



Prague is home to Prague Castle, one of the largest castle complexes in the world.

Bohemian Rhapsody

Exploring historic Prague

By Eric Lucas

Two sets of saints are popular among visitors to Prague's Charles Bridge. The first kind, found along the balustrade, consists of historic statues of ecclesiastical luminaries ranging from St. Barbara, St. Francis, St. Ludmila and St. Christopher to St. John of Nepomuk, who was martyred at this very spot in 1393. St. John is a famed provider of good luck, and his age-darkened statue bears a butterscotch bronze

gleam, left by the thousands of hands that have rubbed it to obtain better fortune.

The other saints ubiquitous on the Charles Bridge are those in the iconic Dixieland song, *When the Saints Go Marchin' In*, one of the most popular items in the repertoire of the Bridge Band,

among the city's most popular street performers. The Czechs embraced jazz around a century ago, and you'll hear this upbeat song almost any summer afternoon on the bridge—along with the voices of countless visitors, speaking Russian, German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Man-

darin, English and, of course, Czech.

It's all in an average day on the Charles Bridge. This pedestrian United Nations is an almost one-third-mile-long, 30-foot-wide span over the gentle Vltava River. On sunny afternoons, visitors make the bridge one of the most popular places in Europe, and it's clear why. The city views on either side are broad, from Prague Castle, uphill to the west, to the myriad church spires in Old Town, to the east. Visitors snap photos; artists sketch caricatures; vendors offer garnet-crusted key rings; and the scent of hearty bread drifts

across from nearby bakeries. This bridge is an emblem of the character the city has presented for almost a millennium: diverse, playful, colorful and deeply intriguing.

"Paris of the East," the Czech capital has often been called, a reference to its centuries of cosmopolitan glory. Home to artists, musicians, writers, philosophers and political visionaries—all of whom may still be found at any given moment on the Charles Bridge—Prague has long welcomed visitors. The city's history, art, beauty and culinary delights draw close to 4.5 million international travelers a year. Visitors stroll the grounds of Prague Castle, among the largest castle complexes in the world; wander the streets of Old Town, with its cobblestone warrens and medieval stone buildings; ply foot-paddle boats along the river; and savor the harmonic echoes of concerts in 500-year-old churches. The 23rd-largest metro area in Europe, at 2 million people, Prague is the continent's sixth-most-visited city.

At the heart of Prague is the area that holds the most interest for visitors: a compact, centuries-old cobblestone enclave stretching from Prague Castle across the Charles Bridge to Old Town Square. This area is eminently walkable,



Visitors walk past statues of saints as they cross the Charles Bridge.

and it takes my wife, Leslie, and me a half hour to journey from the castle to the square. The stroll takes us past tidy, classic gardens clinging to the hillside below the castle; across the bridge; and up narrow medieval lanes in which shop windows glitter with jewelry adorned with garnets and amber, and the Czech Republic's inimitable works of Bohemian glass.

Old Town Square is a vast, sun-drenched plaza. At the Astronomical Clock on the square's southeast corner, an animated clock-tower trumpeter greets each new hour with medieval fanfares (the clock was first installed in 1410) and a procession of statues of the disciples. We stop at a plaza-side food stand and try *trdelnik*, a traditional Slavic pastry made with rolled dough, roasted over a fire and crusted with crystallized sugar.

Nearby, the strains of a piece by English composer Henry Purcell, sung by a girls choir, echo through the arched stone doorways of the stately St. Nicholas Church, and we step inside to bask in the honey-toned Baroque harmonies. Across the square, I buy fine greeting cards embossed with woodblock illustrations by late-Victorian artists, designed during one of Prague's cultural heydays, the 1890s. Images of flowers bedeck some; romantic



WHEN YOU GO

LODGING

The **Kempinski Hotel Hybernska** (Hybernská 12; 420-226-226-111; kempinski.com/prague) consists of elegant modern rooms constructed in a stately former Baroque palace. Though the building is quite large by Central Prague standards, the hotel has only 75 rooms, so it retains an intimate air. Old Town is just minutes away, and the Charles Bridge only five minutes past that.

In Old Town, **Hotel Central** (Rybná 8; 420-222-317-220; central-prague.com) is a three-star hotel with 51 remarkably spacious rooms. Located near the Old Town Square, the hotel enjoys proximity to the central city's most popular destinations.

DINING

It's hard to say which is more appealing at **Restaurace Mlync** (Novotného lávja 9; 420-277-000-777; mlync.cz), its neo-traditional Czech cuisine (duck breast with red cabbage and potato dumplings) or its splendid site above the Vltava River. Tables on the riverside balcony are much in demand; reserve far in advance, or dine very early or late, in order to enjoy this spectacular setting.

Occupying a ground-floor corner of the former Pachtuv Palace (now the Mameison Hotel), **Amade Restaurant** (Karolíny Světlé 34; 420-230-234-316; amaderestaurant.cz) features an elegant dining room and a traditional Czech menu of items such as honey-glazed pork belly and chestnut cake.

Tucked into a restored renaissance home near Prague Castle, **Restaurant Lvi Dvur**, or "Lion's Court" (U prasného mostu 6/51; 420-224-372-361; lvidvur.cz), specializes in barbecued meats, such as steak or chicken, and Czech-style goulash, which is a hearty, stewlike version of the East European staple.

scenes, others; and yes, there's the Charles Bridge as illustrated 120 years ago, the center of the city then as it is now.

The bridge's namesake, Charles IV, laid the foundation of Prague's worldly stature, bringing the title of Holy Roman Emperor to the city he made his capital in 1346. Charles was a patron of art and architecture, and of progressive thought, influenced by philosophers such as Petrarch and other Renaissance Humanists. This open-minded legacy persists in Prague today, as can be seen just a five-minute walk from the Charles Bridge, along a once-obscure wall in a back lane that has become one of the city's most popular attractions.

Here, in the 1989 flowering of the Velvet Revolution that eventually deposed the Communist regime, students began painting on the stucco wall epigrammatic quotations from John Lennon. Authorities would whitewash over the quotations; activists would repaint them overnight. Then Václav Havel, a playwright who stood as the heir to the city's long progressive legacy, led Prague and the Czech Republic to freedom—and the Lennon Wall became a canvas for the world.

It still is. Beneath the shade of old plane trees, I watch a young Asian woman

approach the wall with a spray can. Shrugging off a moment of stage fright, she quickly and assertively scribes a large, stylized form amid a thousand other images and quotations. At first I can't grasp what her art represents; it looks like rail car graffiti, so I inquire.

"It's a dove," she explains. "For peace." She's from Hong Kong, she adds.

Perusing the Lennon Wall is a thought-provoking exercise, just as I'm sure Charles IV, Franz Kafka, Antonín Dvořák and Václav Havel would have wanted. Though the wall is open to anyone, 24 hours a day, virtually all who paint here conform to the spirit of the place.

On a small bridge not far away is another spot where visitors openly express themselves—in this case, the sentiment is love. Fastening padlocks to the bridge railings above a side channel of the Vltava, couples from around the world pledge their bond in this place. I examine the railing and see that on July 6, 2011, Bjorn and Therese swore eternal love with a small brass key lock.

Lacking a handy extra lock, Leslie and

Top: The Astronomical Clock on Prague's Old Town Hall was first installed in 1410.

Left: A visitor contributes to the Lennon Wall's colorful graffiti.



DOUG PEARSON / ALAMY



DIANE C. MACDONALD / ALAMY

I repair to a quiet cafe, adjacent to the little bridge, for lunch. Above us towers a lovely, 100-foot linden tree (*lipa* in Czech), sacred to early Slavs and a national emblem for Czechs. An ancient mill wheel creaks in the current beside us. We savor *gulas*, the Czech version of goulash, a heady stew of beef, paprika, tomato, onion and garlic, served with steamed potato-bread dumplings—perfect for soaking up the stew.

That afternoon, we head up to Prague Castle, a complex so big that guidebooks advise devoting a whole day to its exploration. Poised atop the hill northwest of the city center, the castle is nearly 2,000 feet long and 500 feet wide, and its origins date to the ninth century. Once home to kings of Bohemia and Holy Roman emperors, the castle has more recently

served as offices for the presidents of Czechoslovakia and—following the peaceful division of that country in 1993—the Czech Republic.

Cathedrals, museums, palaces and ancillary structures lie amid the castle's vast cobblestone plazas and lanes. Selecting pretty much at random, we wander into the Treasury of St. Vitus Cathedral, an ancient hall in which treasures from the castle's diocese gleam in exhibit cases. Here we see the glitter of gold, and the sparkle of diamonds, emeralds, garnets and sapphires under spotlights. The hall also features reliquaries bearing those most unusual of European artifacts: relics of saints such as Vitus himself, a treasure dating back to A.D. 929. A vast, gold-and-silver cross holds a supposed piece of Christ's loincloth. Several seemingly simple glass cases are in fact carved crystal, representing a many-centuries-old form of Czech fine art, and priceless priestly garments are decorated with seed-pearl embroidery, a painstaking art



The St. Vitus Cathedral at Prague Castle is one of Europe's most impressive churches.

that's another Czech specialty.

From hillside plazas at the lower end of the castle, the view across Prague is breathtaking. The innumerable red-tile

roofs contrast with the sunflower-yellow color of most of the buildings; dozens of church and cathedral spires spar for attention; and the river threads its way through the city, a glimmering reflective belt in the late-afternoon sun.

Walking back across the Charles Bridge, we find violinists have replaced Dixieland jazz. We settle in for dinner at Restaurace Mlynec, a Czech-revival-cuisine establishment less than 100 yards from the eastern end of the bridge. The building housing the restaurant is built on pillars in the water, and the Vltava flows beneath the restaurant and its estimable balcony. Here, we enjoy venison medallions with cream sauce, more steamed dumplings and red currant jam, and roast duck with braised red cabbage. Dessert is apple-rhubarb pie, which the waiter tells us is "almost as good as what my grandmother makes."

"And her grandmother before that, and on back in time, I bet," I add. He nods enthusiastically: "It's as authentic as you can get."

The meal proves to be not only traditional, but sensational. The lowering sun reaches the parapets of Prague Castle across the river as I peruse the foundation of Charles IV's bridge a few yards away.

The bridge has been the central thoroughfare in Prague, physically and metaphorically, since Charles IV began its construction in 1357. It bears his name, though not just for his imperial memory. The naming officially took place in 1870, but there's more to it than most such royal honorifics. Charles himself helped lay the first foundation stone, which lies beneath the bridge to this day. That began a legacy of endurance for a structure that has withstood centuries of floods, survived wars and insurrections, been repaired innumerable times, even escaped "improvement" projects such as the 20th century asphaltting that once covered the stone pavement (now restored). Vehicles were barred from the bridge in 1965, and when the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, ending a short (by historic measures) period of relative isolation, the bridge and the city quickly vaulted back to preeminence among European destinations.

The bridge base is an immense, weathered bulwark here, and I enjoy the notion that the biggest, sturdiest stone right at the bottom is the one Charles himself helped place more than a half-millennium ago, laying the foundation not just for a bridge, but for a thriving metropolis that has spanned many historic epochs. It's been a whole generation now since Václav Havel led Prague back to prominence, where it will surely stay as long as Charles's bridge stands. ▲

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GETTING THERE



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