



Connoisseur's Prague

Art, architecture & design, with privileged access

2–8 September 2024 (MK 411)

7 days • £3,570

Lecturer: Zoë Opačić

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

The itinerary features special arrangements, private visits and curator-led museum tours.

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

Commentary from both our expert lecturer and an excellent local guide.

Option to attend an opera or concert.

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 are rarely seen by the average visitor. Other fine places are open to visitors but hard to get to.

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.

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.

A 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 painting and sculpture from this era, now excellently displayed in the Convent of St Agnes, are among the chief glories of Charles IV's commission.

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



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

buildings in Central Europe arose here. In the eighteenth century, some of the richest landowners of the Baroque age built palaces here.

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.

In the city where Mozart premiered two of his operas and where Smetana and Dvořák lived and worked, there is still a rich musical life in a range of beautiful historic opera houses and concert halls. We coincide with the The Dvořák Prague International Music Festival and there will be the opportunity to attend performances.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly from London Heathrow to Prague at c. 10.15am (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. Drive up to Prague Castle to visit to this extensive hilltop citadel, residence of Dukes and Kings of Bohemia from the 10th century and now of the President. Begin with the Royal Gardens where we view the delicately arcaded Belvedere, the finest Renaissance building in Prague. The Old Royal Palace rises from Romanesque through Gothic to Renaissance and its Vladislav stone hall has extraordinary vaulting. Visit the cathedral of St Vitus, a pioneering monument of High Gothic, richly embellished with chapels, tombs, altarpieces and stained glass. We also gain privileged access to a wonderful sequence of halls not open to the public, dating from the 1570s to the 1930s (state occasions permitting).

Day 3. Begin with a walk to the 14th-century Charles Bridge, the greatest such structure in Europe, wonderfully adorned with sculptures, before 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 beautiful, shimmering façades – medieval, Renaissance, Baroque and Art Nouveau. Visit the Church of St. James, a Gothic shell 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

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continued

one of the world's greatest collections of medieval painting is brilliantly installed.

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, a town hall and cemetery. Cross the Vltava river to the Lesser Town walk through the gardens of the Wallenstein Palace (a 1630s residence, now the Senate) and visit St Nicholas, one of the finest of Baroque churches in Central Europe.

Day 5. Morning visit to the fortress of Vyšehrad, rising high above the river and enclosing a cemetery with the graves of many great Czechs. Continue to the Emmaus monastery whose cloister features a 14th-century cycle of wall paintings. The Schwarzenberg Palace, where we are guided by a curator, has a fine collection of Old Masters. A riverside country retreat, Villa Troja is a 17th-century Italianate mansion with a French formal garden.

Day 6. A treasure south of the centre is St John Nepomuk 'on the Rock', a rarely accessible, little Baroque masterpiece. The Neo-Renaissance National Museum was designed in the 1880s by Josef Schulz as an architectural symbol of the Czech Republic. Then 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. In the afternoon there is a curator-led visit of the Veletržní (Trade Fair) Palace of 1928, which houses national and international modern and contemporary art.

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. 4.15pm.

Lecturer

Zoë Opačić Senior Lecturer in the History and Theory of Architecture at Birkbeck College, specialising in medieval art, architecture and urbanism. She received her BA, MA and PhD at the Courtauld Institute of Art. A Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, she edited the *Journal of British Archaeological Association* (2015–18).

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,570 or £3,360 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,960 or £3,750 without flights.

Included: air travel (economy class) on scheduled British Airways flights (aircraft: Airbus 319); private coach for airport transfers and excursions; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 2 dinners and 3 lunches 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 will be available in the spring of 2024.

Accommodation. Hotel Maximilian, Prague (maximilianhotel.com) A small, recently renovated 4-star hotel with a restaurant in a quiet yet central location near St Agnes convent. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use.*

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

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.

Combine this tour with *The Etruscans*, 9–14 September 2024, *Civilisations of Sicily*, 9–21 September 2024 or *Albania, Crossroads of Antiquity*, 11–20 September 2024.