



## **CZECH REPUBLIC**

**By Anne Dean, Editorial Director, *Living Abroad LLC***

“As the old hermit of Prague, that never saw pen and ink, very wittily said to a niece of King Gorboduc. That that is, is.” *Twelfth Night. Act iv. Sc. 2.* [William Shakespeare](#) (1564–1616)

The Czech Republic has a population of just over ten million. The capital city of Prague (Praha) has slightly over one million permanent residents, although the city is flooded with tourists each summer. Prague is one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, because there's an experience to suit every taste.

The major industries in the Czech Republic are tourism, machinery, transport, steel, armaments, vehicles, cement, ceramics, cotton and beer. On May 1, 2004, the Czech Republic was one of ten new countries to join the European Union.

The one constant in the Czech Republic is change. Patience and flexibility are crucial if you are going to enjoy living and working in the country. The changeover from communism to capitalism has gone far more smoothly here than in most other Central European countries, and business is booming. Particularly in Prague, new shops, restaurants and other businesses are opening daily. Along with a growing economy comes inherent problems of affordable housing, higher crime rates and stubborn pollution.

### **Climate**

Prague, like the rest of the country, is home to a continental climate. Prague is a city with four distinct seasons, characterized by hot, sunny summers, cold winters, and a relatively mild spring and fall. The weather in the spring and fall, however, can change from day to day. In fact, it is not unusual for a pleasant day or week to be spoiled by unpredictable rainfall.

Winter can get bitterly cold and air pollution can be a serious problem, as the air tends to become thick and foul due to the burning coal and vehicle smog. Nonetheless, the snow-covered streets of Prague are quite beautiful in the winter months. Temperatures tend to rise slightly in the spring. June is often regarded as the best month to visit the Czech Republic since the weather is pleasant, with an average temperature of about 18 degrees Celsius (65 degrees Fahrenheit) and the majority of tourists arrive in July.

### **The Culture**

The Czech Republic is home to incredible contrast and the Czech people are no

different, the inhabitants of the Czech Republic represent a wide range of influences. Some of the major nationalities represented include Austrian, Czech, German, Hungarian, Polish and Slovak. In general, the Czech people can be characterized as mild tempered and soft spoken. However, with such a diverse mixture of nationalities, it is not surprising that a broad spectrum of art, cuisine, music and personal characteristics can be found throughout the country. The Czech Republic is also home to a wide range of beliefs, whether religious or political.

So as not to promote a prevailing attitude among Czechs that foreigners are ignorant of Czech history and culture, it is advisable to study the basics on the country. Be prepared, however, for attitudes toward women and minorities may be very different from those found in other Western countries. As always, it is also helpful to learn some useful phrases in the Czech language.

Prague has a large number of foreign residents and tourists, and a large number of businesses that cater to them, which makes it definitely not a place where you would really get wrapped up in the Czech language and culture. To get the real feel of the country you may have to travel to surrounding towns, but understand the only language you might hear is Czech!

### **Language**

The official language of the Czech Republic is Czech, a Slavic language. Although the language is closely related to Slovak, the official language of the Slovak Republic, there are distinct differences. You may find English spoken in Prague, but for conducting business you should plan on hiring an interpreter,

### **Religion**

The largest church in the Czech Republic is the Roman Catholic Church, but Catholicism is not necessarily the largest religious denomination. Other major religions represented in the Czech Republic include Protestantism, Orthodox, Judaism and Atheism. Religion, like politics, is regarded differently by each individual in the Czech Republic and it is not strange that these beliefs will range from extremely liberal to traditional or fanatical.

### **Getting Around**

While most cities in the Czech Republic are small and easy to navigate, Prague presents more of a challenge. Its winding streets and hidden passageways are enchanting, but sometimes difficult to traverse when trying to get from one place to another. Fortunately, there are many good maps available at bookstores and tourist information centers.

Prague's inexpensive and efficient public transport system, comprised of an underground metro, trams and buses, provides access to any part of the city. Many of the old tram lines have recently been replaced, and the metro is modern, clean and easy to use. Subway stations can be recognized by a sign with a large white M on a green, yellow or red background, depending on the line. Passengers are always expected to give up their seat for an elderly or disabled person.

Prague's tram system, with 21 different lines, is the preferred mode of transportation for many residents. It is almost as quick and efficient as the metro system, and many tram lines snake through some of the most scenic parts of the city.

The city's bus lines provide transportation to people commuting daily to and from the outlying suburbs of Prague. Buses run day and night, although service is more frequent during peak travel hours, and some buses run only during those times.

The train system provides a quick connection for those who commute into Prague from nearby towns and villages. You can buy your ticket either on the train or at the station. In most cases, buses provide less comfortable, but faster service to many towns and cities outside Prague.

Beware that many cab drivers will try to overcharge you, either by setting the meter at a higher level, getting lost or leaving the meter off and then quoting an arbitrary price at the end of the trip. The best idea is to negotiate a price before you get in the taxi. You should have your destination written down in Czech so you can show it to the driver.

There are two ways of getting to and from the airport on public transportation. The express airport bus, run by Czechoslovak Airlines (CSA); or, the second option is a city bus, which runs frequently, but takes slightly longer.

### **Visas**

Nationals of all western European countries, Japan, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand can visit the Czech Republic for up to 90 days, and UK citizens for up to 180 days, without a visa. Nationals of South Africa and many other countries must obtain a visa, which is good for a stay of between 30 and 90 days depending on your nationality.

### **Entertainment**

Czechs regularly engage in outdoor activities. Hiking through the woods, mushroom picking, cycling, skiing, swimming and ice skating are among the favorite activities. The area known as *Cesky Raj* (Czech Paradise) in central Bohemia provides the perfect background for outdoor sports. Its natural ponds, gentle hills, wooded areas and castle ruins keep weekends active and interesting. There are also many indoor pools, tennis and racquet courts, health clubs and skating rinks throughout the country.

Although Czechs enjoy outdoor activities year round, foreign nationals may have difficulty adjusting to the level of air pollution. It is especially noticeable in the winter months when coal smoke looms over the country.

Prague's nightlife is non-stop. In addition to roaming street musicians, live music can be found at clubs throughout the city. Bars, taverns, pubs and traditional beer halls serve up the famous Czech pilsner and other imported beverages all night, while clubs provide dancers with all types of dance music. Some night clubs may have a cover charge, and many places accept cash only.

### **Cultural Highlights**

There are an endless number of castles, historical buildings and cultural museums throughout the Czech Republic, but the highest concentration can be found in Prague. The Charles Bridge, Prague Castle, the Jewish Quarter, Old Town Hall with its famous astrological clock and the Powder Gate are among the city's most interesting landmarks.

The Prague State Opera House, the National Theatre and Smetana Hall in the Municipal House constantly produce operas and concerts featuring works by legendary European masters. Outdoor concerts and dance recitals are common throughout the spring in this city rich in cultural history.

### **Local Cuisine**

Traditional Czech cuisine is very heavy and filling. For this reason, the main meal is usually eaten at noon, and a smaller, simpler meal (such as an open-faced sandwich) is eaten in the evening.

Roast pork, dumplings and Bohemian sauerkraut is the national dish. Beef goulash with dumplings is another regional specialty. The Czechs are very proud of their dumplings (*knedliky*), and may insist that foreigners try them. The Czechs are also very good with soups. They were traditionally made with leftover foods, so they are very hearty and filled with meats, vegetables and potatoes.

No Czech meal is complete without a *pivo* (beer) or two. Czech beer is ranked among the best by connoisseurs, so it is not surprising that the Czechs boast the highest per capita consumption of this beverage. Many foreign nationals are surprised both by the low cost and the high alcohol content of Czech beer.

The Czechs do not really excel in desserts. Most restaurants will serve several variations of ice cream and canned fruit topped with chocolate sauce and whipped cream. Thin rolled-up pancakes and bananas are also commonly topped with chocolate sauce and whipped cream. The best and hardest to find is the traditional Czech dessert which is fruit dumplings (small balls of dough filled with stewed fruits, boiled, and topped with white cheese or powdered sugar). These are definitely worth searching for.

While Prague is the best place to find a good variety of quality international foods, it is rather difficult to find a real traditional meal in the city because most restaurants cater to tourists. The best places to experience typical Czech meals are small pubs and the no-frills *restaurace*. Not only is the food prepared using more traditional methods in these places, but it is also affordable.

### **Tipping**

A 10 to 15 percent tip is considered excellent for restaurant service, but is generally only given to an attentive server. However, finding good service in the Czech Republic is very rare. Most Czechs simply round up the bill, leaving the server a couple korun.

### **Shopping**

Prior to 1989's Revolution, products were strictly limited and shelves were often empty throughout Czechoslovakia. Capitalism has rapidly taken over Prague since then, and everything from the hottest fashions to tropical fruits can be found in modern-day Czech Republic.

In addition to beer, the Czechs are famous for their Bohemian crystal, marionettes, painted eggs and wooden crafts. Contemporary artists, selling everything from original photographs and paintings to wooden jewelry, faithfully set up shop on the Charles Bridge every day. The Old Town Market in Stare Mesto is another fun place

to find these crafts as well as fresh fruit and vegetables.

Parizska Street, leading from Old Town Square to the Vltava River, is lined with high-quality, high-priced shops such as Christian Dior and Pringle of Scotland. The area around Wenceslas Square is another good place to find foreign products and designs.

So whether you are planning to stay for awhile or just a few days, you will find the Czech Republic, especially Prague, ready, willing and able to welcome foreign nationals.

Living Abroad LLC's Global Editorial Partner, **Expat Relocation Center (Prague)**, assisted with this article.