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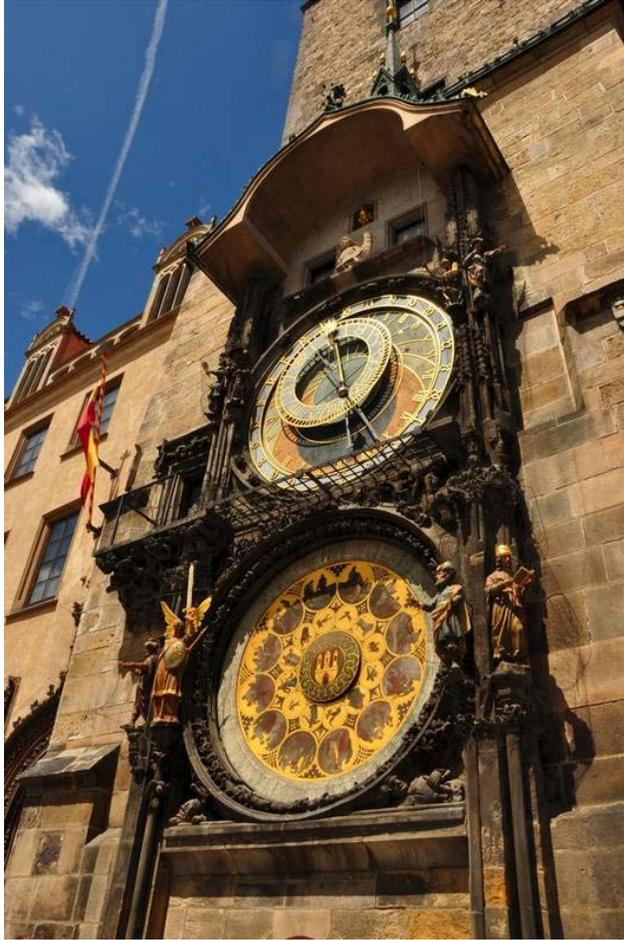
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Exploring Prague, Europe's free and easy capital



Visitors on Prague's Charles Bridge stop to touch the base of the statue of St. John Nepomuk, who was martyred when he was thrown from the bridge.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



The Astronomical Clock on Prague's Old Town Square has charted the passage of time since the Middle Ages.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



The ceremonial changing of the guards at Prague Castle is a spectacle, and it's free.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

You gotta love a city where beer is cheaper than water.

Sitting at an outdoor cafe on one of Prague's most popular public squares, my husband and I expected to pay top dollar for our lunch. As we waited for our room to be ready on our first day, we lolled around under the café's bright umbrella, picture-taking and people-watching as a constant stream of humanity passed our table. An hour came and went. We ordered another round of drinks. Finally, we called for the check: \$25, tip included.

Try that in Paris, or for that matter on Michigan Avenue.

In fact, it was among our most expensive meals, lunch or dinner, including wine and beer -- really good Czech beer, often less than \$2 a half liter. A 10-ounce bottle of water? Around \$2.40.

Prague ranks as the sixth most-visited city in Europe, and it's easy to see why. Not only is it affordable, it's cheap and easy to get around, and it's a feast for the eyes with a trove of colorful historic sites, many free or with nominal admission fees.

When the Czech Republic joined the European Union it did not adopt the euro, fearing the switch from its beloved koruna would drive prices up. From a visitor's perspective, it proved a wise move.

The castle on the hill

You can't miss it. How often have you heard that when asking directions? But if you're looking for Prague Castle, the advice is true. Just look up; you can't miss it.

From its perch on a hill above the Vltava River, the castle looms over central Prague. A series of buildings that covers more than 17 acres, the Guinness Book of World Records ranks it as the largest castle complex in the world. The mix of buildings, some dating back to Roman times, include palaces, religious structures and government buildings. Once the home of Bohemian kings and Holy Roman Emperors, it's now the Czech Republic's White House.

You could spend a full day here wandering through the many buildings by buying a ticket for around \$10 or \$14 depending on the circuit you choose (half price for seniors and kids), or you could spend just an hour or two taking in free sights.

There's no charge to see the ceremonial changing of the guards at noon in the first courtyard. And admission to the castle's most important building, St. Vitus Cathedral, also is free.

The biggest church in the country and the seat of the archbishop of Prague, St. Vitus contains the tombs of those kings and emperors. Though founded in the 10th century, shortly after the Holy Roman Emperor gave Prince Wenceslas a relic of St. Vitus, most of the present cathedral dates from the 14th century. It's primarily Gothic, flying buttresses and all. Inside, the stained glass windows bowl over visitors as does the St. Wenceslas Chapel with its precious and semiprecious stones.

The view of Prague from the castle also is free, and what a sight: dozens of spires, red-tile roofs and the river gracefully curving around the old city. Take in the scenery as you walk to and from the castle. If you find the 209 Castle Stairs too daunting, do as we did: Take the public tram up to the castle, and walk down. You'll pass through vineyards financed by Britain's Prince Charles before reaching the city streets where you pick your way down to the riverfront and the tower leading to the Charles Bridge.

A storied bridge

San Francisco has its Golden Gate, New York the Brooklyn Bridge but neither can hold a candle to the Charles Bridge in Prague.

Built from 1357 to 1402 on orders of Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV, it replaced a bridge destroyed by flood and cemented the connection between Eastern and Western Europe on a crucial trade route. Legend has it Peter Parler, the St. Vitus Cathedral architect, put eggs in the mortar to strengthen it. Whatever. It survived numerous floods, wars and rebellions.

The bridge measures 31 feet wide, broad enough for royal carriages processing down from the castle, but today only pedestrians use it. Street performers and vendors set up shop for hordes of visitors freely congregating on the bridge, often stopping to look up and snap photos.

What are they all gawking at? The statues, 30 of them, lining the bridge balustrades. Mostly baroque and mostly depicting religious and heroic figures, they are replicas of the originals moved to the National Museum in 1965. Visitors especially draw close to the figure of St. John Nepomuk, touching the plaque at his feet, turning it golden, as they wish for good luck and a return to Prague. Luck was not with Nepomuk in 1393 when King Wenceslas IV ordered him bound and thrown from the bridge into the river because he refused to reveal what the queen had told him in the confessional.

In another grisly medieval scene straight out of "Game of Thrones," 27 severed heads of anti-Habsburg rebels were put on display here to scare the bejesus out of the Czechs. Seems to have worked; the Habsburgs ruled another 300 years.

Three towers protected the bridge from intruders. For a small fee you can climb the Old Town Bridge Tower, also designed by Parler, for a view of Prague and the castle, or just stand below to admire its gothic architecture.

Prague's medieval heart

Pass under the tower and you're on the Royal Way along which the king's carriages rolled through Old Town. Walls and a moat once enclosed the cobblestone streets now lined with souvenir, gift and jewelry shops. You'll find Bohemian crystal and garnets as well as amber. You won't find tour buses, though. Old Town lies within Prague's massive UNESCO Heritage Site and access is limited, but you're free to wander around on foot and get lost.

Sooner or later the winding, narrow streets open onto Old Town Square, the heart of the medieval city, ringed by facades in pretty pastels and gray, gloomy gothic buildings. Crowds gather under the Astronomical Clock on the wall of the old City Hall to wait for the spectacle to unfold on the hour. Wooden figures of the 12 apostles parade past as Death in the form of a skeleton strikes the time. A figure of a miser holding a bag of gold represents the sin of greed and that of a man admiring himself in a mirror symbolizes vanity. Both shake their heads indicating their unreadiness to depart the earth. A calendar displays the months and an astronomical dial with zodiac signs shows the position of the sun and the moon.

The biggest crowds gather below the clock at noon to witness the longest free show of the day, then quickly disperse across the square where musicians and street buskers perform for tips. Segways -- too many -- weave around mimes and a guy waving a wand sending soap bubbles onto the breeze.

Take note of the people passing by and you'll realize Prague draws an international crowd: women in saris and burqas, men in turbans and Tyrolean hats and Americans in short shorts and flip-flops (bad idea on those cobblestones). We even saw a man in a kilt.

Time for lunch? Choose one of the cafes on the square as we did and you'll pay a premium for the meal and ringside seat. Go ahead, splurge.

- Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by Czech Tourism.

Prague

Czech Tourism: czechtourism.com

Where to stay: The Emblem, pricey but worth it for its Old Town location, from about \$270, emblemprague.com

Getting around: From the airport, the minibus Cedaz drops travelers in central Prague, walking distance from many hotels, for about \$6 per person. For the easy-to-navigate subway and the tram system, a 30-minute ticket should be all you need in central Prague, about \$1, half price for kids and seniors 60 and older. Beware of flagging down taxis, some of which have a reputation for ripping off travelers. Ask your hotel or restaurant to call a reputable one for you or look for the yellow AAA taxis that have English-speaking drivers and accept credit cards.

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