

HISTORY AND FAIRY TALES

The beauty of Czech castles

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The Czech Republic has many things to be proud of and one of them is the huge number of castles and chateaux•. In fact, with over 2,000 of them, it has more castles and chateaux per square mile than any other country in the world. So how do you choose which ones to visit? It is not easy, but here are some castles we picked, and in the May-June issue you can look forward to a selection of chateaux.



Křivoklát

Křivoklát is one of the country's oldest and most important castles. Czech kings, including Přemysl Otakar II and Charles IV, used to stay here. It is a proper **medieval**¹ castle, complete with towers, a **moat**² and **dungeons**³. Because of this and its romantic setting in the beautiful Bohemian hills it is a popular place for films to be made, both Czech and international. If you watch *Noc na Karlštejně*, *The Brothers Grimm* or *Wanted*, be sure to look out for Křivoklát.

Zvíkov

Sitting where the Vltava and Otava rivers meet, Zvíkov is a typical **defensive**⁴ castle. Its highest tower has an irregular shape with a **pointed part**⁵ – if attackers threw stones at the castle, the pointed part would have protected the structure better than the usual round shape. One of the most interesting parts of the castle is the **chapel**⁶ of St. Wenceslas decorated with Gothic **murals**⁷. Legends say that a ghost called *Rarášek* lives in one of the castle's towers.



Pernštejn

One of the most beautiful Moravian castles stands on a rock above the Nedvědička river. Obviously, the founders made a good decision about where to build it as, in the castle's 800-year history, Pernštejn **has never been conquered**⁸. Its name originates from the German *Bärenstein*, which means 'bear rock'. The castle has kept its late Gothic / Renaissance look from the 16th century, and you might have seen it not only in many Czech fairy tales but also in the US action-fantasy movie *Van Helsing*.



Landštejn

If you walk from the picturesque town of Slavonice through the beautiful countryside, you will be able to see the castle emerging from the forest as you get closer. Once inside, you will discover its unique layout – two towers connected by a palace. This is so unusual that it makes Landštejn one of the most significant Romanesque monuments in central Europe. It **was abandoned**¹³ in 1771 when it **was struck by lightning**¹⁴, which caused a devastating fire.



Bezděz

This castle, founded by Přemysl Otakar II, can be seen from miles away thanks to its location on top of a hill. It is a bit of a climb to get there, but you are rewarded with great views of the so-called Mácha region and a fantastic castle preserved in its original early-Gothic form. In the 17th and 18th centuries Bezděz served as a **monastery**⁹. There are many legends and unanswered questions about Bezděz, such as ‘did the **monks**¹⁰ who lived here really hide treasure somewhere within the castle?’ The castle **features**¹¹ in Mácha’s story *Večer na Bezdězu* and Smetana’s opera *Tajemství*.



Špilberk

Guarding over the city of Brno is Špilberk, built in the 13th century as a royal castle. In the 17th century it was turned into a strong Baroque **fortress**¹⁵ which contained a very harsh and much **feared**¹⁶ prison. Now it is home to the Brno City Museum. The best part of the tour is exploring the casemates – dark scary rooms in the **fortifications**¹⁷ that were used as prison cells. Špilberk also has one of the deepest **wells**¹⁸ in the Czech Republic – more than 110 metres deep.

Helštýn

Also called Helfštejn, this is one of the largest castles in the Czech Republic. It is said that its founder Fridoš was a **marauding knight**¹⁹ who stole the land from someone else, built the castle and then robbed people travelling on the nearby roads. Various aristocratic families have owned the castle, but in the 18th century it was deserted. Today, **blacksmiths**²⁰ from many countries come to Helštýn every summer to show their art at a festival called Hefaiston. Some of their works are exhibited at the castle throughout the year.



Bouzov

Although this castle was originally founded as a medieval fortress, its appearance is now completely different. In the 17th century, it was sold to the Teutonic Knights (a German military and religious **order**¹²), and they had the castle radically rebuilt at the end of the 19th century, using elements of German architecture. It gave Bouzov its romantic look, quite different from other Czech castles. The design naturally attracts film-makers, and many popular fairy tales, such as *O princezně Jasněnce a létajícím ševci* and *Arabela*, were filmed there.

VOCABULARY

- ¹ **medieval** [mediˈi:v(ə)] – středověký
- ² **moat** [məʊt] – příkop
- ³ **dungeon** [ˈdʌndʒ(ə)n] – žalář, kobka
- ⁴ **defensive** [diˈfensɪv] – obranný
- ⁵ **pointed part** – břit
- ⁶ **chapel** [ˈtʃæp(ə)] – kaple
- ⁷ **mural** [ˈmjʊərə(ə)] – nástěnná malba
- ⁸ **to conquer** [ˈkɒŋkə] – dobýt
- ⁹ **monastery** [ˈmɒnəst(ə)rɪ] – klášter

- ¹⁰ **monk** [mʌŋk] – mnich
- ¹¹ **to feature** [ˈfi:tʃə] – objevit se
- ¹² **order** [ˈɔ:də] – řád
- ¹³ **to abandon** [əˈbændən] – opustit
- ¹⁴ **was struck by lightning** [strʌk ˈlaɪtɪŋ] – byl zasažen bleskem
- ¹⁵ **fortress** [ˈfɔ:trɪs] – pevnost
- ¹⁶ **feared** [fiəd] – obávaný
- ¹⁷ **fortifications** [ˌfɔ:tɪfɪˈkeɪʃ(ə)n] – opevnění
- ¹⁸ **well** [wel] – studna
- ¹⁹ **marauding knight** [mɑːˈrɔ:ɪdɪŋ naɪt] – loupeživý rytíř
- ²⁰ **blacksmith** [ˈblæksmɪθ] – kovář

LANGUAGE POINT

The Czech word *zámek* can be translated in various ways. In Britain it might be called a palace (if royalty, a bishop or emperor lived there), or a mansion, manor house or country house (all used to describe large, grand houses). Czech travel guides usually use a French word, *chateau* (plural *chateaux*), to translate *zámek*.