



# *Preserved magic*

Prague offers a feast for the eyes and the soul

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIE-MARIE INNES

**F**or a city that was not on my list of must-see destinations, Prague turned out to be the perfect place for me.

I was heading to Switzerland to visit my daughter and a friend suggested I check out Prague, saying a quick stopover would be all I would need.

I found myself in the heart of Europe, in a beautiful city steeped in history and brimming with architectural mastery, mesmerizing music and breathtaking vistas. With its fairytale-like setting, this is a place

where time stands still, offering a feast not only for the eyes, but also the soul.

My three-day visit, while somewhat whirlwind, was adequate for capturing Prague's main sights – while still leaving me longing for more, another time down the road.

Prague is the capital of the Czech Republic, the historical capital of Bohemia and home to just over a million people. Arriving first thing in the morning after a night flight from Toronto, I was taken by the famed skyline of red rooftops, gold-tipped towers and magnificent church

spires. Nicknamed “the Golden City of a Hundred Spires,” it is noted for being one of Europe's best preserved cities.

Armed with my camera and wearing sturdy walking shoes, I strolled the narrow cobblestone paths and explored the highlights, all within a relatively compact area.

Walking tours are highly recommended. I selected Tour 4 Charity, where the guides are passionate about Prague and their nominal fee goes to charities for underprivileged children in the Czech Republic. The guides then keep any gratuities to support their income. It is a novel concept for giving

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** The Prague Astronomical Clock is one of the city's greatest treasures and has been working for 600 years.

It attracts crowds every hour to enjoy a mechanical performance as 12 Apostles parade in the windows.

**ABOVE:** Day shot of the Gothic spires of Church of Our Lady Before Tyn, which dominates the Old Town Square.



Tourists are drawn to the majestic buildings in Old Town Square.

back while supporting local tourism.

Our tour guide, John Paul Schlamm, revealed part of Prague's charm is its pristine condition. Despite being occupied by the Nazis during the Second World War, its structures were largely spared from the bombings. "Adolf Hitler ordered his troops not to damage Prague because he planned to retire here after the war," Schlamm said.

Wars, invasions, religious revolts, fires and floods – Prague's turbulent past is filled

with upheaval, yet it is widely celebrated today as a place where the power of the people has led to great pride and prosperity.

"We've always been the underdog in history," adds Schlamm, "but we're still here. Prague has a magic about it, much of it is preserved. Post-communism, there was a big push to fix up facades, bring back decorative styles and lay the cobblestone streets. Czech pride is everywhere."

Also everywhere are its stunning structures and buildings – many designed and constructed in the Middle Ages, awe-inspiring and still standing as a testament to the country and its people's resilience.

Nowhere is this more evident than at Prague Castle.

It is a World Heritage Site and, according to the Guinness World Records, it is the largest castle complex in the world – larger than seven football fields. The castle is perched on a hill overlooking Prague's Old Town Square and the picturesque Vltava River. Constructed in the 9th century and used as a fortress to ward off invaders, the castle has evolved over 1,000 years and through several dynasties, including the Přemyslids, the Luxembourgs and the Habsburgs. It is the original seat of Czech Kings and is currently the official residence of the president.

History buffs are captivated by the sights and stories. After all, this was where a large Protestant protest took place back in 1618 when a group of angry nobles marched in to dispute Habsburg Archduke Ferdinand's succession to the throne. The mob managed to throw two of Ferdinand's Catholic governors out of a castle window; despite falling more than 15 metres, they survived by landing in a heap of manure. The incident was called the Defenestration of 1618 and signalled the start of the Thirty Years' War.

Art historians also flock here to gaze at the art, architecture and the impressive array of magnificent palaces, churches, grand banquet halls and manicured gardens.

St. Vitus Cathedral is the distinctive landmark on the castle grounds and one of the standouts of my trip. Words are

somewhat inadequate to describe its beauty and grandeur.

While its construction started in the 1300s under the orders of the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia, Charles IV, it was a true "work in progress," enduring political and religious conflicts and frequent fires. It was finally completed in 1929. The cathedral was constructed under many art and architectural influences, notably Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, baroque and art nouveau. It is a remarkable blending of masterful builders over the centuries.

King Charles IV is buried here, a forward-thinking leader who chose Prague as his imperial residence. He is noted for heralding in the country's Golden Age in the 14th century and founding Central Europe's first university – Charles University in Prague.

The cathedral also houses the crown jewels and the tomb of Czech's patron saint Wenceslas – a.k.a. Good King Wenceslas – a revered duke and martyr who was killed by his brother in the 10th century.

Famed early 20th-century Czech artist Alphonse Mucha created art-nouveau-style stained-glass windows as the cathedral's glorious centrepiece, and while visitors marvel at this artistry, many are equally impressed by the cathedral's St. Wenceslas Chapel, which is encrusted in opulent semi-precious gems.

As I wind my way down the castle hill towards the Old Town Square, the famed footbridge – Charles Bridge – awaits. Commissioned by its namesake Charles IV in 1357, after the previous bridge was destroyed in a flood, it straddles the Vltava River and it, too, has a tale.

The bridge was fortified with sandstone blocks and is rumoured to have eggs mixed in with its mortar. It has proved to be durable and in 2002 withstood one of the country's worst floods.

The bridge was the sight for the signing of the Thirty Years' War truce in 1648, which ended the conflict and saved Prague's old town from the Swedish army. Today, this is the place where tourists congregate

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**THIS PAGE:** Tourists flock to the John Lennon Peace Wall, often spray painting their graffiti art and peaceful prose.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Art Nouveau stained-glass window created by Czech painter Alfons Mucha in the St. Vitus Cathedral at Prague Castle.

in droves, as they enjoy artists, buskers, musicians and the replicas of the 17th-century baroque statues placed along the bridge. The real ones were removed for preservation and can be viewed in a nearby citadel.

And if this bridge seems familiar to some, it may be because it was used as a backdrop for Hollywood blockbusters such as “The Bourne Identity” and the James Bond thriller “Casino Royale.”

Heading into the Old Town Square, I navigate a winding maze of narrow streets lined with restaurants and souvenir shops but, once entering the square, its vastness and vibe abounds. Its attraction is the variety of architecture – the baroque churches, a rococo palace and, once again, those signature soaring spires.

Looming over me is the dominant Gothic spires of the Church of Our Lady Before Týn, the ancient structure that represents the Hussite church and its revered reformist founder, Jan Hus. He was burned at the stake here in 1415 for alleged crimes of heresy after he questioned the Catholic Church’s corrupt practices. His statue watches over the square, while those church spires are some of the most photographed in Prague. They even inspired the

foreboding castle design in the Angelina Jolie movie “Maleficent.”

The Old Town Square formerly served as a horse and cattle market, but more than 600 years ago there was another reason to travel here.

The Astronomical Clock at the Old Town Hall is deemed a medieval wonder and is the oldest working astronomical clock in the world, drawing hundreds of tourists on the hour to experience its craftsmanship and precision. Every hour, 12 Apostles parade in the windows to help signal the position of celestial bodies, astronomical cycles and, yes, eventually revealing the time and date. The master clockmaker who created it is said to have been blinded back in 1490 to prevent him from replicating the clock anywhere else in the world.

While Prague is a popular tourist destination for its annual Christmas market, its Spring Music Festival receives equal billing and has been hosting the world’s best performing artists, symphony and chamber orchestras since 1946. It is also a mecca for Mozart fans. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart had a fondness for Prague, famously saying, “My Praguers understand me.” Here at Prague’s Estates Theatre, he debuted and directed his renowned opera, “Don

Giovanni” back in 1787.

Today, that same theatre hosts prominent musicians – tenor Placido Domingo headlined during my visit – as do the many churches and palaces in Prague daily. I took in one of those concerts at the Charles Bridge Palace, the site where the movie “Amadeus” was filmed in 1983 by Czech-born director Milos Forman.

Surrounded by untouched 18th-century frescoes and original chandeliers, I was entranced by the Royal Czech Orchestra as I listened to its moving renditions of Beethoven, Bach and Mozart’s “Don Giovanni” Aria.

Transfixed as many are by Prague’s old-world charm and medieval mystique, make no mistake there is a youthful exuberance here too. Its youth have led many peaceful protests over the ages, especially in 1989 during the famed Velvet Revolution, when hundreds of thousands of students rallied for two weeks against their Communist rulers and ultimately helped end four decades of control, eventually leading to democracy.

Perhaps the protesters were buoyed by peace activist and former Beatle John Lennon, who was assassinated in 1980 and memorialized in Prague just steps away from the Charles Bridge. Many admirers and peace advocates make the pilgrimage to the colourful John Lennon Peace Wall that boasts pacifist graffiti in his honour and creative renderings from visitors. The wall’s vibrant hues and soulful statements continue to draw crowds, celebrating freedom of speech. Many even pick up a spray can, available nearby, to add to the powerful prose.



October 2018 marks the 100th anniversary celebration of the founding of independent Czechoslovakia. The country has been referred to as the Czech Republic since 1993’s amicable parting of Czech and Slovak states, and both the Czech Republic and Slovakia are getting set for the anniversary.

Prague has been priming for the party for several years, renovating and refurbishing landmarks to welcome visitors. While the city will be alive with special exhibits, festivals and many free events, so too will

the record number of festhalls and pubs, as Praguers hoist a pint of beer to usher in the anniversary.

Beer drinking is a favourite pastime here and so it is no surprise the Czech Republic boasts a unique claim to fame: it has the highest beer consumption per capita in the world.

The country’s famous brand of Pilsner Urquell originated here in 1842 after it was first brewed in the Czech town of Pilsen. Today, that small town 80 kilometres away is home to many competing brewers.

Just down the road, the brand Budweiser Budvar is brewed in a town named Budweis. Sound familiar?

The American brewer Budweiser adopted that name for its product after a visit to the town in the 19th century and quite likely after imbibing a few, or several, sudsy samples.

Medieval charm, spectacular architecture and Czech beer . . . the reasons to visit Prague just keep adding up, whether to quench your thirst for history or, quite simply, to quench your thirst. 