



Prague at Christmas

Music, history, art and architecture

21–27 December 2023 (MJ 150)

7 days • £3,180 – *flights not included*

Lecturer: Martina Hinks-Edwards

Inaccessible and hidden glories as well as the main sights of this endlessly fascinating city, the most beautiful in Central Europe.

Special arrangements, private visits and museum tours with curators.

Top category tickets to two operas.

An excursion to Kutná Hora, a provincial town of great charm with a splendid late-Gothic cathedral, and to the country house at Kačina.

Centrally located, five-star hotel.

The most beautiful city in Central Europe, Prague enjoys an unequalled density of great architecture, from Romanesque to modern, but it is the fabric of the city as a whole as much as the individual masterpieces that makes it so special. The city is splendidly sited on a crescent of hills rising from one side of a majestic bend in the River Vltava and across the gently inclined terrain on the other bank. A carapace of red roofs, green domes and gilded spires rise above marvellously unspoilt streets and alleys and magically picturesque squares. We view the whole gamut of Czech art and architecture from the Middle Ages to the 1920s.

The 14th century was a high point in Prague's history, when kings of Bohemia were also Holy Roman Emperors, and the city became one of the largest in the western world. The cathedral rising from within the precincts of the hilltop castle complex is one of the many monuments of that golden age. The pattern of innovation and excellence continued; some of the finest Renaissance and Baroque buildings north of the Alps are located here, and Classicism and Historicism are amply represented.

The spirit of national revival and the achievement of independence (in 1918) inspired a ferment of creativity among artists, writers and composers. A variety of styles drew on earlier Bohemian traditions, Art Nouveau was pushed in innovative directions and the dawn of modernism is manifest in some beautiful, precocious and unique architecture.

It's not all buildings: the beautifully converted Convent of St Agnes displays one of the world's best collections of medieval panel paintings, there is Mucha stained glass in the cathedral, European Old Masters in the



Prague, Týn Church.

Schwarzenberg Palace and the incomparable Art Nouveau decoration in the Municipal House. In the city of Smetana and Dvořák, and where Mozart had his most enthusiastic audiences, there is a range of historic opera houses and concert halls. Two performances are included.

Itinerary

Day 1. Leave from Prague airport following the arrival of the recommended flight from London Heathrow (British Airways, currently 1.20pm). *Flights are not included – see 'Practicalities'.*

After settling in to the hotel, there is an introductory lecture and dinner.

Day 2. Morning exploration of the ancient core of the city on the right bank of the Vltava. A dense maze of picturesque streets and alleys converges on Old Town Square, surely the prettiest urban space in Europe, with shimmeringly beautiful façades – medieval, Renaissance, Baroque and Art Nouveau. Visit the Týn Church and the Church of St. James, a Gothic carcass encrusted with Baroque finery. See the medieval painting brilliantly installed

in the 13th-century Convent of St Agnes. Late afternoon *opera at the Prague State Opera: La Bohème (Puccini), State Opera Orchestra & Chorus.*

Day 3. Drive to Prague Castle, an extensive hilltop citadel, residence of dukes and kings of Bohemia from the 10th century. The Old Royal Palace rises from Romanesque through Gothic to Renaissance, the chief glory being the Vladislav Hall with its extraordinary vaulting; the Cathedral of St Vitus is a pioneering monument of High Gothic, richly embellished with sculpture, paintwork and glass. Then visit the private collection at the Lobkowitz Palace and the National Gallery's collection of European Old Masters.

Day 4. The history of the Jewish community is an indelibly fascinating aspect of Prague's history. In the former ghetto, the Josefov, there remain six synagogues, town hall and cemetery. In the afternoon there is a special visit to the glorious suite of assembly rooms created 1904–12 in the Obecní dům ('Municipal House'), a unique and very Czech mélange of murals and ornament. Continue to the 'New Town' (1355),

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continued

in and around Wenceslas Square, threading through a succession of arcades, and viewing outstanding turn-of-the-century architecture and early modernist masterpieces.

Day 5, Christmas Day. Morning walk across 14th-century Charles Bridge, the greatest surviving such medieval structure, and in the 'Lesser Town' visit the magnificent Baroque church of St Nicholas. Alternatively opt for a free morning and attend a church service before Christmas lunch. *Late afternoon opera at the historic 18th-century Estates Theatre: The Magic Flute (Mozart), National Theatre Chorus & Orchestra.*

Day 6: Kutná Hora, Kačina. Excursion into the Bohemian countryside. In the Middle Ages, Kutná Hora acquired great wealth from the nearby silver mines. Now a small provincial town of great charm, it possesses a stunning late-Gothic cathedral, the creation sequentially of Bohemia's two finest medieval architects. The lovely Neo-Classical country house at Kačina, set in a landscaped park, has a sequence of fine rooms including a theatre and circular library.

Day 7. Strahov Monastery has commanding views over Prague and two magnificent library halls, which by special arrangement we enter. Then walk down the hill, passing the formidable bulk of the Černín Palace and the delightful façade of the Loreto Church, before driving to the airport for the recommended flight to London Heathrow (British Airways, currently departing at 2.25pm).

Lecturer

Martina Hinks-Edwards. Specialist guide living in Prague. She studied English at Charles University, Prague. She began working for MRT while still at university, as an interpreter for groups visiting the Czech Republic, and from 2004 as an expert guide with a wide breadth of knowledge of the country's cultural history. She has led tours throughout the Czech Republic and has a particular interest in 20th-century Czech history and architecture.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,180.
Single occupancy: £3,570.

Included: private coach for airport transfers and excursions; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 5 dinners (one is light) and 2 lunches with wine, water, coffee; admissions to museums; tips for restaurant staff, drivers and guides; state and airport taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Flights are not included in the cost of the tour as British Airways are not allowing group bookings on our preferred flights. We can book flights on your behalf, quoting the fare at the time of booking, or you can make the bookings yourself. Suggested flight details are provided with your confirmation of booking, but please contact us if you require details sooner.

Music: tickets (top category) to 2 musical performances are included. Programmes may change and tickets are not confirmed until July.

Accommodation. Grand Hotel Bohemia, Prague (grandhotelbohemia.cz/en/): Excellently located in the Old Town beside Obecní dům, the Grand Bohemia was built in 1923 and retains some original features. Bedrooms are modern, with pleasantly understated decor and comfortable furnishings. Single rooms are doubles for sole use.

How strenuous? There is quite a lot of walking, much of it on roughly paved streets, some on inclines. The tour would not be suitable for anyone with difficulties with everyday walking and stair-climbing.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.