

PRAGUE

This city has always been at the heart of Europe, but Prague has a lot more going for it than location, reports **Luciano Di Gregorio**.

WHY GO?

Prague has dusted off its dour communist past, buffed its squares and spires, and is now more alluring than ever. Its strategic position on the banks of the Vltava river, at the convergence of eastern and western Europe, has allowed it to thrive and develop a distinct architectural and cultural heritage. Yes, Prague invokes unique images of Gothic fairy tales and the city is packed with historic landmarks. But it has also catapulted into the 21st century as the capital of one of the European Union's most enthusiastic members. Prague now relishes its place at the heart of Europe, both physically and metaphorically, brandishing a thriving modern culture and hearty economic pulse.

WHAT TO DO

The Old Town Square in the Praha 1 district should be the first port of call. The spires and terracotta rooftops visible from the Town Hall's observatory immediately give you a perspective of the city's ancient core. Although you may want to, you won't lose track of time as the square boasts the famous Astronomical Clock (1410), the most photographed landmark in the Czech Republic. You'd be forgiven for thinking that astronomy is the theme here, with the 16th-century tomb of astronomer Tycho Brahe inside the Tyn Church, which frames the Old Town Square with its gothic twin steeples.

The neighbouring narrow streets and lanes are a medieval labyrinth of chic cafés, stylish bars and charming shops. From the square, take Melantrichova south to Havelská where you will stumble across Havelske Trziste, the main market in the city centre. Aside from fresh fruit and vegetables, there are a number of stalls selling all kinds of trinkets including wooden toys and ceramics.

A few minutes from this lively market is Wenceslas Square, an ideal

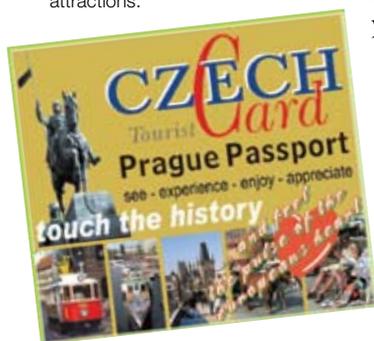
spot in the city centre to sit and watch local residents chat and gesture emphatically. Fashionistas throng the high street chain stores in the immediate area, where the shopping holds its own alongside the likes of London and Rome and your wallet will take a battering.

After a few hours of meandering the Old Town, head west to the river and feel dizzy whilst staring at Frank Gehry's Dancing House, nicknamed 'Drunk House'. If modern architecture is not your cup of tea, you will find the ancient Charles Bridge further north. It is Prague's most charismatic testament to its colourful past and one of the oldest, most intact medieval bridges in central and eastern Europe. The panoramic view from the Malá Strana tower back towards the Old Town is perhaps the most awe-inspiring in Prague, with the gothic spires of the bridge keep framed by the domes of Baroque churches.

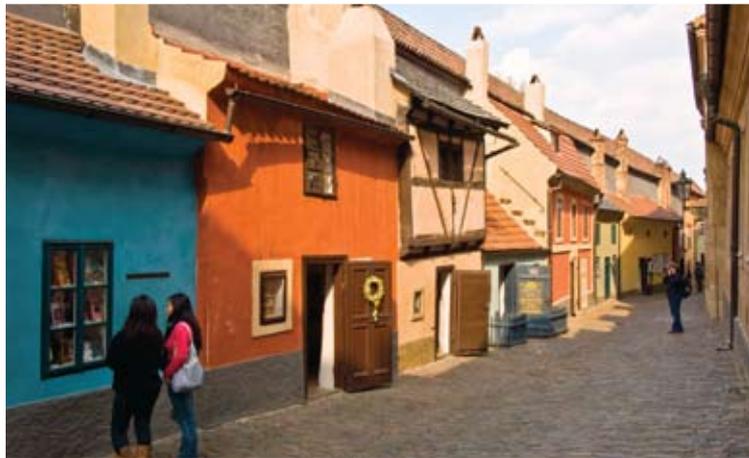
Across the bridge, the area known as Malá Strana is home to the imposing Baroque church of St Nicholas, founded in 1755. Its dome dominates views of Prague for miles. From here, it is a pleasant (though often steep) walk to Hradcany, the city's original site. Prague Castle is said to be the biggest ancient castle complex in the world, with its imposing St Vitus Cathedral, Royal Palace and the crowded but captivating Golden Lane.

Opposite page (clockwise from top): Malá Strana, also known as the Lesser Quarter, clusters around the foothills of Prague Castle across the river from the Old Town; Getting around Prague is easy thanks to 900 tram cars and 34 lines. Old trams find new life as a coffee shop in Wenceslas Square; The famous Astronomical Clock in the Old Town Square; The Charles Bridge was built in medieval times; Wenceslas Square (Vaclavske Namesti) is one of two main squares in the city centre; Frank Gehry's Dancing House, also known as 'Drunk House'; Dumplings are a staple side dish; Toys for sale at Havelská Market in the Old Town.

Below: A variety of Prague discount cards and passes are available that allow for unlimited travel on public transport, as well as free entry to numerous attractions.







Top: An excursion boat next to Kampa Island, which enjoys a great view of the Old Town.

Above: The Golden Lane is a charming part of the Prague Castle complex.

WHERE TO STAY

The elegant Golden Well Hotel (goldenwell.cz) is set in a panoramic spot below Prague Castle and its rooms give you the chance to wake up to the sight of Prague's domes, rooftops and spires. On the other side of the river, Hotel Ambassador in Wenceslas Square is one of the original 5-star hotels in the city and, whilst pricey, is excellent value considering its location in the Old Town.

WHAT TO EAT AND DRINK

Czech food is dominated by large servings of belly-bursting meat dishes such as pork or beef accompanied by the starchy goodness of potatoes or rice. Knedlíky (dumplings) is the staple side dish of the Czech meal and is served just about anywhere the language is spoken. The most quintessential Prague meal, however, is *svíčková*: an unlikely combination of meat and a rich sauce complete with whipped cream. This is all washed down with a famous Czech beer such as a Pilsner or Budweiser (not to be confused with its American cousin).

The Old Town is brimming with chic cafés and traditional Czech eateries such as Staroprazsky Hostinec (Provaznicka, 3) offering filling Czech meals. However, if an overload of carbohydrates does not appeal, you'll be happy to know that the new breed of modern Czech youngsters have given

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Prague is best visited in summer or winter. Summer brings warm, sunny days, bright colours and al fresco dining. Winter takes the breath away for both the sheer cold and the enchanting December revelries when Christmas markets line ancient squares and buildings and bridges are lit up. The warmest months are June, July and August and the coldest is January, with temperatures plummeting well below zero. Currency is the Czech koruna. (CZK1= US\$0.048 approximately).

GETTING THERE

EMIRATES will fly daily between Dubai and Prague from July 1. Visit emirates.com or emirates-holidays.com for further information.

RESOURCES

There are two excellent official online sources: pragueexperience.com and czechtourism.com.

FURTHER READING

ME, MYSELF AND PRAGUE by Rachel Weiss is a thorough exploration of the real Prague.

THE ROUGH GUIDE TO PRAGUE offers all the practical information you will need to explore the city.

FAST FACT

The city of Prague consists of numbered districts: Praha 1 to 10. Although it is helpful to be aware of this, with only 48 hours in the city you will spend most of your time in the Praha 1 district.

rise to a large number of kebab shops and pizzerias. The latter have sprung up at every corner despite the presence of a clear winner: Papa Giovanni (Kožná, 11), just off Old Town Square.

To crack a laugh or two with the locals, head to the neighbourhood of Zizov, some 10 minutes from the Old Town, and enjoy an evening of people watching, eating and drinking at one of the numerous bars in the area.

TRIP TIP

A variety of Prague discount cards and passes are available (touristcard.eu). These allow for unlimited travel on public transport as well as free entry to a variety of landmarks and attractions across the city, such as the castle, museums and art galleries.

MUST DO

From Malá Strana, walk south down to Kampa Island and enjoy majestic views of the Old Town from the river. Though the small island is close to almost all of Prague's famous landmarks, it is relatively devoid of tourists. Relax in the park and watch real Czechs at play. ❖