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The secret of golden poppyhead turrets and a dozen more Prague stories

Why is Prague ‘golden’? Did medieval builders use eggs? What secrets and signs are Prague houses, façades and streets hiding? Let’s take a stroll through the city and reveal tales of thirteen interesting places you might otherwise pass by. Have fun in Prague!
1. Why Prague is ‘golden’

Prague is over eleven hundred years old. The city has been through a lot: wars and revolutions, periods of prosperity and flourishing. Prague was a city shaped not only by Czechs, but also Germans, Jews, Italians and many other nationalities; Prague attracted ordinary folk, and exceptional people too – thinkers, scientists, artists and adventurers. They have given Prague various poetic as well as less flattering epithets: the ‘mother of cities’ or simply ‘mother Prague’ (as when the famous Prague writer Franz Kafka wrote that ‘this mother has claws’), the ‘heart of Europe’, an ‘architecture textbook’, and ‘city of a hundred spires’. The most enduring nickname, however, one that has been in use for centuries, is surely ‘golden Prague’.

The city may have gained this moniker thanks to the towers of Prague Castle, gilded in medieval times by Emperor Charles IV. Another theory suggests the name refers to the alchemists, active at the court of Emperor Rudolf II in the 16th century, trying to turn base metals into gold. We will most likely never find out the truth for sure, because Prague abounds with legends and mysteries, and some will remain hidden forever. But one thing is certain, you will find gold here, easily enough. It decorates the interiors of churches and palaces, but is also found on the towers that are so inseparably part of Prague. Their spires are often topped off with poppyheads, round hollow ornaments often gilded with real gold, wherein various period documents or coins were deposited as time capsules for future generations, to top-off completed construction. Occasionally, when the spires undergo repairs, they give up their secrets, revealing the history of the building, or the city.
2. The House At the Moon and the Sun

When you walk through historical Prague, you’ll often find houses with façades featuring an emblem, sign or symbol. These house signs were used for better orientation, in the days before house numbers. Each sign tended to refer to the owner of the house, their name or profession. There are a total of 264 such houses in Prague today.

Many of the houses with preserved household signs line the former Royal Route, which leads from the Municipal House to Prague Castle; it gets its name as the route taken by the coronation processions of Czech Kings, in the olden days. The Royal Route also included Úvoz Street, which rises up from today’s Nerudova Street to the Strahov Monastery. Roughly halfway along it is a beautiful house called “U Luny” [At the Moon] or “U Kamenného sloupu” [At the Stone Pillar], with distinctive red plasterwork. It is unique for having two, or even three signs on its façade that it gets its names from.

The first one, U Luny, is a reference to the name of painter and architect Kristián Luna, who lived here at the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries and rebuilt the house into its current form. The corner of the house is decorated with a bust of Luna (which means the Moon) and is complemented by the Sun – ‘Sol’ on the other side. Note that Luna is depicted as a woman, while the Sun takes the form of a man.

Our ancestors believed that these two celestial bodies were the personification of two opposing principles, female and male, which complement each other in perfect harmony.
Kristián Luna also placed a diminutive version of another Prague edifice on the facade – the Marian Column, which stood in Old Town Square until 1918. Among other things, it served as a sundial, the length and direction of its shadow giving the time. The column was destroyed in 1918, but its small replica has remained on the facade of the red house to this day, giving the house its other epithet – At the Stone Pillar.

3. Who lives in the Wallenstein Garden

Malá Strana, the Lesser Town, would be lesser still without its beautiful gardens, typically belonging to the palaces and imposing stately homes of local aristocratic families. The Wallenstein Garden was built at the same time as the palace of the same name, the largest in Prague in its time. These days it houses the Senate of the Czech Republic. Wallenstein Garden is the second largest after the Royal Garden at Prague Castle and one of the most beautiful historical gardens in Prague.

Perhaps the most fascinating feature is the impressive artificial stalactite wall, called the Grotta. It is located in a section once known as the ‘Secret Garden’. The stalactites are made of stucco, fly-ash mixed into the delicate mortar to give a grey-black tint. This makes the Grotta seem rather mysterious and also somewhat gloomy. On closer inspection you’ll find various silhouettes, heads of animals and mysterious faces.
hidden among the stalactites on the wall. In addition to artificial caves, meant to inspire reflective meditation, the Grotta also features a historical aviary, with eagle owls, the largest Czech owl species. The imposing owls, in conjunction with the Grotta, are meant to symbolize the garden’s links to the natural realm.

In addition to eagle owls you can also see other animals and birds in the garden. The pond, with an island in the middle, is home to several species of fish – catfish, pike, golden orfe and ornamental Japanese koi carp. As for feathered friends, there are moorhens and mallard ducks to be seen, although the garden is not their home - they come and go as they please. The real pride of the garden, however, are peacocks, including white ones.
You could easily miss this nameless alley in the Lesser Town, if it were not for the throngs of tourists drawn to it every day. It is the only street in Prague whose traffic flow has to be governed by a pedestrian traffic light. Being only about half a metre wide, only one person at a time can pass along it. Today it serves as a passageway to the courtyard of a restaurant above the Čertovka canal; if you want to go this way, do wait for the green light, or risk colliding with oncoming pedestrians.

The alleyway was built more than 400 years ago, as one of many just like it, intended as a fire-break to slow the spread of fires that ravaged the city from time to time, back then. It is the last one of its kind in Prague today. It also served for access to the river, where the locals drew water.
5. A legendary knight, as a street sign

Charles Bridge, Kampa, Prague 1 – Lesser Town
Malostranské náměstí

On one of the pillars of Charles Bridge, on the bank of Kampa island, stands a majestic statue of a knight with a golden sword in his hand. This is the legendary Bruncvík, who allegedly also brought the lion to the Bohemian Kingdom’s coat of arms. The legend tells how Bruncvík, on his travels, rescued the lion from the dragon, but also that he acquired a miraculous sword that cut off the heads of enemies all by itself. This sword, however, became inexplicably lost. Legend has it that it was either walled up into the pillar of Charles Bridge or thrown into the river. It will re-emerge when Bohemia faces the worst. Also coming to the rescue will be the Blaník Knights, emerging from within Blaník Mountain, led by Saint Wenceslas, the patron of the Czech Lands.

Note that Bruncvík stands somewhat apart from the other statues on Charles Bridge. This is because he had an important function, as evidenced by the shield with the emblem of the Old Town held in his left hand. The shield is turned toward the Lesser Town. Much like today’s street signs indicating urban boundaries, Bruncvík is informing pedestrians that they are now leaving the Lesser Town and entering the Old Town. Bruncvík is thus a kind of milestone between these two historic quarters, which used to have their own town halls. Similar statues once stood on the bridges and town halls of many other European cities, symbolizing their town status and rights.
Charles Bridge is the second oldest preserved stone bridge in the Czech Republic and one of the symbols of Prague. It was built in the 14th century at the behest of Emperor Charles IV, whose name it bears today. It replaced the older Judith Bridge, destroyed by floodwaters. The bridge comes with numerous interesting facts, as well as legends.

For centuries, for example, it was believed that its builders had added raw eggs to the mortar to make the bridge strong in order to resist the fate of its predecessor. Note that such practices were indeed common in the Middle Ages! The most famous legend relates how by the king’s command eggs were summoned up from all corners of the country, because Prague’s chickens alone were not up to such a great task. Eggs were also sent by the town of Velvary in South Bohemia. To save them from breaking en route, they were hard-boiled first, earning the ridicule of the whole city of Prague – boiled eggs were no use for mixing into mortar. The cheerful tale of the Velvary eggs is recounted to this day, even in Velvary itself. Never mind the fact that during the recent renovations of Charles Bridge scientists ruled out there being any eggs in the mortar.

Also of interest is the date and time when the foundation stone for the bridge was laid. It was chosen by Emperor Charles IV, who was well-versed in astrology and numerology. To make sure the bridge would last forever, he set the founding day and hour to be 9 July 1357, at 5 hours and 31 minutes. Note that when you arrange the date and time as a numerical sequence, you get a pyramid of odd numbers with a nine on top, the so-called palindrome. This
means the number sequence reads the same forwards and backwards: 1-3-5-7-9-7-5-3-1.
Nevertheless, experts dispute this date. Many of them argue that the cornerstone was laid
a month earlier, i.e. on 9 June 1357, on the feast of the land’s patron, St. Vitus, whose statue
stands on the facade of the Old Town Bridge tower.

Although known today as Charles Bridge, the bridge was named after its founder only at the
end of the 19th century. Prior to that it was known as the Stone or Prague bridge.
7. Kingfishers on the Old Town Bridge Tower

- Křižovnické náměstí / Charles Bridge, Prague 1 – Old Town
- Staroměstská Čarlov lázně

One of the most beautiful towers in Prague is the Old Town Bridge Tower. Much like its older counterpart, the Lesser Town Tower on the opposite end of Charles Bridge, this tower was part of the city’s medieval fortifications. It was also a kind of triumphal arch, through which coronation processions passed. This role is borne out by its exceptional decoration.

You will find a number of symbols adorning the tower, most frequently repeated – six times – the motif of a kingfisher garlanded with a “věník”. The “věník” is a coil of twisted towel or ribbon. The son of Charles IV, King Wenceslas IV, chose the kingfisher and towel as his personal symbol. But why?

One explanation comes from the tale about King Wenceslas and the beautiful bath-house wench Zuzana. Wenceslas got into a dispute with the Bohemian nobles; they captured him and held him prisoner. His detention was clearly none too cruel, however, for the captive King regularly attended a bath-house next to Charles Bridge, accompanied by guards. The medieval baths offered similar services to today’s wellness centres; in addition to offering baths and regular hygiene its staff also acted as physiotherapists and physicians. During one of the visits, the king asked Zuzana to help him escape. She made a rope of tied towels, down which she and the king climbed into a boat, and made their escape along the river.
king then duly rewarded Zuzana and, as a reminder of the event, chose the kingfisher and towel for his emblem.

The symbol of the kingfisher had several meanings, however. In addition to symbolizing faithful love, it also represented the human soul and rebirth. It was also believed to be able to protect a building against lightning, also to multiply hidden treasures and calm storms.

In addition to the sculpted or painted kingfishers, you can also find their living examples in Prague. Kingfishers have recently been recorded on some of the streams in Prague and environs, for example in the districts of Troja or Radotín. The Vltava is their major overwintering base. In winter, kingfishers tend to gather around bigger rivers that do not freeze over, so they can keep fishing.
8. The mysterious Bradáč – bearded man

On the waterfront wall at the Old Town Bridge Tower you will find a special monument to the former Judith Bridge that stood here before Charles Bridge, until it was destroyed by floodwaters. It is a male bearded head carved in stone, called Bradáč, originally part of the first arch of Judith’s Bridge. Although the pillar has survived to this day, it can only be seen from the boat jetty under Charles Bridge, whereas Bradáč has been relocated to the embankment wall, and so is visible from Charles Bridge.

Bradáč had an interesting role, for centuries. He served Prague citizenry as a water level marker forewarning of rising flood. When the level of the Vltava rose to reach his beard, this signalled high time to start evacuating anyone living near the river. Once the water reached his mouth, the river was already pouring into the adjoining streets. If the whole head was underwater, people would be using boats to cross Old Town Square. (We need to remind ourselves that many streets and squares of medieval Prague were far lower than they are today.) Bradáč was used to mark the water level until 1714, when the flood levels began to be recorded in ells (1/3 fathoms) above normal river levels. We will probably never know who that mysterious Bradáč was modelled after. But there are several theories. One claim is that he was one of the Grand Masters of the Order of the Knights of the Cross, or even a depiction of Jesus Christ. Another theory is that this was a portrait of the Italian builder of the ancient Judith’s Bridge, whose name is lost to history, or, more likely, of the later builder Peter Parler, who built Charles Bridge.
9. Prague limnigraphs

- Rašínovo nábřeží, Prague 2 – New Town
- Výtoň
- Dvořákovo nábřeží, Prague 1 – Old Town
- Dlouhá – Nemocnice Na Františku

The limnigraph, or water level meter, is a modern version of the medieval Bradáč. Like Bradáč, limnigraphs have been serving for over a hundred years to measure water in the Vltava River and warn Praguers against the threat of floods. In Prague you can find two historical limnigraphs, one in Výtoň near Vyšehrad, the other in the Old Town at the St Agnes Convent. These near-identical buildings are in the Art Nouveau style, and at first glance look like domed garden gazebos. On closer inspection you will note two different dials. The smaller, a classic clock face, shows the time. The larger, with numbers from zero to five, shows the current status of water in the Vltava. The hand on the dial is connected to a cork float on the surface of the river. When the float rises, the hand turns to the right. When the level falls and the float drops, the hand turns in the opposite direction. The limnigraph at Výtoň also includes a weather station. There are instruments for measuring pressure, humidity and temperature. The dog-head weathervane on top of the copper dome of the Výtoň limnigraph shows which way the wind is blowing.
10. The Black Knight in Platnéřská Street

Mariánské náměstí 2/2, Prague 1 – Old Town
Staroměstská

On the corner of Platnéřská Street and Mariánské náměstí Square, in a wall recess of the New Prague Town Hall, stands a statue of a dark knight, which today’s visitor could easily mistake for Darth Vader from Star Wars. This black knight is, however, connected to an old Prague legend, quite unrelated to the cosmic saga.

Platnéřská Street was named after platters, medieval blacksmiths who made iron plates for suits of armour. In the Middle Ages, they had their workshops here and in the surrounding streets. Legend has it that once upon a time, a certain knight, in black armour, fell in love with the daughter of one of the platters. Yet, the girl did not want the knight – and he, in a rage out of jealousy about her other suitors, ran her through with his blade. The dying girl cursed him, and the knight turned to stone. The petrified knight was then put on show in the street, so his gruesome act would not be forgotten. His ghost, however, returns every hundred years, on the day and hour of the girl’s death, to seek salvation. Apparently, only an innocent girl willing to forgive his sin can deliver him.

This is indeed the place where the House at the Iron Man used to stand, complete with a statue of a black knight. You can see the original in the Prague City Museum at Florenc. The original Platnéřská Street and the house are long gone, and all we have left to remind us of
the local legend is the Darth Vader lookalike on the Town Hall building.

One of the most famous Prague legends is that of the golem. In Jewish lore, a golem is a man-made, animated being, that has no will of its own and fulfils its master’s orders to the letter. A golem can take different forms. The Prague one, probably the most famous around the world, had the form of a man, and was created by Rabbi Yehuda Löw Ben Becalel, known as the Prague Maharal. Rabbi Löw was one of the leading Jewish scholars of his time. At the turn of 16th and 17th century he lived in Prague, where he also died. He was buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery, where you can still see his tomb.

The Prague Golem was named Josille, a diminutive form of Josef. His main task was to protect the Jewish ghetto from the attacks of Christians, but the Rabbi also used him as a domestic and temple servant. He brought him to life with the so-called Shem HaMephorash, laid in the Golem’s mouth. The Shem was no particular object, but the name of God correctly written onto a scroll of parchment or paper, or a ball. In accordance with the Jewish tradition, the Rabbi would take the Shem from Golem every Friday evening, so he too would rest on the Sabbath.

Once on the Sabbath, however, the Rabbi forgot to remove the Shem and went off to worship in the synagogue. Meanwhile the Golem, having no tasks to do, built up tremendous energy,
and began to destroy everything. His fury was only stopped when the Rabbi removed the Shem. According to one version of the legend, the Golem then crumbled into dust, because he had flouted the Jewish holy day, when no activity was allowed. According to another version, after this experience the Rabbi himself decided not to re-animate the Golem and put him away in the loft of the Old Synagogue, which remained off-limits thereafter.

In the 20th century two separate surveys were undertaken, but neither found any trace of the Golem or anything that implied his existence.
Directly on the boundary of the Old and New Town is one of the oldest churches in Prague, with a peculiar name, the Church of St Martin-in-the-wall. The church owes its name to its position. It was originally founded in the settlement of Újezd, which used to stand here. When the city walls were built in the 13th century, the settlement was split into two parts; the smaller part, together with the church, joined the Old Town. The church was close to the newly built city wall and was indeed a part of it. Right next to it was one of the gates to the city, named after it as St Martin’s Gate.

Today a narrow street runs between the church and the neighbouring Platýz palace, connecting Martinská Street and Národní třída boulevard. It is here that a stone boy looks down from a church pillar. He seems to be a gargoyle, similar to the ones you can see on medieval cathedrals; to take rainwater from the roof and deflect it away from the walls of the building.

The bizarre sculpture comes with a legend, in several versions. According to one, he is a petrified pigeon-egg thief, who had mocked a passer-by and was cursed by him in return. According to another version, he was a roofer’s helper, making fun of a priest from the rooftop, just as the priest was about to give the last rites to a dying man. The third version tells of a desperate mother who cursed her unruly son for scrabbling around on the church roof. All versions agree on the outcome – the boy was turned to stone, and to this day keeps leaning over the edge of the roof, leering at passers-by. The Middle Ages were no time for mockery!
At Platýz palace near St Martin-in-the-wall you will find another Prague curiosity – the oldest traffic sign in Prague. It is located next to the entrance to the palace courtyard, from Národní třída Street. You might mistake it for a house sign or a part of the façade decor. It is a very unassuming statuette of an owl on a perch, and was probably put there over 200 years ago.

Back in the day, the palace had stables and room for covered wagons (today we would say parking spaces). The waggoners did much the same job as freight forwarders do today – taking heavy or bulky cargo and goods around with their wagons. The owl was a sort of precursor to today’s traffic-light, to let the waggoners know whether there was room in the stables. If it was upright, with its head up, the wagons could drive on in. If the owl was up-ended, hanging from its perch, it meant that Platýz was not accepting any more incoming traffic, that the stables were full.

In those two hundred years of guarding the entrance, the owl has witnessed the demise of horse-drawn carriages, replaced by cars and trams. In recent years, it has no doubt been watching the ascent of electric and mechanical bicycles and scooters, skateboards, hoverboards and various other go-faster gadgets. The pace of a walk along Prague’s paved streets has stayed much the same for centuries – and indeed it’s only pedestrians who have the time to notice the little owl.