



Connoisseur's Prague

Art, architecture & design, with privileged access

7–13 June 2022 (M1 384)

7 days • £2,980

Lecturer: Richard Bassett

Includes inaccessible and hidden glories as well as the main sights of this endlessly fascinating city.

Special arrangements and private visits are major features. Also museum tours with curators.

Museums and galleries have been transformed in recent years, and new ones added.

Particular focus on art and architecture around the turn of the 19th century.

This is an experience of Prague like no other. The capital of Bohemia needs no introduction as the most beautiful city in Central Europe, with plenty to delight the cultural traveller for a week or more. Yet many a façade screens halls and rooms and works of art of the highest interest which can scarcely ever be seen except by insiders. Other fine places are open to visitors but hard to get to. Gaining access to the inaccessible is a major strand of this tour.

Pursuing the private and straying off the beaten track will not be at the expense of the well-known sights, among which are some of the most fascinating buildings and artworks. But here participants are enabled to focus on the essentials and as far as possible to visit when crowds have subsided.

Prague enjoys an unequalled density of great architecture, from Romanesque to modern, but it is the fabric of the city as a whole rather than individual masterpieces which makes it so special. The city has the advantage of a splendid site, a crescent of hills rising from one side of a majestic bend in the River Vltava with gently inclined terrain on the other bank. A carapace of red roofs, green domes and gilded spires spreads across the slopes and levels, sheltering marvellously unspoilt streets and alleys and magically picturesque squares.

Though the whole gamut of Czech art and architecture is viewed, the tour has an emphasis on the period from the 1870s to the 1920s. The spirit of national revival and the achievement of independence (in 1918) inspired a ferment of creativity among artists, writers and composers. A bewildering variety of styles drew on earlier Bohemian traditions, led Art Nouveau into highly innovative directions and pioneered some radical and unique features at the dawn of modernism.



Prague, Charles Bridge, watercolour by B. Granville Baker, publ. 1923.

Another high point in Prague's history was the fourteenth century, when Kings of Bohemia were also Holy Roman Emperors and the city became one of the largest in the western world. The Gothic cathedral rising from within the precincts of the hilltop Royal Castle is one of the many monuments of that golden age, and the exquisite panel paintings from this era, now excellently displayed in the Convent of St Agnes, are among the chief glories of the city.

Subordination within the Habsburg Empire from the sixteenth century curtailed Bohemia's power but not its wealth or architectural achievements: some of the finest Renaissance buildings in Central Europe arose here. In the eighteenth century, some of the richest landowners of the Baroque age built palaces here.

In the city where Mozart had his most enthusiastic audiences and where Smetana and Dvořák reached fulfilment, there is still a rich musical life in a range of beautiful historic opera houses and concert halls. There will be the opportunity to attend performances.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly from London Heathrow to Prague at c. 9.45am (British Airways). After settling into the hotel there is a special visit to the Obecní dům ('Municipal House') to see the glorious suite of assembly rooms created 1904–12, a

unique and very Czech *mélange* of murals and ornament.

Day 2. Begin by exploring the ancient core of the city on the right bank of the Vltava. A dense maze of dazzlingly 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 Church of St. James, a Gothic carcass encrusted with Baroque finery after a fire in 1689 and the Gothic Týn church, at the heart not only of Prague but also of Czech history. There follows the 13th-century Convent of St Agnes, where one of the world's greatest collections of medieval painting is brilliantly installed. In the afternoon walk in and around Wenceslas Square, threading through a succession of arcades, taking in some outstanding turn-of-the-century architecture and decoration and early modernist masterpieces. The Neo-Renaissance National Museum was designed in the 1880s by Josef Schulz as an architectural symbol of the Czech Republic.

Day 3. Drive up to Prague Castle for a first visit to this extensive and fascinating hilltop citadel, residence of Dukes and Kings of Bohemia from the 10th century and now of the President. The Old Royal Palace rises from Romanesque through Gothic to Renaissance, the chief glory

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continued

being the largest stone hall in Europe and its extraordinary vaulting. Visit the cathedral of St Vitus, a pioneering monument of High Gothic, richly embellished with chapels, tombs, altarpieces and stained glass. The Lobkowitz Palace contains a fascinating private collection of painting, decorative arts, music, military and hunting equipment. Finish at the delicately arcaded Belvedere in the Royal Gardens, the finest Renaissance building in Prague.

Day 4. Return to Prague Castle for privileged access to a wonderful sequence of halls not open to the public, dating from the 1570s to the 1930s (state occasions permitting). The Schwarzenberg Palace has a fine collection of Old Masters. In the afternoon visit the Veletržní (Trade Fair) Palace of 1928, which houses Czech art of the 19th and 20th centuries alongside that of France, Germany and Austria.

Day 5. Walk across 14th-century Charles Bridge, the greatest such structure in Europe, wonderfully adorned with sculptures. In the Lesser Town visit St Nicholas, one of the finest of Baroque churches in Central Europe. Walk through a sequence of delightful gardens on the south slope, followed by a visit to the Wallenstein Palace, a rare example of a 1630s residence (now the Senate).

Day 6. A treasure south of the centre is St John Nepomuk 'on the Rock', a little Baroque masterpiece (*rarely accessible*), and is followed by a special tour of the National Theatre (1869–83) to which all the leading Czech artists of the time contributed. The Lapidarium features fine sculpture including several original statues from Charles Bridge. A riverside country retreat, Villa Troja is a 17th-century Italianate mansion with a French formal garden.

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. Fly to London Heathrow, arriving c. 2.45pm.

Lecturer

Richard Bassett. Journalist and historian. He was a foreign correspondent for The Times throughout the 1980s and early 90s, covering central and eastern Europe. His books include *Austrians: Tales from the Vienna Woods*, *Hitler's Spy Chief: The Wilhelm*

Canaris Mystery, *Balkan Hours*, *A History of the Habsburg Army* (2014) and the widely acclaimed *Last Days of Old Europe* (2018).

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £2,980 or £2,840 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,380 or £3,240 without flights.

Included: air travel (economy class) on scheduled British Airways flights (aircraft: Airbus A320); private coach for airport transfers and excursions; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts and 3 dinners and 1 lunch with wine; all admissions to museums; all tips for restaurant staff, drivers and guides; all state and airport taxes; the services of the lecturer and Czech guide.

Optional music: we hope to be able to offer tickets to some performances; programmes should be available in early 2022.

Accommodation. Hotel Paris, Prague (hotel-paris.cz) is a 5-star hotel built in 1904 that retains the Art Nouveau theme throughout. Comfortable and elegant but not fussy with a good restaurant and café. Very well located in the Old Town close to Obecní dům (Municipal House). *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. Fitness is essential.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.

Combine this tour with Moravia, 13–20 June 2022.