

# prague now

The capital of the Czech Republic beckons with its intimate old-world romance. More affordable — for now — than many of its European neighbours, now is the best time to explore the city's rich culture and nightlife. By Judy Chapman



The garden at Aria Hotel.



The streets of Prague.



Trams are a good way to get around town.



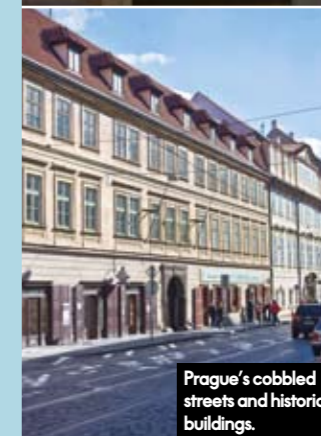
The magical rooftop view of the city.

As twilight approaches, the spirit of Prague awakens. Somewhere along the cobbled Masná street, in Old Town, a sign reads “No Stag Parties”. It is the cult bar M1 Secret Lounge, where the hip and cool gather just before midnight to chill, dance or get wow-ed by the fire-twirling barmen. Here, you are safe from the beered-up stag groups that sweep through Prague for cheap weekend getaways. The industrial-glam of M1 Secret Lounge — with its concrete floors, velvet banquettes and exposed pipes — will make you feel like you’re in Manhattan or London.

But by daylight, Prague’s more historical charms, starkly different from its heady nightlife, come alive. Just a few hours’ flight from London and Paris, the city that’s on the UNESCO World Heritage list offers the decadence of Rome and Barcelona, the intimacy of Paris and the affordability (though some say that will change in a couple of years) that none of those cities can promise. Prague is well-loved for its cobble streets, museums and castles. Architecture is stunning and, now, a new breed of designer hotels, restaurants and wine bars have sprung up in restored historical buildings.

Traditionally known for its writers, artists, philosophers and drinkers, Prague has now become host to a thriving film industry (*Mission: Impossible*, *The Bourne Identity* and *Casino Royale* were shot here). Wander through the winding streets of the city and it’s easy to see why Hollywood keeps coming back. Virtually every architecture style of the last millennium is represented here, amid the diversity of the Jewish Quarter, Old Town Square, Prague Castle and Wenceslas Square.

The best way to explore this smallish city is by foot, so you won’t miss the endless choices of antique shops, old-world book stores, artisan shops, and Prague’s charming café culture. While savouring the perfect mix of the old and the new, you’ll be seduced by the picturesque town and its air of freedom.



Prague’s cobble streets and historic buildings.



River Vltava at Charles Bridge.



Sculptures lining the Charles Bridge.

## TOP ADDRESSES IN PRAGUE SIGHTSEEING

- Join the throngs at Charles Bridge (Prague’s oldest bridge) that’s buzzing with market sellers, gypsies and painters.
- Highly recommended is the Prague Ultimate Tour ([www.praguer.com/ultimate-tour](http://www.praguer.com/ultimate-tour)) that takes you on walking tours through the city.

## BROWSING

- Pick up glam chandeliers, hand-made Czech glassware designed by Karen Feldman and an eclectic assortment of Boho-chic handbags at Artel ([www.artelglass.com](http://www.artelglass.com)), an enchanting accessories boutique.
- Artwork by young Czech designers can be found at Qubus Design Studio ([www.qubus.cz](http://www.qubus.cz)).
- Rub shoulders with Prague’s emerging writers and poets at Globe ([www.globebookstore.cz](http://www.globebookstore.cz)) which hosts philosophical reading groups, live music and art-house movies. It’s an institution for the artsy crowd.

## CHILLING

- Café culture here rivals the beer culture so find a nice spot to soak it up.
- Find a corner booth at Café Slavia ([www.cafeslavia.cz](http://www.cafeslavia.cz)) and imagine what it would have been like during the Velvet Revolution, a time when writers, students and intellectuals gathered to plot the overthrow of communist rule. Once the





Spring time in Prague.



Hotel Josef



Lily Spa at Hotel Hoffmeister.



Urban street art can be found in the most unexpected places.



Municipal House Concert Hall Box Office

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Café Slavia

favourite haunt of author Milan Kundera, Café Slavia re-captures 1930s Art Deco history. Order the traditional hot apple strudel and enjoy the view of Prague Castle across the river.

- Seeking Cubist inspiration? The Grand Café Orient ([www.grandcafeorient.cz](http://www.grandcafeorient.cz)) on the second floor of the House of the Black Madonna is Europe's first Cubist house that has reopened with most of its original design intact. The balcony overlooking Prague's rooftops is the place to sample traditional desserts like the almond cake with Baileys.
- Check out the Art Nouveau-style Café Imperial ([www.cafeimperial.cz](http://www.cafeimperial.cz)) that has now re-opened. Originally built in 1915, the L-shaped dining hall has been restored with old wood panelling, marble pillars and an elaborate mosaic-tiled ceiling. Must try: The apricot dumplings.
- Barocco Vaneziano Café at the Alchemist Hotel ([www.alchymisthotel.com](http://www.alchymisthotel.com)) is a *patisserie* adorned with decadent crystal mirrors and rich crimson velvet chairs that echo the Baroque-Rococo periods. But it's the famous frothy hot chocolate (it tastes like melted chocolate pudding) that has patrons returning time after time.

## ROOMING

- Book a room overlooking the Vrtbovska Gardens at the Aria Hotel ([www.ariahotel.net](http://www.ariahotel.net)), located in the fashionable Mala Strana district. Inside the contemporary Art Deco-style hotel, rooms are sumptuous, with each dedicated to a different style of music. On the classical floor,

select from the Vivaldi or Chopin rooms; or go upbeat with the jazz-inspired Miles Davis room.

- For a decadent experience, splurge at The Alchymist Grand Hotel & Spa ([www.alchymisthotel.com](http://www.alchymisthotel.com)). The rooms are lavish in this 16th century baroque-style building.
- The Mandarin Oriental Hotel ([www.mandarinoriental.com](http://www.mandarinoriental.com)) attracts the rich and famous — the Dalai Lama, Michelle Yeoh and Gwen Stefani recently stayed here. Housed in a former 14th century monastery, the hotel serves a brilliant afternoon tea at its magnificent Monastery Lounge.
- Hip young things check into the more affordable Hotel Josef ([www.hoteljosef.com](http://www.hoteljosef.com)), one of Prague's first boutique hotels located in the Old Town. A departure from old-world architecture, its modern rooms are fully outfitted with heated floors, frosted-glass bathrooms, espresso machines and iPod stations.
- The beauty of Prague is that it also offers excellent apartment rentals ([www.prague-stay.com](http://www.prague-stay.com)) for that authentic feel, ranging from loft-style one bedrooms and studios, to luxe Art Deco-style long-term rentals.

## SHOPPING

- Denisa Nová ([www.denisanova.cz](http://www.denisanova.cz)) is one of the most successful young Czech designers working today. Her design sensibility has been compared to that of Ann Demeulemeester's.

- Find great vintage pieces at Retro ([www.retro.cz](http://www.retro.cz)) or Pour Pour ([www.pourpour.com](http://www.pourpour.com)), located behind the National Theatre.
- Well-cut and feminine pieces with a touch of glam can also be found at Tatiana Kovariková ([www.tatiana.cz](http://www.tatiana.cz)).

## PAMPERING

- Relax after sightseeing at the Roman Spa of Boscolo Hotel Carlo IV ([www.boscolohotels.com](http://www.boscolohotels.com)). This spa is all mosaic tiles, marble and perfumed woods; the purifying sauna and hot Turkish bath will wash your fatigue away.
- The spa at the Mandarin Oriental ([www.mandarinoriental.com/prague](http://www.mandarinoriental.com/prague)) is built in an old Renaissance chapel and feels like a true sanctuary. Try indigenous Czech treatments like the Barley Ritual, inspired by the tradition of monks brewing beer in monasteries.
- The Lily Spa at Hotel Hoffmeister ([www.hoffmeister.cz](http://www.hoffmeister.cz)) houses a 15th century underground stone bath — a dark cave-like cellar where steam is generated by 650 deg C hot lava stones dipped in water. Feeling sluggish? Book the Therapy for Overall Relaxation that includes a dry thermal-pack application, back realignment, and the mobilisation of small joints in the hands and feet.

## DINING AND BOOZING

- Soak up the views overlooking Charles Bridge on the riverside

terrace at Kampa Park ([www.kampagroup.com](http://www.kampagroup.com)), one of Prague's best restaurants for roasted duck. A cosy indoor bar offers an extensive wine list. Kylie Minogue has been spotted here.

- Visiting in summer? Select a table at Perpetuum ([www.cervenatabulka.cz](http://www.cervenatabulka.cz)) where you're served home-grown Bohemian dishes in chic, un-touristy surroundings.
- Tretters Bar ([www.tretters.cz](http://www.tretters.cz)), a lively 1930s style champagne bar featuring maroon-coloured walls, flickering candles and a charming old tile bar, is a quaint experience.
- The grown-up Bar & Books ([www.barandbooks.cz](http://www.barandbooks.cz)) boasts a subdued private club atmosphere. Picture red leather chairs and an excellent scotch and bourbon whisky menu.
- Prague's answer to Singapore's food halls are the local pubs that feature communal tables where affordable beer and *schnitzel* are served. During winter, warm up with a glass of hot red wine (*svarene vino*) — blended with cinnamon, sugar and dried oranges — sold at street-side stalls that dot the city.

## WHEN TO GO

Spring (April to May) and autumn (September to October) are nice times to visit Prague, although many love the snow-dusted streets during winter.



The Cigar Club



The Alchemist Restaurant



Historic houses line the canal flowing into the River Vltava.

PHOTOS DANIEL LISBER