

Time to Czech In Europe's Hidden Treasures

By: Claire Quinn

Ahead of this year's summer break and conscious of everyone's desire to spend wisely we took a look at some of Eastern Europe's top destinations. Although immensely popular within their own region Czech Republic, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria may not be the first choice for many western Europeans. With a little bit of investigation we show you how you can find an unspoilt holiday destination where you won't meet your neighbours.

Getting to this side of Europe is now much easier due to several low cost airlines and the improved networking of European-wide rail passes. From the UK to Prague travellers can either take the afternoon Eurostar from London to Brussels and a connecting high-speed train to Cologne, then the excellent 'Phoenix' City Night Line sleeper to Prague. Conversely take the Eurostar from London to Paris, the overnight sleeper to Berlin, then a scenic EuroCity journey from Berlin to Prague. Using Prague as your base you can easily utilise excellent local road and rail services to work your way down through Slovenia and out to Croatian's spectacular Dalmatian Coast.

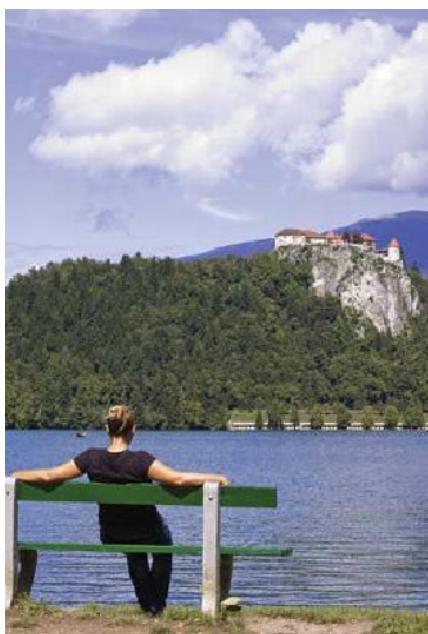
The Czech Republic and in particular the capital Prague have become a relatively new tourist destination in Europe. Bordering Germany and Austria the Czech Republic is easily accessible through neighbouring countries and supports an excellent rail and road system. Although landlocked its unique landscape and rich historical heritage make it a brilliant summer choice for those who want to get out and about. The Czech countryside offers protected areas such as Bohemian Paradise and Šumava National Park. Littered with castles, caves and historical landmarks southern Bohemia and the Šumava Mountains contain many hiking and cross-country skiing possibilities including the Rejvíz nature reserve in the Jeseníky Mountains. Prague itself is a heady mix of stunning architecture from gothic, renaissance and baroque to neoclassical,

art nouveau and cubist. Beyond the Old Town and the Castle District there's an entire other cosmopolitan city to explore. Search out the riverside parks, lively bars and beer gardens, music clubs, museums and art galleries. Harness Prague's excellent public-transport system to explore emerging suburbs such as Žižkov, Vinohrady, Smíchov and Holešovice. You'll be guaranteed cheaper prices, a more local ambience and a real snapshot of life in urban Bohemia. The most westerly of countries in this item the Czech Republic is an EU member and therefore prices have risen somewhat. Nevertheless this historical location is still excellent value for money in comparison to some of western Europe's well trodden tourist spots. The currency in Prague is still the Czech Crown (czk) but some restaurants, hotels and shops will also accept the Euro. Using cost of living statistics for 2011 we found that dinner for two in a mid-range restaurant averages €22.00, a 5-day transport pass for

Prague costs €20.35, a double room in a 4 star hotel is €105

Heading south from the Czech Republic we make our way to the smallest of our countries, Slovenia. This is the only country in Europe that combines the Alps, the Mediterranean, the Pannonian Plain and the Karst. Slovenia has been dubbed a lot of things since independence in 1991 - 'Europe in Miniature', 'The Sunny Side of the Alps', 'The Green Piece of Europe' - and, though they may sound like tourist-brochure blurbs, they're all true. From beaches, snow-capped mountains, hills awash in grapevines to gothic churches and baroque palaces Slovenia offers more diversity than countries many times its size. Its incredible mixture of climates brings warm Mediterranean breezes up to the foothills of the Alps, where it can even snow in summer. With more than half of its total area covered in forest, Slovenia truly is one of the greenest countries in the world. Jam packed with castles and chateaux visitors looking for a unique location to stay are spoilt for choice. Ljubljana is the capital city and sits in the centre of the country in the Ljubljana Basin, offering small-town friendliness and a relaxed atmosphere perfect for couples and families. The city has an excellent bus network and ahead of London has an established public bicycle rental system.

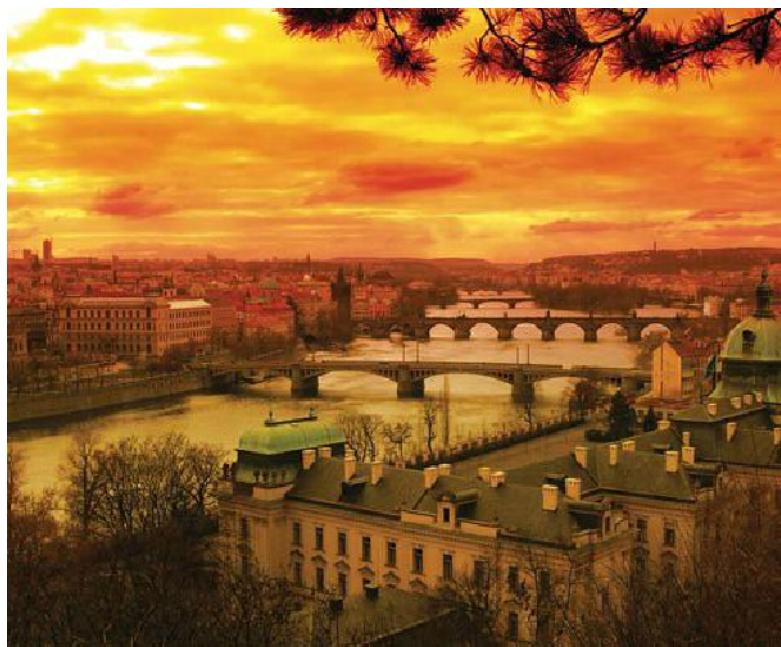
At the north-western corner of the country lie the Julian Alps with the picturesque Lake Bled and the Soča Valley, as well as the nation's highest peak, Mount Triglav rising from Triglav National Park. The Karst Plateau is a landscape shaped by water dissolving the surrounding carbonate bedrock, forming stunning caves including the UNESCO-listed Škocjan Caves. For wine lovers the hills around Slovenia's second-largest city, Maribor are renowned for their wine-making and often attract tours whereas the north-eastern part of the country is rich with long established spas, perfect for a low key retreat. ☺



01. Woman on Bench in Bled (Slovenia)
enjoys a beautiful summer



02. Gold quaint street Prague.



03. Vltava in Czech capital city Prague.

From beaches, snow capped mountains, hills awash in grapevines to gothic churches and baroque palaces Slovenia offers more diversity than countries many times its size.



05. Lake Bled, island with a church and the alps in the background, Slovenia.

06. An old fortified town in South Eastern Europe - Rab, Croatia.



From here we head to Croatia's stunning Dalmatian Coastline. This shoreline is famous for being one of the most indented in Europe with its 1,185 islands and islets, of which only 66 are inhabited and is undoubtedly Croatia's most popular tourist attraction. Continental Croatia however has plenty to offer the rambler such as the magnificent Plitvice Lakes in Lika and the Gorski Kotar gorge. Like scenes from a Constable painting the Croatian countryside has managed to maintain a romantic hue with golden wheat fields, oak woods and wide rivers winding past quaint villages and pretty castles.

The capital Zagreb lies in the south-western part of the Pannonian Basin providing excellent connections for traffic between central Europe and the Adriatic area. The city itself is well serviced with suburban trains and operates a modern tram system, perfect for darting around town. If it's all beginning to sound a bit too calm then remember that Croatia is now a hotspot for an eclectic mix of summer music festivals, attracting thousands of people from across Europe. This in combination with Zagreb's excellent selection of nightlife and its near perfect summer temperatures make it the perfect summer party destination. Also noteworthy is the best preserved fortified city in the world, Dubrovnik. The city and its 6 meter thick walls date back to the 6th century and are now a UNESCO listed World Heritage Site. Like most popular resorts Croatia has a high season with July and August proving the most expensive time. Although if you're flexible April, May, September and October can see prices reduced by as much as 50%.



07. Split, town in Croatia.

08. Colorful fountains row in Bucharest - Romania.



Bucharest, has an amazing blend of grotesque communist monuments, gothic towers and purposefully hidden-away cathedrals, perfect for exploring.

Leaving the party vibe behind we head much further east to Romania, the EU's newest member. Travelling in Romania proves an interesting juxtaposition of modern and historical, life is defined by its sweet country heart and almost anywhere you'll spot horse-drawn buggies plodding up green mountains, past cone-shaped haystacks and herds of sheep. Leaving aside Dracula-related stereotypes the region defiantly has an overwhelmingly gothic feel and makes for a refreshing break from the nouveau brashness of some western countries. Romania's currency is the Ron and prices are moderate to low, thankfully ATMs are plentiful in towns so there is no need to change large quantities of money.

The capital, Bucharest, has an amazing blend of grotesque communist monuments, gothic towers and purposefully hidden-away cathedrals, perfect for exploring. Excellent hiking, biking and skiing are found all over the Transylvanian

Alps which curl across central Romania. Farmhouse B&Bs allow guests to soak up some village life, particularly in the bucolic paradises of Maramureş and Southern Bucovina where cemeteries and monasteries are painted as boldly as pop-art. For a complete change of scene it's essential to make the journey to the Romanian Black Sea Riviera, this stretches from the Danube Delta in the north down to the Bulgarian Riviera in the south, along 275 km of coastline. The most important resort is Mamaia, situated north of the city of Constanţa, a modern and popular destination in summertime for Romanians and foreign tourists as a result of recent major investments. The area offers fine, soft sand and safe gently sloping beaches. The water of the Black Sea has a low salinity in comparison with other inland seas and is virtually free from tides and currents, making it a perfect location for children and families. ↗



09. Sutu palace Bucharest.



10. Glacial lake Zabecko with Hvoinat peak at national park Pirin, Bulgaria.

Sharing the Black Sea coastline is Bulgaria but this is an eastern European country with entirely its own feel. Bulgaria boasts similar beach resources to Romania but offers exquisite networks of well-maintained hiking trails and horse-riding routes, allowing visitors to reach untouched mountains and forests inhabited by bears, lynx and birds now rare elsewhere in Europe. Staying in-town? Bulgaria's cities are dynamic and cosmopolitan in contrast to its wild landscape. Sofia offers beautifully manicured parks, sociable al-fresco bars and fascinating museums. Plovdiv introduces visitors to its National Revival architectural treasures and Roman remains whereas Varna feels youthful and fresh with its marina. Getting around the country is easy, with cheap and efficient public transport to ferry you between the cities and into the remote rural corners where the traditional slow pace of life continues, much as it has done for centuries. Bulgaria's interior has impossibly pretty timber-framed villages with traditional stone-tiled roofs where locals still greet tourists with an air of curiosity.

Prices have certainly risen since Bulgaria became a member of the EU, but most western European travellers should be delighted with both the cost and value of what they get. A 3-course meal for 2 in a mid-range restaurant would average €16.68 and a taxi for a 5 km journey would cost around €2.65.

Overall these eastern European countries are inexpensive, friendly and now very accessible. What they lack in western sophistication they more than make up for in charm and uniqueness. The more western locations such as the Czech Republic provide ease of access and are in many respects much like their central European counterparts. Travel a little further east and enjoy not only the lower prices but unique cultures and landscapes the like of which have long vanished in the west. ■



11. Typical Balkan houses on a hill in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria.