



Prague: hidden stories

The histories,
mysteries,
and symbolism
of Prague's monuments

prague.eu

Prague:emotion

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Introduction

It’s not a particularly original comparison, but Prague is like a book – an illustrated storybook. To the detriment of its stories (and its readers), its illustrations are so impressive that many people just quickly flip through the book and let themselves be carried away by the flood of lines, shapes, and colours on every page. Then they put it back on the shelf and start looking through another one.

But what gives a city its depth and sense of place are its stories. Prague is full of them. It should be said, however, that these stories can be grim, violent, or even morbid, but one can find mystery, obsession, and wonder in them, as well. Without these stories, however, Prague would be nothing more than a collection of colourful buildings, pleasing views, trams, and great beer. That’s no small thing – what some cities wouldn’t give for such a collection! – but Prague is so much more.

The purpose of this brochure is to show you at least a tiny part of the text that is inscribed over every inch of Prague – in its cobblestones, facades, statues, bridges, and towers.



i Information about individual buildings and monuments be found on our website prague.eu.

The texts for this brochure were sourced from dozens of publications, which, due to space limitations, we cannot list in their entirety. For those who would like to learn more about the history of Prague, we recommend taking a private tour of the city with one of our licenced guides. You can find a list of them at prague.eu/guides.

Charles Bridge

Prague 1 - Old Town, Lesser Town

Staroměstská Malostranské náměstí

Karlovy lázně

Charles Bridge, one of the most famous symbols of Prague, has its own unique atmosphere, best experienced in the early morning hours before the souvenir vendors and tour groups show up. The bridge's builder, Holy Roman Emperor and Bohemian King Charles IV, was a scholar and Christian mystic whose lifelong mission was to turn Prague into the spiritual and cultural centre of Europe. All of his city-planning and construction projects were carefully thought-out parts of a higher plan, always following spiritual and esoteric principles. This stone bridge was no exception. Astrological and numerological calculations were made to determine the ideal date and time to lay the bridge's foundation stone: July 9, 1357, at 5:31 a.m., which would ensure good fortune and eternal existence. The numerals of the year, day, month, hour, and minutes created a palindrome (a numeric or letter sequence that reads the same forwards and backwards) – in this case, a series of prime numbers

with 9 in the middle: 1-3-5-7-9-7-5-3-1. This creates a numerical pyramid with 9 at the top, which, according to numerological principles, symbolises noble human ideals and favours the richness of the soul over material wealth. The configuration of the planets at the moment that the foundation stone was placed should also be mentioned. All the known planets were placed above the horizon in astrologically significant positions – a conjunction of the Sun and Saturn took place, considered to be one of the most auspicious moments of the entire year according to medieval astrology.

The stone bridge across the Vltava, which was not called Charles Bridge until 1870, was adorned with only a simple wooden cross for centuries. The Baroque statues of the saints were not placed on the bridge until the 17th century. The most striking of these is the statue of St. John of Nepomuk, a Czech saint who was tortured and thrown from the bridge into the Vltava River (see page 6). The spot is commemorated today with a plaque.

i To learn more about the history of Charles Bridge, visit the Charles Bridge Museum near the Old Town Bridge Tower. muzeumkarlovamostu.cz



The numerical palindrome can also be found on the Old Town Bridge Tower (see page 8) and the New Town Hall (see page 32).





Statue of Charles IV on Křižovnické Square

📍 St. John of Nepomuk

Statue: 📍 north side of Charles Bridge,
Prague 1 – Old Town 🚶 🚗 Staroměstská

Grave with tombstone: 📍 St. Vitus Cathedral,
Prague 1 – Hradčany 🚶 🚗 Pražský hrad (Prague Castle)

Sculptural group: 📍 Národní třída 8, Prague 1 – New Town
🚶 🚗 Národní divadlo

Statue of St. John of Nepomuk on Charles Bridge



The statue of Czech patron saint John of Nepomuk (John Nepomucene) is the most important – and popular – on Charles Bridge. During the day, it's nearly impossible to miss as it's usually surrounded with a throng of tourists patiently waiting for their chance to touch its base in the hope that it will bring them good luck. Equally popular is the bronze cross embedded in the bridge railing a short distance away towards Old Town, supposedly marking the place from which John of Nepomuk was thrown into the river after his death.

John of Nepomuk is the most popular of the Czech saints elsewhere in the world. His story and legend, which arose after his martyrdom, are generally well-known. It was long believed that he was executed by being thrown off Charles Bridge after being sewn into a sack for refusing to speak during an interrogation. A later examination of his remains showed, however, that he died from a blow to the head before being thrown into the water, most likely during torture ordered by King Wenceslas IV. What exactly John refused to disclose and what he did to earn such a punishment we don't know. It is said that he refused to reveal the confessional secrets of the king's wife Sophie, but there is also a version of the story that says that he was the victim of a power struggle between the king and

the Archbishop of Prague, against whom John refused to testify. John's body surfaced about a month later near the Convent of St. Agnes and, according to legend, five stars shone above his head, which became his attribute and how he is usually portrayed. He was buried in St. Vitus Cathedral during the lifetime of Wenceslas IV. Thanks to the massive silver tombstone, his tomb is hard to miss.

John was canonised in 1729 based on four recognised miracles. It's well-known that organic matter was found inside John's skull – reputedly his tongue, proof that he did not divulge the secrets of the confessional. Later, however, it was determined that it was part of his brain tissue. This is stored in the church at Zelená Hora (Green Mountain) near Žďár nad Sázavou, which was built expressly as a reliquary for the tongue of St. John of Nepomuk. The church, registered in the UNESCO World Heritage List, is the work of the Baroque architectural genius Jan Blažej Santini-Aichel. The symbols of the tongue and star repeatedly appear throughout the building.

John of Nepomuk is one of the Czech patron saints. He is also the patron saint of bridges, all people who live and work around water, and even Venice and the Venetian gondoliers. His statue on Charles Bridge is one of the centres of the St. John cult and every year on May 15, the eve of his feast day, a worship service takes place there in the presence of the Archbishop of Prague. The celebrations include a musical performance on boats on the Vltava River near Charles Bridge.

Plaque marking the location where John was reportedly thrown into the river



3 Old Town Bridge Tower

📍 Charles Bridge, Prague 1 - Old Town

🚶🚗 Staroměstská



The City of a Hundred Spires, as Prague is often called, speaks from the depths of its history not only with its palaces, churches, and statues but also with its towers. One of the most remarkable is the Old Town Bridge Tower of Charles Bridge. At 47 meters high, this 14th-century tower is covered with many symbols that are worth searching for. At first glance, one notices that the tower is divided into four horizontal sections, each with different decoration and ideological significance. The lowest part is called the earthly sphere, represented by the Gothic tower passageway



and net vaulting with rich ceiling frescoes. In the frescoes, we see depictions of a kingfisher in a knotted towel. The same symbol is repeated in the relief decoration of the tower's facade. It is the personal symbol of King Wenceslas IV as well as the Barbers' Guild. According to legend, Zuzana, a bathhouse girl, helped the king escape from captivity and a deeper emotional bond developed between them. A less poetic explanation says that the kingfisher in a knotted towel is simply the architectural symbol of King Wenceslas IV and appears on other buildings in the country. Sculptural decoration in the "human and sinful" earthly sphere is worthy of mention – notably the amusing erotic sculpture of a knight with a hand up a nun's skirt. Lascivious motifs can be found on other towers in Prague as well, such as the Powder Tower.

Slightly above, under the cornice of the tower, we find the lunar sphere, with symbols of the countries that were part of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown. Above this, in the solar sphere of the tower, Emperor Charles IV and King Wenceslas IV pay tribute to St. Vitus. The topmost part of the tower represents the celestial sphere. From here, Czech patron saints Vojtěch and Zikmund gaze out over the land. We should not omit to mention the "magical trap" that can be found under the tower's roof. It is a palindrome (see the chapter New Town Hall, page 32 and Charles Bridge, page 2), i.e. a sentence that reads the same in both directions. The magic formula reads: SIGNA TE SIGNA TEMERE ME TANGIS ET ANGIS. ROMA TIBI SUBITO MOTIBUS IBIT AMOR ("Cross yourself, cross yourself, you plague and vex me without need. For, owing to my exertions, Rome, the object of your wishes, will soon be near."). This magical trap was intended to protect the tower against all evil, just like the palindrome on Charles Bridge and the New Town Hall.



4 Prague Astronomers – Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler

The tomb of Tycho Brahe 📍 Church of Our Lady Before Týn (Chrám Matky Boží před Týnem), Old Town Square
🚶 Staroměstská

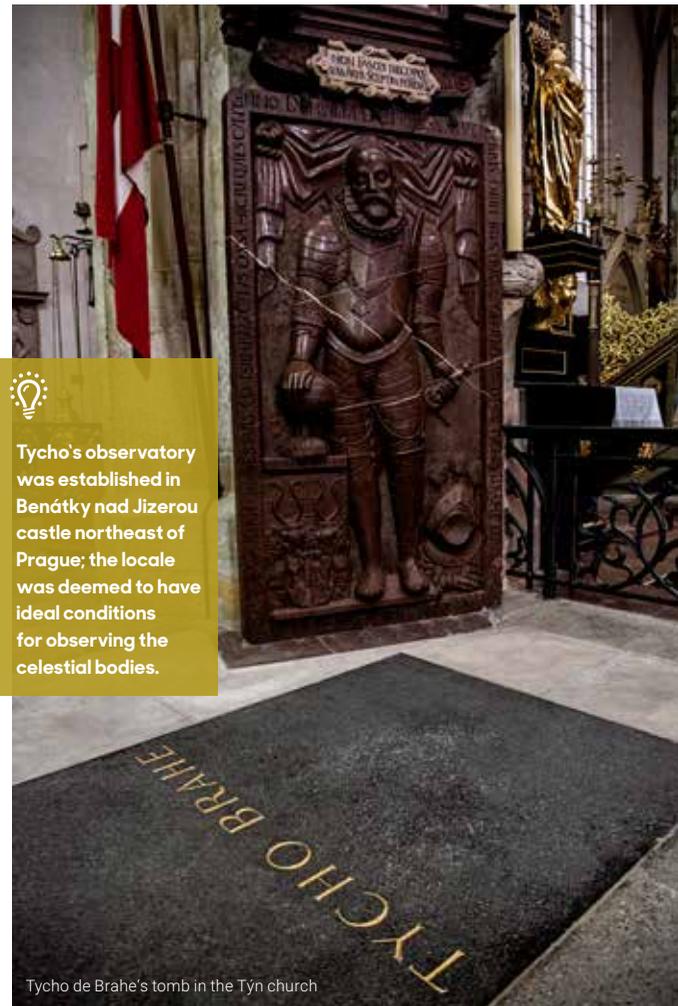
Sculptural group 📍 Parlářova 2, Prague 1 – Hradčany
🚶 Pohořelec



© Kajano / Shutterstock

In the imposing Church of Our Lady Before Týn on Old Town Square lies the tomb of the famous Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, who was considered the greatest expert on the heavens in his day. Brahe came to Prague at the invitation of Emperor Rudolf II in 1599 and built a modern observatory a short distance from Prague, which also included an alchemical workshop, his second passion after astronomy. A year later, Brahe met another astronomer, Johannes Kepler. The two scientists held differing opinions, but their cooperation still managed to bear fruit. Brahe argued that

the Sun revolved around the Earth, but the other planets revolved around the Sun. Kepler, on the other hand, was inclined towards a heliocentric arrangement of the universe (the centre of the universe is the Sun, around which the planets revolve, see the Star Summer Palace chapter, page 50). It is worth mentioning that Brahe's eulogy was delivered in Týn Cathedral by Jan Jessenius, distinguished physician and rector of Charles University, who was one of the Czech nobles executed on Old Town Square twenty years later (see page 12). The Imperial Court astronomer is depicted on his tomb in knight's garb, and a keen eye won't miss the depiction of Brahe's prosthetic nose. He lost the tip of his nose during a duel in Denmark, and from that time he used a gold and silver prosthesis always carefully attached with special glue. Both astronomical greats are memorialised in Prague today with a sculpture group at Pohořelec in front of the Jan Kepler Secondary School.



Tycho's observatory was established in Benátky nad Jizerou castle northeast of Prague; the locale was deemed to have ideal conditions for observing the celestial bodies.

Tycho de Brahe's tomb in the Týn church

5 The Execution of 27 Czech Nobles

Crosses on Old Town Square

📍 Old Town Square (Staroměstské náměstí),
Prague 1 – Old Town 🚶 Staroměstská

Bollards in front of the Lichtenstein Palace

📍 Malostranské náměstí/Square 13,
Prague 1 – Lesser Town 🚶 Malostranské náměstí

Old Town Square



Twenty-seven crosses are embedded in the pavement in the imposing space of Old Town Square next to the Old Town Hall tower, along with a date. The crosses commemorate the 27 Czech lords and burghers who were executed on this spot on June 21, 1621. The executions were an act of revenge for the Czech uprising of 1618-1620, during which Czech nobles openly resisted the ruling Habsburg dynasty; the core of the dispute was both political and religious differences. After multiple conflicts, the dissenting Czech estates, primarily Protestant, were defeated by the Catholic army of King Ferdinand II Habsburg at the Battle of White Mountain in 1620. Later, prominent leaders of the anti-Habsburg camp, members of the Czech nobility, knights, and burghers, were publicly executed on Old Town Square. (One of those killed was the rector of Charles University, Jan Jessenius, who, twenty years earlier, delivered the eulogy over Tycho Brahe's grave, see the preceding chapter, page 10).

This dramatic execution, which had a devastating effect on the rest of the population, was followed by a strict recatholisation and an associated wave of emigration by Protestant-minded intellectuals, burghers, and nobles; during this period, the Czech lands lost a significant part of its elite.

Along with the twenty-seven crosses, this tragic event in Czech history is also commemorated by 27 figural bollards on Malostranské Square in front of the Liechtenstein Palace – it was within its walls that the fates of the Czech lords were decided. The metal bollards are the work of Czech sculptor Karel Nepraš and were installed here in 1993.

Malostranské náměstí/Square



6 Hebrew Clock on the Jewish Town Hall

📍 Maiselova 18, Prague 1 – Old Town

🚶 Staroměstská 🚶 Právnická fakulta

Over the centuries, Prague's character has been shaped by the co-existence of three cultures – Czech, German, and Jewish. Only the core of the former Jewish quarter remains today; however, synagogues and other buildings are eloquent testimony to the former importance of the Prague Jewish community. The first mentions of the Jewish town hall date back to the 16th century. The building underwent several reconstructions during which it gained a Rococo tower and two clocks. The face of the first clock is marked with Roman numerals, and it tells the time in the usual manner. The face of the second clock, however, is marked with Hebrew letters and the clock hands turn in the opposite direction. The principle is the same as Hebrew texts, which are read right to left. The Hebrew letter “aleph”, which corresponds to the value of the number 1, is therefore located on the place where the number 11 is located on a clock with Roman numerals. The letter “beth”, signifying the number 2, occupies the 10 o'clock position, and so forth. The clock was completed in the mid-18th century and is considered one of the oldest Hebrew clocks in Europe.

Old New Synagogue with the Jewish Town Hall in the background



It is worth noting that during the Middle Ages, the Prague, or rather the Czech Jewish community used the Knaanic language (Leshon Knaan) in addition to Hebrew. It is Old Czech transliterated into Hebrew characters. A similar language system was derived from each Slavic language in general; however, many written monuments survived in the Old Czech language. Ask your guide at the Jewish Museum jewishmuseum.cz



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🏰 Convent of St. Agnes

📍 Anežská 12, Prague 1 – Old Town

🚗 Dlouhá třída 📍 ngprague.cz

At the north end of Old Town, off the beaten tourist path near the Vltava River, is one of the oldest sacred places in Prague – the medieval Convent of St. Agnes. It bears the name of the Přemyslid Princess Anežka (Agnes), who took inspiration from the ideas of St. Francis and St. Claire and built it together with her brother, Bohemian King Wenceslas I. Agnes of Bohemia, who became the convent's first Superior, was an exceptional personality and, thanks to her piety and generous philanthropy, was venerated as a saint during her lifetime, and the convent became an important spiritual centre. The Na Františku Hospital was part of the convent, serving first as a refuge for the poor, who received not only basic health care here, but also religious services, including confession and last rites and Christian burials. The convent was also built as a Přemyslid royal tomb. After her death in 1282, Agnes was buried in a simple grave in the convent chapel of the Virgin Mary and her remains, to which miraculous effects were attributed, became the subject of a cult. According to legend, they were later transferred to a wooden casket, which was removed and hidden by the Franciscans at the start of the Hussite Revolution in the 15th century. An ancient prophecy says that happy times will return to the Czech lands once Agnes' remains are found.



The convent and the nearby Church of St. Castulus (Haštal) were the heart of the former Na Františku slums, whose original character can still be glimpsed when strolling through the narrow lanes that surround them. Based on historical sources, the Church of St. Castulus is one of the possible resting places of Agnes' remains. An archaeological survey carried out in 2010 refuted this, however.

Today the Convent of St. Agnes is part of the National Gallery in Prague. It houses a phenomenal collection of medieval art, including a tactile exhibition; there is also a special route for children, as well as an art workshop. The convent building, which charges no entry fee (except to exhibitions), is surrounded by a complex of lovely gardens. Every year, a festival – Anežka Live! – is held here, featuring lectures, workshops, meetups, film screenings, yoga classes, and other events.



St. Francis of Assisi church, part of the St. Agnes complex

8 House at the Black Madonna

📍 Celetná Street 43, Prague 1 – Old Town

📍 Náměstí Republiky 🌐 czkubismus.cz

When entering Prague's Old Town, it's hard to miss the Cubist building on the corner of Celetná and Ovocný trh Streets with a statue of the Black Madonna and Child behind a gilded screen, which gives the house its name. Although the building was constructed from 1911–1912, the figure of the Madonna dates to the 17th century and, according to historical sources, was part of



the former building. The significance of the Black Madonna is still not fully understood. The general opinion is that it relates to the pagan cult of Mother Earth (in which the colour black signifies the mystery of the virgin fertility of the earth) and the worship of goddess-mothers, such as the cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis cradling the god Horus in her arms. It is worth noting that many statues of Isis and of the Black Madonna bear the same inscription: „Virgini pariturae” (Virgin, who would bear a child). This Eastern cult found its way to Europe most likely through the Templar Knights. It is probably no coincidence that the Prague Black Madonna looks out over the House at the Temple (U Templu) directly opposite, the former seat of the Templars in Prague.

The original statue is in the Prague City Gallery in the House of the Stone Bell on Old Town Square.



The House at the Black Madonna was the first Cubist building in Prague and was designed by the famous Czech architect Josef Gočár. Today it is the home of the Museum of Czech Cubism and the Cubist-style Grand Café Orient on the first floor.

© Atmosphere1 / Shutterstock

9 National Memorial on Vítkov Hill

📍 U Památníku 1900, Prague 3 – Žižkov

🚗 U Památníku ↗ Křižíkova ↖ nm.cz

Few buildings can offer such a strong testimony of their era as the National Memorial on Vítkov. The 19th-century Czech National Revival movement yearned for the myths of national identity, and the newly-built Žižkov district became one great reference to Czech history. The streets of Žižkov were named after Hussite generals, houses were adorned with their idealised portraits. (The Hussites were a pre-Protestant Christian movement that followed the teachings of Czech reformer Jan Hus, burned at the stake in 1415; for decades, their army was feared throughout Europe.) Nearby Vítkov Hill was to become the home of a massive monument to Hussite leader Jan Žižka, which would dominate the entire city.

The National Monument, today one of Prague's visual landmarks, was, however, built to honour the Czechoslovak Legionnaires from World War I as well as to celebrate the 1918 founding of Czechoslovakia. The foundation stone was laid in 1928, but the building wasn't handed over to the public until 1938. Everything changed abruptly, however, with the Nazi occupation of

Czechoslovakia and World War II. The monument was occupied and sealed.

Repairs began soon after the war ended. In 1948, Czechoslovakia fell under the power of the Communists, and the new regime found a new purpose for the Memorial – to become a mausoleum for the first Communist president Klement Gottwald, after the Moscow model. (Despite assistance from Soviet experts, the mummification was unsuccessful, and Gottwald had to be hastily buried.) Today the dark days of Communism are recalled in an exhibition entitled “Laboratory of Power”, located in the Memorial's underground space.

Worth visiting is the imposing three-aisled marble ceremonial hall in Art Deco style, the columbarium, the Chapel to the Fallen, and other spaces. In 1950, a statue of legendary Hussite military leader Jan Žižka was, at last, erected in front of the Memorial, one of the most colossal equestrian statues in the world – just the horse's tail weighs 400 kg.

Today the National Museum's military history exhibitions are located in the Memorial. Visitors can also climb to the very top of the Memorial, which offers a 360-degree panorama view of Prague.





10 Nicholas Winton

📍 Wilsonova 8, Prague 2 – Vinohrady

🚗 🚆 Hlavní nádraží

Two memorials at Prague Main Railway Station remind passers-by of the most moving stories of World War II. Sir Nicholas Winton (1909-2015) was a British stockbroker and humanitarian worker who in 1939 saved 669 mostly Jewish children in German-occupied Czechoslovakia from transport to the concentration camps, by securing their departure by train to the United Kingdom.



After the Nazis came to power, several organizations were helping the persecuted to emigrate from Germany and occupied territories, among them the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia (BCRC). In addition to financial assistance, these organizations sought to negotiate with the authorities of states willing to accept the refugees. In December 1938, one of the BCRC workers, Martin Blake, asked his friend Nicholas Winton to skip a skiing holiday in Switzerland and go to Prague instead, to help the BCRC Prague Office organize the children's transports. Each

child needed a foster family in the UK and a deposit of £50, after which they could obtain a British visa and residence permit. After leaving Prague, Winton coordinated the adoptions from London. He looked for foster parents, dealt with the adoption authorities and collected contributions, all alongside his daytime job. Meanwhile, the new head of the BCRC Prague branch, Trevor Chadwick, got the necessary documents from parents and secured travel permits from the German occupying authorities. All this under the watchful eyes of the Gestapo.

Winton and his colleagues managed to organize eight transports between March and August 1939. The last successful 'Kindertransport' was dispatched on 2 August 1939, bringing the number of rescued children to 669. Nicholas Winton never regarded what he did as exceptional and never sought publicity. It was only in 1988 that historian Elizabeth Maxwell broke the story. Nicholas Winton was then invited to the BBC programme *That's Life*, where he unexpectedly found the audience full of now-adult Jewish children whose lives he'd helped to save.

The statue of Sir Nicholas Winton with two children is on the first platform of Prague's Main Station. The plaque reads: 'With deep gratitude, dedicated to Sir Nicholas Winton and all compassionate people who by eight train transports to Great Britain in 1939 rescued 669 children from the horrors of World War II, and to commemorate the 15,131 Czechoslovak children murdered in concentration camps.'

From May 2017, the underpass to the platforms features a second memorial associated Sir Winton's name. Conceived by three of 'Winton's children', the Farewell Memorial is a monument to the love and commitment of parents whose difficult decision to send their children into the unknown ended up saving their lives. The Memorial consists of a replica train carriage door, with casts of the hands of children and parents, representing the survivors' strongest memory: children and parents pressing their hands against the door-glass to say goodbye.



Jan Palach

Jan Palach Memorial (cross) 📍 **Václavské náměstí, pavement in front of the National Museum fountain, Prague 1 – New Town** 🚶 **Muzeum**

Jan Palach memorial plaque 📍 **Charles University Faculty of Arts, náměstí Jana Palacha 2, Prague 1 – Old Town** 🚶 **Staroměstská**

The House of the Suicide and The House of the Mother of the Suicide - Jan Palach Memorial 📍 **Alšovo nábřeží, Prague 1 – Old Town** 🚶 **Staroměstská**

The Communist Czechoslovakia reform attempt to build “socialism with a human face” ended with the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968. Scores of Czechoslovaks emigrated; those who remained either resigned themselves or tried to adapt to the new regime. Twenty-year-old student Jan Palach refused to accept society’s growing apathy. To galvanise his fellow citizens into action, he decided to take action, and on June 16, 1969, near the statue of St. Wenceslas on Wenceslas Square, he doused himself with petrol and set himself alight. He died several days later from the resulting injuries. His radical act shook society and even inspired a follower, Jan Zajíc – but he was unable to change the course of history.



© Peter Zurek / Shutterstock

Palach's name immediately became taboo and remained so until the fall of the Communist regime in 1989. Today, three memorials commemorate his act. A bronze cross embedded in the pavement in front of the National Museum subtly marks the spot where Palach self-immolated. A memorial plaque with Palach's death mask is mounted on the facade of the Faculty of Arts, where he studied; the square in front of the building bears his name today. And finally, a few steps away, a twin metal sculpture entitled The House of the Suicide and The House of the Mother of the Suicide soars towards the sky. It is by John Heyduk, an American architect with Czech roots.

A spot in the Olšany Cemetery was chosen as Palach's final resting place, and it quickly became a pilgrimage destination. This displeased the Communist ruling elite, who had Palach's body exhumed, cremated, and removed from Prague. The ceremonial return of his remains to Olšany Cemetery took place after the Velvet Revolution with the participation of Václav Havel. His bronze tombstone is the work of famous Czech sculptor Olbram Zoubek.



After being removed from the Olšany cemetery in Prague, Palach's remains were moved to Všetaty, the town where Jan Palach spent his childhood years.



The House of the Suicide and The House of the Mother of the Suicide
© LALS STOCK / Shutterstock

12 Nuclear Fallout Shelter at the Jalta Hotel

📍 Václavské náměstí 45, Prague 1 – New Town
🏛️ Muzeum, Můstek 🚶 Václavské náměstí
🌐 hoteljalta.com

Wenceslas Square has borne witness to multiple dramatic historical moments. In May 1945, shortly before the defeat of Nazi Germany, the Luftwaffe firebombed the city centre. After the war, the destroyed buildings in the middle of the square were quickly replaced with new ones.

One of these went up between 1954 and 1958 and entered the consciousness of Praguers as the luxury Hotel Jalta. The highly decorative building is notable for the rich tiling on its facade. At the time, its designer, architect Antonín Tenzler, enjoyed the support of Communist president Antonín Zápotocký. The politician, a mason by vocation, even assisted in choosing the highest quality marble and travertine. The sculptural decoration was also very tasteful. The luxurious interior included glass partitions by Stanislav Libenský, elegant ceramic tiles, and hand-woven textiles.

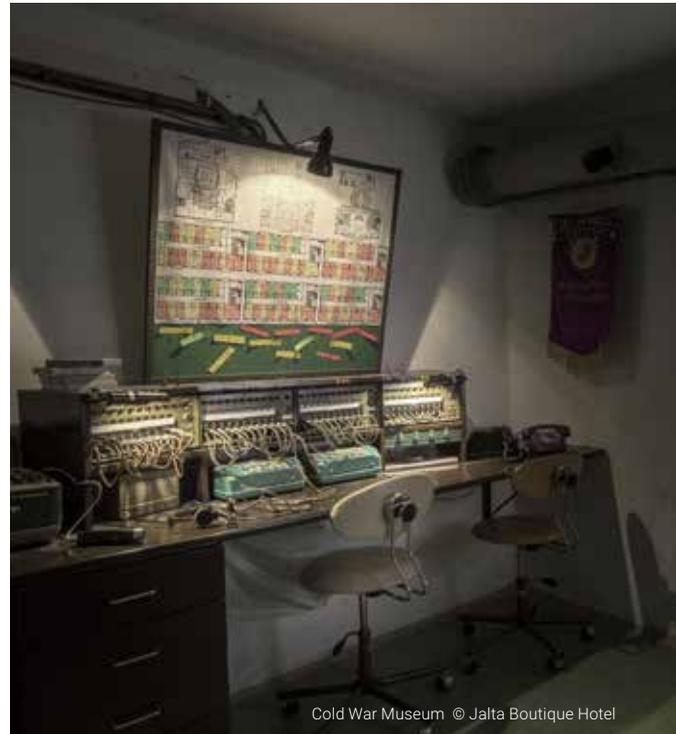
But one detail which the public remained unaware of, however, was the vast underground nuclear fallout shelter built under the hotel for members of the Communist elite. It was designed to house 250 people, equipped with an operating theatre, a water reservoir, and facilities for military staff. The underground space also had a telephone listening centre with connections to each room, operated by the secret services. Today it is open to the public as the Cold War Museum.



Cold War Museum © Jalta Boutique Hotel



© Jalta Boutique Hotel



Cold War Museum © Jalta Boutique Hotel

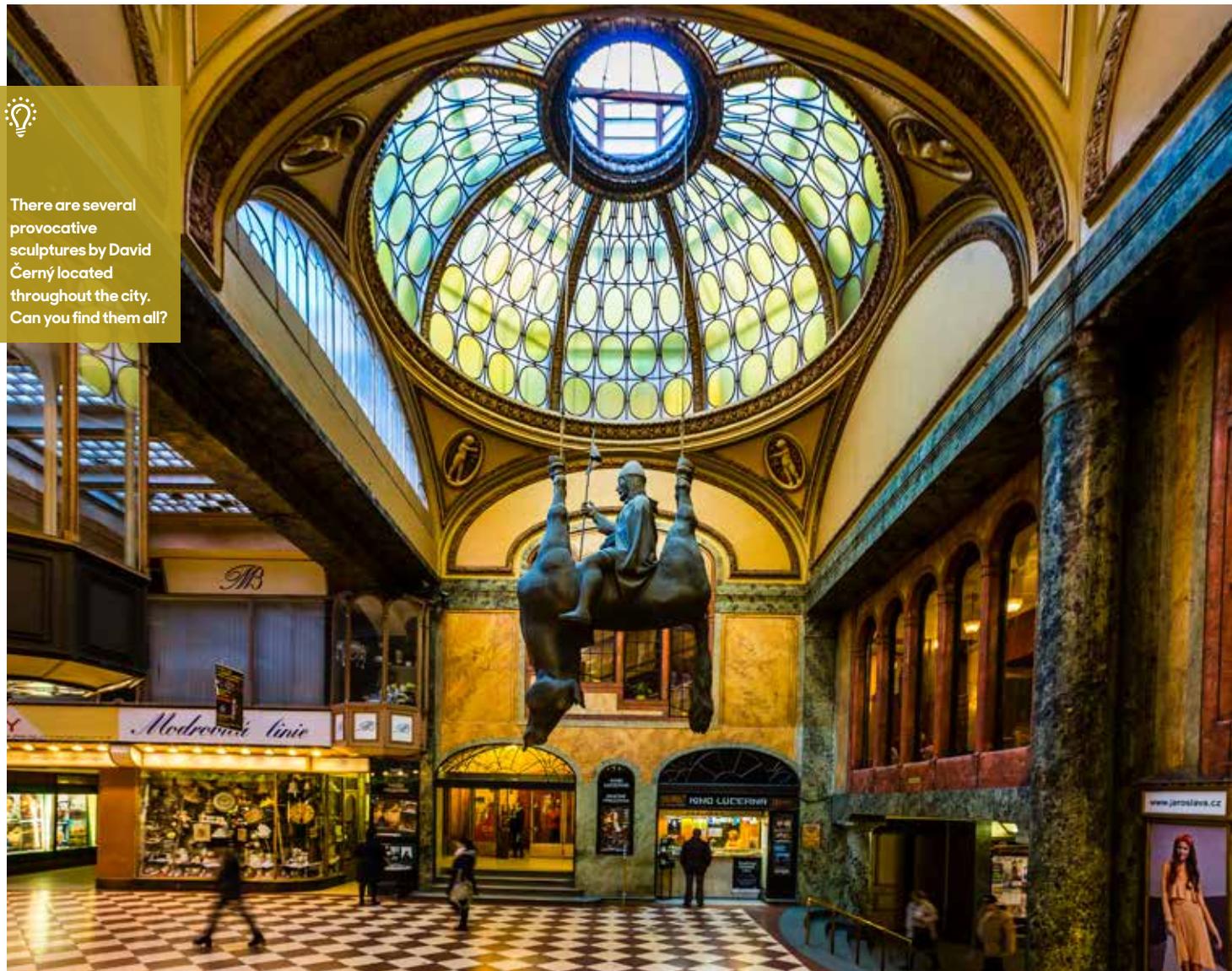
13 Statue of St. Wenceslas in the Lucerna Shopping Arcade

📍 Štěpánská 61, Prague 1 – New Town

🚶 Můstek 🚶 Václavské náměstí 🌐 lucerna.cz

The Lucerna Palace, just off of Wenceslas Square, is an example of early Czech Modernism, although its eclectic design also bears traces of late Art Nouveau. Completed in 1921, the complex became the most popular social centre of the city. Today, it still has an elegant, functional cinema, a café, a large hall used for concerts and balls, and a shopping arcade with a diverse mixture of shops and boutiques.

Since 2000, this arcade – the first of its kind in the city – has been home to a provocative hanging sculpture of an armoured knight sitting on the belly of a dead horse. The horse is suspended by its hooves from the glass dome in the central part of the arcade. The sculpture was designed by famous Czech artist David Černý and is a unique counterpart to another, much older, work: the original equestrian statue of the Czech patron saint Wenceslas by Josef Václav Myslbek from 1913. This statue is located nearby at the top of Wenceslas Square in front of the National Museum. There are numerous interpretations of the statue of St. Wenceslas on a dead horse, but most agree its tone is critical – a sarcastic commentary on degraded national pride, when only empty pathos remains of the former lofty ideals.



There are several provocative sculptures by David Černý located throughout the city. Can you find them all?

14 Charles Square and the New Town Hall

📍 Karlovo náměstí 23, Prague 2 – New Town

🚗 🚶 Karlovo náměstí 🚶 Novoměstská radnice

🌐 novomestskaradnice.cz



New Town Hall

The largest square in Prague is in the New Town, just off the regular tourist route – but it's a place with a fascinating history. Most of the square today is occupied by a large park with mature trees, flowering bushes, statues, and a fountain – on hot, humid days, it's a pleasant place to stop and relax.

New Town was founded by Emperor Charles IV in the 14th century as part of his grandiose plan to build the spiritual centre of Europe, a "New Jerusalem", in Prague; indeed, if we compare contemporary maps of both cities, they clearly correspond in at least 20 places in mirror-image. The spiritual centre of Jerusalem, a platform with an irregular four-sided shape called Mount Moriah, where Abraham

sacrificed Isaac and at the centre of which the Temple of Solomon was built, found its counterpart in Prague's New Town in the Cattle Market, or what is now known as Charles Square (Karlovo náměstí in Czech).

Charles apparently truly believed that he and his oldest son and follower on the Holy Roman and Bohemian thrones, Wenceslas IV, were the reincarnation of another father and son: kings of Israel David and Solomon. According to the Old Testament, David founded the City of David – the Jerusalem of the Bible. On Mount Moriah, he bought land and gathered materials for building the Temple, but God forbade him – this was to be Solomon's task after David's death. Charles, therefore, constructed only a wooden tower in the middle of the Cattle Market, from which he displayed the crown jewels and rare reliquaries on holidays, such as the thorn from the Crown of Christ and St. Longinus' spear (see the chapter on Vyšehrad, page 40). After Charles' death, his son Wenceslas IV built an octagonal chapel (named Corpus Christi) on the tower, which dominated the square until the 18th century (depicted in several contemporary engravings). A model of the chapel is on view at the City of Prague Museum 📍 muzeumprahy.cz

The Gothic New Town Hall overlooks the northern end of the square, a building with a turbulent history. Notably, the first Prague defenestration took place here in 1419 (defenestration is the act of forcibly ejecting – usually – political opponents out of a window), which led to the start of the Hussite Wars, a series of religious conflicts in which a spontaneously-formed army of Czech Hussites battled the armies of Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund, the Pope, and his loyal European rulers. What's interesting is that on the south wall of the town hall, we find the same palindrome found on the Old Town Bridge Tower (see page 8). Today the Town Hall is open to visitors; there's a beautiful view of the city from the tower. In the area there are a number of buildings worth seeing, such as the early Baroque Church of St. Ignatius of Loyola on the corner of Ječná Street, the Church of St. Charles Borromeo with the memorial to the heroes of the Heydrich Terror (page 36) towards the river, and on the south side of the square, the noteworthy Emmaus Monastery complex (page 38).

View of Charles Square from the New Town Hall tower



View of the New Town by Aegidius Sadeler (ca. 1568-1625), with the Corpus Christi chapel in the middle of the square. The chapel was destroyed in the 18th century.



15 Crypt of the Church of Sts. Cyril and Methodius

National Memorial to the Heroes of the Heydrich Terror

📍 Resslova 9a, Prague 2 - New Town

🚶🚗 Karlovo náměstí

👉 vhu.cz/muzea/ostatni-expozice/krypta



Busts of the two paratroopers in the church's crypt
© Cristian Puscasu / Shutterstock

The Baroque Orthodox Church of Sts. Cyril and Methodius near Charles Square is a remarkable religious building; thanks to its role in modern Czech history, it's also one of the most important historical sites in the city.

On March 15, 1939, the German Army occupied the Czech territory, and the following day, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was established, followed by six years of brutal oppression and humiliation of the Czech nation. The worst period began with the appointment of Reinhard Heydrich as Reichsprotektor in 1941. One of the most powerful men in Nazi Germany, he declared martial law in the Protectorate.

The Czechoslovak government in exile decided a forceful response was necessary – retaliation, the aim of which was an attack on Heydrich. The operation, code-named Anthropoid, was to be carried out by Josef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš, who were specially trained for this task in Great Britain. They returned to the Protectorate in a secret parachute landing to carry out their mission. The assassination was successfully carried out in May 1942. The reprisals that followed, however, were swift and brutal: resistance fighters, their collaborators, and all those who condoned (even supposedly) the assassination were killed. The villages of Lidice and Ležáky were razed for mere suspicion of having helped the paratroopers. Meanwhile, the paratroopers, along with five soldiers

from the independent Czechoslovak brigade from the UK, hid in the Church of Sts. Cyril and Methodius.

As a result of betrayal by one member of the group, however, SS and Gestapo troops discovered their hideout, surrounded the church, and went on the offensive. After two hours, the attackers occupied the nave of the church, and the remaining four soldiers retreated to the crypt. SS troops threw tear gas grenades through the window from Resslova Street, then tried to break through the crypt with a battering ram and flood it with water. Faced with certain death, the Czechoslovak soldiers, whose ammunition had already run out, took their own lives.

The National Memorial to the Heroes of the Heydrich Terror was established on the site. It comprises the church, the crypt, and an exhibition dedicated to the fate of the paratroopers. The Czech-British-French film *Anthropoid* (2016) was based on the events of the Heydrich Terror.



16 Emauzy Monastery

📍 Vyšehradská 49, Prague 2 – New Town
🚶 Karlovo náměstí 🚊 Moráň 🌐 emauzy.cz



Near Charles Square (see p. 32) two unmistakable slim towers jut into the sky, their graceful geometry contrasting with the horizontal orientation of the surrounding buildings. The modern character of the towers is made more conspicuous by the fact that they are part of a medieval building complex – the Emauzy (Emmaus) Monastery, also known as Na Slovanech. The monastery, founded in the 14th century by Emperor Charles IV, was part of a system of religious buildings that formed the shape of a cross on the plan of the New Town. The monastery is particularly notable for its frescoes from the 1460s depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments.

Prague's architectural mosaic is partially so well preserved due to the fact that it escaped major bombing damage during World War II. But the city was not spared entirely. On February 14, 1945, Prague became the target of a raid by 62 American bombers that dropped 250 bombs over a populated area of the city. The strike, however, was made in error – Dresden was the intended target, but the bombers, which took off from a base in the UK, lost their orientation in dense fog and their navigation system failed. Unfortunately, none of the bombs hit industrial facilities which the Nazis could use. As a result of the carpet bombing, 701 people lost their lives, nearly 1,200 sustained injuries, and 183 houses and historic buildings were destroyed; 11,000 inhabitants of Prague lost their homes.

The Na Slovanech monastery was heavily damaged. Two-thirds of the church's vault collapsed, the building suffered extensive fire damage, and the north tower was destroyed. You can view photos

showing the condition of the monastery after the raid in the cloister. In the years that followed, extensive repairs were made. The main challenge was the completion of the facade, which was to become a landmark of the New Town skyline once again. An innovative project by architect František Maria Černý won the architectural competition. It features two concrete triangle-shaped spires with gilded tips. A closer look reveals a minor detail - one of the towers is slightly smaller and more delicate than the other. This element is has been part of church architecture since the Middle Ages. The more massive tower symbolizes the principle of masculinity, while the slimmer, slightly smaller tower symbolizes femininity. The rebuilding was completed in 1968.



Ceiling fresco detail

Vyšehrad

📍 Vyšehrad 🚆 Výtoň 🌐 praha-vysehrad.cz

On a cliff high above the Vltava River, Vyšehrad (literally “High Castle”), with the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul, majestically soars over the city, a prominent part of Prague’s Right Bank skyline.

Vyšehrad forms an imaginary counterpart to Prague Castle, the dominant of the opposite riverbank. Both places are connected by the fact that at one time they housed royal residences. Vyšehrad is home not only to the basilica, but also to an extensive cemetery featuring Slavín, the shared tomb of the most deserving men and women of the Czech nation, massive brick fortifications including a church embedded in their walls, an intricate system of underground corridors, the Romanesque Rotunda of St. Martin, and many other buildings scattered throughout the park.

Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul

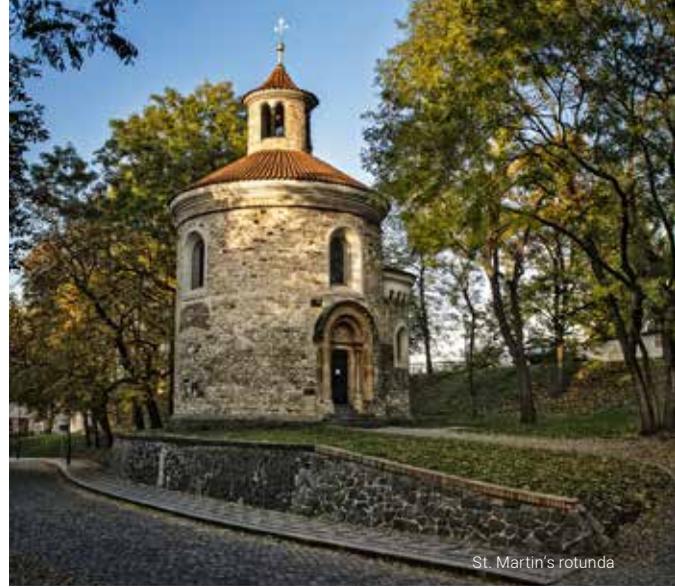


Devil's Column

Vyšehrad is a place shrouded in many legends, one of which is the legend of the Devil's Column. In the Karlach Gardens behind the basilica, a simple black stone column lies broken into three pieces. On the underside of one of the pieces, there is a partially-legible inscription S M M R I E M W, the significance of which is unclear. Legend has it that one of the local priests had made a deal with Hell for personal gain. Eventually, he began to regret his contract with the Devil and begged St. Peter for help. St. Peter showed compassion for the offender and advised him to make a bet with the Devil for his soul – if he could serve Mass before the Devil could bring back one column from the Cathedral of St. Peter in Rome, he would be released. The Devil flew away to Rome. He broke off a column from the first church he saw in Rome and headed back to Prague with it. St. Peter, however, intervened and threw him and the

column into the sea near Venice three times. He delayed the Devil to such an extent that he did not reach Vyšehrad in time, and the soul of the priest was saved. The enraged Devil threw the pillar at the cathedral, where it broke into three pieces and lay for a very long time. It is worth noting that the entire legend is depicted in murals on the walls inside the basilica. Foreign literature about demonology discusses the Devil's Column in Prague. As a point of interest, the Roman church from which the Devil allegedly stole the column was the Basilica di Santa Maria di Trastevere, where one column is still missing today.

Vyšehrad holds more secrets than just the Devil's Column. The shoulder blade of St. Valentine, the patron saint of lovers, is stored in the basilica. There is also the sarcophagus of St. Longinus, the Roman soldier who, according to the Gospel of Christ, pierced Jesus' side with a spear as he hung on the cross. Upright stones, called Vyšehrad menhirs, date back to ancient pagan times. Even today, one of them, on the slope near the Rotunda of St. Martin, is topped with candles and pebbles painted with Celtic symbols on major Celtic holidays.



St. Martin's rotunda



Vyšehrad vineyards with a view of the Vltava

18 Portheimka

📍 Štefánikova 12, Prague 5 – Smíchov
🚶🚗🚲 Anděl 🚶 Arbesovo náměstí
📌 museumportheimka.cz

On the left bank of the Vltava River in Smíchov, entirely off the tourist track, you'll find the Portheimka summer palace just adjacent to the Church of St. Václav. The side of the building facing busy Štefánikova Street appears rather plain but walk just a few feet, and from the other side, the lovely Baroque facade, a small courtyard with a fountain, and a park with mature chestnut trees come into view. The summer palace was built here in the mid-18th century by Prague native and one of the most renowned architects of his time Kilian Ignaz Dientzenhofer, whose name is associated with the Church of St. Nicholas on Old Town Square and the completion of the dome of the Church of St. Nicholas in the Lesser Town.

The summer residence faces the garden. The richly decorated French doors open out on to the balcony, which is adorned on each side with busts depicting allegories of Day and Night. Ideologically, they refer to the antique gods Apollo and Venus and represent the Sun and Moon as well as the masculine and feminine principles. The placement of the busts on the balcony is not random – traditionally, the masculine aspect is attributed to the right side, representing rationality, thinking, and activity, while the left side – the feminine aspect – represents feelings and creativity. Of interest is a small grotto (an artificial cave) built into one of the summer palace's windows facing the park, fitted with artificial stalactites and, originally, with a fountain. It was intended for songbirds to nest in.

Today, the Portheimka summer palace is home to a museum of glass, administered by the Jan and Meda Mládek Foundation.



The building's primary public space is the oval hall with frescoes depicting Bacchanalian festivities by renowned Baroque painter Václav Vavřinec (Wenzel Lorenz) Reiner, whose work adorns many Prague churches. Young Antonín Dvořák even played concerts here.





The cupola of the Church of St. Nicholas in Malá Strana, work of K.J. Dientzenhofer



19 Church of the Archangel Michael at Petřín

📍 Kinsky Gardens, Prague 5 - Smíchov

Latitude 50°4'42,3" N, longitude 14°23'54,3" E

🚗 Švandovo divadlo

While strolling through the Kinsky Gardens, one of the most beautiful parks in Prague, located on the southern slope of Petřín Hill, you may encounter a charming wooden building with a shingled roof with an almost fairytale appearance – there's nothing like it anywhere else in the city. This is the Orthodox Church of the Archangel Michael, a typical example of folk architecture of Ruthenia, today known as Transcarpathian Ukraine, which was part of pre-war Czechoslovakia. The church was built in the second half of the 17th century near Mukachevo. In 1929, it was gifted to the city

of Prague as an example of traditional folk architecture, as well as a diplomatic gesture, as Prague was also the capital city for locals.

After careful selection, Petřín Hill was chosen as the site, so that this wooden jewel would once again stand among hills and trees like its original setting. The timbered building has three distinctive onion-shaped turrets. The central church tower rises above the space reserved in the church for women. The towers are polychromed in three colours, white, green and red, symbolising faith, hope and love. The floor is only beaten earth. Surrounding the entrance is a wooden walkway, which protected the faithful who could not fit inside in the event of bad weather.

Today the church is used by the Orthodox Church. Every Sunday and Monday, liturgies are held in Romanian and Czech. The church is accessible to the public only before services or on special occasions, such as European Heritage Days in September.

20 Hvězda Summer Palace

📍 Hvězda Game Park, Prague 6 – Liboc

🚗 Vypich 📍 pamatniknarodnihopisemnictvi.cz



West of Prague's historical centre, in a forested game park in the Liboc district, is a unique structure built in the shape of a six-pointed star. This Renaissance summer palace, named Hvězda (Star) after its shape, was built in the mid-16th century by royal governor Ferdinand of Tirol, one of the more remarkable personalities in Czech history. Ferdinand was a highly educated man, in particular in art, philosophy, alchemy, and the mystic arts. He had the Star Summer Palace built on the principles of these teachings as a "philosophical abode".

According to its designer, the building was meant to reflect macrocosmic concepts in earthly life. The central arrangement of the building refers to the heliocentric model of the universe (see page 10). The six-pointed star resulted from the combination of two equilateral triangles, symbolising the connection of two opposing forces in mutual harmony. The best-preserved parts of the interior can be found on the ground floor, where the alabaster stucco with antique motifs can still be seen. Individual rooms in the points of the star are dedicated to the primary gods of the Roman pantheon, which also represent the planets and basic alchemical principles, such as Mercury (mercury), the Saturn (lead), and others. The central circular space symbolises the Sun (gold).

The location west of Prague Castle was not chosen at random. It refers to the Evening Star, the first star that appears in the sky after sunset.



The nephew of Ferdinand of Tirol later became Emperor Rudolf II Habsburg, under whose reign Prague experienced an unprecedented cultural boom, especially in the arts and education. Today the building is home to the Museum of Czech Literature. It is open daily except Mondays from April to October.

21 Ball Games Hall in the Royal Gardens

📍 Royal Gardens, Prague Castle, Prague 1 – Prague Castle

🚗 Pražský hrad

👉 hrad.cz/en/prague-castle-for-visitors

The Ball Games Hall is a lovely Renaissance building situated in the Royal Gardens at Prague Castle. Bonifac Wohlmut, a German builder and stonemason who also worked on the construction of the Star Summer Palace (see page 50), built the hall for Emperor Ferdinand I in the mid-16th century. As its name suggests, it was used for playing various period ball games. Its northern wall, facing the Royal Gardens, is richly decorated with figural sgraffito – decorations scratched into wet plaster. The sgraffito above the arches depicts allegories of virtues and the seven liberal arts. The sgraffito also conceals one slightly more surprising scene. In one of the richly decorated arches, there's a symbol depicting the Communist five-year plans, represented by the number 5, a hammer, and a sickle positioned in the middle of a toothed gear. The emblem was added to the facade during the building's reconstruction during the 1950s.



So, did you
find it...?



Ball Games Hall in the Royal Gardens



Bílek studied art in Paris, where he met Alphonse Mucha, one of the world's leading representatives of Art Nouveau. The two artists then enjoyed a lifelong friendship.

22 František Bílek Studio

📍 **Bílková vila (the Bílek villa), Mickiewiczova 1, Prague 6 - Hradčany** 🗺️ **Hradčanská** 🚇 **Chotkovy sady**
👉 en.ghmp.cz/frantisek-bileks-studio

Located just a short walk from Prague Castle is a remarkable monumental building with an exterior dominated by striking, unusual columns: the villa and studio of important Czech sculptor František Bílek (1872-1941). The artist, whose work reflects the spirit of Art Nouveau symbolism, designed the villa himself and infused it with the visual language of ancient symbols based on his personal spiritual beliefs.

According to Bílek, the Prague villa symbolised “life like a field filled with ripe ears that provide daily nourishment for brothers. Many ears bundled in sheaves – columns. Some of the columns left unfinished because they do not support anything.” The segmented floor plan can be compared to the path of a scythe when reaping grain. Also striking are the pillars resembling ancient Egyptian temple architecture. The red brick and rough-hewn stone represent nature and manual labour. The irregularly divided interior is dominated by a high-ceilinged studio that functions as the natural work and spiritual centre of the building.

Upon entering the studio, a three-meter high statue titled „Wonder” from 1907 captures your attention. This statue, Bílek’s largest wooden sculpture, depicts a man gazing towards the heavens, his arms embracing his own head in wonder at the beauty and infinite expanse of the universe. He is experiencing a mystical ecstasy, having seen and beheld all life in the “true light”. True knowledge is achievable within a human lifetime, and the sense of amazement that accompanies it is, according to Bílek, one of the central themes of human existence. This theme pervades his other works as well (sculpture, graphic works, and literary works), such as the limewood carving from the 1920s entitled “I Know”, in which a young boy grabs a star, symbolising the possibility of achieving the highest knowledge (for comparison, see the chapter on the Hvěзда (Star) Summer Palace, p. 50).

The upper floor of the Bílek villa is devoted to his drawings and graphic works. Bílek’s works in the style of Art Nouveau Symbolism are to this day a source of lively debate due to the influence of philosophical and spiritual teachings reflected in them.

Bílek’s works can be viewed in the St. Wenceslas Church at Zderaz, near Charles Square: a statue of the Crucifixion, an altar, and other objects. 📍 **Resslova 6, Prague 2 - New Town**

23 Time Machine – Metronome

📍 Letná Park, Prague 7 – Letná

🚶 Čechův most 🚶 Chotkovy sady

This kinetic sculptural object by Czech sculptor Vratislav Karel Novák stands on the site of the former Stalin monument at Letná. At the time, the monument was the largest sculptural group in Europe and was erected to honour Soviet leader J. V. Stalin in the mid-1950s, the darkest period of the Communist era in Czechoslovakia. Its construction was preceded by a competition which all known architects and sculptors were required to enter. Sculptor Otakar Švec submitted his design for a statue of Stalin surrounded by a figural group, hoping that its complexity would eliminate it from the competition. To his dismay, however, his design won. In Švec's rendition, at Stalin's left stand representatives of the Soviet people, and to his right, the people of Czechoslovakia. Praguers nicknamed the monument "the queue for meat": the first in line in front of Stalin seemed to be pulling his wallet out of his coat, while a crowd stood waiting behind him.

Otakar Švec did not live to see his monument ceremonially unveiled in 1955 – he committed suicide a month earlier. Stalin, too, was long dead by that time. The new Soviet leader Khrushchev repudiated

his predecessor – it was therefore necessary to address the question quickly of how to dispose of Stalin. Finally, it was decided to demolish the sculpture. The demolition was carried out in 1962; the event was heavily guarded, and photography was forbidden. Two stonemasons were needed to break the head of the Soviet leader into pieces and remove them with a lift. The monument was dismantled, some of the blocks were transferred to the Karlin docks, and the rubble was shovelled into the underground space.

The metronome, officially titled Time Machine, is one of the modern symbols of the city. It symbolises the unstoppable passage of time, its location serves as a warning not to repeat the tragedies of the past, it commemorates the fall of idols, and in its own way, it is the modern counterpart of the Old Town astronomical clock.

The platform at the southern edge of Letná Park on which the metronome now stands is a favourite destination for Prague visitors, who come here primarily for the stunning view of the city's historical centre and the Vltava River and its bridges. The spot is also a favourite of skateboarders, who practice their tricks on the smooth surface. Every summer, the space under the metronome transforms into the home of the seasonal cultural centre Containall Stalin.



24 Rudolf's Water Tunnel

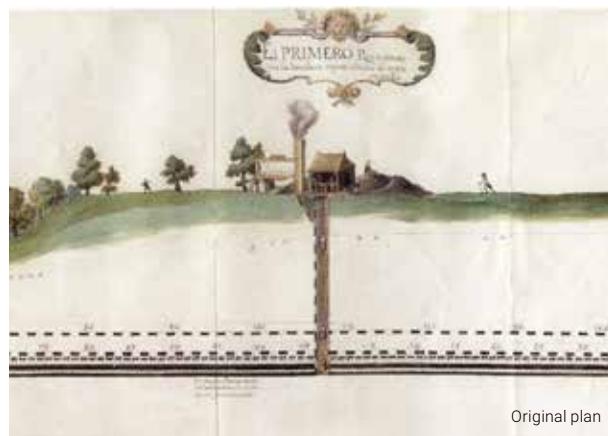
📍 Royal Game Park (Stromovka) near the Mecsery Road,
Prague 7 – Bubeneč 🚶‍♀️ Výstaviště Holešovice



Opening of the water tunnel in Stromovka Park © Roman Plesky / Shutterstock

When strolling through Prague's largest park, an observant visitor might notice the unassuming barred stone entrance leading into the bowels of Letná Hill. Upon closer inspection, one can see that the top of the entrance archway is inscribed with the letter "R" with a royal crown. This is the opening to an over-400-year-old tunnel that fed water from the Vltava under Old Town to the lakes in the Royal Game Preserve using only gravity. The tunnel, over 1 km long, was dug at a depth of up to 45 metres through the entire Letná massif. Its construction was ordered built by Emperor Rudolf II (1552-1612), one of the most original figures in all of Czech history (see page 10).

Today the tunnel is considered a remarkable feat of engineering. Its construction lasted for ten years, and its internal height ranges from 2 to 4 meters. The tunnel served its function for over two centuries and is maintained today, although it usually is inaccessible. On special occasions, the National Technical Museum 📄 ntm.cz displays the original plans for the entire project, drawn on a 2.5-metre-long parchment scroll (below).



Original plan



Original plan



- 1 Charles Bridge
- 2 St. John of Nepomuk
- 3 Old Town Bridge Tower
- 4 Prague Astronomers – Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler
- 5 The Execution of 27 Czech Nobles
- 6 Hebrew Clock on the Jewish Town Hall
- 7 Convent of St. Agnes
- 8 House at the Black Madonna
- 9 National Memorial on Vítkov Hill
- 10 Nicholas Winton
- 11 Jan Palach
- 12 Nuclear Fallout Shelter at the Jalta Hotel
- 13 Statue of St. Wenceslas in the Lucerna Shopping Arcade
- 14 Charles Square and the New Town Hall
- 15 Crypt of the Church of Sts. Cyril and Methodius
- 16 Emauz Monastery
- 17 Vyšehrad
- 18 Portheimka
- 19 Church of the Archangel Michael at Petřín
- 20 Hvězda Summer Palace
- 21 Ball Games Hall in the Royal Gardens
- 22 František Bílek Studio
- 23 Time Machine – Metronome
- 24 Rudolf's Water Tunnel



Convent of St. Agnes



House at the Black Madonna



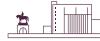
The Bielek villa



Emauzy Monastery



Charles Bridge



National Memorial on Vítkov



National Museum



Church of St. Michael



Statue of St. Wenceslas



St. Nicholas Church



Hvězda Summer Palace



Metronome



Prague Castle



Old-New Synagogue



Vyšehrad



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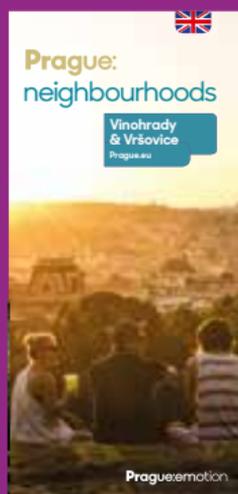
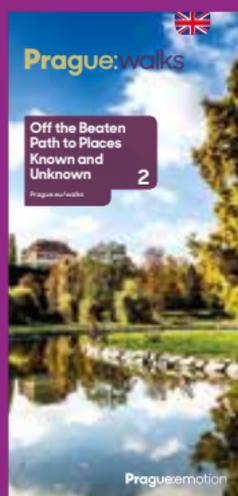
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