

{travel}

Czech Trek

Take a walking journey through Prague's antiquated architecture

Story and photos by Rose Davidson

Amid a bustling culture of art enthusiasts, music lovers and beer aficionados in the Czech Republic, there's one unifying factor: the city, layered by centuries of architectural elegance, in which it all transpires.

While surrounding regions were not so lucky, many of Prague's historic buildings were spared from the destruction of World War II. Now the city can be seen as a glorious example of architecture through the ages.



St. Vitus Cathedral

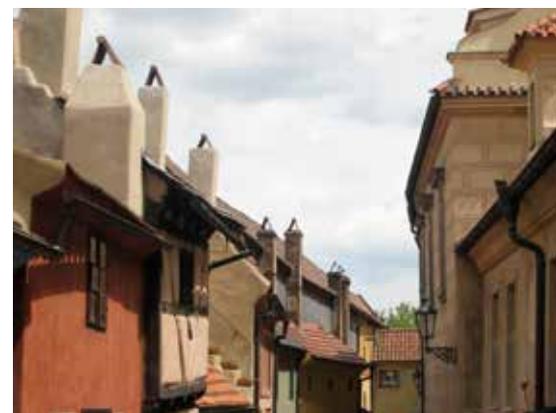


The majority of Europe's most treasured cities are best seen on foot, and Prague is no exception. I say this from personal experience – I traveled to Prague in 2008, and during my stay I embarked on a guided walking tour that highlighted some of the city's most acclaimed architectural contributions. Prague's layout is ideal for pedestrians, with each destination just a short walk from the next.

Starting out on the western side of the city, the first stop on any checklist should be the Prague Castle. The castle is an integral part of Prague's history – it was founded in the late 800s and has subsequently held many of the city's most important administrative officials. Topping the list of largest ancient castles in the world, Prague Castle measures more than 700,000 square feet. Parts of the castle have been fortified and rebuilt at various times throughout its history, and improvement efforts continue to this day.

For many, St. Vitus Cathedral has come to be synonymous with Prague Castle. Its spires tower over the castle grounds and call attention to the cathedral's intricate Gothic style, which starkly contrasts with the more simplistic Renaissance architecture of its surrounding buildings. There is often a long line for those wishing to enter its doors, but admiring the host of gargoyles lining the exterior can make for a great way to pass the time. Once inside, the cascading, bell-shaped columns and exquisite stained glass impart a sense of sacred artistry to which few – if any – other basilicas can compare.

Tucked away in the castle's complex, visitors can also find the Golden Lane. Once home to the castle's goldsmiths, the small



The Golden Lane

living quarters have been transformed into a colorful, interactive venue for visitors to explore. While souvenir shops now fill most of the houses, some still evoke imagery of what it may have been like to live among the castle's servants.

One building is particularly worth seeing, and that's the former residence of writer Franz Kafka of *The Metamorphosis* fame. From 1916 to 1917, Kafka lived at dwelling No. 22 with his sister, and it's rumored this was where he came up with the ideas for his well-known novel *The Castle*.

Crossing over from west to east (or vice versa) in the city, there's no better route for pedestrians to travel than across the Charles Bridge. Just two-thirds of a mile from the castle, the 500-yard stone pathway is a central hub for creative activity,

with artists and street musicians providing constant entertainment for passersby. The structure, built in the 1300s by the same architect responsible for the St. Vitus Cathedral, offers a picturesque view of the cityscape from Prague's Vltava River. Here, magnificent scenes of building tops, both old and new, can be seen for miles in either direction.

Though the cityscape is captivating, don't forget to appreciate the majestic features of the bridge itself. Lining both sides of the bridge are highly detailed statues – 30 in total – that form an avenue of masterpieces crafted by almost as many artists. Many reflect a religious theme, as it was the Catholics who initiated their construction between the 17th and 19th centuries.

One must-see statue is that of St. John of Nepomuk, a national saint of the Czech Republic. Known as a 14th-Century priest to whom many confessed their sins, Father John was allegedly thrown from the Charles Bridge after he upset the king. The bronze bas relief on the statue's base is worn from the countless past visitors who have touched it; viewers are encouraged to rub this area, depicting a man being thrown off a bridge, because the gesture promises those who follow this ritual good luck and a return trip to Prague.

Moving east, pedestrians immediately find themselves in Prague's Old Town. One of the first sites seen when stepping off the bridge is the Old Town Bridge Tower, a worn structure that was designed as a protective post to defend against potential invaders. Though damaged by the Swedes in the 1600s, the tower still stands and is open to the public. Visitors can climb to the top and capture images of the sprawling city, or simply soak in the magnificent beauty of Prague from above its busy streets.

Old Town Square – less than a half-mile northeast of the tower – is brimming with an interesting mixture of quaint eateries



The Astronomical Clock

and designer-name stores, giving a modern spin to a marketplace first established in the 11th Century. In the center of the square is Old Town Hall, where people congregate each hour to see the striking of the Astronomical Clock.

While the show only lasts about a minute, it's truly a sight to see. A skeleton, symbolizing death, rings a bell to start the procession of the 12 apostles from two windows above the medieval 15th-Century clock. Often a trumpeter, dressed in a traditional yellow and red costume, will then play a tune for the crowd from atop the clock tower.

On the other side of the square is Týn Church. The church, founded in 1385, possesses a combination of Gothic exterior and Baroque interior, and one can see evidence of this in its spires. Characteristic of Gothic style, the spires are slightly uneven. Visible from miles away, this building is an iconic landmark in Prague. In fact, the church's tall spires are so distinguishable that, for those who find themselves lost in Old Town, they can often act as a beacon directing travelers back to the square. **CS**

Rose Davidson is a contributing writer. Feedback welcome at gbishop@cityscenemediagroup.com.



Above: Old Town Bridge Tower

Below: Old Town Square

