THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The Czech Republic seldom makes headlines, but this year’s Czech presidency of the EU might increase awareness of this medium-sized state in Central Europe. Prague is usually the first thing that comes to mind, as the birthplace of Kafka or the picturesque backdrop to the Velvet Revolution. But the Czech State has more in store.

A state in the modern sense of the word was established as a union of Czechs and Slovaks, called Czechoslovakia, in 1918 after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. On January 1, 1993, the two nations went their separate ways.

The Czech Republic comprises three lands: Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, and 14 regions. The biggest one is the Central Bohemia region.

POLITICS
The Czech Republic is a parliamentary democracy. The Parliament consists of two chambers: the House of Deputies (200 members) and the Senate (81 members). The Senate is a relatively new institution, re-introduced in 1996, to balance the power of the House. The executive branch is represented by the government and the president. After parliamentary election the president appoints the prime minister, usually from a winning party, to form a government. The MPs are elected for a four-year-term and senators for six years.

NATURE
Mountains form natural boundaries in the north (Krkonose), south (Sumava) and west (Krušné Mountains). The highest peak is Sněžka (1,602 m) in the Krkonose mountain range. The major European river the Elbe rises in Krkonose too.

The interior is more of a plain, broken by small hills, rivers and streams. The Moravian landscape has lowlands in the south as well as mountains such as Jeseníky in the north and Beskydy in the east. Natural beauty spots include national parks in mountains such as Krkonoše, Šumava (with the remains of primeval forests), Czech Paradise (sandstone rock formations in the north) and Moravian Karst (a series of caves and the gorge Macocha).

BRIEF HISTORY
The historical roots of the Czech state can be traced back to the 10th century, when the region was ruled by the Přemyslid dynasty. In 935, Duke Václav was killed by his brother Boleslav in fight for power. This violent act gave rise to the Wenceslas cult and St. Wenceslas is also the patron saint of the Czech Republic. The Czech kingdom expanded and experienced booms during the reign of Přemysl Otakar II (13th century) and Charles IV (14th century). Later on, the kingdom was absorbed into Habsburg Empire.

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This village in south Bohemia represents a rural style architecture, known as folk baroque, from the mid 19th century.


Originally a summer residence of Olomouc bishops, Kroměříž’s palace is considered a fine example of Baroque architecture. But the gardens were the most praise for being an example of the period’s landscaping. The castle houses an impressive art collection, including works by Titian.


This unique arcade palace is one of the most important examples of Renaissance architecture in the Czech Republic. It is an important venue for cultural events, the most notable being the opera festival Smetana’s Litomyšl, named after the famous composer who was born in the town.


The town of Olomouc is an important medieval town and a university centre. The UNESCO attraction is one of the tallest Baroque monumental columns in the Czech Republic (35 m). Decorated with copper adornments and statues, it is a monument to a plague epidemic between 1714-1716. The town also has its own astrological clock, though the saints have been replaced by figurines from the socialist period.

11. Villa Tugendhat, Brno (2001)

Brno, the second biggest city in the CR, has many architectural jewels, among them the fortress Špilberk and the gothic St. Peter and Paul’s cathedral. The functionalist Villa Tugendhat (named after its owners) was based on a design of a major modernist architect and furniture designer Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, made in 1928. The building is divided into three levels but gives the impression of a one-storey building. The owners, being of Jewish origin, had to leave Czechoslovakia in 1938 because of persecution by Nazis. Interestingly, the talks between the Czech and Slovak government that led to the division of Czechoslovakia took place on this site in July 1992.


This historical centre includes St. Prokopius’ Romanesque-Gothic basilica as well as the remains of the Jewish quarter, which is the only Jewish site on the UNESCO list beside Israel. It documents a big Jewish community in the Czech lands prior to the WWII.

Try to match each UNESCO sight to the right photo.

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