



Prague, Europe's free and easy capital

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By Katherine Rodeghier



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

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

Sitting at an outdoor café 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 Vienna.

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 is a popular add-on to European river cruises and many cruise companies offer excursions before and after itineraries on the Danube. But whether you book one of these tours or plan a side trip yourself, you'll see why the sixth most-visited city in Europe is so appealing. Not only is it affordable, it's easy to get around and a feast for the eyes with a trove of colorful historic sites, many free or with nominal admission fees.

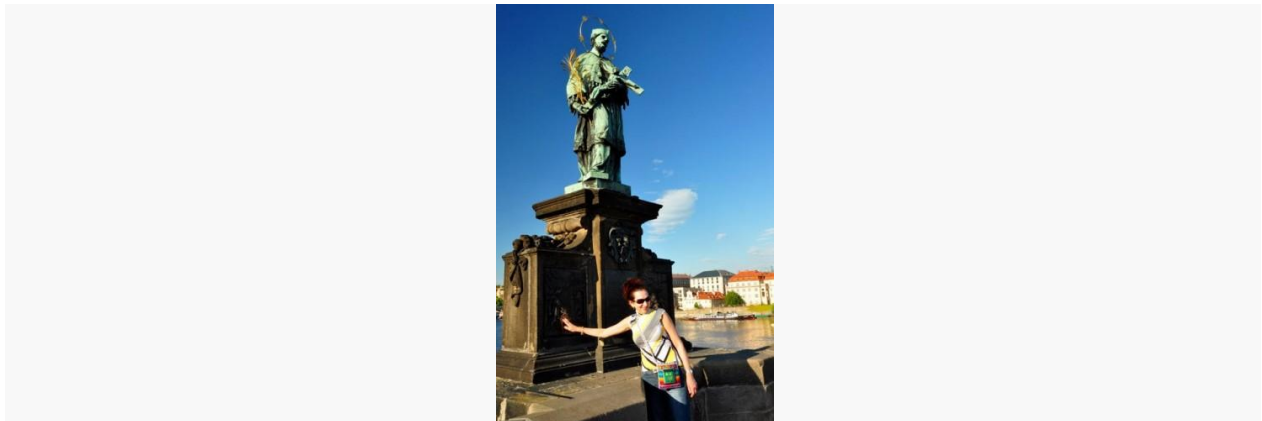
The castle on the hill

From its perch on a hill above the Vltava River, Prague 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 includes 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 a hour or two taking in free sights.

There's no charge to see the ceremonial changing of the guards at noon and admission to the castle's most important building, St. Vitus Cathedral, also is free. The biggest church in the country, St. Vitus contains the tombs of those kings and emperors. Though founded in the 10th century, 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 semi-precious stones.

The view of Prague from the castle also is free: dozens of spires, red tile roofs and the river 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 picking your way to the riverfront and the tower leading to the Charles Bridge.



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.

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 has survived numerous floods, wars and rebellions. 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. 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.

Three towers protected the bridge from intruders. For a small fee, you can climb the Old Town Bridge Tower to admire the view.

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.

You won't find tour buses, though. O



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

Old Town lies within Prague's massive UNESCO World Heritage site and access is limited, but you're free to wander around on foot.

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. On the hour, figures of the 12 apostles parade past as Death in the form of a skeleton strikes the time.

Afterward, crowds quickly disperse across the square where musicians and street buskers perform for tips. 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.

If you go

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, 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 age 60 and up. 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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