪn dɪ'faɪnd] - pro pražské panorama je typický
mirror labyrinth ['mɪrə 'læb(ə)rɪnθ] - zrcadlové bludiště
observatory [əb'zəːvət(ə)ri] - planetárium, observatoř
black-light performances - černé divadlo
cannot fail to be charmed [tʃɑːmd] - se nechávají okouzlit