

# PRAGUE AND OTHER CZECH CITIES

## PRAGUE

Prague is the **capital city** of the Czech Republic. It is also **the largest city** in the Czech Republic. About **1.3 million people** lived there at the end of 2018. Prague is located **in the centre of Bohemia on the Vltava river**. It is the seat of the Czech **parliament and government** and the **president** of the Czech Republic lives there.

Many other important institutions, for example the **Czech National Bank**, are also located in Prague. The city has been called "**The Heart of Europe**" and "**The Mother of Cities**" and "**The City of a Thousand Spires**". It is often considered **one of the most beautiful cities in the world**.

### History

Prague is **more than one thousand years old**. The first written record of Prague comes from the **10th century**. Its author, a Jewish businessman from Muslim Spain called **Ibrahim Ibn Yaqub**, describes Prague as **a stone city with a marketplace**.

The city grew and grew. In the **14th century**, it became **the second largest city in Europe** (after Paris). It was mainly thanks to **Charles IV**, who made Prague the de facto **capital of the Holy Roman Empire**. He established **Charles University** – the oldest university in Central Europe – in 1348. It is still the best Czech university today. He also ordered the building of a new bridge across the Vltava River, which is called **Charles Bridge** to this day. He also established the part of Prague called the **New Town**. The main nationalities living in Prague were **Czechs, Germans, and Jews**.

After Charles IV died, Prague **lost a lot of its importance** in Europe. Its time came again **at the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century** under emperor **Rudolph II**. Rudolph II loved Prague and made it **the center of his kingdom**. Famous scientists such as **Johannes Kepler** and **Tycho de Brahe** moved to Prague. The Prague **Jewish community** was at that time one of the most important in all of Europe with famous rabbis like **Yehuda Löw**.

After the **Thirty Years' War** (which started in Prague, by the way), the city **lost its importance again**. Bohemia and Moravia were part of the Hapsburg Empire and Vienna, the capital city, was much larger and more important than Prague. However, Prague still managed to grow and become **an important cultural and industrial city**. After World War One, Prague became **the capital of Czechoslovakia**.

The **Nazi occupation** and the **Communist dictatorship** changed the face of Prague **a lot for the worse**. The **population became very different** from what it had been for hundreds of years. There are very few Jews (they were murdered by Germans) and Germans (they were driven out by Czechs) living in Prague today. A lot of **ugly buildings** were constructed **on the outskirts**. However, the city is still full of beautiful historical buildings which preserve something of the **original spirit of the city**.

### Famous places

#### Prague Castle

Prague castle is one of the oldest parts of Prague. It is **the largest castle complex in the world**. Many famous sights, for example St Vitus Cathedral and St George's Basilica are located there. The largest hall in the Prague Castle is the **Vladislav Hall**. It is used for important state ceremonies. The **Royal Garden** is also part of the castle. Today, Prague Castle is **the seat of the president of the Czech Republic**.

#### Charles Bridge

Charles Bridge is **the oldest bridge** in Prague. It is **more than 500 metres** long and about 10 metres wide. There are **30 statues or groups of statues** on the bridge. They are mostly **saints**. In the past, cars and even trams could go over the bridge. Today, the bridge is **open only for walking**.

#### The Clementinum

The Clementinum is a **collection of Baroque buildings**. Today, it is the seat of the **National Library of the Czech Republic**. There are **more than 6 million books** in the library. In the past, it was a **Jesuit College**. The

Clementinum includes the famous **Mirror Chapel** and the **Astronomical Tower**. Classical and jazz **concerts** take place in the Clementinum.

### **Old Town Square**

Old Town Square is one of the most popular tourists places. Its main attractions are **Týn Church**, **John Huss Memorial** and the **Old Town Hall** with its **astronomical clock**. Every hour, the Apostles appear above the face of the clock and are watched by fascinated tourists.

### **St Vitus Cathedral**

St Vitus cathedral is **the most important Catholic church in the Czech Republic**. The construction of the cathedral started in the 14th century and it took more than 500 years to finish. The architecture of the cathedral is mainly **Gothic and Neo-Gothic**. The Czech **crown jewels** are stored in the cathedral.

### **Prague Zoo**

Prague Zoo is the **largest zoo in the Czech Republic**. It was opened in 1931 and today there are about 5,000 animals representing almost 700 species. It is one of the most visited places in the Czech Republic and according to TripAdvisor it is **one of the 10 best zoos in the world**.

### **The Jewish Quarter**

Jewish people settled in Prague in the **10th century**. For a long time, they had to live in a **ghetto**. When something bad happened, for example an epidemic or a period of hunger, the "Christians" often thought that it was the Jews' fault and **massacred them**. Later the situation got a bit better and many important buildings were built in the Jewish Quarter. The most famous ones still standing today are the **synagogues**, especially the **Old-New Synagogue**, which is the oldest synagogue in Europe. The **Old Jewish Cemetery** is also very famous and popular with tourists.

### **The Strahov Monastery and Library**

The Strahov Monastery is the **second oldest monastery** in Prague. It was established in the **12th century**. Today, it is especially famous for its two **beautiful Baroque libraries**.

### **The Petřín Lookout Tower**

The Petřín Lookout Tower stands on the **Petřín Hill**. It is **about 60 metres tall** and it looks like a **miniature Eiffel Tower**. The whole Petřín area is popular with **lovers**, especially in the spring.

### **St Nicholas Church**

Prague is a very **Baroque** city. One of the most famous Baroque churches in Prague is **St Nicholas Church on Little Quarter Square**. It was built by the **Jesuits** in the **18th century** and it is decorated with paintings by **Karel Škréta**.

### **Wenceslas Square**

Wenceslas Square is the **main square** in Prague. It is about **750 metres long** and **60 metres wide**. The **National Museum** stands on the square. In front of the museum, there is a **statue of St Wenceslas riding a horse**. Many important historical events took place on the square, for example the **demonstrations that led to the Velvet Revolution** in 1989.

### **The National Theatre**

The National Theatre is located on the banks of the Vltava River. It was opened in 1881 and it is the most prestigious theatre in the Czech Republic.

### **Famous people**

Almost every person from the Czech Republic who becomes famous sooner or later **moves to Prague**. The following list definitely does not include all famous people who at some point of their life lived in Prague. It focuses on **people who are connected with the city in some special way** and that are not included in the article about the Czech Republic as a whole. If a person is not on the list, it definitely does not mean that they are not important.

### **Charles IV**

Charles IV is **one of the most famous Czech rulers**. He was **educated in France** and then returned to Bohemia which he loved. He ordered the construction of many important buildings in Prague – for example the **New Town** or **Charles Bridge**. He also wrote **his own biography in Latin**.

### **John Huss**

John Huss was a Czech **thinker and priest**. He **criticised the corruption** of the church. He preached in the **Bethlehem Chapel** in the Old Town. He was **declared a heretic and burnt alive** in 1415. His followers, known as **the Hussites**, left the Catholic church and created their own version of Christianity. There were **long and bloody wars** between the Hussites and the Catholics.

### **Rabbi Löw**

Yehuda Löw ben Bezalel was an important **rabbi and philosopher**. He lived in Prague at the time of emperor **Rudolph II**. According to a legend, he created a **golem** – a kind of robot made of clay. The legend says that the golem **protected Prague Jews from anti-Semitic attacks**.

### **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was a famous **Austrian composer**. He was **born in Salzburg** and spent most of his life in **Vienna**, but he **liked Prague** and often visited it. One of his most famous operas, **Don Giovanni**, had its **premiere in Prague**. While he was staying in Prague, Mozart lived with **the Dušek family** (no relation to your teacher, unfortunately).

### **Bernard Bolzano**

Bernard Bolzano was a **Catholic priest, mathematician, logician and philosopher** from Prague. Today, he is especially famous for his mathematical and logical work on the **problems of infinity**. Bolzano's father was **Italian** and his mother was **German**. He considered himself a **Bohemian patriot** and he **wanted Czechs and Germans to live peacefully together**. He was also **against war in general**. His ideas were too liberal for the Hapsburg monarchy and he was **thrown out of the university and exiled to the countryside**.

### **Jan Neruda**

Jan Neruda was a Czech **19th century writer**. He lived in the part of Prague which is called **the Lesser Town of Prague**. His most famous book is a **collection of short stories about people from this part of the city**.

### **Franz Kafka**

Franz Kafka is **the greatest German-language writer of all time**. He was born in a Jewish family in Prague and he loved the city. He became famous only after his death. His most famous books are ***The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, and *The Castle***.

### **Jaroslav Hašek**

Jaroslav Hašek is a famous Czech writer. He was born in Prague in the New Town. His most famous book is ***The Good Soldier Švejk***. The word *švejk* is sometimes used to refer to Czech people in general. Unfortunately, often with a good reason.

### **Jaroslav Seifert**

Jaroslav Seifert was a famous Czech **poet**. He was **born in Prague** and wrote a lot of **poems about this city**. In one of these poems, he says that Prague is even more beautiful than Rome. He won the **Nobel Prize in Literature** in 1984.

### **Jan Křesadlo**

Jan Křesadlo was a Czech **polymath**. He was a **psychologist, logician, painter, composer, writer**, and more. He spoke a lot of languages and wrote poetry in many of them. His books are often **parodic and bizarre**. He was born in Prague and returned there after more than 20 years of exile in Great Britain. He wrote, among other things, a **collection of sonnets about Prague** and he **translated some of Seifert's poetry into English**.

## Jan Zábřana

Jan Zábřana is not very famous but he should be. He was **one of the greatest Czech poets and translators** of all time. He was born in the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands but he moved to Prague when he was about twenty. His **sonnets** are some of the best poems ever written in the Czech language.

## Transportation

Getting around Prague is not different from getting around any other big city. There are **buses, trams**, and even the **underground**. You can also take a **taxi** but Prague taxi drivers are **often dishonest** and try to make you pay more than is legal, especially if you are a foreign tourist. It is a shame.

You can also **go by bike or walk**. There are also some **ships** on the Vltava River but they are used mainly for fun. The **Václav Havel Airport** in Prague is the largest airport in the Czech Republic.

## Shopping and food

There are a lot of **good places for shopping** in Prague and also a lot of **tourist traps** that sell expensive trash. There are many **large shopping centres** where you can buy almost anything. Some of the largest are **Metropole Zličín, Palladium, Flora, Chodov**, and others. There is also a Vietnamese marketplace called **Sapa** where you can buy **things from Asia**.

You can find **food from all over the world** in Prague. There are **Italian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian** and other restaurants. There is plenty of **kebab shops**. There are also **traditional Czech restaurants and pubs**. Many of the restaurants, especially in the centre, are **overpriced** so be careful before you order your food.

## Sport

Prague is the home of many famous Czech sports teams. There are three football teams from Prague in the top Czech football league – **SK Slavia Praha, AC Sparta Praha, Bohemians Praha 1905**. There are also several famous sports clubs that play other sports.

## BRNO

Brno is the **second largest city** in the Czech Republic. It is located in **southern Moravia**. The population of Brno is **about 400,000 people**. The city of Brno is located on the **Svitava and Svatka rivers**.

Some of the most famous sights in Brno are the **Špilberk Castle**, the **Tugendhat villa**, the **Old Town Hall**, and the **Church of St Peter and St Paul**. There are also several **universities, a zoo, the Technical Museum, the Moravian Museum, the Museum of Romany Culture**, and other interesting places.

Some of the most famous people from Brno are the German naturalist **Gregor Johann Mendel** and the German mathematician **Kurt Gödel**. The Czech composer **Leoš Janáček** and the Czech poet **Jan Skácel** were not born in Brno but they spent most of their lives there.

There is a certain **friendly rivalry between Prague and Brno** which is kind of funny because Ostrava is much better than both, except for the air and beer quality.

## OSTRAVA

Ostrava is the **third largest city** in the Czech Republic. It is located **on the border between northern Moravia and Silesia**. The population of Ostrava is about **300,000 people**. The city is located **on the Ostravice River**.

In the past, Ostrava was **one of the centres of Czech industry** and the city is still full of **factories, steelworks, coal mines, and other industrial buildings**. As a result, **the quality of air in Ostrava is bad**.

Because steel manufacturing and coal mining decreased, there are a lot of **unemployed people** in Ostrava and the city looks **a bit depressing and Soviet** as a result. People who just visit it or see it on TV are often scared but it really is a **nice place**. There are lots of **great shops with old books** and the people are **generally friendly**.

Ostrava is home to **Baník Ostrava**, a famous football club. The athletics competition called the **Golden Spike** takes place in Ostrava every year. The famous contemporary music band **Kryštof** comes from Ostrava. A festival called **Colours of Ostrava** takes place in the city every year.

## PLZEŇ

Plzeň is the **fourth largest city** in the Czech Republic and the **capital of the Plzeň region**. The population of Plzeň is about **170,000 people**. The city is famous for making **beer**. It is the home of the Pilsner beer style. There is a university and a zoo and all the other things that can usually be found in a city of this size. The **Škoda Transportation** company (not to be confused with Škoda Auto, the car manufacturer) has its seat in Plzeň. It is **one of the largest tram manufacturers** in the world.

## LIBEREC

Liberec is a large city in **northern Bohemia**. Its population is about **100,000 people**. Before World War Two, most of the people living in Liberec were **Germans**. The city stands below **Ještěd**, a mountain topped by the famous **Ještěd TV Tower**, which is one of the symbols of Liberec. The **Liberec zoo** is famous for its **white tigers**. **Petr Torák**, a well-known **British policeman of Roma origin**, was born in Liberec.

## OLMOUC

Olomouc is a large city of about **100,000 people**. It is located **in the centre of Moravia**. It is a very old city with a lot of historical places and **the second oldest university in the Czech Republic**. About a quarter of the people who live in Olomouc are university students. The **smelly cheese** produced in Olomouc called "**olomoucké tvarůžky**" is notorious all over the Czech Republic. There is also a **strange ugly communist astronomical clock** in the city.

## ÚSTÍ NAD LABEM

Ústí nad Labem is a large city in **Northern Bohemia**. Like Liberec, it used to be a predominantly **German city**. The population of Ústí nad Labem is **more than 90,000 people**. The city is situated on the **Labe River**. **Vladimír Páral**, one of the worst Czech writers ever, lived in this city.

## ČESKÉ BUDĚJOVICE

České Budějovice is **the capital city of the South Bohemian Region**. The population of the city is **more than 90,000 people**. One of the most famous buildings in České Budějovice is the **Black Tower**. It is located on the main square. Another tourist sight located on the main square is the **Samson Fountain**.

## HRADEC KRÁLOVÉ

Hradec Králové is a large city in **Eastern Bohemia**. Its population is **more than 90,000 people**. It is located on the **Labe and Orlice Rivers**. It is famous for its **Cubist buildings**.

## PARDUBICE

Pardubice is a large city in **Eastern Bohemia**, not very far from Hradec Králové. Its population is **more than 90,000 people**. The city is famous for making **gingerbread**.

## KARLOVY VARY

Karlovy Vary is a city in **western Bohemia**. Its population is **almost 50,000 people**. It is a famous **spa resort**. Like Liberec and Ústí nad Labem, it used to be a predominantly **German city**. It was a favourite city of **Charles IV** and **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**.

This overview is largely based on the following articles and websites:

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