

Term 1

Lesson 1: The Czech Republic

We are now comfortably settled for a few days in the Czech Republic, a country that is less than 30 years old! Despite being a new country, this land has a long and colorful history. At one time, it was a province in the Habsburg Austrian Empire, and before that, a kingdom in the Holy Roman Empire. For most of the twentieth century, the present country of Slovakia was joined with the Czech Republic as the country of Czechoslovakia, which was founded in 1918 following the end of World War I. It remained the only democracy in central Europe during the interwar period. However, following World War II, Czechoslovakia became a communist state until the 1989 Velvet Revolution peacefully ended communist rule and re-established democracy. In 1993 Czechoslovakia peacefully dissolved into the independent states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The Czech Republic, also known by its short-form name Czechia, is just smaller than South Carolina and consists of three historical regions: Bohemia in the west, Moravia in the east, and Czech Silesia in the northeast. As a whole, the republic is a long, narrow strip of land-locked territory bordered by Austria to the south, Germany to the west, Poland to the northeast, and Slovakia to the southeast. The Czech Republic has one of the most stable, wealthy, and developed economies in the world due in part to this strategic location in central Europe. The manufacturing industry is the main pillar of the Czech economy, primarily the automotive industry.

As we travel through the country, we immediately notice the diversity of the Czech landscape. We begin our journey in Bohemia, a land that consists of a basin drained by the Elbe and the Vltava rivers, surrounded by mountain ranges on almost all sides. The basin is of the shape of a baseball diamond, and we might regard the mountains as a mighty grandstand overlooking the diamond. The steep Ore mountains form the frontier with Germany in the northwest, while the Sumava Mountains, which include the Bohemian Forest, create a natural southwestern border with Germany's Bavaria and Austria. The Sudetes Mountains mark the northeastern border with Poland and contain the country's highest point, Mount Snezka, at 1602 meters. The Bohemian-Moravian Highland is the lengthy hilly land that marks the border between Moravia and Bohemia.

At the heart of Bohemia is Prague, the largest city and capital of the Czech Republic. It is the only major city of Europe to escape significant damage during World War II, and we are astounded by its striking beauty and its well-preserved architecture. We stop by the Prague Castle, the largest ancient castle in the world, built in the 9th century, whose walls have been the home of Bohemian Kings and Holy Roman Emperors, and is the office of today's president. On the castle grounds, we visit the magnificent gothic Cathedral of St. Vitus, the country's largest and most important church. The Vltava river weaves through the city, and there

are eighteen bridges from one river bank to the other. We walk over the Charles Bridge, built a hundred years before Captain John Smith landed at Jamestown, and explore Prague's Old Town Square, a captivating area filled with various architectural styles and the world's oldest working astronomical clock, installed in 1410. Throughout the city, we find modern public buildings mixed with old structures erected during the Middle Ages. The city has so many churches that it is sometimes called "the City of a Thousand Spires," despite its reputation as the least religious capital city in the world.

Bohemia has a long history of gems and jewelry and is especially noted for the garnet, a rich red stone from mines in the mountains. Garnets of less value are mined in many other countries, including the United States, but the most beautiful are Bohemia's fiery red stones. The garnets are cut and polished here in Prague, and we can see the cutters at work. After cutting, the gems are polished and made into jewelry. Traditional garnet jewelry from this region brings to mind the inside of a pomegranate, ripe with glistening red seeds. The jewelry was extremely popular during the late nineteenth century when the Victorians wore it, and it has seen a revival in the 21st century. First Lady, Michelle Obama, brought home a Bohemian garnet brooch after visiting the Czech Republic in 2009.

Leaving Prague, we make a rapid trip across Bohemia. The central regions are characterized by lower hilly areas and lowlands of the rivers originating in the bordering mountain chains. Agriculture is a small but important sector of the Czech economy. In the fields, we see many crops such as wheat, rye, barley, oats, and corn, which support the Czech Republic's dozens of small breweries. The Czech Republic has a long tradition of brewing and consuming more beer per capita than any country in the world. We also see cattle and sheep grazing in the fields and now and then pass a flock of geese. The Czech Goose, the only goose breed native to Czechia, was once widespread in the Bohemian countryside and provided a significant income to small farmers.

We cross the Bohemian-Moravian Highland and enter the Czech Republic's eastern province of Moravia, where we enjoy the rolling hills and pretty landscapes. Moravia gave birth to many great scientific minds such as the father of genetics, Gregor Mendel, and psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud. The Morava River traverses the region from north to south and winds its way to the Danube river and eventually to the Black Sea. The region also contains the source of the Oder River, a major tributary of the Baltic Sea. The range of the Beskids, part of the Carpathian Mountains, lies in the southwest on the Czech-Slovakian border. This area is the Czech Republic's premier wine region, and we find vineyards throughout the countryside.

Along the Sazava river, not far from the Austria-Slovakia border, we visit Brno, the Czech Republic's second-largest city. We climb a hill to Spilberk Castle, a medieval castle overlooking the city. The castle was built in the 13th-century to protect the city, and over the years, it has served as a military fortress, barracks, and one of the harshest jails in Europe. The castle walls offer an amazing view of Brno, and from here, we can see the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul sitting atop Petrov Hill in the middle of the city. This Cathedral dates back to the 11th century, and the bells on the cathedral towers ring at 11 am instead of at noon in

remembrance of a legendary trick played on the Swedish army as it lay siege to Brno during the Thirty Years' War. As the story goes, the invading Swedes had promised they would abandon the siege if they failed to conquer the city before the bells started to ring at noon. For this reason, some shrewd citizens decided to ring the bells one hour earlier, fooling the Swedes into breaking off the siege and saving the city.

Maps

[Political Map of Eastern-Central Europe](#)

[Political Map of Czech Republic](#)

[Physical Map of Czech Republic](#)

[Czech Republic Map with Borders](#)

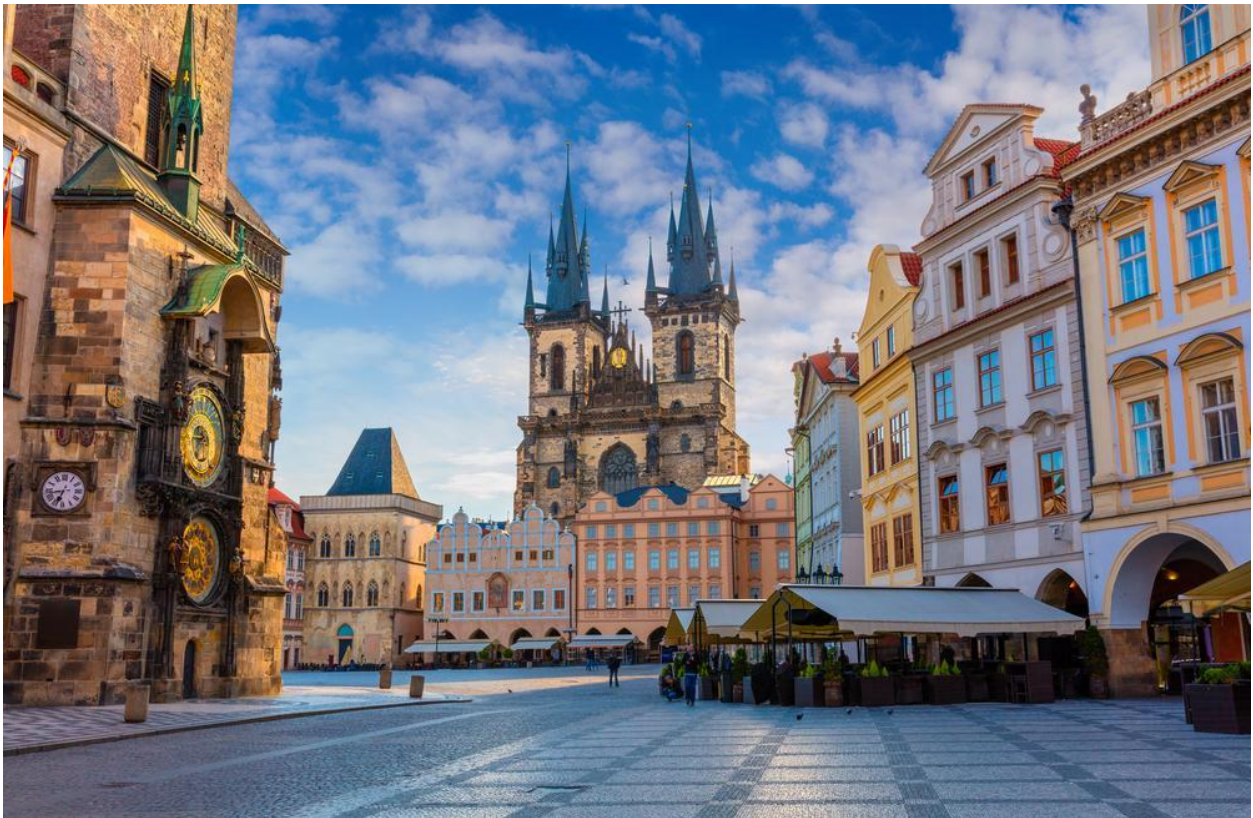
Map Questions

1. Name the borders of the Czech Republic. (Germany to the west, Poland to the northeast, Slovakia to the southeast, and Austria to the south)
2. Name the northernmost and southernmost latitudes of the Czech Republic. Find some other countries that fall within these latitudes. (48.33 degrees N – 51 degrees N)
3. The Czech Republic is traditionally divided into three lands. Name these historical regions. (Bohemia, Moravia, and Czech Silesia)
4. Name any mountain ranges that surround the Czech Republic. (Sumava- Bohemian Forest is part of this, Ore Mountains, Sudetes, and the Beskids)
5. Name two rivers that find their source in the Sudetes near the border with Poland? (Elbe and Morava) Name the river that flows the entire length of Moravia and forms part of the Czech-Slovakia border. (Morava) Trace the Morava to its mouth. The Morava is a tributary to what large river? (Danube)
6. Name any tributaries to the Elbe? (Vltava) Through which city does it pass? (Prague) Name the mouth of the Elbe. (North Sea)
7. Through which other countries does the Oder flow? (Poland, Germany) Name its mouth. (Baltic Sea)
8. Name three cities in Bohemia and three cities in Moravia. (Bohemia- Prague, Plzen, Liberec; Moravia- Brno, Olomouc, Ostrava)

Pictures



Vltava River and Charles Bridge in Prague



Prague's Old Town Square and Astronomical Clock



Castle Krivoklat in Central Bohemia. One of nearly 1200 castles in the Czech Republic



Bouzov Castle: 14th Century fortress in Moravia



Grapes growing at South Moravian winery



Cesky Krumlov: City in Southern Bohemia