

The Czech Republic – an overview

A little history....

The Czech Lands of Bohemia and Moravia, now known as the Czech Republic, have a history which dates back a thousand years. Throughout this period, the region has been home to peoples of fiercely independent nature, who have known at different times both full independence and subservience to other European nations.

The Czech Lands were a major European force in the Middle Ages, but lost their independence by the early 17th century. As part of the Hapsburg monarchy, the Czech Lands were industrialised very early compared with other parts of Europe, and had a high standard of living, culture and education. These advantages were retained when Czecho-Slovakia was formed after the dissolution of the Empire in 1918 and the country, despite its small size, ranked among the economically most successful in Europe. The period between the First and Second World Wars was marked by problems of economic hardship and a struggle for survival against aggressive neighbours and was only an interlude of independence before the country fell into the Soviet sphere of influence after the war. After the respite of the Prague Spring in 1968, a return to full democracy was only achieved after the fall of communism across Central and Eastern Europe, which began in 1989. Following the peaceful separation of the country into the Czech and Slovak Republics in 1993, both have pursued their goal of being integrated into the principal European structures, now achieved through membership of NATO and the European Union.



.... and geography

The Czech Republic is the geographical centre of Europe, a fact that places the country genuinely at the crossroads of the new Europe, well placed to benefit from the growth potential of the region.

The major cities are the capital city Prague, Brno, Ostrava, Plzeň (Pilsen), Liberec and České Budějovice. A relatively high proportion of the population still lives outside the major cities; some have noted a reluctance of some employees to relocate to the new centres of investment. The birth rate, which fell significantly after 1989, has now stabilised at lower than replacement rates; only immigration (largely from the East) will maintain the population at its current level.

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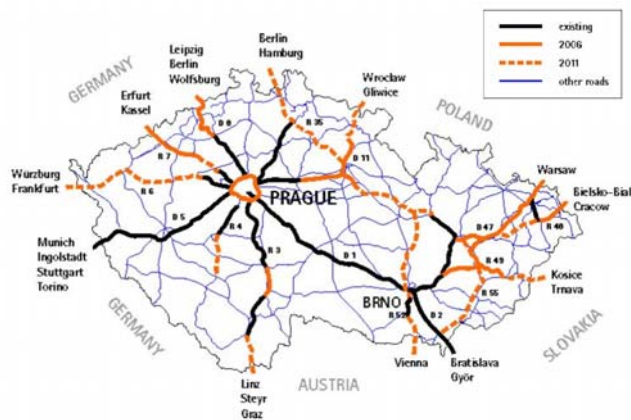
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The terrain is largely hilly and the country is surrounded by a ring of low mountains; these have kept the borders of the country unchanged for over a thousand years. River transport was once very important and large river craft still connect Pardubice (east of Prague) with the German border near Dresden and on to Rotterdam. The railway network is comprehensive but for reasons of geography remains slow. Recent pan-European cooperation projects have brought about the possibility of high-speed rail travel across the Czech Republic, connecting

Prague and Brno with Berlin and Vienna.

There has been heavy investment in the motorway network since 1989 and only major links north into Germany and south into Austria remain to be completed.



And the language!

Czech is the native language of 96% of Czechs (the remainder speak Slovak, Polish or German). Czech is one of the West Slavonic (Slavic) languages, closely related to Polish and Slovak and less closely to Russian and Ukrainian. The language has a reputation for being difficult to learn and it is true that fluency is difficult to attain, although much goodwill can be generated by learning and using the basics.

Knowledge of foreign languages is widespread across all generations. German, Russian and French are most common among those of middle age and older, while English is widely spoken by the younger generation and by many involved in business and trade. Prague in particular is a multi-lingual city; in business locations away from the major cities knowledge of foreign languages may not be so common.

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