

Did You Know?

- Czechs typically eat a kind of fish called carp for dinner on Christmas Eve.
- Nearly 40 percent of Czechs are *atheists* (believe that there is no God).
- The word *robot*, which means “labor,” was invented by a Czech writer named Karel Capek.
- Because of a shortage of affordable housing, young married couples tend to live with their parents until they can be independent.
- The Czech Republic has nearly 21,800 artificial lakes, which are used mainly for fish farming.
- In the Czech Republic, it is not considered rude to stare at other people in public.
- You should take off your shoes when you enter someone’s home in the Czech Republic.
- Charles University, the oldest university in the Czech Republic, was founded in 1348 by Charles IV, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire.
- One of the tallest skyscrapers in the Czech Republic once had an office built into its elevator so the boss could constantly ride up and down in the building supervising all the employees.
- The Charles Bridge in Prague was originally built using mortar made from eggs, flour, and honey.
- The Christmas song “Good King Wenceslas” was named for Wenceslaus I, once a Duke of Bohemia, a large region in the western Czech Republic.

Flag

Each color on the flag represents one of the three important regions in the country. Red is Moravia’s color and represents the blood shed for freedom. White symbolizes the sky and is the traditional color of Bohemia. Blue represents political independence and is the traditional color of Slovakia, which is now an independent country. In 1993, when Czechoslovakia became two independent nations, the Czech Republic kept this flag as its symbol. The current flag was adopted in 1920.



National Image

Representing birth, richly decorated eggs are a tradition that goes back hundreds of years among many European cultures. The Czech Republic is known for producing some of the most beautiful designs in the world, and folk artists from the Czech Republic travel the world displaying their creations.



People and Places

Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.)
30,451
Area (sq. km.)
78,867



The Czech Republic is a small country roughly the same size as Serbia or the state of South Carolina. It is divided into three major geographic regions. Bohemia makes up nearly two-thirds of the western part of the country, and Moravia occupies most of the remaining one-third on the eastern side. Silesia, the smallest of the three regions, sits on the northeastern border with Poland.

Mountains surround much of the Czech Republic, forming natural borders with several of its neighbors. The interior of Bohemia is relatively flat and home to farmland that produces sugar beets, grain, grapes, flax, and *hops* (an important flavoring ingredient in the brewing of beer). Gently rolling hills and a central valley make Moravia also an ideal region for farming. Coal, copper, silver, and lead are available in both Moravia and Silesia. Bohemia's rivers flow north to the *Labe* (Elbe) River and on to the North Sea, while Moravia's rivers flow south to the Danube and on to the Black Sea.

Summers are moderate, with the highest temperatures usually coming in July, although temperatures vary widely depending on elevation. A cool 50°F (10°C) in the mountains could be matched on the same day with a much warmer 86°F (30°C) in the lower valleys and plains. The capital city, Prague, usually records the hottest temperatures in the country, but these typically average 75–80°F (24–27°C). Winters are cold, with snow in the mountains and temperatures usually below freezing. Snow sometimes falls in the lower regions and tends to be slushy and wet.

Population

Population
10,644,842



A large majority of the population is Bohemian. Moravians and Slovaks make up a small percentage of the population, along with a combination of people from various ethnic groups, including Russians, Germans, Poles, Ukrainians, Greeks, Romanians, Hungarians, Vietnamese, and Bulgarians. Many Roma (Gypsies) also make their homes in the Czech Republic but are difficult to count because they do not like to state their ethnic identity for fear of *discrimination* (being treated differently or poorly because of one's race), which continues to be a problem in the country. The majority of the population lives in cities, and more than one million people live in Prague, the capital.

Language

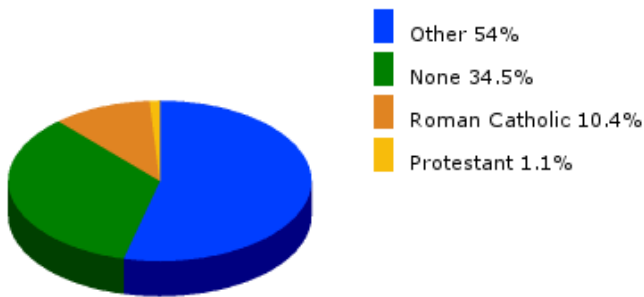
Czech, like Russian and Polish, is a Slavic language (a language group that began in Eastern Europe). Until the 14th century, Latin was used for writing and Czech for speaking, but Czech gradually gained popularity as a written language and has since become the main spoken and written language of the country. Like English, Czech uses a Latin alphabet, but with several distinct accent marks and letters. The marks *ˇ*, *´*, and *°* appear over consonants or vowels to soften or lengthen the sound. When a woman marries, the ending *-ova* ("wife of") is added to her husband's last name to become her new last name. For example, if the husband's last name is Vyskocil, the wife's new last name becomes *Vyskocilova*.

Minority groups speak their own languages. In addition to speaking Czech, young Czechs typically also speak German, Russian, or English (or all three) as second languages.

Can You Say It in Czech?

Hello	<i>Ahoj!</i>	(uh-HOY)
Good-bye	<i>Nashledanou</i>	(NOSK-le-DON-oh)
Please	<i>Prosím</i>	(PRO-seem)
Thank you	<i>Děkuji</i>	(DECK-kwee)
Yes	<i>Ano</i>	(AH-no)
No	<i>Ne</i>	(neh)

Religion



Source: *The World Factbook 2016. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2016.*

Although Christianity has played a central role in Czech history, a majority of Czechs do not attend church regularly. Religion tends to be a private matter for Czechs, and 40 years of official *atheism* (the belief that there is no God) made them suspicious of churches. Beautiful churches in Prague and throughout the countryside are visited mostly by tourists. More than a third of Czechs consider themselves *atheists*; however, since 1990, there has been an increase in the number of Czechs who claim some religious belief.

History

Time Line

400 AD	
400s	Slavic tribes begin settling in the area of what is now the Czech Republic
800	
800s	By this time, the Slavic tribes have united to make up the Great Moravian Empire
863	Greek missionaries convert the people to Christianity
900	

900s The Bohemian Empire, centered in Prague, is established



1300

1300s Prague becomes an important cultural and political center; construction on Charles Bridge begins



1500

1526 Parts of what is now the Czech Republic are combined with Austria, Slovakia, and Hungary, forming the Austro-Hungarian Empire ruled by the Hapsburg monarchy from Vienna

1800 Czechs try to restore their lost culture, including its language, history, and literature; Czech authors begin writing and publishing novels, poems, plays, and newspapers in Czech

1900

1918 Following World War I, Czechoslovakia becomes an independent state

1938 Hitler *annexes* (takes over) the Sudetenland, a region in the northwest where many German-speaking people live

1939 Germany invades the rest of Czechoslovakia; World War II begins

1945 The Soviet Union *liberates* (frees) Czechoslovakia at the end of World War II



1946 Elections are held under Soviet direction

1948 Communists gain control of the government

1968	During the Prague Spring of early 1968, Czechoslovakian leader Alexander Dubček tries to introduce reforms that will make the country <i>democratic</i> (government by the people), but a Soviet-led army crushes the movement	
1989	In what is known as the Velvet Revolution, the Czechs overthrow communist rule through nonviolent protest	
1990	The first free elections since 1942 are held	
1993	Czechoslovakia splits peacefully into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in what becomes known as the Velvet Divorce	
1999	The Czech Republic becomes a part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)	
2000		
2004	The Czech Republic gains European Union (EU) membership	
2009	The Czech Republic takes over the presidency of the EU	
2013	Czech voters participate in the first open presidential election	
2014	Czechs celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution; celebrations are disrupted by protests against the current president for his failure to advance human rights	
PRESENT		

Prague and King Charles IV

The modern Czech Republic was once a loosely connected kingdom made up of Slavic tribes in the east, Bohemians in the west, and *nomadic* (wandering) *Magyars* (ancestors of today's Hungarians). King Charles IV governed his vast empire from the city of Prague, which he had built up into an important political and cultural capital in Europe. He oversaw the construction of some of the most magnificent historical buildings in Prague, including St. Vitus Cathedral and the Charles Bridge. He also established Charles University and is known as the father of the country. Later, the Protestant Reformation would have its roots in Prague when Jan Hus, a Bohemian priest and philosopher, was burned at the stake for *heresy* (speaking out against the Catholic Church).



Czechoslovakia

At the end of World War I, the lands of the Czechs and Slovaks were combined into a single *democratic* (government by the people) nation called Czechoslovakia. As World War II began, Adolph Hitler took control over much of Czechoslovakia and claimed that it belonged to Germany. Many thousands of Czechoslovakians, including 250,000 Czech Jews, lost their lives in the war. After the war ended, half a million Germans and several thousand Hungarians were forced to leave the country.



The Prague Spring

Early in 1968, under the presidency of Alexander Dubček, life in Czechoslovakia began to offer more political and personal freedom to its people. Citizens of the country had more liberty to say and write what they thought, and they were allowed to travel more freely than they had been permitted to do during earlier times. This brief but lively period of freedom, known as the Prague Spring, was soon crushed by military forces from the Soviet Union, which rolled their tanks into Prague in August 1968, effectively putting an end to most of the changes that President Dubček had begun. However, the taste for freedom remained strong in the Czech people, and 20 years later they would successfully gain their independence from the Soviet Union.



The Velvet Revolution

Czechoslovakia finally gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1989 when thousands of Czechs, many of them students, participated in several strikes to express their unhappiness with the way the government was controlling their lives. Student protestors walked peacefully into the center of Prague, holding memorial candles and calling for an end to communism. Hundreds of thousands joined the students, facing an armed police force. The communist government fell, and a man named Václav Havel, a famous playwright who had been sent to prison for his political views, was elected president in a free election. Because this revolutionary change took place without the use of military force or through the spilling of blood, it became known as the Velvet Revolution.



Four years later, Czechoslovakians voted to split themselves into two independent nations—the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The Czech Republic later became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU).

Lifestyle

Games and Sports

Czechs love to play outside. Some of their favorite activities include hiking, camping, swimming, and gardening. Many Czech families continue a popular tradition of going to their country cottage to relax and enjoy nature on the weekend. Plenty of snowfall means that winter activities such as skiing, snowboarding, speed skating, and ice hockey are popular. The Czech Republic national hockey team has won several world championship titles. Soccer and tennis are popular activities during the warmer months. World-famous Czech athletes include Martina Navratilova (tennis), Jaromir Jagr (ice hockey), Jan Zelezny (javelin), and Ivan Lendl (tennis).



Holidays

Christmas Eve is the most important part of Christmas for Czechs, and people eat a kind of fish called carp for dinner in honor of their Catholic heritage. They also eat *vánočka*, a fruit bread, in the days leading up to Christmas and during Lent. Small marzipan candies or paper cards in the shape of pigs are given in the New Year for good luck.

All Saints' Day (1 Nov.) and St. Nicholas Day (6 Dec.) are celebrated but are not days off from work. On St. Nicholas Day, adults often dress as angels, devils, or Santa Claus and walk the streets asking children if they've been good or bad. Each village or town also celebrates a day for its patron saint with fairs, dancing, feasting, and Mass. Name days are personal holidays commemorating the saint after whom a person is named. On this day, a person receives gifts, greetings, and toasts from friends and family. Czech Founding Day (28 Oct.) is an important public holiday that celebrates the beginning of the Czech state at the end of World War I. St. Wenceslas Day (28 Sept.) honors the beloved Bohemian duke Wenceslas, patron saint of the Czech Republic.



Food

Czechs eat three meals a day and often a midmorning snack. Breakfast usually consists of coffee and rolls or bread with butter and jam or ham and cheese. Lunch often begins with a hearty soup, followed by a main dish of meat and potatoes or bread dumplings. A common dinner dish is *knedlo, vepřo, zelo* (sauerkraut, pork roast, and dumplings). Hot dogs and pizza are popular snack foods that can be purchased from sidewalk carts. It is okay to refuse second helpings after you have said how good the food is.



Schools

Adult Literacy
99%

The Czechs take education very seriously, and Czech schools are some of the best in Europe. Although children are required to go to school when they turn six, most of them attend a nursery school as early as three or four years old. After finishing grade school, they can select one of several tracks to follow: academic (a preparation for college), technical, art, or teaching. Czechs can choose to enter high school after fifth grade, after seventh grade, or after ninth grade. There are several colleges and universities that students may choose to attend, the oldest of which is Charles University, founded in 1348. Students at public universities pay a small amount for tuition.



Life as a Kid

Many young people in the Czech Republic know how to speak two or three different languages. In fact, they often start learning English in first or second grade. After school, kids are busy with sports such as soccer, tennis, swimming, kayaking, or archery. Some enjoy learning how to play musical instruments as well. If they have time, Czech kids enjoy hanging out with their friends or texting them.

When kids get home, they take off their shoes inside the house. Sometimes they put on house shoes called *bachkory* and change out of their school clothes into more comfortable play clothes. They are also expected to help around the house and complete chores, including cleaning their rooms, vacuuming, doing the dishes, or taking care of their younger siblings. In countryside villages, children also do yard work and help gather firewood for the winter. Most homes in the countryside do not have clothes dryers, so children help by hanging the laundry out to dry on clotheslines.

Kids in the Czech Republic love participating in festivals where young people dance and perform gymnastic moves in groups that are sometimes as large as a thousand people. Birthdays are celebrated twice each year for each person. One birthday is to celebrate the child's actual birthday, and the other birthday is to celebrate the child's "name day"—the day each year that is assigned the same name as the child. In the spring, young Czech boys make whips to use on "whipping day." Boys use a soft twig from a birch tree to "whip" the girl they like. Getting "whipped" is believed to make it easier for you to have children.



Society

Government

Capital

Prague

Head of State

President Miloš Zeman

Head of Government

Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka



The Czech Republic is divided into 13 regions and one capital district. Each region has its own local government, which is elected by the residents of the region. Each region is responsible for providing such services as police protection, education, and driver's licenses.

The country's president is elected by the people to a five-year term. The prime minister is head of the government and leads Parliament's majority party or *coalition* (a group of parties). Parliament (or the National Council) is composed of an 81-seat *Senát* (Senate) and a 200-seat *Poslanecká Snemovna* (Chamber of Deputies). You must be 18 to vote.

Money and Economy

Currency
Czech koruna



Agriculture is a small but important part of the Czech economy, and the country produces many different kinds of crops, including wheat, *hops* (a grain used to make beer), sugar beets, potatoes, barley, rye, onions, and many kinds of fruit. Heavy industry is also important in the Czech Republic. Its factories produce heavy machinery, cars and trucks, military equipment, and beautiful glass products. The Czech Republic gets most of its electricity from coal- and nuclear-powered plants. Its gas and oil come mainly from Russia. Millions of tourists visit the country every year, most of them making a stop in Prague to see the historic buildings or to visit health spas west of the city.

Getting Around

Although many more people own cars now than did before independence, public buses, trams, and both fast and slow trains are still popular and efficient modes of travel throughout the country. Prague, the capital city, has a subway system, and there is a large amount of boat traffic on the Elbe River. A network of good roads is available for those with cars of their own, but drivers must purchase a special sticker to drive on the highways. Toll roads are also common. Because of its location in Central Europe, the Czech Republic receives a lot of business and tourist traffic passing through on its way to and from surrounding countries. Three major airports provide local and international air service.



Culture Facts & Contacts

Glassblowing

Czechs are proud of their reputation as some of the best makers of decorative glass and crystal in the world. Using long tubes and very hot furnaces to heat the glass, highly skilled craftsmen blow through a tube into a lump of heated glass attached to the end of the tube. Using only their breath and a few simple shaping tools, glassblowers rotate, blow, and bend the glass while at the same time holding it over a flame to keep it hot and flexible. Once they achieve a piece of glass of the desired shape, they cool, polish, and often decorate it with paint or other intricate markings. These master glassblowers produce beautiful glass objects. Hanging ornaments for Christmas or other times of the year, delicate vases, and gracefully shaped crystal bowls are among their favorite creations.



It can take as many as 10 years or more to become a master glassblower, and one must pass a difficult test of skills before claiming this title. Much of the work of glassblowing is still done by hand, although often this work takes place in large factories rather than in small shops as it once did. Occasionally, you may still find a master glassblower still at work in a small shop making beautiful glass objects in the old way.

Learn More

Contact the Embassy of the Czech Republic, 3900 Spring of Freedom Street NW, Washington, DC 2008; phone (202) 274-9100; web site www.mzv.cz/washington. Or contact the Czech Tourist Authority, phone (212) 288-0830; web site www.czechtourism.com.

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Czech Republic



Mount Sněžka (5,256 ft, 1,602 m) is the highest point in the Czech Republic.

