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## Travel Writing: Prague

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Prague offers a feast of architectural delights, from the medieval hauntings of Old Town Square to the baroque stylings of buildings interwoven throughout the city. The general structure of this city, spiralling down from the castle and through the lesser town and out, can only really be described as beautiful, regardless of weather.

If you're lucky enough to catch the sun, then a leisurely stroll alongside the river while munching on a sweet and traditional delicacy of trdelnik can brighten an already lovely day. If the changeable May weather sidles up to disturb your hopeful sun-tanning then never fear; a smorgasbord of museums and art galleries are tucked away around almost every cobbled street bend to feed your curious mind. If you're searching for some history then the troubled Czech past while under communist rule is well documented in the Museum of Communism just off Wenceslas square; or, if medieval history is more intriguing to you, then the Museum of Medieval Torture found next to the Charles Bridge is well worth a trip if just to marvel at their collection of 60 different inventive and painful instruments. Of course, if you're not in the mood to be disturbed and you actually went on this holiday to relax, then maybe an art museum is more for you. Veletrzní Palác has four floors of Czech and international art ranging from the classics of Monet and Picasso, to the plainly odd and abstract works of varying hilarity.

Visual art isn't all Prague's known for. Hosting a plentiful musical history, street performers are abundant – and unlike the ones off Buchanan street, they won't just play Ed Sheeran. Mozart once said "My Praguers understand me", and he repaid their respect with many a symphony; his famous opera 'Don Giovanni' premiered at the Estates Theater, and is still loved today. If you're wanting to combine the operatic power of Mozart with puppets (I mean, why wouldn't you?) then the National Marionette Theatre is for you, with the performance staged in the original Italian. And if you're not feeling at all arty-farty and just want a good dance whilst completely off your face, then drink your way into drunken embarrassments in Karlovy lázně, the largest club in central Europe stretching over 5 floors.

All in all, Prague is a delightful city – which, unfortunately many people have already noticed, so be prepared to elbow your way through many a crowd of awestruck and selfie stick wielding tourists. The only consolation for this is that the whole city is prepared for British tourists too lazy to learn a new language (like me) with pretty much every sign being in English. The beauty, history, and art is enough to spark interest and love for all the nooks and twisting crannies this city has to offer. And now for the classic student review: pints for £1.10. Decent.

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# Sightseeing in Prague

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Prague is a magical city of cathedrals, bridges, and gold-tipped towers. The Vltava River, populated with swans, is an iconic European image that beckons visitors from all over the world. For more than ten centuries, Prague has been an epicenter of culture and history, starting in its medieval center of cobbled lanes and walled courtyards.

The wonder, energy, fine dining, music, and history make Prague a must-see city for anyone wanting to experience that part of the world. **Regarded as one of [Europe's](#) most charming and picturesque cities**, there are many sights to see and cool districts like [Holesovice](#) to explore. Here are some of those not to be missed, especially on one's first trip to the historic city.

## PRAGUE CASTLE

As the largest castle complex in the world, the Prague Castle is also a historic and beautiful place. Dating back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the castle surrounds St. Vitus Cathedral, and bears the marks of each historical and architectural era it has survived through. Even today, the castle serves as the seat of the Czech government.

The castle is not just a single structure but is a sprawling series of connected palaces and buildings, gardens, and courtyards that cover 230,000 square feet. Visitors often spend the entire day exploring the grounds, appreciating its history and beauty. Specific sites not to miss within the castle complex include the Gothic St. Vitus Cathedral, St. George's Basilica, and the well-preserved medieval Golden Lane. Additionally, the Prague Castle is home to the Bohemian Crown Jewels, priceless works of art, and is the final resting place of the Bohemian kings.



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## **ST. NICHOLAS CHURCH (MALA STRANA)**

A trip to Prague would be incomplete without a visit to St. Nicholas Church (Mala Strana). An iconic aspect of the skyline, it is perhaps one of the most significant buildings of Prague's Baroque period, consisting of a copper dome and belfry. It is a pristine example of High

Baroque architecture, though it was originally an Early Gothic church dating back to the early days of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The church and tower both have a long and rich history, with the bells playing a significant role. The belfry was a strategic watchtower through 1891, with watchmen ringing the bells in the event of emergencies such as invasion or fire. During the communist regime, the tower was used by the secret police to spy on the city.

## **VYŠEHRAĐ**

Another iconic landmark that is not to be missed is Vyšehrad, comprised of a sprawling, walled fortification that dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Vyšehrad is actually home to a few different historic sights including the Gothic Church of Saints Peter and Paul, the Romanesque Rotunda, and the Slavin Cemetery.

## **DRIVING IN PRAGUE**

Though it is possible to see much of Prague on foot, renting a car online is also an option for those that want to explore the area a little more widely. However, it is important to know a few things before getting behind the wheel. Though it is not necessary to obtain a special license, it is quite possible that some will need to obtain an International Driving Permit, available from most driving organizations, such as AAA. The Czech Republic practices a zero tolerance law for drinking and driving; therefore blood alcohol level must always be zero. Additionally, all drivers are required to keep their lights on while operating the vehicle and have a first-aid kit inside the car.

*Photo credits: 1 2*

## **NEXT STOP**

### **Art and Nightlife Have Baden-Baden Percolating Again**

**By CHARLES RUNNETTE**

THE jammed bar and lounge areas are dimly lighted with candles; the D.J. spins an irresistibly danceable Sasha track, and the flushed, pulsating Prada-clad crowd in their 30's and 40's is having a ball. The scene looks straight out of a well-cast and choreographed liquor ad, and nothing like the fusty image many have of legendary Baden-Baden. But this new club, inside the Bombay Rooms, is indeed in Baden-Baden, the historic and elegant Black Forest spa town that has a not-so-subtle new spark.

"We do a lot with fire here," said Thomas Costal, the club's manager, shouting over the din. "We have fire on the bar, fire eaters, we even serve drinks with fireworks."

After decades of hibernation, Baden-Baden, the Teutonic Monte Carlo, is bubbling back into favor with cultured, carefree visitors — including the English soccer team and their nearly as famous wives, who were based there for the World Cup. Sure, the Versailles-like 18th-century casino still looks as it did when Dostoyevsky lost his shirt researching "The Gambler," and yes, there's something a bit disturbingly old fashioned about the 125-year-old all-nude Roman-Irish bath, but this place knows something about staging a comeback.

The reappearance of youthful glitterati in this high-priced hamlet that was until recently seen by many as a haunt for surly, stinking-rich septuagenarians is just one more sign that this picturesque valley of the River Oos is becoming chic again. Baden-Baden is determined not to lose its deserved reputation as one of history's exclusive summertime escapes. To its long list of celebrities, artists and aristocrats who have visited — from Queen Victoria to Mark Twain, Marlene Dietrich to Peter Sellers — they can finally add some contemporary names like Bono, President Clinton and the Beckhams.

While many still credit Baden-Baden's enduring popularity to the 211,000 gallons a day of piping hot (as high as 156 degrees Fahrenheit), fabled spring water that has made the town's iterative name famous the world over, one very prominent resident sees a different picture. Frieder Burda, scion of the Burda publishing empire says: "The real secret to Baden-Baden are the friendly people — young and old. We laugh a lot and enjoy life here more than any other place in Germany."

Mr. Burda founded — and financed — the town's latest celebrated attraction, his own Richard Meier designed museum. Built in late 2004 to house Mr. Burda's phenomenal personal modern art collection, the positioning of this small, white, boxy, perfectly proportioned museum adjoins the 100-year-old public Staatliche Kunsthalle (the State Art Museum) on the town's tree-lined, horse-and-buggy-only Lichtentaler Allee. Its positioning is a fitting symbol of the new local ethos: don't overshadow our beloved town's storied past, just figure out subtle ways to improve on it.

Or as Mr. Burda puts it, "Baden-Baden has an ability to connect tradition with the future."

Last week, the Frieder Burda Museum's permanent collection of German Expressionism (Max Beckmann, August Macke), American Abstract Expressionism (Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning), and the post-war German art of Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and the Leipziger School will be mostly put away to make room for its first truly international exhibition. Until Oct. 29, "A New Light on Chagall" brings together 100 pieces of Chagall's best work — on loan from his family; museums in Paris, Moscow, St.

Petersburg, Nice and Madrid; and several private collections — and helps put Baden-Baden back on the art map.

Like the Burda Museum, the thriving Festspielhaus is another relatively new (1998) internationally acclaimed cultural center in this town of just 35,000. With 2,650 seats, it is one of Europe's largest opera houses, and it has generated a good deal of buzz in just a few years with a diverse but popular line up: from the experimental composer Steve Reich, to the Bolchoi Ballet, to the mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli.

One of this summer's hottest tickets for opera fans around the world is the long-awaited return to Baden-Baden of the Kirov's "Ring of the Nibelung" (July 13 to 18). The Russian production's debut at the Festspielhaus in 2004 received rave reviews, including a piece by critic John Rockwell in this paper calling it, "A 'Ring' to match the four or five most important stagings since the middle of the last century."

The local hotels and restaurants have been kicking it up a notch or two, as well. Brenner's Park, perhaps Germany's top hotel and the temporary home of Posh and the other wives of the English soccer players, boasts a couple of notable enhancements. First, it just received a Michelin star for Andreas Krolik's seafood-heavy menu at the stunning 30-seat Park-Restaurant. And to the Beauty Spa and a staffed medical spa, Brenner's has added a Bulgari spa suite.

The town's other standout hotel is the hilltop hideaway the English soccer team called home during the World Cup, the Schlosshotel Bühlerhöhe. Up until now, this fortresslike former Prussian army hospital was mostly known for its fantastic views of the Black Forest, the clubby bar with two giant Van Dyck portraits on the walls, and the Michelin-starred Imperial Restaurant. But as part of the deal to secure the stay of the English team, the once ragged-looking rooms were completely redone, with longer beds, a fresh coat of soothing champagne paint for the walls, plasma screen TV's and new furnishings. Once the cleat marks are cleaned up, the Bühlerhöhe may finally be a worthy competitor for Brenner's.

Old school as they are, no trip to Baden-Baden would be complete without a trip to the city's two most famous sights: the dressy casino and not-so-dressy baths. For those who want to try curative spring water (German doctors prescribe visits for patients with arthritis, rheumatism and broken bones) there are two options.

The bold should head for the all-nude (as in no towel, no nothing) unisex Roman-Irish Bath at the Friedrichsbad. Dating back to 1877, this schloss-like, neo-Classical temple to spa culture was built following the plan of the town's original Roman baths with a few newer Irish elements (dry heat rooms and a cold plunge at the end). The three-hour, 16-stage spa process is not for everyone. A little rough and very intense, it's an extreme spa experience.

The first few stages are a thorough cleaning — everyone (don't try to skip one, they're watching) takes numerous showers, sits through sweat chambers, steam chambers and most even get a firm massage brushdown that seems to be designed to remove a few layers of skin. Then comes what can be the slightly awkward moment.

Most days of the week — and even on days when it's supposed to be separate — men and women at the Friedrichsbad meet up for stages 7 through 11 in the gorgeous domed thermal bathing area. The mostly attractive straight and gay couples in their 30's and 40's are very close to each other and the uncoupled few are often shopping around. People who tell you it's not sexually charged are pretty much lying.

Luckily for the modest, the other spa with access to the water, the modern and huge (32,000 square feet) Caracalla Spa, next to Friedrichsbad, requires bathing suits (except in the saunas where they are verboten). The multiple family-friendly spacious indoor and outdoor pools range from a chilly 64 degrees to a sweltering 101. There are also Finnish saunas, outdoor log cabin saunas, a saltwater inhalation room, aroma steam bath and ample room to sunbathe overlooking the town's castle gardens.

The town's other not-to-be missed throwback, the high-stakes Louis XIV-style casino, has its own quirky dress code: jacket and tie for men and formal for women. It's all part of the charm of this, the oldest casino in Europe. With the players in their suits and gowns and the dealers in their tuxedos all surrounded by gold leaf-covered molding, massive crystal chandeliers, priceless Chinese vases, there's a distinctly "Casino Royale" vibe.

Just a few blocks away down Kaiserallee, the retro chic gives way to sexy chic. Stacked one on top of another is the town's current nightlife hub: Max's dance club below and the Bombay Rooms above. Smiling as he watched a guest conga drummer step up onto the bar to entertain the raucous crowd, Bombay's Mr.

Costal said, "This may not quite be St.-Tropez, but in Baden-Baden, we know how to have a good time again."