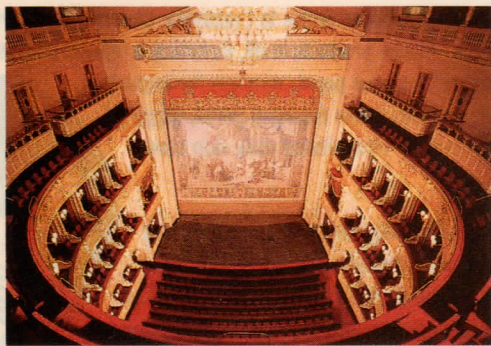


# Prague's Latter-Day Renaissance

## Czech, Please

In the romantic splendor of Prague, **Gerard Raymond** unlocks the doors to the charms of this former Iron Curtain Capitol.



**V**isitors returning from Prague usually bring back with them memories of an unforgettable magical moment. For some it may be the experience of standing on the ancient Charles Bridge in the moonlight; for others, viewing the city's myriad golden spires from a vantage point in Letna Gardens. My unforgettable moment occurred at dusk, while standing on a bridge over the Vlatava River. The dying light caught the golden crests of the National Theater, situated on the east bank; Prague Castle glowed enchantingly on its perch over the west bank, illuminated in shades of yellow and green; and on the river, the swans floated by silently like debris on the water—Prague had cast its spell over me.

Prague's charms are chiefly architectural; the city is a living gallery of over five

hundred years of art history. You don't go there for the restaurants—greasy food and dumplings are the staple. Walking through any of the city's five historic districts—Hradcany (Castle district), Mala Strana (Lesser Town), Stare Mesto (Old Town), Josefov (the Jewish Quarter) and Nove Mesto (New Town)—is like time-traveling through history. No wonder Hollywood has turned to Prague often for period locations: *Yentl*, *Amadeus*, and this past winter's costume blockbuster *Immortal Beloved* were filmed here.

Spared both by World War II and the Russian occupation, much of the city's remarkable architecture has stood unscathed through the centuries. Many of the buildings, which had been left to rot during forty years of Communist rule, are being restored, gloriously revealing Prague's full range of Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and Art Nouveau styles. Richly decorated palaces from the peak periods of the Austro-Hungarian empire evoke the world of Mozart. In other parts of the city, dark cobblestone paths, medieval castles and eerie Gothic spires create a spooky atmosphere, conjuring up the native Czech legends of the Golem, the artificial monster that went on a killing rampage in the city, and Dr. Faustus, who made his infamous pact with the Devil.

Of the former Soviet-Bloc countries, the Czech Republic (Slovakia broke away from Czechoslovakia to form a separate country two years ago) is economically the most viable. Privatization and business enterprise have taken root more strongly here than anywhere else in Eastern Europe, yet costs remain cheap. Consequently, ever since the Velvet Revolution—the peaceful transition from Communist rule in 1989—Prague has

become one of the most popular tourist cities in Europe.

Praha (as the locals call it) is still one of the least expensive of European capitals, although prices have kept going up in these past five years. English is not commonly spoken (a little German will come in handy), but the Praguers are a friendly lot, and the city has adapted very quickly to dealing with the tourist traffic. Prague has become especially popular with young Americans and other Western European students seeking the same kind of bohemian experiences that Rome or Paris formerly offered in those long-faded days of high exchange rates. Occasionally you may be reminded of a bleaker era, particularly in the grudging service-without-a-smile attitude you may encounter in certain shops and restaurants. And, unfortunately, petty crime is on the increase and your taxi driver will more than likely try to rip you off.

The city has an excellent transportation system. The subway (Metro), one of the useful legacies of the Soviets, is particularly efficient. Daily or weekly passes entitle you

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to unlimited travel on all public transport. But since Prague is a compact city, and many areas are restricted to pedestrians, the city is best enjoyed on foot.

### *The Sights*

**Hradcany (Castle district)**: Ever since the ninth century, whoever occupied Prague Castle ruled over the Czech peoples.

President Vaclav Havel's office is located in a building within the Castle complex. A popular tourist attraction is the mid-day changing of the Presidential Guard. Pay special attention to the sentries in their blue uniforms, designed by the Oscar-winning costumer for *Amadeus*. The most impressive building connected to the castle is St. Vitus's Cathedral (built between 1344 and 1929), the repository for the rarely displayed Czech crown jewels. While in the area visit the magnificent Italian Renaissance-style Summer Palace; the "singing fountain" in the palace garden is famous for the pleasant sounds it produces. Letna Gardens, north of the castle, is the city's main park and chief gay cruising ground. For a fabulous view of the city go to the absurdly decorative Hanavsky Pavilion. Originally built for an exhibition in 1891, the Art Nouveau structure was relocated to a hill in the park, and is now a restaurant.

**Mala Strana (Lesser or Little Town):** You'll discover a treasure trove of Baroque delights walking among the crooked lanes in Lesser Town, situated on the lower slopes below the castle. And, surprisingly, it is usually tourist-free. The townhouses on Neruda Street retain the ancient signs that were used before numbers were introduced in the eighteenth century—photographers love the house of the three violins. The Church of St. Nicholas in Lesser Town Square and the Wallenstein Palace, with its exquisite landscaped garden, are Prague's most famous Baroque beauties. Relax in the serene riverside park on Kampa island, which is separated from the left bank of the Vlatava by a little strip of water known as Prague's "Little Venice." If you think you see the Eiffel Tower in the hills of Mala Strana, you are not losing your mind. It's a miniature version located on Petrin Hill, built for the 1891 Prague Exhibition. A funicular (cable car) takes

you up to the site and to some of the best views of Prague.

**Stare Mesto (Old Town):** Perhaps the best-known landmark in Prague is Charles Bridge, the stone bridge built over the Vlatava by Charles IV in 1357 to connect the Old Town and Lesser Town. If you want to get romantic with somebody in Prague this picturesque bridge—with Gothic towers on either end and a Baroque gallery of saints lining its sides—is the perfect place. But every visiting backpacker

*Giovanni* in 1787, has been beautifully restored. (For Mozart fans, visit Villa Betramka, the house where the composer lived in the suburb of Smichov on the west bank of the river.)

**Josefov (the Jewish Quarter):** The Prague ghetto was founded in the ninth century. Today only a few buildings have survived the razing of the quarter in 1900 and Nazi occupation. The Gothic-style Old New Synagogue, which is still a religious center for Prague's Orthodox Jews, is the oldest

functioning synagogue in Europe. Note the clock which runs backwards like Hebrew script on the Jewish Town Hall nearby. The remains of renowned Talmudic scholar Rabbi Low, who, according to legend, created the Golem out of the clay from the Vlatava River, are buried in Josefov's Old Jewish Cemetery. The cemetery (in use from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries) is part of the State Jewish Museum which houses the treasures and artifacts of the ghetto. The palpable presence of



from Europe seems to have the same idea. During the day the bridge (which is closed to motor traffic) is packed with strolling pedestrians and souvenir vendors; in the evenings it turns into a kind of block party.

Some of the oldest buildings in Prague are located in the Old Town Square, which is dominated by the twin Gothic spires of the Tyn Cathedral. Crowds gather on the hour to watch the dancing figures in the Old Town Hall's magnificent astronomical clock.

Kafka fans will want to visit his birthplace, now a museum, just round the corner. Drop in at the Merchants' Bank at 20 Naprikope; the stunning murals inside will take your breath away. Nearby, the Estates Theater (Stavoske Divaldo), where Mozart conducted the world premiere of *Don*

this lost history has inspired a sort of neo-Jewish fad among Prague's young intellectual set, especially evident, curiously enough, in some of the popular rock bands that perform in venues around the city.

**Nove Mesto—New Town):** New by Prague's standards, this district was founded by Charles IV in 1348. Its focal point is Wenceslas Square, once a horse market and now the hub of modern Prague. The site of several historical political demonstrations, including the decisive events of the Velvet Revolution, the wide boulevard-like square is lined with department stores, hotels, tourist offices and some very decorative buildings. Drop in at the Hotel Europa, whose elegant Art Nouveau cafe was a pop

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### Prague Info:

Country Code: 42; City Code: 2

Exchange rate: 1 \$US approx: 28  
Czech crowns

*Tourist Information: Cedok Tours:*  
New York Office 10 East 40th  
Street Tel: (212) 689-9720 Fax:  
(212) 481-0597 and branches  
throughout Prague

*Gay Information Center:*  
Tel: 692-63-59 • Fax: 26-44-08

*William Higgins's Drake's:*  
Corner of Zborovska & Petrinska  
Streets, Smichov, Praha 5  
Tel/Fax: 534-909

*Tom's Bar:*  
Pernerova 4, Praha 8

*Mercury:*  
Kolinska 11 (Entrance at Slezska  
Street) • Tel: 673-106-03

*Riviera Club:*  
Narodni 20, Praha 1  
Tel. 249-12-249)

*U Strelce:*  
Strelecky ostrov, Praha 1

was His problem

cent of whom describe themselves as agnostic, have a far more enlightened attitude towards sex than their more puritanical neighbors to the West (age of consent is fifteen, prostitution is legal for those over eighteen). But at present, you might miss the gay scene altogether, such as it is, if you don't know where to look, and particularly if you only speak English.

Gay bars and discos come and go with



great rapidity. Many are hidden behind forbidding-looking locked doors, and the hapless gay tourist is often subject to the whims of surly bouncers. Further, the gay venues are generally located in deserted neighborhoods. You must call for a cab before you leave, since it would be dangerous to hang about waiting for night-buses in these areas. A free listings guide titled "Gay and Lesbian Services" has been available in the past, but when I checked with Prague's Gay Information Center, they were not sure if they could continue the publication.

A good source of information is Higgins' establishment, Drake's, which is centrally located, open 24 hours and geared towards American and English-speaking visitors. Among the bars, the best known is **Tom's Bar**, though I thought being positively rude to anybody who didn't speak Czech was taking their Tom of Finland S&M theme a little too far. The disco/bar **Mercury** is more easy-going and friendly, patronized by a lively set of young people and drag queens. **U Strelce**, near the city center, hosts a popular drag show on Saturday nights.

The most popular gay venue in Prague at the time of my last visit, was **Riviera**, which has the advantage of being located on a main thoroughfare, a few doors away from the National Theater in the New Town. Unfortunately, I was turned away at the door twice, once even when I was accompanied by a Czech friend. I wasn't sure how to react when my local acquaintances

and the Gay Information Center both told me that, given my South Asian looks, I was probably being mistaken for an Eastern European gypsy, a pariah in latter-day, post-Communist Prague, the scapegoat for urban problems that blight all Western cities: poverty, muggings, assault. Needless to say, the episode left a bad taste in my mouth, but this was Prague—I had only to walk out into the streets to be enchanted by the beauty of this city all over again. □

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ular gay meeting place before tourists drove the prices up.

**Gay Prague:** I left talking about gay Prague for the last because there are no specific gay areas, and there is no organized gay community as yet. But there is certainly the potential for Prague to become what porn-filmmaker William Higgins calls the Amsterdam of Eastern Europe. He opened a bar/videostore and hustler service here a few years ago. The Czechs, over fifty per-