
EASTERN EUROPE: CZECH REPUBLIC, POLAND & HUNGARY

Lecture by Cameron Hewitt

The “Big Three” most accessible and enjoyable Eastern European countries—extremely different but complementary.

General Travel Tips

Get past your Cold War blinders: Communism is old news here in “Central” Europe.

Accommodations: Good quality, mostly new, but expensive (close to Western European prices).

Transportation: Cheap and easy, but can be a bit slow. Use trains (especially night trains) or cheap flights to connect these far-flung cities. For budget flights, check Skyscanner.com; for train connections, see Bahn.com.

Cuisine: Better and more varied than you might expect. Each country has its own flavors. If you avoid touristy places, food is very affordable.

Communication: Easy. English is widely spoken. But learn a few polite words to impress locals.

Currency: Different in each country, but ATMs are everywhere. In general, the East is cheaper than the West... but not as much as it once was.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Prague

The “Golden City of a Hundred Spires” is Eastern Europe’s most romantic and accessible destination.

New Town: Bustling, modern urban zone centered on Wenceslas Square, oozing with recent history (e.g., “Velvet Revolution” in 1989). Local guides are a great value everywhere.

Old Town: Showpiece Old Town Square, monument to Jan Hus (the Czech Martin Luther), Astronomical Clock. Extremely crowded (like all of Prague); use smart sightseeing strategies, and wear a money belt to foil pickpockets.

Music: Tourist shows & serious concerts. Grand venues. Use ticket office to understand options.

Jewish Quarter (Josefov): Former Jewish ghetto, now a museum with several synagogues and an evocative cemetery. In the Old Town.

Architecture: Buildings from every era, including Gothic towers, “Czech Cubism” (Black Madonna House), Art

Nouveau (Municipal House), and contemporary (Gehry’s “Dancing House”).

Charles Bridge: Famous medieval thoroughfare crossing the Vltava River, lined with saintly statues.

Lesser Town (Malá Strana): “Lesser” = below the castle. Tranquil Kampa Island. Graffiti on Lennon Wall.

Castle Town: Old Royal Palace. St. Vitus’ Cathedral with glorious stained glass by Art Nouveau painter Alfons Mucha (who has his own museum in the New Town). Mucha’s *Slav Epic* now on display in Prague for the first time.

Czech Beer: Europe’s best and cheapest. Famous brands include Pilsner Urquell, Staropramen, and the *real* Budweiser.

Other Czech Sights

Český Krumlov: Charming medieval town about 3 hrs south of Prague. Good day trip, even better overnight. Colorful castle, mellow Old Town, twisty river for fun canoe trips.

Moravia: Low-key, romantic, rustic eastern half of the country.

POLAND

Kraków

Poland’s historic capital; still its cultural and intellectual capital. The “Next Prague.”

Old Town: Compact, ringed by fragments of wall and shady Planty park. Easy to walk everywhere.

Main Market Square: One of Europe’s best squares and centerpiece of Old Town. St. Mary’s Church with Viet Stoss altarpiece. Giant yellow Cloth Hall houses souvenir stands, 19th-century Polish art upstairs, excavations underground.

Milk Bar (*Bar Mleczny*): Cheap but tasty Polish cafeteria, holdover from communist days. Delicious borscht (beet soup). Żubrówka is famous vodka with blade of bison grass.

Wawel Hill: Site of Poland’s historic castle and most important church and national mausoleum, Wawel Cathedral. Home church of John Paul II.

Wieliczka: Salt mine near Kraków with carved statues, giant underground chapel.

Kazimierz: Former Jewish community decimated by Holocaust. Still has several synagogues and cemeteries. *Schindler's List* set and filmed here. Schindler's Factory Museum for WWII history.

Other Polish Sights

Auschwitz-Birkenau: Notorious Nazi concentration camp, now a poignant memorial to the Holocaust. Divided into two parts: Auschwitz I (work camp, now museum) and Birkenau (vast death camp). A 1.5-hour drive west of Kraków.

Warsaw: Capital city bombed flat in WWII, now rebuilt and becoming a super-modern metropolis. Stalin's monstrous Palace of Culture and Science. Reconstructed Old Town with Royal Palace, mermaid statue. Chopin's hometown.

Gdańsk: City on Baltic coast with gorgeous Hanseatic Old Town, maritime heritage (medieval crane), shipyard with Solidarity museum and Lech Wałęsa history.

HUNGARY

Budapest

Mighty Magyar capital straddling the Danube, divided in two parts: hilly, historic Buda (with castle) and flat, urban Pest (with most attractions).

Castle Hill: Historic but fairly dull, Royal Palace, Matthias Church, great views.

Chain Bridge: Iconic bridge over the Danube.

Public Transportation: Metro, trams, and buses are essential for getting around this huge city. Nighttime Danube cruise is worthwhile.

Váci utca: Famous, overrated, pedestrians-only shopping street in downtown Pest; was enclave of the West during "goulash communism."

Parliament: Tourable interior, several interesting monuments outside (including Imre Nagy, the hero of the 1956 Uprising).

Great Market Hall: Souvenirs, produce, paprika.

Andrássy út: Boulevard from city center to City Park, several sights (e.g., St. István's Basilica).

Opera House: Daily tours plus affordable opera.

House of Terror: Modern museum documenting the Nazis and communists, in their former HQ.

Great Synagogue: Second-biggest on earth, with museum and *Tree of Life* monument.

Heroes' Square: Millennium Monument with statues of historic Hungarians, gateway to...

City Park: Transylvanian castle, Art Nouveau zoo, chess players, Széchenyi Baths, and Hungarians at play.

Thermal Baths: Top Hungarian experience, less intimidating than they seem—you can stay clothed the entire time. Jets, whirlpools, steam baths, saunas, chess. Best are local-style Széchenyi Baths (in City Park) and touristy/upscale Gellért Baths (in Buda); also old Turkish-style Rudas Baths (in Buda).

Other Hungarian Sights

Memento Park: Collection of communist "Socialist Realist" monuments, just outside Budapest.

Eger: Mid-size city 2.5 hrs from Budapest, good for a day trip or overnight. Historic castle where Dobó István held off Ottomans in the 16th century. Beautiful Baroque architecture: Minorite Church, basilica, lyceum. Workaday, untouristy market hall. Local wine region ("Bull's Blood").

Pécs: Colorful, historic city slathered with decorative Zsolnay tiles. Former Ottoman mosque now a church.

Bratislava, Slovakia: Capital between Budapest and Vienna, worth quick visit if passing through. Rejuvenated Old Town, hilltop castle, dreary communist sprawl mixed with high-rises.

LEARN MORE

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