

GETTING STARTED

Beyond booking accommodation, you can do as much or as little planning as you like – Prague is one of those places best explored at random, discovering hidden corners on your own. Getting around is easy, food is served all day (and half the night) and there are treats aplenty for budgets big or small. Just let serendipity be your guide!

WHEN TO GO

Prague caters for visitors all year round, so there's really no such thing as a bad time to visit. The city is at its prettiest in spring, when the many parks begin to bloom with flowers and the budding leaves on the trees are a glowing green.

The tourist crush is especially oppressive during Easter and Christmas through New Year, as well as in May (during the Prague Spring festival), June and September. Many Czechs go on holiday in July and August, when the weather can be uncomfortably hot – you'll probably want a hotel with air-con at this time of year. If you can put up with the cold and the periodic smog alerts, hotel space is plentiful in winter (outside Christmas to New Year), and the city looks gorgeous and mysterious under a mantle of snow.

FESTIVALS

Spring and autumn are the main festival seasons in Prague, as the big classical music events take place during these times. Other minor festivals and events are scattered throughout the year.

January

THREE KINGS' DAY (SVÁTEK TŘÍ KRÁLŮ)

6 January

Three Kings' Day, also known as Twelfth Night, marks the formal end of the Christmas season on 6 January. The Czechs celebrate it with carol-singing, bell-ringing and gifts to the poor.

ANNIVERSARY OF JAN PALACH'S DEATH

19 January

A gathering in Wenceslas Square commemorates the Charles University student who burned himself to death in 1969 in protest against the Soviet occupation (see the boxed text, p29).

February

MASOPUST

www.carnevale.cz

Street parties, fireworks, concerts and revelry mark the Czech version of carnival. Banned by the communists, this ancient tradition was first revived in Žižkov in 1993, and the rest of the city is now joining in. Celebrations start on a Friday before Shrove Tuesday (aka Mardi Gras), and end with a masked parade.

March

ST MATTHEW FAIR (MATĚJSKÁ POUŤ)

From the Feast of St Matthew (24 February) up to and including Easter weekend, the Vystaviště exhibition grounds (p130) fill up with roller coasters, fairground rides, ghost trains, shooting galleries and stalls selling candy floss and traditional heart-shaped cookies. The fair is open 2pm to 10pm Tuesday to Friday and 10am to 10pm Saturday and Sunday.

BIRTHDAY OF TOMÁŠ G MASARYK

7 March

The father figure and first president of Czechoslovakia is commemorated in a ceremony at Prague Castle.

EASTER MONDAY (PONDĚLÍ VELIKONOČNÍ)

In this mirthful rite of spring, Czech boys chase their favourite girls and swat them on the legs with willow switches decked with ribbons (you'll see them on sale everywhere); the girls respond with gifts of hand-painted eggs (likewise on sale), then everyone gets down to some serious partying. It's the culmination of several days of spring-cleaning, cooking and visiting family and friends.

ONE WORLD (JEDEN SVĚT)

www.oneworld.cz

This week-long film festival is dedicated to documentaries on the subject of human

rights. Screenings are held at some of the smaller cinemas around town, including Kino Aero (p201).

FEBIOFEST

www.febiofest.cz

This international festival of film, TV and video features new works by international filmmakers. Shown throughout the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

April

BURNING OF THE WITCHES (PÁLENÍ ČARODĚJNIC) 30 April

This is the Czech version of a pre-Christian (pagan) festival for warding off evil, featuring the burning of brooms at Výstaviště (p130) and all-night, end-of-winter bonfire parties on Kampa island (p81) and in suburban backyards.

BOOKWORLD PRAGUE (SVĚT KNIHY)

www.bookworld.cz

This major international book festival is held at the Výstaviště exhibition grounds (p130). Though primarily an industry event, it's open to the general public and has author readings, book launches, exhibits, seminars and lectures, mostly in English.

May

LABOUR DAY (SVÁTEK PRÁCE) 1 May

Once sacred to the communists, the 1 May holiday is now just an opportunity for a picnic or a day in the country. To celebrate the arrival of spring, many couples lay flowers at the statue of the 19th-century romantic poet Karel Hynek Mácha (Map pp76–7), author of *Máj* (May), a poem about unrequited love. Former president Václav Havel has been known to pay homage here.

PRAGUE SPRING (PRAŽSKÉ JARO)

Running from 12 May to 3 June, this international music festival is Prague's most prestigious event, with classical music concerts held in theatres, churches and historic buildings. For details, see the boxed text, p202.

KHAMORO

www.khamoro.cz

This festival of Roma culture, with performances of traditional music and dance, exhibitions of art and photography, and a parade through Staré Město, is usually held in late May.

June

PRAGUE WRITERS' FESTIVAL

www.pwf.cz

An international meeting of writers from around the world, with public readings, lectures, discussions and bookshop events.

DANCE PRAGUE (TANEC PRAHA)

www.tanecpha.cz

International festival of modern dance held at theatres around Prague throughout June.

July

JAN HUS DAY (DEN JANA HUSA) 6 July

Celebrations are held to remember the burning at the stake of Bohemian religious reformer Jan Hus in 1415. They're kicked off with low-key gatherings and bell-ringing at Bethlehem Chapel (p101) the evening before.

August

FESTIVAL OF ITALIAN OPERA

www.opera.cz

Beginning sometime in late August and extending into September, this festival

ADVANCE PLANNING

Apart from booking flights and hotels well in advance in high season, Prague is not a city that asks you to do a great deal of forward planning.

If your main reason for visiting is to attend a major festival such as Prague Spring, check the festival website at least a month in advance, and book tickets for any performances you don't want to miss. If all you want to do is see some opera, listen to live jazz or catch a rock gig, take a look at websites such as www.prague.tv a week or two ahead to see what's on. Most opera and classical concert tickets are sold on the day or so before the performance.

We've mentioned in individual reviews where you might want to book a table at a particular restaurant. However, if you want somewhere special for, say, Valentine's Day, it's best to reserve a table a couple of weeks ahead.

HOW MUCH?

1L of petrol 33Kč

Bottled water (1.5L) 15Kč

Guardian newspaper 90Kč

Beer (0.5L) in tourist/nontourist pub 60Kč and up/30Kč

Pork & dumplings 100Kč to 150Kč

'Prague Drinking Team' T-shirt 200Kč to 400Kč (plus any remaining shreds of personal dignity)

Ticket to *Laterna Magika* 680Kč

Tour of Municipal House 160Kč

Cinema ticket 100Kč to 170Kč

Vintage car tour 980Kč

features the works of Verdi and other Italian composers performed at the Prague State Opera (p201) – your chance to see quality productions outside of the main opera season.

September

PRAGUE AUTUMN (PRAŽSKÝ PODZIM)

www.prazskypodzim.cz

This international festival of classical music is the autumn version of the renowned Prague Spring (p17). Most of the performances are held in Dvořák Hall at the Rudolfinum (p199).

October

INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL (MEZINÁRODNÍ JAZZOVÝ FESTIVAL)

www.jazzfestivalpraha.cz/jazz

Established in 1964, and based at the Reduta Jazz Club (p197), this two-week festival stretches from late October into early November, with a mix of Czech musicians and star performers from around the world.

December

CHRISTMAS-NEW YEAR (VÁNOCE-NOVÝ ROK)

From 24 December to 1 January many Czechs celebrate an extended family holiday. Revelling tourists engulf Prague, and a Christmas market is held in Old Town Square beneath a huge Christmas tree.

COSTS & MONEY

Gone are the days when Prague was a cheap destination. A rapidly growing tourism industry and an increasingly strong currency mean that the Czech capital now ranks alongside most Western European cities when it comes to quality hotels and restaurants.

You can expect to pay around €130 (US\$200) a night for a double room in a midrange hotel, while luxury and boutique hotel rates can be in the €260 (US\$400) range. Backpacker hostels typically charge around €15 (US\$23) for a dorm bed. Dinner for two in a good Malá Strana restaurant can easily set you back €38 (US\$60) per head with a bottle of wine, and the famously 'cheap' beer is now at least €2 (US\$3) per half-litre in tourist bars.

The good news is that you can still find relatively inexpensive food and drink if you're prepared to venture off the beaten tourist trail – just a few blocks away from Old Town Square there are places where you can eat for under €11 (US\$17) per person, and get that same beer for under €1 (US\$1.50).

As for accommodation, search the internet for deals – many hotel websites offer special rates or weekend packages. Or consider visiting out of season: hotel rates can fall by up to 40% in winter.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Expats.cz (www.expats.cz) Community site for expats living in Prague: listings, articles, bar and restaurant reviews, forums etc.

Living Prague (www.livingprague.com) Insider guide to the city by a British expat who has lived there for more than a decade.

Prague City Hall (<http://magistrat.praha-mesto.cz>) Official website of the city council, with lots of useful background information.

Prague Daily Monitor (www.praguemonitor.com) News site with English translations of what's making headlines in Czech newspapers.

Prague Information Service (www.pis.cz) Official tourist information website.

Prague Public Transport (www.dpp.cz) Everything you ever wanted to know about Prague's metro, tram and bus services.

PragueTV (www.praque.tv) Useful listings site covering nightlife, cinema, restaurants etc.

All Praha (www.allpraha.com) Info for tourists and expats, with local listings (restaurants, bars, etc) reviewed by users.

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