

FESTIVALS & CUSTOMS

As in much of the rest of the Western world, many holidays in the Czech Republic are observed only nominally, as days off from work. Traffic will be lighter, public transportation slower, and small shops and government agencies closed, but beyond that, there might be no way for a visitor to know that it's a state holiday.

That said, when Czechs do decide to celebrate—whether for a special holiday like Christmas or a notable occasion such as a name day or wedding—there are definite customs and traditions observed that may be unexpected to an outsider.

THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

The biggest holiday on the Czech calendar is Christmas, with formal holidays extending from December 24 through 26. The Christmas season kicks off much earlier, however, with December 5, Mikuláš (St. Nicholas' Eve), the unofficial start date.

On that date, the streets of the city fill with groups of costumed figures: angels, devils, and St. Nicholases. The tradition is for groups of the three to visit individual apartments to see the children of the household. All Czech children know that if they haven't been good,

the devil can take them away in a sack on Mikuláš. The role of the angel is to protect the children from the devil, while St. Nicholas elicits a song or poem from the children and gives them a little present in return.



If you ask a Czech adult about Mikuláš, many will readily admit that in their childhood December 5 was one of the most stressful days on the calendar. The “best” devils are remarkably frightening-looking, especially for small children—with blackened faces, wild wigs, horns, tails, and a sack with chains—and it is ingrained from an early age that the devil and his sack are more than ready to take naughty children back to hell.

For visitors, Mikuláš is a wonderful time to be in the center of Prague. Old Town Square fills with people of all ages and countless trios of the three main players. Even little babies in carriages wear the small, electric devil horns for sale at the holiday market that springs up around this time in the square.

It's safe to say that many such notions would not play well in North America, but in the Czech Republic, it's a much-anticipated way to kick off the Christmas celebrations.

As Christmas draws closer, other traditions get underway as well. Christmas cookies in vast number and variety are considered required work in most families, and the family bakers start several weeks in advance to craft the tiny masterpieces, many of which are designed to "age" in the weeks before Christmas. From crumbly almond crescents to intricately molded marzipan beehives, the cookies on offer in Czech households will delight and astound. Unfortunately for visitors, very few of the baked goods and only the most common varieties are sold in commercial stores—the handcrafting necessary doesn't lend itself to mass marketing.

About a week before Christmas, live Christmas tree stands and—more confusingly for visitors—huge aluminum tanks appear in the public squares and on busy street corners. The tanks are filled with live carp, the official Christmas dish of the Czech Republic. Carp buyers can choose to take their fish home live, where they will



be kept in the bathtub until Christmas Eve, or they can have them "whacked" and processed there on the street.

The fish entrails are never thrown away, as they create the basis for the soup that is the first course of the Christmas dinner. The carp itself is fried in batter, and served traditionally with potato salad. Non-fish-eaters might be offered *kuřecí řízek* (breaded chicken breast prepared like Wiener schnitzel). Sometimes a special rolled sausage will be served as well.

Carp may not seem like the most obvious Christmas dish, but the popular theory is that carp was a cheap enough "centerpiece" to be affordable for everyone, even peasants. Carp is also a traditional Christmas dish in parts of Poland and Germany.

Czech families celebrate the gift-giving portion of the holidays on December 24, and that is also the traditional day for the big Christmas dinner. The Christmas tree is a part of the celebration, but it is put up on Christmas Eve, once the children have been



taken somewhere else. Once the tree is decorated and the presents are in place, a small bell is rung to signify that *Ježíšek*—the Czech equivalent of Santa Claus whose name literally means "Little Jesus" but is not a religious figure—has come and the children can return. The number of presents is more important than the size or scale of the

items, and the opening can take many hours.

Christmas is very much considered to be a private family holiday, so it is somewhat unlikely that a visitor new to the country would be invited to take part in the celebration. Still, visitors can involve themselves in the season by wandering through the markets, eating at a restaurant that offers Christmas carp (*karp*), or attending a church service.

Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and the day after Christmas (St. Stephen's Day) are considered state holidays, and many businesses and all government agencies will be closed. Because of the three-day holidays for Christmas and the status of January 1, New Year's Day, as a state holiday as well, some companies simply don't bother to open between Christmas and New Year. Even those businesses that do stay open are likely to be manned by skeleton crews, since the holiday season is a favorite time for package vacations as well.

Given the closures and low staffing levels, the holiday season is a singularly bad choice for a business trip and can even be problematic for a pleasure visit, at least on the state holidays. Dining and shopping choices even in central Prague will be limited, and outside the capital—with the possible exception of ski resorts—it can seem like visiting a ghost town.

NEW YEAR'S EVE AND NEW YEAR'S DAY New Year's Eve is called "Silvestr" in Czech and is celebrated with lavish parties, dinners, and fireworks—largely by non-Czechs. The traditional Prager way to spend Silvestr is to leave the city for a small private party at a *chata*, or ski cottage. Most visitors will find themselves in one of the central squares or at the castle to watch the fireworks, which are indeed spectacular but can also be dangerous. Fireworks are sold in myriad retail outlets for several weeks leading up to the holiday, and there are no restrictions on who can buy them. Basic safety rules about lighting (and throwing!) fireworks in crowds are not observed.



As such, Prague tourist centers including Old Town Square, Wenceslas Square, and the castle district are not good spots for families with children on New Year's Eve. The danger factor is simply too high. For the adventurous, however, the celebration is huge and infectious, if sometimes quite cold.

Restaurants traditionally offer a "Silvestr-Menu," a multicourse meal and champagne, instead of their usual fare, and it's important to check the price before sitting down. Such menus are almost always more expensive than regular

offerings, sometimes ridiculously so. Be aware.

New Year's Day is the actual state holiday, and in addition to marking the start of the new year it commemorates Independent Czech State Renewal Day, the date in 1993 when Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. It is not traditionally celebrated with anything more involved than a day off from work to nurse Silvestr hangovers.

EASTER

Given the Czechs' overall lack of affection for organized religion, it is perhaps not surprising that they have put their own spin on Easter traditions. While the faithful do observe the Lenten and Easter season in ways that would be familiar to Christians around the world, on Easter Monday—also the state holiday of the period—the Czechs have their own pagan-origin way to celebrate.

For a week or so before Easter, braided willow switches ranging from tiny to giant are on sale in flower shops and markets. On Easter Monday, men wield the switches to whip women around the ankles. The women—who by tradition are supposed to want to be whipped by as many men as possible—respond to the whipping not by



slugging the men but by presenting them with eggs. Men are supposed to want to collect as many eggs as possible.

Although the tradition has been questioned by some outsiders and feminists, most Czechs see it as harmless fun. However, some women admit to dreading the day because of overeager male relatives, and the practice is less popular than it once was in urban areas.

SPRING WEDDINGS, SUMMER HOLIDAYS

As the sun returns in the spring, the wedding season ramps up at local town halls. As in most European countries, Czechs must have a civil ceremony to make their nuptials official, and Prague's spectacular Old Town Hall on the Old Town Square is a favorite spot. In April and June (May weddings are considered unlucky), the Old Town Hall turns into a virtual assembly line of civil ceremonies, with bridal couples in and out every ten minutes. Once joined, the wedding parties head to waiting cars decorated with flowery window ribbons and small bride and groom figures to go to the reception. The motorcade will then honk its way through town, and it is entirely proper—if not impossible to resist—to wave and smile as they pass.

still considered cause for celebration and honor. In the weeks leading up to the tests, small groups of potential graduates will gather in high-traffic areas such as public transportation stops and squares to raise money for the parties that are held on completion of the exams. Putting a few coins in the can is sure to be appreciated—and the money is likely to be spent on drink.

Summer Vacations

As in most other European countries, summer vacations are taken seriously in the Czech Republic. For their part, Czechs flee the cities for the fresh air of their *chata*s in the summer, and weekends almost universally start early on Friday afternoons. Weekends are spent in the country, and most Czechs will also spend two weeks or more on vacation abroad. The Czech Republic, like most other European countries, offers generous paid vacation to its citizens. Employers are required to give their employees four weeks of paid vacation leave, and many employers tack an additional week onto that. Czech law also states that one vacation should be at least two weeks in length, so many workers take advantage of that stipulation to go on one of the many popular and affordable package vacations to sunny destinations. At least 10 percent will go to the seaside of Croatia.

Both May 1 and 8 are state holidays, honoring May Day for workers and the end of the Second World War, respectively. Parades and demonstrations are not uncommon on May Day, especially among anti-globalization forces, far-right groups, and Communists, and sometimes violence has erupted when the disparate groups meet. However, since the riots of 2000 during a world meeting of the International Monetary Fund, the Czech police have become more adept with crowd control, and as such, the demonstrations in recent years have stayed calm. Many Czechs also mark May 5, which was the beginning of the Czech uprising against Germany at the end of the Second World War in 1945, but it's not a formal holiday.

The Maturita

Another spring rite of passage is the *Maturita*, a state exam given in May and June to secondary school students to allow them to graduate and go on to university (if they can then pass the university entrance exams). The two-part test dates from the mid-nineteenth century, and students must conquer both the written and oral exams in several subjects to pass. Approximately 40 percent of all Czechs have passed the test, and to do so is



Given the high probability that vast swathes of working Czechs will be taking a “Czech Friday” or be on vacation during the summer months (roughly mid-June to September 1), showing up to conduct business is not advised during this time. Delays can stretch to weeks as waves of employees leave for vacation.

The holidays that fall on July 5 and 6—commemorating the arrival of Christianity in the Slavic lands in the ninth century, and the burning of the religious and linguistic reformer Jan Hus at the stake in 1415—take a particular toll on productivity as the two-day holiday often stretches longer. Such vacation largesse may well be too depressing for vacation-starved Americans to cope with on a business trip. Best to wait until the fall.

FALL CELEBRATIONS

Fall sees three state holidays, all commemorating Czech nationhood in some form. On September 28, Czech Statehood Day honors the Czech patron saint, Václav (Wenceslas). A month later, in October, the state recognizes Independent Czechoslovak State Proclamation Day, which marks the founding of the state of Czechoslovakia in 1918. After the Velvet Revolution, November 17 was declared the “Day

of the Fight for Freedom and Democracy” in honor of demonstrators—many of whom were students—who rose up against the Nazis in 1939 and the Communists in 1989. The day is marked mostly by the presence of small shrines with burning candles at significant spots throughout Prague.

Many Czechs also observe a sort of Memorial Day on November 2, once the Day of the Dead (All Souls’ Day) in the Church calendar. It is not a holiday from work and no longer has religious connotations, but people visit and tend the graves of loved ones on this day. Czech cemeteries tend to be beautifully kept up throughout the year.

Fall is also mushroom-picking season for legions of Czechs. Wild mushrooms (*houby*) are used year-round by drying and pickling the fall’s harvest, and most every family has a special mushroom spot. A few Czechs every year die from eating poisonous mushrooms, but given how many do it, it’s a testament to Czech horticultural knowledge that the number is as low as it is.

BIRTHDAYS AND NAME DAYS

For Czechs, “name days” (*svátky*) are actually more important than birthdays. Each day of the calendar corresponds to the name of a saint, and

on that day, anyone who shares the name of that saint will celebrate his or her name day. It is customary to offer a toast and a small gift such as flowers or chocolates or a greeting card. (It is vital to remember that only an odd number of flowers should be given as a gift. Even numbers signify funereal arrangements!)

In an office setting, it is not unusual for coworkers to gather to celebrate a name day with champagne and an exchange of good wishes. Name days for the week are often posted outside flower shops and also appear in most newspapers, including the English-language *Prague Post*.

Birthdays are also celebrated, but on a smaller scale than name days. In addition, the person celebrating the birthday is customarily expected to provide the refreshments, which may seem strange to North Americans. If you are invited to a restaurant for a Czech person's birthday, for example, it would be tradition that the person having the birthday would pay for the dinner, although it would be appreciated if the guests were to bring flowers or another small gift. At the office, a person having a birthday may bring in his or her own cake and champagne to share with the rest of the staff.



HOLIDAYS AND THE CZECH YEAR

January 1	Independent Czech State Renewal Day, New Year
March/April	Easter Monday
May 1	Labor Day
May 8	Liberation Day
July 5	Cyril and Methodius Day
July 6	Jan Hus Day
September 28	Czech Statehood Day
October 28	Independent Czechoslovak State Proclamation Day
November 17	Day of Fight for Freedom and Democracy
December 24	Christmas Eve
December 25	Christmas Day
December 26	St. Stephen's Day