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## Fairy-Tale Villages and Castles Come Alive in the Czech Republic

Lauren B. Weiss - AOL Travel,

The dungeon was dark and the man's shadow loomed large and menacing against the brick wall. He bent down and tightened the screws on the thumb press. "Stop!" my terrified husband shrieked. "I'm going to squeeze harder," sneered the looming man maneuvering the device. If the thumb screws didn't elicit a confession, then a burning hot face mask or the dreaded Spanish Shoe with its flesh-tearing teeth, might do the trick. "Had enough?" the man asked, his mouth contorted in a sneer. "Yes!" yelped my husband as he jumped from his seat. Everyone applauded and the man, who just a few minutes earlier had seemed so menacing, broke into a broad grin. He was in fact our 21st century tour guide, escorting us through the 13th century Rozemberg Castle, a towering pile situated on a bluff overlooking the Vltava River near the picturesque southern Bohemian town of Český Krumlov in the Czech Republic. The demonstration of pre-18th century torture techniques was just part of the castle tour.

When traveling to the Czech Republic, most Americans never venture further than Prague, the country's cultural, political and historical hub. That's a shame because the small Central European nation—which is bounded by Germany and Poland to the north, Austria to the south, and Slovakia to the east—boasts magnificent fairy tale castles set among impossibly quaint villages that look as if they've jumped out of the pages of Grimm's Fairy Tales. Yet, the country's recent troubled past lurks just below this romantic surface. Before 1989, then-Czechoslovakia existed for 40 years under Soviet rule (the Czech Republic and Slovakia split in 1993) and World War II inflicted its share of misery. For example, Rozemberg Castle, with its gilded ceilings, resident ghost, and portraits of elegant lords and ladies, was home during the war to a Nazi youth group. These days, the country is a member of the European Union and is known worldwide for its cultural offerings—and for its excellent beer. In fact, the Czech Republic ranks number one worldwide in beer consumption. So central is the brew to Czech life, that each of the country's drinkers are said to down an average of 41 gallons of the suds per year. So venture out from Prague and visit charming castles and enchanting villages – and maybe a brewery or two while you're at it.

### Mikulov

In Mikulov, the very distant and not-so-distant past collide. Entering the town, you're greeted by a square lined with colorful Renaissance-era buildings. Many of the structures surrounding the square, like the pink "U Rytířů," boast facades decorated with "graffito," a technique that transforms the exteriors into fanciful painted processions of lively knights and ladies or artfully applied geometric designs. Located in southern Moravia not far from the Austrian border, Mikulov is also a thriving wine growing center; one night we were treated to a tasting of local white and red wines and fruity plum brandy at a nearby cellar. Above the town square, a Baroque castle houses the largest wine barrel in central Europe, dating from 1642. But there is another, more sobering, side to Mikulov: its haunting Jewish quarter. Before World War II, the town was a thriving center of Jewish culture, dating back to the 15th century. Of the original 12 synagogues, only one survives, as a museum. We ventured up "Goat Hill," to the town's Jewish cemetery, an evocative place, overgrown with weeds, bushes and gnarled trees, that houses 4,000 tombs, some from as early as the 1500s. I stumbled upon a marble tombstone, where the date of death was marked 1939, a poignant reminder of the coming human devastation.

### Lednice-Valtice Cultural Area

A short drive from Mikulov, set among the lush Moravian countryside, lies the romantic Lednice-Valtice Cultural Area, a UNESCO world heritage site. Two Gothic-style castles, residences of the Lichtenstein family until the end of World War II, mark the spot. Acres of parkland—at 77 square miles, it is one of the largest artificial landscapes in Europe—are ideal for a short romantic stroll or a more vigorous hike. This is no ordinary spread. After hiking along well-marked trails through woods and fields, we came upon the Lichtenstein's fantastic "follies." These ornate edifices—one resembled the Arc de Triomphe, another, a minaret—were designed to provide resting and eating places for the nobleman's hunting parties. At the final folly—a semi-circular pavilion—our guides brought us abruptly back to recent history. "There," said one pointing to a nearby barley field. "That's where no-man's land used to be." Before the 1989 Velvet Revolution, the place was strung with barbed wire and studded with watch towers to keep Czech citizens from fleeing across the border to the west.

### Telc

It seemed that no other attraction could provide the enchanted aura of Lednice-Valtice, but then we saw Telc's town square. Another UNESCO site, the wedged-shaped town center is a breathtaking assemblage of Renaissance buildings gathered under facing arcades. Graffito is used to great effect. Local shopkeepers are housed in many of the buildings while some are hotels and restaurants. The Lichtensteins reigned here too and just as at Lednice-Valtice, they were bitten with the redecorating bug; the original Gothic castle was restyled in the 16th century into a Renaissance showpiece. On a tour of the castle, we saw the Knight's Hall which bristled with armor, guns, helmets and other weaponry. Meanwhile, the Golden Hall sported a ceiling with 30 ornate wooden carvings. By this time, we were ready for a refreshing break. What could be better than a trip to the Budweiser factory in Český Budějovice? Visitors can take a tour of the facility, but

don't confuse it with the American beer of the same name. The two companies are locked in a trademark dispute. The tour includes a taste of "mother beer," which is unpasteurized and unfiltered as well as the company's other brews. We walked along a catwalk and watched workers overseeing the assembly line; bottles zoomed along at a dizzying speed before they were packed in cartons and shipped off to stores and restaurants.

### Český Krumlov

For sheer story-book splendor, you can't do better than the southern Bohemian town of Český Krumlov, a village so picturesque that you expect to see Rapunzel letting down her hair from the castle tower. (Yes, you can climb to the top and see if she's actually residing there.) One of the largest castles in Eastern Europe, the palace boasts 300 rooms and five courtyards, an original Baroque theater with splendid sets, and some bone-chilling history. Český Krumlov castle was founded by the lords of Krumlov in the first half of the 13th century. From its towering windows, high above the quaint, steeply pitched streets that curve down to the Vltava River, the peculiar Czech practice of "defenestration" was carried out. Here offending citizens were dispatched summarily from the castles windows—left to tumble to the ground far below to an almost certain death. Today, the only slightly fearsome inhabitants of the castle—two bears—reside by the moat, a distraction for tourists who yearn for a break from yesteryear.

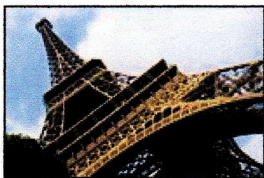
### Getting Around

Trains and buses link the towns and cities of the Czech Republic but check schedules before embarking. Renting a car is another option, though road signs may be difficult to decipher since they are written in the Czech alphabet which contains unfamiliar pronunciation marks. Many tour companies offer guided excursions as well. And while many Czechs speak English, it's best to carry a Czech phrase book with you. Hotels and restaurants are plentiful, though air conditioning is scarce. The Czech diet is based on meat and potatoes. Pork is plentiful; chicken and meat are also available. Sauerkraut accompanies nearly every meal.

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