

LAND & PEOPLE

Glinting spires, winding cobblestone lanes, mountaintop castles, and red roofs as far as the eye can see—how could anyone fail to be charmed by this most charming of Central European countries? Trapped behind the Iron Curtain for more than forty years, Czechoslovakia burst its bounds in 1989 and emerged as a must-see destination for anyone pining for a perfectly preserved piece of scenic paradise.

By the time Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993, the Czech Republic—and especially Prague—was already starting to find a place “on the traveling map,” due to its reasonable prices, beautiful panoramas, and uniquely “Bohemian” flavor.

More than ten years on, the Czech Republic may no longer be considered an exotic destination, but it is one with considerable magic left for visitors. From Prague’s Old Town—Europe’s only historical center almost completely untouched by the Second World War—to its castle, and from Český Krumlov’s tiny

Renaissance glory to Karlovy Vary’s old-world spa town ambience, there is enough beauty and atmosphere to intrigue even the most jaded visitor.

GEOGRAPHY

Slightly smaller than South Carolina, the Czech Republic is a landlocked, temperate country that borders Germany, Slovakia, Poland, and Austria. One of the world’s newest independent states, the Czech Republic was founded on January 1, 1993, after the breakup of Czechoslovakia, a state first recognized in 1918.



Today’s Czech Republic consists of two primary historical areas, Bohemia (*Čechy*) in the west and Moravia (*Morava*) in the east. The Bohemian landscape is characterized by hills and gently rolling plains flanked by low mountains, while Moravia has a slightly more mountainous terrain. Important rivers include the Labe (Elbe),

Vltava (Moldau), Morava, and Odra (Oder). Slovakia ended up with most of the mountains in the split, but the Czech Republic still boasts several high peaks in the Krkonoše (Giant) mountain range, including Sněžka at 5,200 feet (1,600 meters) above sea level.

The capital city, Prague, is also considered to be the historical capital of the Czech people and is now home to approximately 1.2 million people. The Moravian first city, Brno, is also the second-largest city in the Czech Republic with a population of approximately 370,000. Ethnic Czechs comprise some 81 percent of the Czech population of approximately 10 million, while ethnic Moravians—who do not speak a separate language, although some would contend they speak more proper Czech—make up approximately 13 percent of the country's people. Other ethnic groups include Slovaks, Poles, Germans, Hungarians, and Roma, also known as Gypsies.

Politically, the country is now divided into thirteen regions, called *kraj* (the plural is *kraje*)



and its capital city, Prague. Besides Prague and Brno, the only other city with a population of over 300,000 is the Moravian city of Ostrava. Neither Brno nor Ostrava is as well-known internationally as two smaller cities, however: Plzeň and České Budějovice, while perhaps not recognizable by name, are internationally known for two of the Czech Republic's most famous exports, Pilsner Urquell and Budvar (Budweiser) beers. (The latter brand has been locked in an international struggle with U.S. beer giant Anheuser-Busch for trademark rights to the "Budweiser" name.)

After Prague, the most common tourist destinations are medieval silver town Kutná Hora, UNESCO heritage site Český Krumlov, and the spa towns of western Bohemia.

The Czech Republic's location and geography have lent it a temperate climate, with humid, warm summers; short, mild springs and falls; and rainy, cold, and very gray winters. As a guideline, the average temperature in Prague ranges from 22°F (-5°C) to 33°F (0°C) in January and from 53°F (12°C) to 74°F (23°C) in July.

As the temperate climate would suggest, there are few extremes in Czech weather, although the precipitation levels combined with the low-lying terrain can lead to widespread and extremely damaging floods, as happened in 2002.

A BRIEF HISTORY

The oldest recorded settlers in the present-day Czech Republic were a Celtic tribe called the Boii, from which the name Bohemia stems (from the Latin *Boiohaemum*). The Boii lived in the region starting from the fourth century BCE and were eventually joined by Germanic tribes.

Slavic peoples ventured into the territories of present-day Moravia and Slovakia in the sixth century CE. In the ninth century the kingdom of Greater Moravia, in the eastern part of the region, was founded by the Slavic prince Svatopluk, and Christianity was adopted. In 906 Moravia was conquered by Magyars. In around 995 the state of Bohemia in the northwest broke away from Moravia under the homegrown Přemyslid dynasty. This dynasty, which ruled the Czech lands until 1306, has its roots in the semilegendary Princess Libuše, sometimes called the Mother of the Czech Nation. According to the most famous telling of the legend, written in the height of the nineteenth-century Czech national revival by Alois Jirásek, Libuše foretold the founding of Prague standing on the hill at Vyšehrad by saying, "Behold, I see a great city, whose fame will touch the stars."

Princess Libuše ruled the Czech lands wisely, and her people were happy, as Jirásek tells it, until two men quarreling over land questioned her

judgment because she was a woman. Incensed, she chastised them for not appreciating her sensitive ruling style and told them to find her a husband who could rule in her place. She even told them where to find him and what he would be—a simple plowman (*Přemysl*). When they returned with Přemysl, the two were wed, thus founding the Přemyslid dynasty.

In around 880, the first Přemyslid prince, Bořivoj, founded Prague Castle high above the Vltava River, transferring power there from the fortress of Vyšehrad. During the Přemyslid reign, the Czech state managed to maintain titular sovereignty, despite its incorporation into the Holy Roman Empire in 950 CE. The assassination of the pious Prince Wenceslas (Václav) by his pagan brother Boleslav in 935 created a Christian martyr and a symbol of Czech nationalism, and Wenceslas became the patron saint of Bohemia.



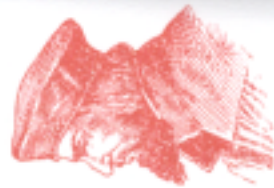
The Kingdom of Bohemia

In 1029 Moravia became a fief of Bohemia, and in the twelfth century Bohemia became a kingdom. Under Otakar II, who reigned from 1253 to 1278, the Czech kingdom expanded to include territory in modern-day Austria and Slovenia. The

Přemyslid dynasty died out after the murder of Wenceslas III, but the Czech lands experienced a high point in power and prestige under Charles IV (of the Luxembourg ruling family, who had married into the Přemyslids in the early fourteenth century), who reigned from 1346 to 1378. Charles IV was elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1355 and founded a number of notable institutions, including Charles University, the oldest university in central Europe.

The Hussite Wars

In the fifteenth century, a homegrown precursor of the Protestant Reformation—a movement called the Hussites, after its leader Jan Hus—swept the nation and alarmed the papacy. Hus was tried by the Council of Constance for heresy and burned at the stake in 1415, but his ideas lived on. The anger aroused by this act led to the Hussite Wars (1420–36), in which the reformist armies led by Jan Žižka held the Catholic Emperor's superior forces at bay. By the mid-fifteenth century, the Catholic Church and the Hussites had reached an uneasy truce that allowed the largely Protestant Czech nobility to gain in strength, but by 1526, the Austrian-Catholic Habsburgs had taken control of Bohemia.



Habsburg Rule

That control was cemented in 1620 with the defeat of the Bohemian nobility at the Battle of White Mountain, in part precipitating the Thirty Years' War. (The "defenestration" in 1618 of three royal Catholic officials from the Old Royal Palace of Prague Castle hadn't helped relations much either.) Following their defeat at White Mountain—an event still commemorated by a monument on Old Town Square—Czechs were forced to convert to Catholicism or leave, a policy that has perhaps led to the Czech objection to organized religion even today. Leading the fight against Protestantism were the Jesuits, who built many new churches in the Baroque style.

The Czech lands remained part of the Habsburg empire—and were subject to its attendant assimilation and Germanization policies—until 1918. By the nineteenth century, the Czech language itself was in danger of dying out, with the educated classes speaking and writing German. In 1848, a national revival of language and culture turned political, and the Czechs began demanding greater sovereignty. With the creation of the dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1867, Bohemia was reduced to a province of Austria, and nationalist sentiment grew. But the



goal of an independent state would not be reached until after the First World War, when the empire dissolved following Austria-Hungary's defeat in the war.

Independence

The postwar Treaty of Versailles enshrined the principle of national self-determination, and on October 28, 1918, the sovereign state of

Czechoslovakia was founded.

Within ten years the so-called First Republic of Czechs and Slovaks, led by President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, had become one of the most developed countries in the world, with one of the most progressive constitutions. The



First Republic survived little more

than twenty years, however, with the Munich Conference ceding control of the northern Sudetenland districts, which were home to many ethnic Germans, to Nazi Germany in the infamous policy of appeasement. The remainder of Czechoslovakia was annexed by Germany in 1939. President Eduard Beneš set up a government-in-exile in London. The Nazi occupation lasted from March 1939 through the end of the Second World War in May 1945.

The Nazi Occupation

After Czechoslovakia was liberated by Soviet and American troops in 1945, a government of national unity was formed under Beneš. The country expelled its two to three million ethnic German citizens, and thousands were killed in the process. The expulsion increased ill relations between Czechoslovakia and its neighbors, Germany and Austria, and groups of expellees living outside Czech territory are still lobbying for compensation for lost property. However, most Czechs believe the expulsions were justified because of the suffering experienced under Nazi occupation—suffering that included not only brutal repression of Czechs in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia but also the deportation and extermination of most of the Gypsies (Roma) and Jews living in the country.

One of the most notorious events that occurred in the Protectorate during the war was the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, the deputy Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia, who ruled the lands with an iron fist. In 1942, a group of Czech resistance fighters who had been



trained in England were returned to Prague to carry out an assassination. Although Heydrich was only wounded in the daring attack, he died a

week later of blood poisoning brought about by the shrapnel lodged in his wounds.

As retaliation for the death of Heydrich, German Gestapo and SS killed as many as 1,000 Czechs suspected of being involved in the assassination and deported 3,000 Jews. But the reprisals did not stop there. In June, just days after Heydrich died, Hitler commanded that the small Czech town of Lidice be liquidated for its role in helping the assassins—a charge that had no basis in fact. Nearly 200 men and boys over the age of sixteen were shot, while the women were sent to a concentration camp. Young children were sent to another camp. The village was then completely razed, destroyed house by house, and crops were planted over the area.

In addition to dramatic events such as these, ordinary Czechs were deported to serve as slave labor in German factories and Gestapo roundups, arbitrary violence and executions, and near-starvation conditions were everyday occurrences.

Stalinism

Following the war, by the terms of the deal struck at Yalta, Czechoslovakia was placed into the formal Soviet sphere of influence, and a February 1948 takeover by the Communists forced the young country behind the Iron Curtain to suffer more indignities as an occupied country. Stalinist

show trials in the 1950s—set up to purge the Czechoslovak Communist Party of those who were not considered sufficiently supportive of Stalinism—terrorized the populace and led most people to retreat into themselves.



The Prague Spring

In the late 1960s, Czech Communists led by Alexander Dubček did attempt to lighten the hand of the regime in a reform effort christened the Prague Spring, but the August 1968 invasion by the armies of the Warsaw Pact ended the experiment of "Socialism With a Human Face." In 1977 a human rights group of intellectuals called "Charter 77," which included the playwright Václav Havel, was formed. This led to a crackdown against dissidents.

The Velvet Revolution

Czechoslovakia languished under Communist rule until 1989, until the decay of the Soviet empire and the decline of the Communist system led to unrest and demonstrations around Eastern and Central Europe, culminating in Czechoslovakia in the November '89 demonstrations—under the spiritual guidance of Alexander Dubček and Václav Havel—that led to

the fall of the Communist regime. New political parties were formed and legalized, and the Communist Party was stripped of its powers. Havel was appointed president and amnesty was granted to thousands of prisoners. The events were popularly known as the Velvet Revolution.

The Parting of the Ways

Political wrangling between politicians in Czechoslovakia's two ethnic constituencies—most notably former Slovak Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar and former Czech Prime Minister (now president) Václav Klaus—led to a parliamentary decision to split the country into the Czech Republic and Slovakia (sometimes called the Velvet Divorce). A referendum on the issue was never held, but the country was split on January 1, 1993, and Václav Havel elected the president of the Czech Republic. At the time, polls indicated that only 9 percent of the population supported the break, although polls taken on the tenth anniversary of the split showed that people in both countries were now glad to have their separate republics.

Since 1993, the Czech Republic has been successful in integrating into wider multinational structures, including NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004.

THE CZECH GOVERNMENT

The Czech Republic is a parliamentary democracy. The country's main political parties include the leftist Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and the rightist Civic Democratic Party (ODS)—who have swapped primary power back and forth since independence—and the Christian and Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL), the Freedom Union-Democratic Union (US-DEU), and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM).



The president is not directly elected but is instead chosen by the parliament for a five-year term. President Havel stepped down after ten years in power in the winter of 2003 and was ultimately replaced by former prime minister, ODS leader, and Havel rival Václav Klaus after several contentious rounds of elections.

Political participation by Czech citizens has waned since the early heyday of the flowering of democracy following the overthrow of Communism. Cynicism and apathy have taken their toll on the democratic process, but overall the government and citizenry remain committed to democracy and European-style capitalism.

THE CZECH ECONOMY

Czechoslovakia under Communism had a great many industrial areas and manufacturing plants, as well as some mining. Much of the heavy industry was located in Slovakia, meaning that after the 1993 split, the Czech Republic was left without that decaying industrial legacy, but for a few spots in Northern Bohemia. The Czech Republic has prospered since then, becoming one of the stars of the post-Communist region, but for a recession shortly before 2000 that ended relatively quickly.

Today, the Czech economy is diversified. The main manufacturing industries, according to the Czech Foreign Ministry, are machines, transport equipment, power, glass, jewelry, porcelain, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, steel and iron, textiles and clothing, aerospace, food processing, and brewing, as well as agriculture in grain, potatoes, sugar beets, oilseeds, fruits, vegetables, livestock, and milk.

The largest sector of the economy is services—including such industries as telecommunications, banking, and education—which make up approximately 60 percent of GDP. Tourism also plays a large role. Industry accounts for 35 percent, and some Czech products—such



as Škoda cars (now owned by Volkswagen), Pilsner beer, and Czech-made streetcars and trolleys (used in cities worldwide including Portland, Oregon)—are internationally famous. Agriculture still plays a small but important part in the economy, approximately 5 percent of GDP.

The country's currency, the Czech crown (*koruna*) (CZK), has had a run of strength against the dollar and euro in the last two years and looks set to continue to



appreciate against the weakening dollar. Inflation is low, but the country's deficits and stubborn 9 to 10 percent unemployment rate remain a concern. The Czech government has also had trouble completing deals for privatization of the country's large state-owned monopolies, including ČEZ, the energy giant, and the telecommunications company Český Telecom.

In Prague and other selected, highly visited pockets such as Český Krumlov and Karlovy Vary, much of the economy is based on tourism, with fluctuations in tourist numbers causing much anxiety among the many people who are dependent on tourist dollars. The Czech tourism industry took a heavy hit in 2002 when the worst floods in one hundred years—maybe as many as 1,000 years—hit the country and especially the

capital. Visitor numbers have returned since then, but that year is remembered as a black one for one of the country's leading industries.

There has been heavy investment in the tourist industry in many of these areas by foreigners, especially Russians, and many Czechs resent that presence. Karlovy Vary—a small, historic spa town in western Bohemia still sometimes known by its German name, Karlsbad—in particular has become so popular among the Russian *nouveaux riches* that there is a direct Czech Air flight between the town of 50,000 and the Russian capital of Moscow.

Prague has also become a popular choice for international company and organization headquarters in Central Europe. German shipping giant DHL recently moved its IT headquarters to Prague, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is still headquartered (for now) in downtown Prague.

CZECHS AROUND THE WORLD

Immigrants from the Czech lands can be found around the world, with high concentrations in the Midwestern United States and in the U.S. state of Texas dating from the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century. (There is even a National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library in Iowa!) During the Communist era—and especially

after 1968—large numbers of dissidents fled the country for points abroad, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and other “Western” countries. After the fall of Communism, many of these émigrés returned to their former homeland.

Czechs today continue to emigrate, but not in the numbers once seen. There is, however, a steady stream of human “exports” in the form of top-level athletes, especially hockey and football (soccer) players, with Czechs reaching the apex of international and European competition. Some of the best-known modern Czechs are athletes, including tennis star Martina Navratilova (who became an American citizen after defecting in 1975 but was born in Prague) and National Hockey League goalie Dominik Hasek (nicknamed “The Dominator”).

The Czech lands throughout history have produced a tremendous number of famous and important cultural figures as well. Well-known writers of Czech origin include



Franz Kafka (*The Trial*, *Metamorphosis*), Karel Čapek (inventor of the word “robot”), and Milan Kundera (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*). Antonín Dvořák, Bedřich Smetana, Leoš Janáček, and Bohuslav

Martinů represent the most famous Czech composers, although other classical giants, including W. A. Mozart, also worked and lived in Prague at various periods in their lives.

Film is another genre in which Czechs have made impressive contributions. Miloš Forman (*Amadeus*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*), Jiří Menzel (1967 Academy Award winner, *Closely Watched Trains*), and animator and short filmmaker Jan Švankmajer are all Czechs who have achieved the highest levels in their art. Famous Czech visual artists include Art Nouveau giant Alfons Mucha, whose images are immediately recognizable in posters adorning all manner of Czech establishments.

The Czechs have also produced some of the modern era's best-known philosophers and statesmen—by happy coincidence, sometimes in the same person—including post-Communist Czech president and playwright Václav Havel and philosopher and first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who espoused such radical notions as equality for women in the early twentieth century.

Well before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Czechs were also known for porcelain, ceramics, and especially hand-cut lead crystal. The Czech contribution to architecture is on display at its best in Prague, where Gothic castle



remains mingle with the height of Art Nouveau. Prague is also home to one of the only examples of Cubist architecture, the House of the Black Madonna, which now houses the Museum of Czech Cubism.

The sum total of Czech contributions to world culture is impossible to measure but is certainly impressive by any standard, especially given the country's small size and history of oppression by outside forces. It's a tradition of which Czechs are justifiably proud and that modern Czechs show every sign of continuing.