

CZECH MATE!

Think about an unusual honeymoon in Prague!

By Maureen Hart

Although many brides choose a beach vacation or cruise for their honeymoon, other couples like to think outside the box and search for a more unusual destination for their wedding trip.

Couples who enjoy sightseeing, visiting museums and castles, dining and shopping are encouraged to think about Europe as a destination, and one of the most romantic cities on the continent is Prague in the Czech Republic.

Prague is a popular stop for young and old alike, with plenty to see and do in a relatively small area. Having visited Prague in the middle of summer, as well as early December, I can attest to the fact that this city is gorgeous and romantic, at any time of the year.

First-time visitors would do well to book a hotel close to all the popular sites, and then put on their walking shoes to investigate the intriguing cobblestone streets of Old Town and to cross the famed Charles Bridge, built in 1357 and lined with 30 baroque statues of saints as well as ubiquitous sellers of souvenirs and paintings. You will spot other romantic couples strolling hand-in-hand or stealing a kiss as they watch the River Vltava flow by.

The most breathtaking sight—whether it is your first visit or one of many—is Prague Castle and St. Vitus Cathedral which sit imposingly on a hill overlooking the city. The scene is illuminated at night, making it even more striking, and very romantic. The grounds are open during the summer tourist season (April 1-October 31) from 5 a.m. to midnight, and in the winter season (November 1-March 31) from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.

You can take a long tour of Prague Castle, including the Old Royal Palace, St. George's Basilica, Convent of St. George, National Gallery, Golden Lane with Daliborka Tower, and Prague Castle Picture Gallery, or a shorter tour which skips the convent and picture galleries. No one who visits the castle complex should miss a stop inside St. Vitus Cathedral, a Gothic structure built over six centuries.

Mala Strana is Lesser Town, a lovely place to wander, which features such sights as St. Nicolas's Church, the Petrin Watchtower, and an interesting labyrinth.



Old Town (Stare Mesto) has many beautiful sites, including the Municipal House, an Art Nouveau structure featuring a concert hall, coffee shop, fine restaurant, and a beer garden downstairs. The Royal Mile stretches from the Powder Tower through Old Town Square (with its astronomical clock). Prague Ghetto is a poignant place to walk, as it includes remnants of seven synagogues, the Jewish Town House, and the Old Jewish Cemetery, which is the most remarkable in Europe.

In New Town (Nove Mesto) visitors can walk about the fine shops lining Wenceslas Square. It is a bustling commercial area now, but in 1989 it was the scene of the Velvet Revolution which saw the Czech Republic become independent of Soviet domination.

Nobody wants to spend their entire honeymoon sightseeing, and the good news is that Prague is an ancient town filled with young people and many fun things to do. Even better news is that Prague is not yet on the Euro, so meals and entertainment remain quite affordable for visitors.

Czech food resembles Bohemian/German cuisine, meaning it is hearty and delicious. A dinner in a typical Czech restaurant, including an appetizer of wursts, a half roast duck with all the trimming, and that famous Czech beer (try the dark Kozel brand) will run about \$60 for two.

In summer and winter, the churches and concert halls offer a wide variety of music, much of it heavy on Dvorak (a native son) and Mozart (an adopted son), and for the experience of a lifetime, you can see a full production of "Don Giovanni" performed by marionettes. If more modern music is your thing, there are tons of clubs and dance halls frequented by natives and visitors alike. Interestingly, Irish pubs are particularly popular with the Czechs.

Shopping in Prague is fun, as Old Town is bursting with little shops filled with souvenirs such as Czech and Russian matruska dolls, marionettes (a local obsession), and jewelry made of amber or garnet, the national stone. Nobody should leave Prague without a piece of Bohemian crystal, which is beautifully displayed in many shops in the city, in a wide range of designs. You can buy a little trinket box, or splurge on a set of goblets.

If you get tired of the fancy crystal and tourist mementoes, a glittery new five-floor shopping center called the Palladium has recently opened, featuring clothing, jewelry, books, perfumes, toys, and anything else you might be looking for.

In summer, a boat ride on the Vltava is a must, boasting gorgeous postcard views on either side. There are many walking tours of the city with such names as Discover Prague, Architecture Walk, Communist Walk, the Old Jewish Ghetto, Pubs Crawl, Franz Kafka's Prague, Mysteries and Ghosts, and of course, Haunted Prague.

If you are tired of walking, there are numerous bus tours, not only of the city itself, but of nearby sites such as Cesky Krumlov, a medieval town in Southern Bohemia that has fairytale charm (and this is your honeymoon, after

all); Karlovy Vary, the most famous town spa in the Czech Republic, and of the Pilsen and Pilsner Urquell Brewery (there's a reason Czech beer is world famous).

One of the best reasons to visit Prague, aside from the history, food, shopping and music, is for the people. They are unfailingly helpful, and I'm happy to say, most of those who work in the tourist industry speak English, or can direct you to someone else who can help you. Suffice it to say that language is never a problem.

On our visits, we have stayed at a small boutique hotel called the K&K Central Hotel, located on Hyberneska Street, steps away from the famed Powder Tower (where gunpowder was stored at one time). The original Belle Epoque building has been renovated and preserved, with a contemporary interior design. In addition to its excellent location, the K&K also offers a full breakfast buffet in a former theater. The meal features fresh fruit, granola, cereals, eggs, breakfast meats, cheeses, pastries, juices, coffee, tea, and champagne!

Whether your wedding is in the spring, summer, fall or winter, be assured that a trip to Prague will provide memories to last a lifetime. The weather tends to resemble that in Northeastern Pennsylvania. On our most recent trip in late November and early December, the weather was in the high 30s and low 40s, and yet we were never really cold. There was no snow (although it would have been beautiful) and it only rained briefly on our last day in Prague. Like most things in this Bohemian city, it was quite romantic.