

# BOHEMIAN *Paradise*

Monica Frim  
Photography by John and Monica Frim

## Bohemia.

If your mind springs to the 1960's hippy subculture, or the Beat Generation literary movement of the forties and fifties or even the late 19th century opera *La Boheme*, you may be tuned in to subculture and opera, but you haven't been to the Czech Republic. For long before the Bohemian moniker pegged the Beat Generation, or Freddy Mercury's hit song and biographical drama *Bohemian Rhapsody* hit the top of the

charts, Bohemia denoted a central European kingdom in the Holy Roman Empire. Bohemia later became a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; then, from 1918 to 1993, the western part of the sovereign state of Czechoslovakia. Today it is the westernmost region of the Czech Republic, a picturesque country known mainly for castles and beer.

As history and politics reshaped Bohemia's border, Prague remained its stolid epicenter. Known as the "City of a Hundred Spires," Prague is dotted with the spires and turrets of castles and churches and a laundry list

St. Vitus Cathedral and Prague castle at night.

# Czech Republic





Astronomical Clock on the Old Town Hall Tower.

both modern and classical opera, drama and ballet performances, and there's scarcely a block that doesn't have a museum, gallery or exhibition place. Parks and gardens rife with sculptures and statuary play homage to political and cultural heroes—from Wenceslas, the 10th century Duke of Bohemia, revered as Good King Wenceslas in song, to composers Bedrich Smetana and Antonin Dvorak. But strewn among the old masters are touches of outsized whimsy, such as the satirical statues by David Cerny that spoof the pragmatism of Prague's Communist era when artistic expression was heavily repressed. Cerny literally overturned the famous statue of Wenceslas astride his horse on Wenceslas Square with his version of the famous duke (he was given the title of king posthumously) astride the belly of a dead horse hanging upside down in the shopping mall of Lucerna Palace. Cerny's Hanging Man, a caricature of a suicidal Freud looking remarkably like Lenin, dangles midair from a beam in Old

The 39-ton mobile bust of Czech writer Franz Kafka by sculptor David Cerny.

The 14th century Old Town Bridge Tower.



of architectural styles. Cobblestoned lanes lined with palaces and formal gardens spill down hills and into public squares surrounded by Gothic, Baroque, Renaissance, Art Nouveau and Functionalist buildings all standing shoulder to shoulder in their latest incarnations as shops, restaurants and museums. Around the Old Town Square multicolored houses join palaces and multi-spired churches looking for all the world like stage sets from history's most striking eras. Along with the square's most ingenious feat of engineering, the medieval clock on the tower of the Old Town Hall, they draw the crowds with their come-hither presence. For more than 600 years, the clock has been telling not only the time but the months, seasons, Christian festivals, and positions of the sun, moon, and constellations. Its hourly show featuring 12 revolving wooden Apostles is one of the square's chief attractions.

Creativity still looms large in Prague. The National Theater comprises several buildings that feature



Prague boasts the only known Cubist lamp post in the world.

Town while the monumental rotating head of Kafka, an 11 meter-high work of 42 reflective rotating stainless steel panels, looms outside the Quadrio shopping center in New Town.

**Prague** may have taken on a modern patina but the nerve center of its past is still the medieval Charles Bridge over the Vltava (Moldau in German), Prague's most celebrated river. Lined with baroque statues and teeming with artists and crafts people hawking souvenirs of variable quality to a crushing crowd, the pedestrian bridge is the link between Old Town on the east bank and the hills and castle of Lesser Town on the west.

According to the Guinness Book of Records Prague Castle is the largest medieval castle in the world. Comprising palaces, galleries, churches and gardens, and dominated by St. Vitus Cathedral, the castle looms over the copper-green spires and sloping red roofs of Lesser Town's embassies, government offices, palaces, and courtyards.

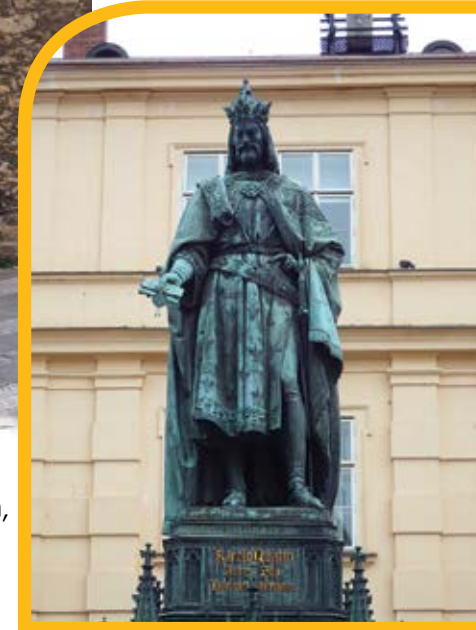
Duly, Prague's magical mien is also its bane. Near constant crowds jostle for views and optimal selfie perches, and tacky souvenir shops share street space with upscale galleries and showrooms. But wander away from the central tourist nub and you'll find some of the

most delightful but underrated parts of Prague—up-and-coming neighborhoods like Holesovice where many industrial buildings have been converted into trendy cafés, restaurants and galleries, or Letna Park with its sweeping bird's eye views of Old Town and the bridges over the Vltava River.

About a two-hour drive west of Prague, the West Bohemian Spa Triangle is one of the world's largest concentrations of therapeutic springs, favored by celebrities ever since Charles IV found relief for his paralytic legs in the area's mineral-rich waters. Today three major spa towns—

Karlovy Vary, Mariánské Lázně and Františkovy Lázně—make up the healthful triumvirate, each purpose-built with parks, gardens, promenades, and colonnades echoing the sentiment that what the waters do for the body, nature and beautiful architecture do for the soul.

In Bohemia balneology is serious business. The resorts come staffed with doctors who diagnose and prescribe spa treatments for everything from



Statue of Charles IV, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia.

musculoskeletal to cardiovascular problems. Even cancer patients come to recuperate from the after-effects of radiation and chemotherapy. Of course one doesn't need to be ailing to enjoy the healthful benefits of the soothing springs and beautiful surroundings. A dip—or a sip—for prevention can be worth the course of a cure.

**Karlovy Vary** is Bohemia's largest and liveliest spa town, and the only one with warm springs. Surrounded by mountains and bisected by the Tepla River, the town is full of old-world charm, storybook buildings and gateway to 112 miles of walking trails with scenic lookouts and benches. Historical buildings that once housed the likes of Goethe, Wagner, Austrian Empress Maria Theresa and Norwegian King Harald VI line the Tepla River, culminating at the prominent neobaroque Grandhotel Pupp, which still accommodates bluebloods and international celebrities. The Pupp is a partner of the annual Karlovy Vary International Film Festival and suitably displays the names



of Hollywood’s glitterati—guests from Antonio Banderas to Renee Zellweger—in the brass bricks of the pavement in front of its main entrance. A star in its own right, the Grandhotel Pupp was a film location in the 2006 James Bond film “Casino Royale” and “Last Holiday” starring Queen Latifah.

Indubitably, a place that boasts a sophisticated clientry also flaunts exclusive mementos. Two of Karlovy Vary’s most iconic products are the medicinal Becherovka liqueur,

concocted from a recipe of secret herbs and spices, and the prestigious Moser glass, esteemed by collectors all over the world. Moser’s lead-free crystal, known for its clear, irreproducible colors, graces the palaces of monarchs such as Queen Elizabeth II and dignitaries like Elton John, Michael Douglas and Madeleine Albright. If you’re looking for a superstar souvenir, a Moser glass puts you in good company.

On the spa route between Karlovy Vary and Mariánské

Lázně, the Bohemian hills billow with fairyland forests and Hansel and Gretel trails that spider throughout the countryside or follow along meandering rivers. Every bend, whether of the road or river, reveals a natural or man-made wonder.

At **Loket**, an 800-year-old castle soars above the winding Ohře River and the opulent burgher homes

Loket Castle is situated on a massive rock above the Ohře River.



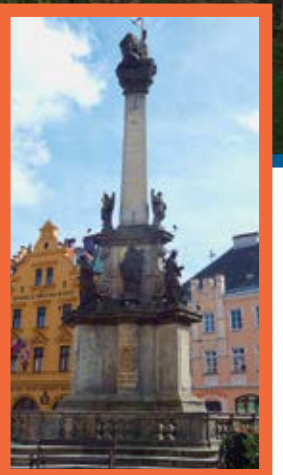
An artisan engraves a vase at Moser Glassworks.



A delicious Karlovy Vary treat: a plate-sized almond-flavored wafer made with local spring water.



A glass-blowing demonstration at Moser Glassworks.



The Holy Trinity Column in the town of Loket.

of the town below. Charles IV frequently stayed at the castle, which served variously as a fortress, administrative center and prison before becoming a museum with porcelain, weapons, tombstones and archaeological displays.

Closer to Mariánské Lázně, the Chateau Kynžvart teems with the heirlooms of the Metternich family whose 300-year-occupation lasted until the chateau was confiscated in the aftermath of World War II. The castle and adjacent Schlossrestaurant Metternich make for another noteworthy stop along the 30-mile road between Karlovy Vary and Mariánské Lázně.

**Mariánské Lázně** is smaller and quieter than Karlovy Vary with a central park surrounded by springs, neoclassical buildings and grand hotels. One of the most opulent is the Nove Lázně, an Italian Neo-Renaissance building known for its carbonated baths that reputedly improve blood circulation and other wellness treatments.

The biggest happening in town is sampling the various mineral waters. Serious imbibers—and fascinated tourists—may stroll through town pausing at the Singing Fountain with its 250 pulsating jets or the iconic 72-columned Cross Spring Colonnade, all the while sipping from specialized porcelain cups with a shapely spout that arcs from the bottom of the cup to preserve the carbon dioxide (or heat in Karlovy Vary). In spa territory, the toast “*na zdraví*” (to your health) takes on a literal meaning.

The spa town of Karlovy Vary.





Banquet Room in the Kynzvalt Chateau in Marianske Lazne.

Headquarters of the Marienbad Kur & Spa Hotels, owned by Danubius Hotels.



Throughout the Czech Republic raising a glass (or cup) is somewhat of a national pastime, although the healthful implications depend on the contents of the vessel. In spa towns, it's probably mineral water; elsewhere, more likely beer. Czechs consume more beer per capita than any other nation given that beer often costs less than bottled water. A favorite is the foamy Pilsner Urquell, a pale lager born in the city of **Pilsen** (Plzen in Czech), a mere 44 miles west of Marianske Lazne, then copied by breweries all over the world.

Fittingly, the Pilsner Urquell Brewery is one of Pilsen's top attractions even among non-drinkers. Exhibits in its historical buildings and modern brew house tell stories that would interest anyone with even a smidgen of curiosity about the city's sociohistorical roots. One doesn't have to be a connoisseur of the bibulous brew to appreciate the cradle of the quaff.

Beyond the beer, Pilsen oozes with intoxicating

sights of a cultural kind. Republic Square in the center of the city features gilded fountains with stylized sculptures of objects depicted in Pilsen's coat of arms, as well as a cathedral that boasts the highest church tower in the Czech Republic. Streets lined with beautiful baroque and Renaissance buildings lead from the square to parks and some of the most remarkable museums and galleries in West Bohemia, many of them housed in unconventional buildings such as a former Gothic butcher shop or medieval market.



Statue of Czech composer Bedrich Smetana.

The Pilsner Urquell Brewery.



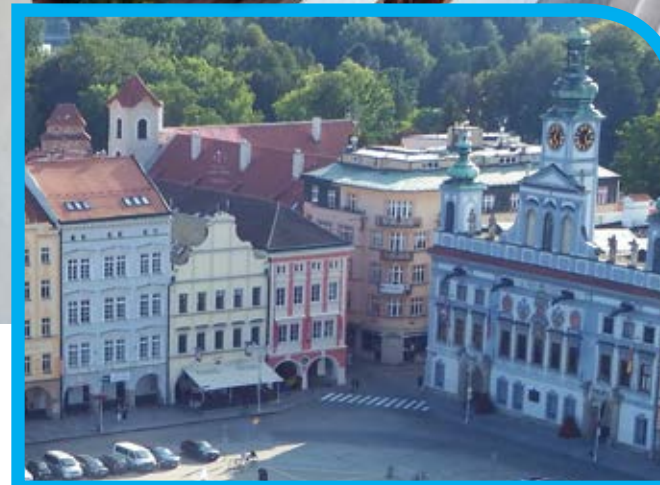
Cellars of the Pilsner Urquell Brewery.



Copper vats in the Budweiser Brewery (Budejovický Budvar) in Ceske Budejovice.



Ceske Budejovice's Baroque Town Hall dominates the south-west corner of the Town Square.



From armaments to puppetry, Pilsen's most connotative icons pepper the tourist trail. One of the most visit-worthy museums is Pilsen's Underground—a labyrinth of medieval cellars, storehouses, wells and tunnels—once used to store and transport supplies, food, water and, of course, the ubiquitous beer.

Breweries of all sizes, from major industrial establishments to micro and restaurant breweries, dot the country producing what the locals informally called Czech gold or liquid bread. In **Ceske Budejovice** (Budweis in German), the eponymous *Budweiser* beer draws crowds to tours of its brewery. For more than a century, The Budweiser Budvar Brewery has been engaged in a trademark dispute with American-based Anheuser-Busch

over the *Budweiser* name, which has resulted in a tentative compromise: American *Budweiser* must be sold as Bud in Europe, and the Czech brand of *Budweiser* as Czechvar in North America.

While beer is Ceske Budejovice's bedrock, Ottokar II Square is its cultural core. Elegant, pastel-tinted townhouses that once belonged to noblemen and burghers surround the square, their Gothic and baroque architectural styles in contrast with the square's spirited and utilitarian past as the site of markets, fairs and executions. The central baroque fountain of Samson fighting a lion still dominates the square but the fountain's statues are copies of the originals, now housed in the majestic Town Hall on the south-west corner of the square. Surrounding the square, narrow streets are lined with the classicist facades of houses and historical treasures such as the Cathedral Church of St. Nicholas, the Masne kramy, a butcher shop turned popular Restaurant, and an Art Nouveau palace





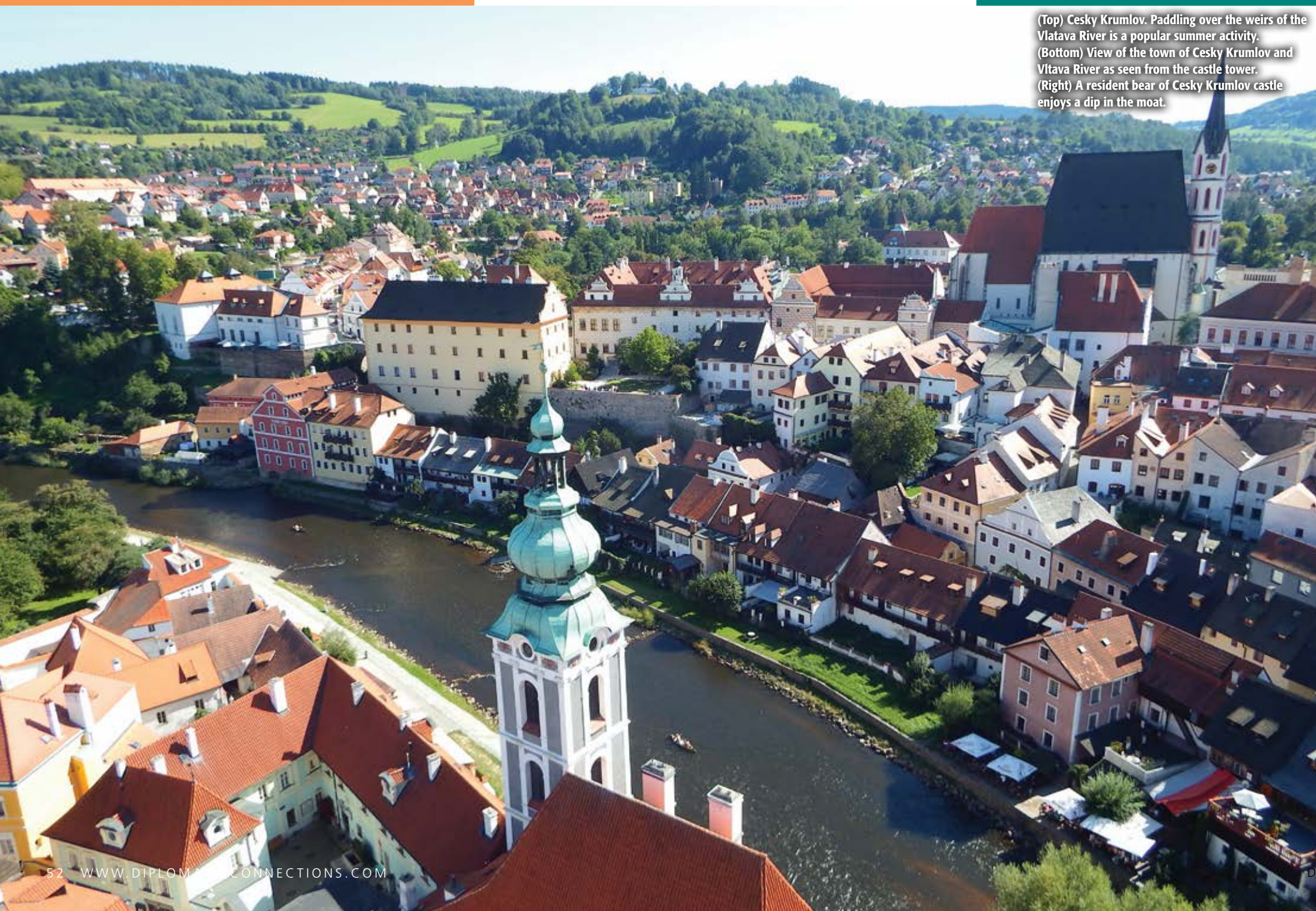
Hluboka Castle in the town of Hluboka nad Vltavou.

turned headquarters of the Komerční banka. Next to the Cathedral Church, the 16th century Black Tower offers a bird's eye view (if you're willing to climb the grueling 225 steps to the top) of the historic town and surrounding countryside that stretches all the way to **Hluboka** castle 23 miles away.

Looking for all the world like a giant sugar cube castle perched on a hill, Hluboka Chateau looms over the Vltava River and the red roofs of the town below. It's one of the country's most romantic castles, owned for almost 300 years by the powerful Schwarzenberg family. Although the Schwarzenbergs were ousted from the castle in the political



(Top) Cesky Krumlov. Paddling over the weirs of the Vltava River is a popular summer activity.  
(Bottom) View of the town of Cesky Krumlov and Vltava River as seen from the castle tower.  
(Right) A resident bear of Cesky Krumlov castle enjoys a dip in the moat.



lavishly furnished bedrooms abound with heirlooms from the noble houses that occupied the castle for 700 years.

But if the historic castle appears dreamy and romantic, the town itself unfurls like a pop-up book of fairy tales. Bisected by the deep bends of the Vltava River, the town's labyrinthine streets are lined with gingerbread-like houses turned into galleries and museums, or refurbished as medieval taverns, restaurants and shops selling amber jewelry, porcelain and glass. Residents, who got more than they wished for in tourism, generally live outside the historical town center, away from the throngs of tourists who can barely pass each other on the bridges and walkways of a town that's been scrubbed and refurbished to Disneyesque perfection. Sadly too few people allow themselves time to absorb the area's authenticity and historical significance. Most come for day visits from Prague and spend only a few hours walking or taking selfies in front of medieval buildings and florid facades before snapping up an impromptu souvenir or a hasty pub lunch without so much as a look-see at the magnificent interiors of the castle, monastery, galleries and museums that have inspired the town's moniker, pearl of South Bohemia.

Cesky Krumlov boasts an assortment of hotels and B & Bs but if you're looking for accommodation away from fairyland excess, Svachovska is the perfect foil. Only a 10-minute drive away, **Svachovka** bubbles out of the surrounding greenery, rustic yet without Cesky Krumlov's swagger and flare. With a main hotel in a converted farmhouse and a restaurant in an old horse barn Svachovka offers space, calm, and restful contemplation and best of all, a key to its private, gated parking lot in Cesky Krumlov. Onsite, the resort's own distillery, chocolate factory and brewery quietly stimulate the senses with aromas of apple and pear distillate or sweetened cocoa. And Svachovska's award-winning Glokner beer has been deemed the best semi-dark beer in the







Larch tubs, specifically designed for beer bathing.

Czech Republic, although the brewery also produces light, stout and others. But you don't have to be a beer drinker to soak up,

or rather in, the suds! Just step into one of the hotel's wooden soaking tubs and lather up in a frothy beer bath specially prepared by an attendant. This distinctly Bohemian pastime is tingly, soothing and supposedly good for the skin.

Bohemia is like that, a bucket list destination full of fanciful sights like fairytale castles, crazy clocks and statues, and whimsical undertakings like bathing in things you would normally drink—all in the name of good health, of course. *Na zdraví.* ■



(Top left) You can buy spirits from Svachovska's own distillery in the lobby of the hotel.  
(Center) A Svachovka beer bath made up of Glok beer, brewer's yeast, and other ingredients dubbed as beneficial to the skin.  
(Bottom) A wedding canopy overlooks the pond and golf course at Svachovka.



**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** Czech Republic  
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www.mamashelter.com  
prague@mamashelter.com

##### **Art Deco Imperial Hotel**

Na Poříčí 15, 110 00 Prague 1  
Tel: +246 011 600  
www.hotel-imperial.cz/en/  
info@hotel-imperial.cz

##### **Next Door by Imperial** (restaurant)

Zlatnická 1126/3, 110 00 Nové Město  
Tel: +420 295 563 440  
www.next-door.cz  
info@next-door.cz

##### **Kuchyň** (restaurant)

Hradčanské Sq. 186/1, 118 00 Prague 1-Hradčany  
Tel: +420 736 152 891  
https://kuchyn.ambi.cz  
kuchyn@ambi.cz

##### **Spojka Karlín** (restaurant)

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Tel: +420 226 203 888  
www.spojka-karlin.cz  
info@spojka-karlin.cz

##### **Holešovická sedma** (restaurant)

Dukelských Hrdinů 696/43, 170 00 Prague 7-Holešovice  
Tel: +420 233 931 003  
www.holesovickasedma.cz  
info@holesovickasedma.cz

#### IN SOUTH BOHEMIA:

##### **Solidní šance** (restaurant)

Sq. Ďsl. Armády 2, 373 41 Hluboká nad Vltavou  
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www.solidnisanace.cz  
info@solidnisanace.cz

##### **Hotel Budweis**

Mlýnská 6, 370 01, České Budějovice  
Tel: +420 389 822 111  
www.hotelbudweis.cz  
info@hotelbudweis.cz

##### **Masné Krámy** (restaurant)

Krajinská 13, 370 01, České Budějovice  
Tel: +420 387 201 301  
www.masne-kramy.cz  
info@masne-kramy.cz

##### **Svachovka** (hotel and resort)

Svachovka Lhotka 1, 382 32 Mirkovice  
Tel: +420 774 499 812  
https://en.svachovka.cz  
info@svachovka.cz

#### IN WEST BOHEMIA:

##### **Hotel U Zvonu**

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https://u-zvonu-cz.book.direct/cs-cz/  
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##### **Beer Factory** (restaurant and brewery)

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##### **Metternich** (restaurant)

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www.metternich.cz/en  
Metternich@metternich.cz

##### **Grandhotel Pupp**

Mírové nám. 2, 360 01 Karlovy Vary  
Tel: +420 353 109 631  
www.pupp.cz/en  
reservation@pupp.cz

##### **Le Marché** (restaurant)

Mariánskolázeňská 675/4, 360 01 Karlovy Vary  
Tel: +420 730 133 695  
www.le-marche.cz/en/  
info@le-marche.cz

##### **U šimla** (restaurant)

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www.usimla.cz/en  
usimla@usimla.cz

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www.czechtourism.com  
newyork@czechtourism.com

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www.czechtourism.com

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Infocentrum  
Náměstí Svornosti 2 (town square), 381 01  
Ďeský Krumlov  
www.ckrumlov.info  
info@ckrumlov.info

##### **Tourism Authority of South Bohemia**

B. Němcové 1824/8  
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www.jiznicechy.cz  
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##### **Visit Pilsen**

náměstí Republiky 41, 301 00 Pilsen  
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info@visitplzen.eu

##### **Destination Agency for the Karlovy Vary Region**

Závodní 379/84a, CZ-360 06 Karlovy Vary  
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