

Sightseeing in Prague

Two different 3-hour city tours are offered, with a meeting point outside the Prague Convention Center. An English-speaking licenced tour guide. We recommend that you arrive in Prague on Saturday morning, so that you can combine both tours between Saturday afternoon, and Sunday afternoon, with half-a-day at leisure. Both the Castle Tour (I), and the Old Town Tour (II) start consecutively 3 times (Saturday 2 PM, Sunday 9 AM, and Sunday 2 PM).

Tour II - The Old Town

Route: Wenceslas Square – Old Town of Prague – Old Town Square – The Astronomic Clock with Horologe – The Tyn Church – The Coronation Route of the Czech Kings – St. Gile’s Church – Krizovnicke Square – Charles Bridge – Lesser Town of Prague – St. Nicolas’s Church

Wenceslas Square

Prague’s response to the Parisian Champs-Elysees and the Viennese Ringstrasse has supplied the stage for the great events of the modern Czech history. An open-air mass celebrated here in 1848 formed the high point of the nationalist revolution which put the Czech nation back on the European map after a break of two centuries. In 1968, the world was treated to images of Warsaw Pact tanks rolling through taunting crowds against the back-drop of St. Wenceslas. In 1989 the same backdrop, the equestrian statue of St. Wenceslas (1913), surrounded the make-shift platform on which much of the drama of the vanishing days of communism was played out. The square was founded as part of the New Town of Prague by the Emperor Charles IV in 1348. Its original name was Horse Market. Its architecture dates mainly from the period 1885-1930.

Old Town of Prague

In the Middle Ages, Prague consisted of four independent cities. The Old Town, chartered around 1230, is the oldest one. The city had its own city walls and administration. King John of Luxemburg allowed the residents of the Old Town to build a Town Hall for themselves in 1338. The best way to enjoy the Old Town (or the Lesser Town on the other side of the river, for that matter), is to walk, more or less randomly. The city is a maze of ancient alleys and passageways, which twist and curve in so many unexpected ways that it is hard for wondering strangers to follow any pre-set route without spending half their time checking a map. Almost every alley hides a few items – a back-street church, an eccentric house sign, a sooty statue – of singular charm and historic value.

The Old Town Square

The oldest literary record about the marketplace dates back to 965 *AD*. Until today, this lovely old piazza has the right proportions to balance intimacy with grandeur. The appearance of the square has changed little since the late Middle Ages. Grave and curious incidents of Bohemia’s history took place here. Just two examples: Twenty-seven white crosses marked in the pavement outside the Town Hall commemorate the

spot where 27 leaders of the Protestant nobility faced the executioner on June 21, 1621. Their crime had been to plunge Europe into the Thirty-Year War, the worst bloodbath in its history before the 20th century. On a snowy morning on February 25, 1948, Klement Gottwald announced the birth of Communist Czechoslovakia from the balcony of the Kinsky Palace. The Jan Hus monument, in the center of the square, shows the reformer in Art Nouveau'ish elongation, accompanied by two groups representing the defeated and the defiant. The memorial was installed in 1915 for the 500th anniversary of Hus's martyrdom and represented a veiled protest against Austrian rule. The sculptor was Ladislav Saloun.

The Astronomic Clock with Horologe

One of the best known sights of Prague, the Astronomic Clock on the southern wall of the Gothic Town Hall, delights its viewers as each hour strikes with a morality play performed by a 17-puppet cast. The 12 Apostles parade out of their window, a skeleton representing Death reverses an hourglass, the Greed and the Turk mock him, and a cock crows when it is all over. The clock is also a wonder of technology in its own right. The clock mechanism is a work of Mikulas of Kadan from 1410. The upper dial shows the hour the usual way, as well as the hour calculated from sunset to sunset. The inner dial with zodiac signs shows the current position of the sun, the moon and the planets. The lower dial is divided into 365 ticks, which make a full circle each year. The clock was rebuilt in its current form by Master Hanus in 1490. Legend has it that the Town Hall failed to pay him (others say he was blinded to make sure he did not build a copy of his clock elsewhere), so he scaled the tower, threw a spell in the works, and died on the spot. No one was able to fix the bug until 1572.

The Tyn Church

Prague's best known visual emblem, the 18-spired Gothic Church of Our Lady Before Tyn was begun under Charles IV in 1365. The construction was completed only after the Hussite revolution in 1490. In the 15th century, the church became the center of Bohemian Utraquism. The Utraquists were the moderate protestant followers of Jan Hus. They administered the sacrament in both kinds – wine and bread – to laymen as well as priests. The famous Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, the man credited with the most complete observation of the planets before the coming of the telescope, is buried in the church. A quarrel left him without a nose for most of his life, so he carried various prostheses, including one made of gold that he only wore on Sundays and gala occasions. The manner of his death was equally absurd: His bladder exploded at a feast where too much beer was consumed. It was considered bad table manners to leave the room when Emperor Rudolf II was still eating. The highest mountain on the Moon carries the name of Tycho Brahe. The Tyn Church is featured on our Goldschmidt poster poster.

The Coronation Route of the Czech Kings

For 100 years, the Czech Kings did not live in the Castle, but in the Royal Court in the city center (1383-1483). Whenever a new king was to be crowned in the Cathedral, the royal procession passed along what we now call the Coronation Route on its way to the Castle. The route intersects the Old Town Square, heads through

Charles street, across the Charles Bridge and passes by St. Nicolas Church in the Lesser Town Square. We will follow this route for the rest of our walking tour.

St. Gile's Church

One of the off-the-beaten-tracks charms of the Old Town. The imposing Gothic structure (139-1371) has a distinctly simple, even severe exterior. St. Gile's church, part of a Dominican monastery, badly suffered from the Hussite anarchy in 1420. The interior was given a Baroque treatment in 1733-1735 with splendid ceiling frescos by Vaclav Vavrinec Reiner. Reiner, the best painter of vast ceiling frescos in the 18th century, is buried here. In the 1980s, this church was known as a place where many dissidents would worship. The Dominican friar Dominik Duka befriended the playwright Vaclav Havel in prison. After the Velvet Revolution (1989), Havel became President (1989-2003), while Duka now serves as the Archbishop of Prague. Also here, the American Czech-born movie director Milos Forman filmed Mozart's wedding for his Oscar-winning film *Amadeus*.

Krizovnicke Square

Located in the vicinity of Charles Bridge, this square, named for the Knights with the Red Cross, the only Czech monastic order, is probably the most beautiful medieval square in Prague. Saviour's Church (1578-1640), forming one side of the space, is part of Clementinum, the third largest Jesuit College in the world. Another splendid early Baroque church in the square is that of St. Francis (1679-1689), a masterpiece by J. B. Mathey. Outside of the church is a bronze statue of Charles IV depicted as the founder of the oldest University in Central Europe (1348). The Old Town Bridge Tower encloses the square in the West. Peter Parler was the architect of this spectacular defence tower with its pointed cap and rich Gothic decoration. Statues of Charles IV and his son Wenceslas IV are a major attraction on the front side of this bridge tower. For 10 years after 1621, the tower served the grizzly purpose of displaying the chopped heads of some of the 27 Bohemian nobles who had led the revolt against the Habsburgs. In 1648 it was the site of the heroic stand of university students and Old Town Jews, which saved the Old Town from the Swedish army, which had occupied – and thoroughly looted – the left bank.

Charles Bridge

This wonderful old bridge, possibly the most beautiful in Europe, has been a landmark of Prague since 1357. Charles IV commissioned it from Peter Parler at a time of his grandiose plans to develop Prague to the permanent capital of the Holy Roman Empire. For nearly 500 years afterward, it was the only bridge on Vltava and thus a critical point of Central European trade and invasion routes. Decorated with 30 groups of statues after 1683, it became one of the greatest showcases of Baroque sculpture on the continent. Charles' original bridge was adorned with a simple crucifix. After the Thirty-Year War, Prague became affluent, and noblemen and civic bodies started to subscribe to individual monuments. Top sculptors of the time were set to work; Ferdinand Maximilian Brokoff, the greatest of them, contributed eight statues. When the program reached completion in 1714, the bridge was a gallery of 26 ecstatic, gesticulating, wriggling, exhorting saints. Three statues deserve special attention: St. John of Nepomuk is the oldest statue on the bridge (1683), and also the

only one cast in bronze. John was martyred in 1393 by being thrown into the Vltava by the king's men at this precise spot. He incurred the royal wrath by refusing to disclose the intimate details of the confession of the 21-year old Queen Sophia. He may also have antagonized King Wenceslas IV by appointing an abbot against his wish, while serving as a deputy of the momentarily untouchable Archbishop Jan of Jenstejn. St. John of Nepomuk was canonized only in 1729 and his statue can now be found in hundreds of replicas from Sicily to Scandinavia. The Vision of St. Luitgard surpasses all other statues on the bridge in its sensuous intensity. It is a masterpiece of the young Mathias Bernard Brown from 1713. Luitgard, a Cistercian nun, is shown in ecstasy as Christ bears down from the Crucifix to embrace her and she reaches over to kiss His wound. The largest and most popular group of statues (St. John of Mathy, Felix of Valois and Blessed Ivan) shows a potbellied Turk and a dog keeping several hapless Christians in jail. The onlooking friars are founders of the Trinitarian Order, which specialized in ransoming Christian captives from Muslim hands. Charles Bridge was not the oldest bridge in Prague. The first stone bridge, commissioned by Queen Judith in 1158, was the second bridge in Medieval Europe after that of Regensburg. It was destroyed by a flood in 1342.

The Lesser Town of Prague

The second oldest of the four medieval cities of Prague was founded at the foot of the Castle Hill in 1257. King Premysl Otakar II invited German colonists to settle the castle slope, marking the beginning of Prague as a bilingual city (c. 1257-1946). Today, the Lesser Town is a place where numerous embassies house Renaissance, Baroque and Classicist Palaces. We will enter the Lesser Town between two Bridge Towers, one Romanesque and one late-Gothic.

St. Nicolas' Church

This crowning work of Dienzehofers father and son is the most astounding example of Baroque religious architecture in Prague. The overall plan (1703) and the facade (1711) belong to Christoph; his son Kilian Ignaz added the 75-meter dome (1737-1753), and Kilian's son-in-law Anselmo Luragho built the elegant Rococo belfry. The church stood under the jurisdiction of the Jesuits, while the funds were supplied by Count Kolowrat. Unique in the European context is the dynamic western facade, on the ground plan composed entirely of convex and concave curves. The interior manifests the characteristic Baroque preoccupation with drama, illusion and ornament at a level of intensity unmatched elsewhere. The vault is covered by an extravagant fresco, with a surface of 1500 square meters reportedly the largest in Europe. The fresco depicts the life of St. Nicolas, a 4th century bishop from Asia Minor, who in time grew into Santa Claus the bringer of gifts, and patron of children, sailors, innocent prisoners and unmarried girls. Contrary to appearance, the interior contains not a trace of genuine marble. What looks like marble is in reality *scagliola*, a painted mixture of plaster and glue, which was even more expensive than the real thing.