

# HOME & AWAY

## Prague, a Textbook of Architecture

Exploring the Golden City of a Hundred Spires is like walking through a design catalog.

*By Katherine Rodeghier*

Old Town Square hums with activity in central Prague. Mimes and musicians draw onlookers. Visitors stroll across the cobblestone plaza ringed by outdoor cafes. Students bend over books, studying between classes at the city's universities.

But students of architecture need no books. In the heart of the capital of the Czech Republic, they need only look around to study architectural styles spanning centuries.

One of the largest urban areas on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the Historic Center of Prague covers almost 3.5 square miles of narrow winding streets, stone buildings with red tile roofs, churches and public buildings with towers and steeples. Prague's nickname, Golden City of a Hundred Spires, does it a disservice. The actual number comes closer to 1,000.

Unlike cities in Europe transformed during rebuilding in the 18th and 19th centuries, central Prague remained untouched. And with few exceptions, its structures escaped the bombs of World War II. It contains the highest concentration of preserved 14th- to 18th-century buildings on the continent, a tangible catalog of architectural design.

### Old Town's Kaleidoscope of Styles

As the minutes tick toward noon, tourists gather outside Old Town Hall, where the medieval astronomical clock on the tower depicts the passage of the sun and moon. Every hour between 9 a.m. and 11 p.m., wooden figures emerge to march past a skeleton symbolizing man's struggle against death. After the crowd disperses, visitors with an eye for architectural detail move closer to the 14th-century building for a look at the Gothic elements in its windows, chapel and portal.

A quick stroll across the square leads to the Church of Our Lady before Týn, begun in the mid-14th century in the Gothic style. At first glance, its two 250-foot towers look identical. Not so. The larger, grander one represents masculinity; the more delicate one, femininity. Inside, the centerpiece of the elaborate altar depicts the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and the Holy Trinity. -



The Church of Our Lady before Týn (right) and the Hus monument (foreground right) contrast with the rosy ornamentation of Kinsky Palace (left).

*Katherine Rodeghier*



The façade of the House at the Minute features figures from Greek mythology, the Bible and Renaissance tales in a decorative plaster technique.

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The church became a focal point for followers of Jan Hus, a Czech religious reformer espousing many of the principles Martin Luther would preach a century later to usher in the Reformation.

A hulking, gray monument to Hus dominates Old Town Square, contrasting with the rosy ornamentation of Kinský Palace. Designed in the rococo style, the palace features shell-like curlicues and scrollwork. The first woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Baroness Bertha von Suttner, was born in the palace and existential novelist Franz Kafka attended a school there.

Kafka grew up on the second floor of a townhouse on the square, the House at the Minute, an example of Renaissance architecture that championed Greek and Roman culture. The façade features figures from Greek mythology, the Bible and Renaissance tales in sgraffito, an Italian decorative plaster technique meaning “to scratch.” The building was rebuilt in the 16th century and is decorated by figural sgraffitoes dating to the beginning of the 17th century and just discovered in 1905. The building now forms part of the Old Town Hall complex with a pizzeria on the ground floor.

#### Across the River, Up the Hill

The Charles Bridge linking banks of the Vltava River ranks high on vacationers’ must-see lists. Constructed from 1357 to 1402 on orders of Czech King and Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV, the bridge stretches for 1,692 feet in a series of graceful Gothic arches and measures 31 feet across, wide enough for the emperor’s royal carriages. Legend has it architect Petr Parléř added eggs to the mortar to give the bridge extra strength.

Now restricted to pedestrian traffic, it can be a madhouse of vendors, street performers and visitors at midday. Replicas of 30 Baroque statues of saints and Bohemian heroes line the bridge. St. John Nepomuk draws much attention from visitors who rub the plaque at the statue’s base for good luck and a return trip to Prague. The saint was martyred in 1393 when he was first tortured and then thrown from the bridge because he refused to tell King Wenceslas IV secrets the queen revealed during confession.

Parléř’s tower on the Old Town side of the bridge ranks among Europe’s best examples of civic architecture in the Gothic style. For another fine example of Gothic architecture, visitors need only look across the river and up. Prague Castle perches on a hill and covers more than 17 acres making it one of the largest castles in Europe. Rather than one massive building, it consists of a series of structures housing churches, museums, palaces and government offices.

Among these, St. Vitus Cathedral, another work of Parléř’s, stands out. The largest church in the Czech Republic, it serves as a textbook of Gothic architecture with its flying buttresses, huge stained-glass windows, rib vaulting, and grotesques and gargoyles. Begun in 1344, construction halted during the Hussite Wars. Nearly six centuries passed before the last builders packed up their tools in 1929.

#### Centuries of Creativity

Prague’s notable buildings extend beyond Old Town and Prague Castle and embrace eras from Roman times to after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Strahov Monastery dates from 1140 but declined following the Communist takeover in 1948. An active monastery once more, it welcomes visitors to its baroque library. In a move to counter the Reformation, the baroque style sought to overwhelm viewers with the glory of the Catholic Church through opulent ornamentation, gilding, frescoes and sculptures. In the library’s Philosophical Hall a ceiling fresco by Viennese painter Franz Anton Maulbertsch stretches across the 105-foot-long room. Gilded cartouches and frescoes based on quotations from the Bible mark the Theological Hall.



Architects Frank Gehry and Vlado Milunic designed the Dancing House, which combines two buildings Gehry nicknamed Fred and Ginger.

*Czech Tourism*

The flower and leaf motifs of art nouveau make their appearance in Prague's Municipal House, completed in 1911. Beautiful ceramics, vibrant stained-glass windows and murals make a visit to the building's concert hall, exhibition rooms and restaurant a treat for the eye.

Prague became a drab city under Communism, its architectural vitality stifled, but a building boom followed the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Architects Frank Gehry and Vlado Milunic designed the Dancing House in 1992, combining a pair of buildings in a yin-yang contrast of the static and dynamic. The cylindrical concrete corner building hugs a curving tower of glass. Gehry nicknamed them "Fred and Ginger." Their combined visual energy may have diners in the building's rooftop French restaurant breaking out in moves reminiscent of the famous dancing duo of 1930s films. Currently, the building offers hotel accommodations on two floors.

#### Planning Your Trip

For more information, visit Czech Tourism at [czechtourism.com](http://czechtourism.com) and Prague City Tourism at [prague.eu/en](http://prague.eu/en). Plan your trip with a local AAA agent or [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).

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