

Czechia survival guide

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Dedicated to the memory of Xin Ying Lim for whom this guide was originally written

1 History

Czechia (a.k.a. the Czech Republic) is a small landlocked country in central Europe. Originally, the Duchy of Bohemia emerged at around 870 AD and in 1198 was promoted to the Kingdom of Bohemia. Since 1394 the Kingdom of Bohemia, Margraviate of Moravia and Duchies of Silesia became known as the Lands of the Bohemian Crown, which was *de facto* a single state roughly corresponding to today's borders of Czechia. In 1526 it became a part of the Austrian empire and was ruled by the Austrian royal family of Habsburgs until 1918. After the dissolution of the Austrian empire following the First World War, a new country of Czechoslovakia was founded, which was a modern parliamentary democracy inspired by the western countries (France, the UK, the USA). In 1938, Czechoslovakia was occupied by Nazi Germany and after the Second World War, in 1945, it (unfortunately) fell under the influence of the Soviet Union. This inevitably led to the rise of communism, which overthrew the democratic regime in 1948. Czechoslovakia did retain some of its sovereignty after the rise of communism (it did not become a part of the Soviet Union) and remained as one of the most developed countries in the Eastern block. By 1968 the communist regime in the country was somewhat liberalised, allowing more freedom of speech and travel. This was reverted by a Soviet military invasion and replacement of the high officials. (Invading your ally was not a great move from the Soviet side.) In 1989 the communist regime fell and democracy and market economy were reinstated. In 1993 Czechoslovakia peacefully split into Czechia and Slovakia. (Still a bit controversial, since it was decided only by the political representatives and not in a referendum. However, no one would be foolish enough to want to reunite.) Today, Czechia is a part of NATO as well as the European Union and the Schengen area (no borders), but not the Eurozone, because it has its own currency.

2 Basics

Czechia is a developed country offering a high living standard to its residents. In some ways, it even surpasses the western countries (e.g. in healthcare availability and quality, unemployment rates, poverty rates, parental leaves). Violent criminality is very low (e.g. much lower than in the UK), but theft is unfortunately quite common, so do not leave your bags unattended and when in crowds of tourists, watch your pockets. It is safe to walk around towns and cities till late evening.

The emergency numbers are:

112 — Integrated police, ambulance, fire fighters (works everywhere in the EU and many other countries)

150 — Fire fighters

155 — Ambulance

158 — Police

Otherwise, Czech telephone numbers always have 9 digits and have to be preceded by +420 (or equivalently 00420) if calling internationally or from a foreign number. Because we're in the EU, you can use your British phone just like in Britain (e.g. for mobile internet). However, calling a Czech number anywhere in the EU will cost you the same as calling a Czech number from the UK, so check how much that is for your service provider.

Cold tap water is of drinking standard and published studies keep showing that its quality tends to be better than that of bottled water. Unless you dislike the actual taste of the tap water in your area, I highly recommend it over bottled water (since you're probably not getting an active charcoal filter that would remove any tastes from the water). Hot tap water is of usage standard, which still means that it would be safe to drink from the microbiological point of view, but its composition may not be suitable for long term drinking. Also if the water is heated locally in a boiler, hot water quality would depend on the

quality of the boiler. I would not recommend drinking hot tap water (it also tastes worse).

We drive on the right side of the road and use power sockets of type E/F (or C when not grounded) i.e. the standard European socket. Note that this is different to the UK two-pin bathroom socket, where the two pins are closer.

3 Language

The official language, with almost 100% prevalency, is Czech. It uses an extended Latin alphabet and is completely phonetic. There is probably little point in trying to learn it for tourism purposes, since it is a very complicated language, but learning how to read it may be worthwhile for navigation and communication with locals. Every letter is a separate sound (except for “ch”) and then you just have to read the word by syllables. Each syllable has one vowel (a,e,i/y,o,u), double vowel (au, ou, eu) or vowel-forming consonant (L or R). The stress is always on the first syllable. Three things are particularly wrong, if you try to read the words just like in English:

- J is pronounced like Y in the word “yoghurt”
- Y and I=i are both pronounced like Y in the word “duty” or I in the word “mint”.
- CH together are pronounced like CH in “Loch Ness” (If that sound is difficult, go for ch like in “architect”, but never say ch like in “chair”)

For more detailed discussion of how to read each letter see [Wikiversity](#).

Young Czechs (below 30 years) will likely be able to reasonably speak English. With older people be careful and patient. :-) Tourist places should be all right.

4 Money matters

The currency is Koruna česká (Kč), which literally translates to Czech crown (peculiar, given that we are not a monarchy, isn't it?). On 1 Kč coins you still have the symbol of a crown. In pretty much all shops you can pay with MasterCard and Visa, but card terminals are not as prevalent as, let's say, in the USA. Therefore, don't be surprised if an ice-cream stand does not accept card payments. If you know the Revolut service, it offers Kč and will give you the best exchange rate (it's a multi-currency payment card). If you want cash, you can either withdraw it from a cash machine or use a currency exchange office. If you want to use cash-machines, use those belonging to normal Czech banks¹ rather than those belonging to specialised companies. Some companies target tourists specifically and their ATMs charge large fees (definitely avoid Euronet cash machines). In terms of exchange offices, most are reasonable, but some, again, target tourists and give unreasonable exchange rates. To counter this, a law has recently been passed, that within 3 hours of the exchange, you can request to go back on the transaction. They may try not to give you a receipt in the first place (always request it) or to evade giving you your money back, but if you tell them that you're calling the police otherwise, they will probably follow. This is an extreme example, but simply be smart about where you change your money and check the exchange rate against the internet. One definitely good exchange office is www.exchange.cz, which is quite central and reputable. You can also check exchange rates of other offices against it.²

¹Moneta, Komerční Banka, ČSOB, AirBank, EquaBank, Reiffeisen bank, Poštovní spořitelna, Fio banka, ING, Era

²The Honest Guide YouTube channel has a videos on exchange offices trying to trap tourists.

5 Orientation

Whenever I travel anywhere, I like to have offline maps in my phone. There is a great map app called Mapy.cz, which has the best tourist maps (for many countries in the world, not just Czechia). The maps are offline, but you cannot find routes, when offline. If you want offline route finding, then Maps.me is a good app.

6 Public transport

The whole of Czechia has a dense net of public transport and large cities have very good city public transport. For intercity public transport www.idos.cz is a website that looks up connections of all buses and trains, as well as city transports for most cities. (It even includes international connections.) It has an app Czech Public Transport IDOS.

6.1 Trains

Most train connections are provided by the Czech Railways (České dráhy) and tickets to those are simply bought at the stations or in the train (for unmanned stations). There are also private providers, mainly between large cities, like RegioJet or Leo Express, where you have to buy tickets online or at their offices.

6.2 Intercity buses/Coaches

Most are state/region/city provided, where you buy tickets at the bus. For these, just find the connection on IDOS and go to the station. However, there are also RegioJet and Flixbus coaches, where you have to buy it online, at their offices or, if they have space, at the bus. In general RegioJet, coaches and trains, are very good (services, punctuality).

6.3 City transport

We shall concern ourselves only with Prague. For Prague public transport, there is a specialised website www.dpp.cz/en with DPP Prague Public Transport app. There you can easily find the current connections including any temporary changes. The transport system is integrated, which means that metro, buses, trams, the cable car to Petřín outlook tower and some ferries, all use the same kind of ticket. The tickets are time based: 30 minutes (24 Kč), 90 minutes (32 Kč), 1 day (110 Kč), 3 days (310 Kč). You can buy paper tickets at machines or newspaper shops, which you have to have stamped with time/date the first time you enter any vehicle/metro station (look for yellow boxes with a slit and slide your ticket in. The tickets have arrows showing which way to put them in). Then you use public transport freely until the time runs out. There are random ticket checks by Prague transport staff, but it is quite likely you will not get checked at all (by which I do not encourage you to travel without a ticket). Alternatively, you can get 30 or 90 min tickets by sending an SMS (phone text message), but I am not sure that it works for foreign phone numbers. Last but not least, you can buy tickets in a phone app PID Lítačka, but you need mobile internet at the time of the activation. Paper tickets are probably the easiest option for tourists. Most machines accept coins, but some (like at the airport) accept cards as well.

7 Food and drinks

Must try items in **bold**. Vegetarian dishes in (v) and dishes that have both vegetarian and meat containing variants (v?).

7.1 Drinks

- **Czech beer** — Most traditionally Pilsner beer, Pilsner Urquell = THE Pilsner beer (there are other brands brewed in Pilsen) Many other Czech beers are also nice.
- **Kofola** — Czech alternative to Coke/ Coca Cola, available in many restaurants on a tap as well as bottled in shops
- Vinea — A grape lemonade
- Malinovka — The most standard lemonade in restaurants, typically served from the tap
- Korunní/Mattoni — Mineral waters. Czechs love flavoured mineral waters, so apart from plain are also available in many flavours
- Becherovka — Traditional Czech herb liquor, sometimes mixed with tonic to make a cocktail
- Slivovice — Distilled plum spirit
- Tuzemák — Czech rum alternative made from potatoes
- Fernet Stock — A very bitter liquor

7.2 Dumpling dishes

Traditionally Czech are sauces with dumplings. This kind of dumplings is raised dough made into a cylinder, cooked, sliced and then served as a side. If the main is grilled meat without sauce (maybe a little bit of gravy), then potato dumplings are sometimes served. Sliced cooked cylinders as before, only smaller in diameter.

- **Svíčková omáčka s knedlíky** — Roasted beef in root-vegetable sauce with dumplings, often served with cranberries and whipped cream
- **Guláš s knedlíky** — Goulash sauce (beef) with dumplings, sometimes served with chopped onions on top.
- **Koprová omáčka s knedlíky (v?)** — Dill creamy sauce with dumplings, typically served with beef or hard boiled eggs.
- **Rajská omáčka s knedlíky (v?)** — Tomato sauce, often with meatballs, and dumplings.
- **Houbová omáčka s knedlíky (v)** — Mushroom sauce with dumplings
- **Kuře na paprice s knedlíky** — Chicken in sweet pepper creamy sauce with dumpling (sometimes served with pasta instead of dumplings)
- **Knedlo vepřo zelo** — Baked pork with cabbage and (usually potato) dumplings

Other dumpling dishes:

- **Knedlíky plněné uzeným masem** — Spherical potato dumplings filled with smoked meat, typically with fried onions on top
- **Ovocné knedlíky (v)** — Spherical dumplings filled with fruit. There are 3 different types of dough: raised, potato, curd cheese (tvaroh). A main course, even though it is sweet.

7.3 Other main courses

- Řízek/řízky (plural) — Fried breaded chicken/pork escalope/schnitzel. Served typically with potatoes or potato salad for better occasions.
- Bramboráky (v) — Potato “pancakes”, often served with pickled cabbage or as a side
- Halušky (v?) — Boiled small potato-dough pieces with either cabbage or a special kind of cheese
- Smažený sýr (v) — Breaded deep-fried cheese. “Traditional” Czech junk food. I quite like it.
- Smažený květák (v) — Breaded fried cauliflower
- Karbanátek — Like a burger without bun, served with potatoes or potato mash
- Sekaná (pečeně) — Minced meat bake, served typically with potatoes
- Lečo (v?) — Light vegetable and egg (sometimes sausage) dish. Typically eaten with bread

Sweet main dishes are quite common in Czech cuisine: (all vegetarian)

- Ovocné knedlíky (as before)
- Rýžový nákyp — Like a solid rice pudding with fruit
- Žemlovka — Apple, white-bread sweet pie.
- Vdolky — Not too far from a doughnut, but prepared differently and served as a main.
- Rýžová/krupicová kaše — Rice/roughly-milled-flour porridge

7.4 Soups

It is essential in Czech cuisine, that at lunch the main course is preceded by a soup (polévka). (often a part of the daily menu in restaurants)

- **Bramboračka/bramborová polévka** (v) — Potatoes and root vegetables
- **Vývar kuřecí/hovězí** — Chicken/beef broth with vegetables, typically with noodles
- **Zelňačka** (v?) — Cabbage soup, sometimes with sausage
- **Hrachová polévka, hrachovka, hrášková polévka** (v?) — Pea soup
- **Rajská polévka** (v) — tomato soup
- **Gulášovka, gulášová polévka** — Goulash flavoured soup
- **Čočková polévka** (v?) — Lentil soup
- **Fazolová, fazolková polévka** (v) — Bean soup
- **Kulajda/kyselo** (v) — Slightly different two soups, both creamy with mushrooms

7.5 Desserts

All vegetarian.

- (Pardubický) **perník** — Gingerbread, the most famous kind comes from the city of Pardubice. This one looks like the British Christmas kind of ginger bread, often heart-shaped. There is also **perník**, which is like a raised cake, where similar spices are used.
- (Karlovarské) **lázeňské oplatky** — Spa wafers, the most famous ones come from the city of Karlovy Vary.
- **Koláč/koláče** (plural) — Round flat cakes with filling on top.

- Buchty — Raised-dough roughly cubic cakes with filling inside.
 - Typical fillings for koláče a buchty include: jam, povidla (plum jam-like thing), tvaroh (curd cheese), crushed poppy seed (which are surprisingly rare food in other cuisines)
- Štrůdl — Apple-cinnamon pastry. In English, they sometimes even use strudel, but the Czech one is very different to the British one, except for also containing apples.
- Trdelník — Recently emerged “tourist-trap” overpriced sweet in a shape of a hollow cylinder. Claimed to be traditionally Czech, even though it is not, but actually tastes quite nice, so feel free to buy it, just keep in mind that Czechs normally do not eat it :-)
- Makovka — Sweet pastry topped sprinkled with poppy seeds
- Bábovka — A simple sponge cake
- Mazanec/vánočka — From the same raised dough, sweet bread in two different shapes. Mazanec is baked for Easter, Vánočka for Christmas.
- Medovník — Relatively expensive, but delicious hone cake
- Bublanina — Fruit cake

7.6 Pastry

Apart from sweet pastries, Czechs are very particular with their **bread**. The most common bread is rye-wheat raised sourdough. There are many kinds and every bakery calls them something slightly different, but Šumava tends to be a very general type of bread. There are also housky and rohlíky, which are from lighter dough. **Housky** are buns and **rohlíky** are hot-dog shaped buns, sometimes bent. A typical Czech breakfast includes fresh bread with butter, ham, salamis, sausages, cheese, eggs and other thing that go well with bread :-).

7.7 Snacks/Small dishes

- Langoše (v) — Czech street food, fried disc of dough with garlic, cheese and ketchup on top
- Utopenci — Literally “drowned men”, a typical pub food. Sausages pickled in vinegar.
- Párek v rohlíku — Like hot dog, but served vertically in a hollow bun
- Buřt — A thick sausage typically cooked over a bonfire
- (Obložený) chlebíček (v?) — A piece of white bread with ham, potato salad, cheese etc. on top

7.8 To buy in a shop

All vegetarian.

- Studentská pečeť — Quite traditional Czech chocolate with jelly, nuts and raisins.
- Esička — Cocoa and cinnamon S-shaped biscuits
- Polomáčené (sušenky), polomáčenky — Biscuits half dipped in chocolate
- Pikao, Jesenka — Liquid sweets, sold in a toothpaste like tube, made from sweet thickened milk with cocoa/plain flavour respectively. I personally absolutely love Pikao.
- Věnečky — Toroidal biscuits, either plain or cocoa flavoured
- Olomoucké tvarůžky/syrečky — Traditional, but very smelly cheese
- Korbáčik — Czech/Slovak salty hard cheese (looks like spaghetti). Similar cheese in a different shape is parenica (spiral) or oštiepok (cylinder).

- Piškoty — A type of Czech biscuit. The best ones are from the Opavia company
- Tatranky/horalky — Wafers with filling dipped in chocolate
- Fidorky — Circular wafers covered in chocolate
- Hašlerky — Herbally flavoured hard sweets
- Slavia — also hard sweets, with non-specific flavour
- Kofila — Coffee flavoured chocolate bar
- Sojový suk — Soya based sweet
- Kaštany, Banány v čokoládě, Margot, Milena — further chocolate bars
- Lentilky — Colourful lentil-shaped chocolate chips
- Termix — Yoghurt/cheese like dessert, typically cocoa flavoured.
- Pribináček — Sweet curd cheese like dessert, vanilla or cocoa flavoured.
- BeBe sušenky — Plain, but quite typical biscuits

8 Prague

For more tips on good restaurants, exchange offices, scams to avoid or things to do, I can recommend [the Prague Honest guide YouTube channel](#). I saw many of their videos and they are indeed honest.

8.1 Restaurants

There are many “tourist” restaurants, which are very expensive and generally not worth it. These chains of restaurants are good, not that expensive and serve Czech food: Potrefená husa, Lokál, Kolkovna, but there are many others, not just chain restaurants.

Most restaurants have daily menus = meals prepared for the day on work days. Guaranteed to be fresh and cheaper than *à la carte* dishes. These may cost 90–130 Kč (at most 150 Kč). Normal restaurants will have meals for 100–170 Kč and for better meals like steaks up to 250 Kč. At less tourist sites it should be feasible to dine for 160 Kč including a drink. It is typical to order drinks and some restaurants not even give away water for free. (I heard a rationale that they subsidise meal prices from drinks, so it is expected for one to have a drink.) A typical price for a half a litre of beer is 20–35 Kč, up to 50 in fancy restaurants.

If you are happy with the service, 10% tip is usually given. Double check if the restaurant accepts card payments, but most do.

8.2 Places

Items in **bold** are must-see.

8.2.1 Historical sites

The two main squares (náměstí) [nah-mies-tee]:

- **Václavské náměstí** — The largest square in Prague, historically important, also important as the place of demonstrations during the fall of communism, but today unfortunately quite commercial. The national museum with the statue of the patron of Czechia, St. Václav (Wenceslas) at the upper end.
- **Staroměstské náměstí** — The main square of the Old City of Prague with the old city hall that bears a famous astronomical clock (Orloj). The Church of Our Lady before Týn (Týnský chrám) and the St. Nicolas Church (Kostel sv. Mikuláše) are near by.

Other historical sites:

- **The Prague Castle** (Pražský hrad, Hradčany) with the St Vitus Cathedral (Katedrála svatého Víta) — The home of our president and the main cathedral.
- **The Charles Bridge** (Karlův most) — The oldest stone bridge that was built over the river Vltava
- **Vyšehrad** — The place of the original Prague castle, where the Přemyslid dynasty had its settlement (the first dynasty of Czech kings). Nowadays there is a church, the Slavín cemetery (full of famous people) and a very nice park (with an amazing view of the city, since it is on a hill).
- Josefov — the former Jewish quarter with many synagogues

- **Národní divadlo** (the National theatre) — A historical theatre
- Rudolfinum — A historical concert hall
- Stavovské divadlo — Another historical theatre
- Prašná brána — Powder gate = A historical gate/tower to the city
- Clementinum — The historical national library
- Carolinum — the oldest building of the Charles University, the oldest university in central Europe
- Obecní dům (the municipal house) — nice historical building in the Art Nouveau style
- Průmyslový palác — also a nice Art Nouveau building
- Monasteries
 - Strahovský klášter (the Strahov monastery)
 - Anežský klášter — st Anne monastery
 - The Emmaus monastery — Originally historical but rebuilt as modern.
 - Klášter augustiniánů kanovníků — Augustinian monastery
 - Břevnovský klášter — Slightly further away, the oldest Czech monastery, has its own brewery
- Palaces
 - Palác Kinských
 - Černínský palác
 - Valdštejnský palác
 - Schwarzenberský palác
 - Thunovský palác
 - Kolovratský palác
- Trojský zámek — Troja chateau, a beautiful chateau

- Nemocnice u Apolináře — A nice historical still functional hospital. (My brother works there)
- Saints Cyril and Methodius Cathedral — A nice church, famous also because the soldiers, who assassinated Reinhardt Heydrich, the Nazi protector of Czechia during the second world war, were hiding there. There is a plaque commemorating this.
- Malá strana (the Lesser Town)— a picturesque quarter of Prague, with e.g. Kostel svatého Mikuláše (St. Nicolas church, a different one to the one at the old square)
- The historical building of the main railway station (still the main railway station)
- Letohrádek Hvězda — A small chateau in a nice park
- The National memorial at Vítkov — a large statue of Jan Žižka an important military leader from Czech history

8.2.2 Non-historical sites

- Rozhledna Petřín = the Petřín [peht-rzeen] outlook tower with a park around it
- Tančící dům - Dancing house = a piece of modern architecture
- John Lennon wall — Wall famous to be used by artists and during communism as a place of protests

8.2.3 Museums

- Národní muzeum — The national museum spread across 11 places, but the main historical building is at Václavské náměstí
- Národní galerie — The national gallery, spread across multiple buildings, some historical, some modern
- Národní technické muzeum — the National Technical museum

- Kafka museum — a museum dedicated to Franz Kafka, a famous Czech/German/Jewish writer
- Prague ZOO — a very nice ZOO, in some ways among the best in the world (keeping and reproducing endangered animals)
- Prague Botanical garden
- Letecké muzeum Kbely — a flight museum

Natural sites:

- Divoká Šárka — a natural park, with forest and a narrow rocky valley
- Náplavka — Low lying pavement along the river
- Střelecký ostrov — an island with a park
- Kampa — another larger island with a park and buildings
- Královská obora = Stromovka — a nice park, said to be founded by one of the Czech kings
- Havlíčkovy sady — a park with a vineyard and a villa in the centre

9 Trips outside of Prague

Items in **bold** are must-see.

9.1 Close to Prague

- **Karlštejn** — A beautiful medieval castle that used to guard the crown jewels, quite close to Prague
- **Kutná Hora** — A historical city, with a beautiful cathedral, a unique ossuary and medieval silver mines. UNESCO

- Mělník — A nice historical city
- Hrad Křivoklát — A castle
- Zámek Konopiště — A chateau

9.2 Further away

Thanks to the size of the country, all of these can be easily made into one day trips from Prague.

- **Český Krumlov** — A wonderful medieval city. The most visited place after Prague and rightly so, it is amazing. UNESCO
- Telč — UNESCO World Heritage historical town
- Lednicko-Valtický areál — Lednice-Valtice cultural landscape. UNESCO protected area with a chateau and many other historical buildings
- Zámek Hluboká — another wonderful chateau, neogothic
- Karlovy Vary, Mariánské Lázně — A larger and a smaller spa city respectively. The first one is quite close to where I live and would make a good day trip from Prague (take a RegioJet bus from the Florenc station)
- Hrad Loket — a medieval castle
- Plzeň, Brno, Olomouc — Large historical cities with many landmarks

Only once I started listing the places worth visiting, have I realised, how much there is to see. I hope I did not forget anything important.

I wish you a pleasant stay and it is a shame that I cannot be your guide in person.