

EXCURSIONS

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The Central Bohemian countryside, most of it within an hour's train or bus ride from Prague, is rich in rural landscapes, medieval towns and historic sights. This chapter lists a selection of day trips and potential overnight visits that can be made easily using public transport. At the top of the list are photogenic Karlštejn Castle, the appealing silver-mining town of Kutná Hora and the harrowing former concentration camp, Terezín.

CASTLES & CHATEAUX

Central Bohemia is rich in castles and chateaux, the former country seats of kings and aristocrats. Popular castles include **Karlštejn** (right), a fairytale fortress built to house Charles IV's royal treasury; **Konopiště** (p232), the country retreat of the ill-fated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, whose assassination kicked off WWI; and the Lobkowitz family's chateau at **Mělník** (p233), with its tiny but historic vineyard overlooking the confluence of the Labe and Vltava Rivers.

MEDIEVAL TOWNS

There are many interesting medieval towns in the region surrounding Prague, offering an escape from the crowds that churn through the capital's narrow streets. **Litoměřice** (p236) has a picture-postcard town square lined with lovely Gothic and Renaissance houses, while the tiny old town of **Mělník** (p233) has peaceful back-streets and a stunning view over the Bohemian countryside. Most impressive of all is **Kutná Hora** (p237), with its lovely cathedral, baroque statues and hilltop setting.

MONUMENTS

The region to the north of Prague contains two deeply moving monuments to the suffering of the Czech people in WWII – the village of **Lidice** (p234), destroyed by the Nazis as an act of vengeance for the assassination of Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich, and **Terezín** (p234), a former concentration camp through which 150,000 Czech Jews passed on their way to the gas chambers.

OUT OF THE ORDINARY

There are several sights around Prague that are decidedly out of the ordinary. The Trophy Corridor and Chamois Room in **Konopiště Chateau** (p232), crammed with the antlers, skulls and stuffed heads of thousands of animals,

stand as bizarre witness to the hunting obsession of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, while Kutná Hora's **Czech Silver Museum** (p237) offers the chance to don a miner's helmet and lamp and explore the claustrophobic tunnels of a medieval silver mine beneath the town. Most extraordinary of all is the **Sedlec Ossuary** (p238) at Kutná Hora, where the bones of 40,000 people have been fashioned into a series of weird and wonderful decorations.

KARLŠTEJN

Karlštejn Castle (☎ 274 008 154; www.hradkarlstejn.cz; Karlštejn; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, to 5pm Tue-Sun May, Jun & Sep, to 4pm Tue-Sun Apr & Oct, closed Feb; see website for opening times in Nov-Jan & Mar), rising above the village of Karlštejn 30km southwest of Prague, is in such good shape these days that it wouldn't look out of place on Disneyworld's Main St. The crowds come in theme-park proportions as well (it's best to book ahead for the guided tours), but the peaceful surrounding countryside offers views of Karlštejn's stunning exterior that rival anything you'll see on the inside.

Perched high on a crag that overlooks the Berounka River, this cluster of turrets, high walls and looming towers is as immaculately maintained as it is powerfully evocative. It's rightly one of the top attractions of the Czech Republic, and the only drawback is its overwhelming popularity: in the summer months it is literally mobbed with visitors, ice-cream vendors and souvenir stalls.

Karlštejn was born of a grand pedigree, starting life in 1348 as a hideaway for the crown jewels

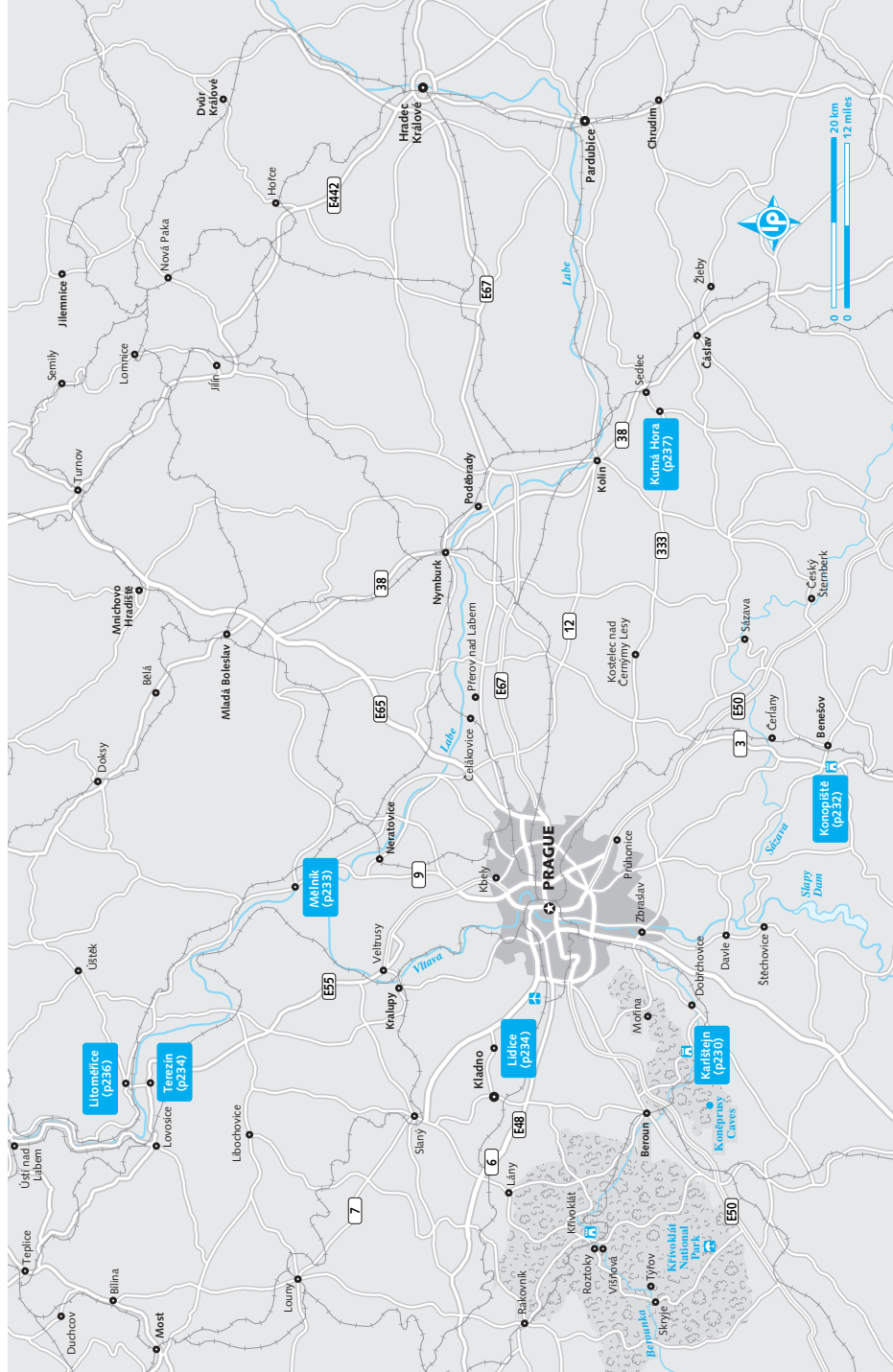
TRANSPORT: KARLŠTEJN

Distance from Prague 30km

Direction Southwest

Travel time One hour

Train Trains to Beroun from Praha-Smíchov stop at Karlštejn (42Kč, 33 minutes, hourly).



Litoměřice (p236)

Mělník (p233)

Terezín (p234)

Lidice (p234)

Karlštejn (p230)

Kurná Hora (p237)

Konoštitě (p232)



and treasury of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles IV. Run by an appointed burgrave, the castle was surrounded by a network of land-owning knight-vassals, who came to the castle's aid whenever enemies moved against it.

Karlštejn again sheltered the Bohemian and the Holy Roman Empire crown jewels during the Hussite wars of the early 15th century, but fell into disrepair as its defences became outmoded. Considerable restoration work, not least by Josef Mocker in the late 19th century, has returned the castle to its former glory.

There are two tours through the castle. Tour I (adult/concession 220/120Kč, 50 minutes) passes through the **Knights' Hall**, still daubed with the coats-of-arms and names of the knight-vassals, **Charles IV's Bedchamber**, the **Audience Hall** and the **Jewel House**, which includes treasures from the Chapel of the Holy Cross and a replica of the St Wenceslas Crown.

Tour II (adult/concession 300/150Kč, 70 minutes) must be booked in advance and takes in the **Great Tower**, the highest point of the castle, which includes a museum on Mocker's restoration work, the **Marian Tower** and the exquisite **Chapel of the Holy Cross**, with its decorative ceiling.

EATING & SLEEPING

Pension & Restaurant U Janů (☎ 311 681 210; info@ujanu.cz; d/apt 1000/1200Kč) On the road up to the castle, this atmospheric place has a decent dollop of authentic charm; there are three apartments and one double room.

Penzión U královny Dagmar (☎ 311 681 614; www.penziondagmara.cz; d/tr/apt 800/1000/1200Kč) Closer to the castle and with similar prices, this slick place has all the creature comforts and a top-notch eatery.

KONOPIŠTĚ

Archduke Franz Ferdinand d'Este, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, is famous for being dead – it was his assassination in 1914 that sparked off WWI. But the archduke was an enigmatic figure who avoided the intrigues of the Vienna court and for the last 20 years of his life hid away in what became his ideal country retreat, **Konopiště Chateau** (☎ 317 721 366; Benešov; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun May-Aug, 9am-4pm Tue-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun Sep, 9am-3pm Tue-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun Apr & Oct, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun Nov; closed Dec-Mar & noon-1pm year-round).

Konopiště, lying amid extensive grounds 2km west of the town of Benešov, is a testament to the archduke's twin obsessions – hunting and St George. Having renovated the massive Gothic and Renaissance building in the 1890s and installed all the latest technology – including electricity, central heating, flush toilets, showers and a luxurious lift – Franz Ferdinand decorated his home with his hunting trophies. His game books record that he shot about 300,000 creatures in his lifetime, from foxes and deer to elephants and tigers. About 100,000 animal trophies adorn the walls, each marked with the date and place it met its end – the crowded **Trophy Corridor** (Tour I and III), with a forest of mounted animal heads, and the antler-clad **Chamois Room** (Tour III), with its 'chandelier' fashioned from a stuffed condor, are truly bizarre sights.

There are three guided tours available. Tour III is the most interesting, visiting the **private apartments** used by the archduke and his family, which have remained unchanged since the state took possession of the chateau in 1921. Tour II takes in the **Great Armoury**, one of the largest and most impressive collections

TRANSPORT: KONOPIŠTĚ

Distance from Prague 50km

Direction South

Travel time 1¼ hours

Bus There are buses from Prague's Roztyly metro station to Benešov (39Kč, 40 minutes, twice hourly) – their final destination is usually Pelhřimov or Jihlava. There are also buses to Benešov from Prague's Florenc bus station (48Kč, 40 minutes, eight daily).

Train There are frequent direct trains from Prague's Hlavní Nádraží to Benešov u Prahy (66Kč, 1¼ hours, hourly). Konopiště is 2km west of Benešov. Local bus 2 (8Kč, six minutes, hourly) runs from a stop on Dukelská, 400m north of the train station (turn left out of the station, take first right on Tyršova and then first left) to the castle car park. If you'd rather walk, turn left out of the train station, go left across the bridge over the railway, and follow Konopištská street west for 2km.

in Europe. Tour I and Tour II in English are adult/child 190/110Kč; Tour III in English is 300/200Kč.

The archduke's collection of art and artefacts relating to St George is no less impressive, amounting to 3750 items, many of which are on show in the **St George Museum** (Muzeum sv Jiří; adult/child 30/15Kč; ☎ same as chateau) beneath the terrace at the front of the castle.

EATING & SLEEPING

Hostinec U zlaté hvězdy (☎ 317 723 921; Masarykovo náměstí 2, Benešov; mains 90-180Kč; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Thu, to 11pm Fri & Sat, 11am-10pm Sun) Enjoy Bohemian pub grub at this snug, central *pivnice* (beer hall).

Hotel Atlas (☎ 317 724 771; www.hotel-atlas.cz; Tyršova 2063, Benešov; s/d from 840/980Kč) This place is bland and functional, but the rooms are spotless and comfortable. Benešov is located just 2km east of the Konopiště Chateau.

Hotel Nová Myslivna (☎ 317 722 496; www.e-stranka.cz/novamyslivna; Konopiště; r from 375Kč per person; (P)) The sweeping angular roof of this chalet-style hotel clashes somewhat with the softer lines of the castle, but the hotel's location by the Konopiště Chateau car park is unbeatable.

MĚLNÍK

Mělník, an hour's drive north of Prague, sprawls over a rocky promontory surrounded by the flat sweep of the central Bohemian plain. Staunchly Hussite in its sympathies, the town was flattened by Swedish troops in the Thirty Years' War, but the castle was rebuilt as a prettier, less threatening chateau and the centre retains a strong historical identity. Modernity has caught up with the town's trailing edge, bringing a clutch of factories to its outskirts, but views from the castle side are untouched and Mělník remains a good place for a spot of wine-tasting – the town is the focus of Bohemia's modest wine-growing region.

The Renaissance **Mělník Chateau** (Zámek Mělník; ☎ 315 622 121; adult/concession 80/60Kč; ☎ 10am-5pm) was acquired by the Lobkowicz family in 1739; the family opened it to the public in 1990. You can wander through the former living quarters, which are crowded with a rich collection of baroque furniture and 17th- and 18th-century paintings, on a self-guided tour with English text. Additional rooms have changing exhibits of modern works and a fabulous collection of 17th-century maps and engravings detailing Europe's great cities. A

TRANSPORT: MĚLNÍK

Distance from Prague 30km

Direction North

Travel time One hour

Bus On weekdays, buses run to Mělník (44Kč, 45 minutes, every 30 minutes) from stop 10 in the bus station outside Praha-Holešovice train station; buy your ticket from the driver (one-way only, no return tickets).

separate tour descends to the 14th-century wine cellars, where you can taste the chateau's wines; a shop in the courtyard sells the chateau's own label. Wine-tasting sessions cost from 70Kč to 200Kč.

Next to the chateau is the 15th-century Gothic **Church of Sts Peter & Paul** (kostel sv Petra a Pavla), with its baroque furnishings and tower. Remnants of its Romanesque predecessor have been incorporated into the rear of the building. The old crypt is now an **ossuary** (kostnice; adult/child 30/15Kč; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.15-4pm Tue-Fri, 10am-12.30pm & 1.15-4pm Sat & Sun), packed with the bones of some 10,000 people dug up to make room for 16th-century plague victims, arranged in macabre patterns. This crypt is much more visceral – and claustrophobic – than the ossuary at Sedlec (see p238): the floor is of beaten earth and you are literally rubbing shoulders with the stacked bones.

The path between chateau and church leads to a **terrace** with superb views across the river and the central Bohemian countryside. The steep slopes beneath the terrace are planted with vines – supposedly descendants of the first vines to be introduced to Bohemia, by Charles IV, back in the 14th century.

INFORMATION

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 315 627 503; infocen trum@melnik.cz; náměstí Míru 11; ☎ 9am-5pm May-Sep, Mon-Fri only Oct-Apr) Sells maps and historical guides, and can help with accommodation.

EATING & DRINKING

Restaurace sv Václav (☎ 315 622 126; Svatováclavská 22; mains 120-230Kč; ☎ 11am-11pm) Dark wood décor, cigar humidors, red leather seats and an outdoor terrace that's a lunchtime suntrap conspire to make this one of Mělník's most appealing restaurants.

Kavárna ve Věži (☎ 315 621 954; ulice 5.května; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Thu, 8am-11pm Fri, 2-11pm Sat, 2-10pm Sun) Set in the medieval tower of the Prague Gate, this atmospheric café and art gallery spreads three floors linked by creaking wooden stairs, and served by an ingenious dumb waiter: write your order on the note pad, ding the bell, and the tray goes down, returning a few moments later with your order. Choose from a wide range of freshly ground coffees and exotic teas, local wines, beer and *medovina* (mead).

SLEEPING

Hotel U Rytířů (☎ 315 621 440; www.urytiri.cz; Svatováclavská 17; d 1900-2500Kč) Located conveniently right next to the castle, this opulent little place has plush, apartment-style rooms with all the trimmings and a garden **restaurant** (mains 100-250Kč; ☎ 8am-11pm).

Penzión Centrum (☎ 315 625 585; penzioncentrum@seznam.cz; Seiferta 13; s/d incl breakfast 1000/1300Kč) This reasonably central place (it's just two blocks south of náměstí Míru) has modest but comfortable rooms. Look for the bright yellow façade.

LIDICE, TEREZÍN & LITOMĚŘICE

The Bohemian countryside to the north of Prague contains two villages that provide a sobering reminder of the horrors inflicted on the Czech people during WWII. If you're driving, Lidice and Terezín can be combined in one day; if you want to spend the night, head for the attractive town of Litoměřice, 3km north of Terezín. Using public transport, you'll have to choose; it's only practical to do one or the other in a single day.

LIDICE

When British-trained Czechoslovak paratroops assassinated Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich in June 1942 (see the boxed text, p115), the Nazis took a savage revenge. Picking the mining and foundry village of **Lidice**, 18km north-west of Prague, apparently at random, they proceeded on 10 June 1942 to obliterate it from the face of the earth. All its men were shot, the women and the older children were shipped to the Ravensbrück concentration camp, and the

TRANSPORT: LIDICE

Distance from Prague 18km

Direction Northwest

Travel time 30 minutes

Bus Buses from Prague to Lidice (25Kč, 30 minutes, hourly) depart from the bus stop on Evropa, opposite the Hotel Diplomat, just west of Dejvická metro station.

younger children were farmed out to German foster homes. The village was then systematically burned and bulldozed so that no trace remained. Of its 500 inhabitants, 192 men, 60 women and 88 children eventually died. The atrocity caused shock around the world and triggered a campaign to preserve the village's memory. The site is now a green field, eloquent in its silence, dotted with a few memorials and the reconstructed foundations of a farm where most of the men were murdered.

The onsite **Muzeum Lidice** (www.lidice-memorial.cz; Lidice; adult/concession 80/40Kč; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, to 5pm Mar, to 4pm Nov-Feb) recreates the village in photographs, text and an emotive multimedia exhibition, and also screens chilling SS film footage of its destruction.

TEREZÍN

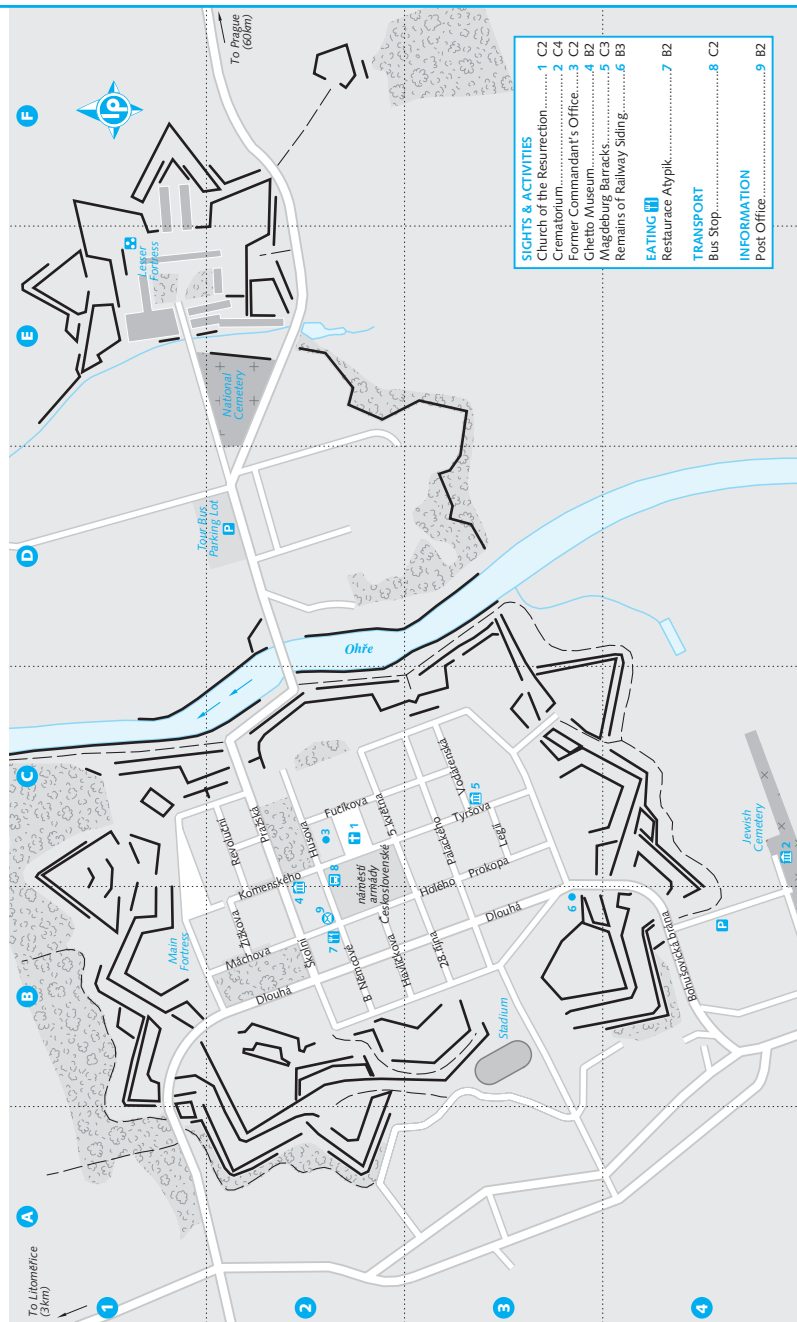
A massive bulwark of stone and earth, the fortress of **Terezín** (Theresienstadt in German) was built in 1780 by Emperor Joseph II with a single purpose in mind: to keep the enemy out. Ironically, it is more notorious for keeping people in – it served as a political prison in the later days of the Habsburg Empire. Gavrilo Princip, the assassin who killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, was incarcerated here during WWI, and when the Germans took control during WWII the fortress became a grim holding pen for Jews bound for the extermination camps. In contrast to the colourful, baroque face of many Czech towns, Terezín is a stark but profoundly evocative monument to a darker aspect of Europe's past.

The bleakest phase of Terezín's history began in 1940 when the Gestapo established a prison in the Lesser Fortress. Evicting the inhabitants from the Main Fortress the following year, the Nazis transformed the town into a transit camp through which some 150,000 people eventually passed en route to the death camps. For most, conditions were

TEREZÍN

To Litoměřice
(3km)

0 500 m
0 0.3 miles



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appalling. Between April and September 1942 the ghetto's population increased from 12,968 to 58,491, leaving each prisoner with only 1.65 sq m of space and causing disease and starvation on a terrifying scale. In the same period, there was a 15-fold increase in the number of deaths within the prison walls.

Terezín later became the centrepiece of one of the Nazis' more extraordinary coups of public relations. Official visitors to the fortress, including representatives of the Red Cross, saw a town that was billed as a kind of Jewish 'refuge', with a Jewish administration, banks, shops, cafés, schools and a thriving cultural life – it even had a jazz band – in a charade that twice completely fooled international observers. The reality was a relentlessly increasing population of prisoners, regular trains departing for the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and the death by starvation, disease or suicide of some 35,000 people.

From the ground, the sheer scale of the maze of walls and moats that surrounds the **Main Fortress** (Hlavní pevnost) is impossible to fathom – mainly because the town is actually inside it. In fact, when you first arrive by bus or car you may be left thinking that the central square looks no different from a hundred other old town centres. Take a peek at the aerial photograph in the Museum of the Ghetto, or wander past the walls en route to the Lesser Fortress, however, and a very different picture emerges. At the heart of the Main Fortress is the neat grid of streets that makes up the town of Terezín. There's little to look at except the chunky, 19th-century **Church of the Resurrection**, the arcaded **former Commandant's office**, the neoclassical administrative buildings on the square and the surrounding grid of houses with their awful secrets. South of the square are the anonymous **remains of a railway siding**, built by prisoners, via which loads of further prisoners arrived – and departed.

TRANSPORT: TEREZÍN & LITOMĚŘICE

Distance from Prague 60km (to Terezín)

Direction North

Travel time 1½ hours

Bus Direct buses from Prague to Litoměřice (64Kč, one hour, hourly), stopping at Terezín, depart from the bus station outside Praha-Holešovice train station. There are also frequent buses between Litoměřice bus station and Terezín (9Kč, 10 minutes, at least hourly).

The main sight here is the absorbing **Ghetto Museum** (Muzeum ghetta; ☎ 416 782 576; www.pamatnik-terezin.cz; Komenského, Terezín; adult/child 160/130Kč; 🕒 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, to 5.30pm Nov-Mar), which has two branches. The main branch explores the rise of Nazism and life in the Terezín ghetto, using period bric-a-brac to startling and evocative effect. Erected in the 19th century to house the local school, the museum building was later used by the Nazis to accommodate the camp's 10- to 15-year-old boys. The haunting images painted by these children still decorate the walls. A newer branch is housed in the former **Magdeburg Barracks** (Magdeburská kasárna), which served as the seat of the Jewish 'town council'. Here you can visit a reconstructed dormitory, and look at exhibits on the extraordinarily rich cultural life – music, theatre, fine arts and literature – that somehow flourished against this backdrop of fear. There is also a small exhibit in the grim **Crematorium** (Krematorium; 🕒 10am-6pm Sun-Fri Apr-Oct, to 4pm Sun-Fri Nov-Mar) in the Jewish Cemetery just off Bohušovická brána, about 750m south of the main square. The Ghetto Museum has good multilingual self-guide pamphlets, a large selection of books for sale, and guides (some of them ghetto survivors) to offer assistance.

You can take a self-guided tour of the **Lesser Fortress** (Malá pevnost; ☎ 416 782 576; www.pamatnik-terezin.cz; Terezín; adult/child 160/130Kč; 🕒 8am-6pm Apr-Oct, to 4.30pm Nov-Mar) through the prison barracks, isolation cells, workshops and morgues, past execution grounds and former mass graves. It would be hard to invent a more menacing location, and it is only while wandering through the seemingly endless tunnels beneath the walls that you begin to fully appreciate the vast dimensions of the fortress. The Nazis' mocking concentration camp slogan, *Arbeit Macht Frei* ('Work Makes You Free'), hangs above the gate. In front of the fortress is a **National Cemetery**, established in 1945 for those exhumed from the Nazis' mass graves. A combined ticket for both the Ghetto Museum and Lesser Fortress is 200/150Kč.

LITOMĚŘICE

After gritting your teeth through the horrors of Terezín, **Litoměřice** is your chance to exhale. Although only a few kilometres to the north of the infamous fortress, this quaint riverside town is a million miles away in atmosphere. Pastel-hued façades and intricate gables jostle for dominance on the main square, and the town's lively bars and restaurants play

host to some vibrant after-hours action. Once stridently Hussite, much of the Gothic face of Litoměřice was levelled during the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), and today the town's unassuming castle plays second fiddle to a clutch of effete Renaissance houses and impressive churches (many by esteemed 18th-century architect Ottavio Broggio).

Dominating Mírové náměstí, the town's attractive main square, is the Gothic tower of **All Saints Church** (kostel Všech svatých), built in the 13th century and 'Broggio-ised' in 1718. Beside it, with multiple gables, pointy arches and a copper-topped tower, is the handsome, Gothic **Old Town Hall** (Stará radnice), which includes a small town museum. Most striking is the 1560 Renaissance **House at the Black Eagle** (dům U černého orla), covered in *sgraffito* biblical scenes and housing the Hotel Salva Guarda. A few doors down is the present town hall, in the 1539 **House at the Chalice** (dům U kalicha), featuring a massive Hussite chalice on the roof. This building also houses the tourist information office. The thin slice of baroque wedding cake at the uphill end of the square is the **House of Ottavio Broggio**.

Along Michalská at the southwest corner of the square you'll find another house where Broggio left his mark, the excellent **North Bohemia Fine Arts Gallery** (Severo česká galerie výtvarného umění; ☎ 416 732 382; Michalská 7, Litoměřice; adult/concession 32/16Kč; ☎ 9am–noon & 1–6pm Tue–Sun Apr–Sep, 9am–5pm Tue–Sun Oct–Mar) with the priceless Renaissance panels of the Litoměřice Altarpiece.

Turn left at the end of Michalská and follow Domská towards grassy, tree-lined Domské náměstí on Cathedral Hill, passing pretty **St Wenceslas Church** (kostel sv Václav), a true baroque gem, along a side street to the right. At the top of the hill is the town's oldest church, **St Stephen Cathedral** (Chrám sv Štěpán), dating from the 11th century.

Go through the arch to the left of the cathedral and descend a steep, cobbled lane called Máchova. At the foot of the hill turn left then take the first right, up the zigzag steps to the **old town walls**. You can follow the walls to the right as far as the next street, Jezuitská, where a left turn leads back to the square.

INFORMATION

Litoměřice Tourist Information Office (☎ 416 732 440; www.litomerice.cz; Mírové náměstí 15, Litoměřice; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri, 8am–5.30pm Sat, 9.30am–4pm Sun May–Sep, 8am–5pm Mon & Wed, 8am–4.15pm Tue & Thu, 8am–4pm Fri, 8–11am Sat Oct–Apr)

EATING

Bašta Steakhouse (☎ 608 437 783; Mezibraní 5, Litoměřice; mains 100–500Kč; ☎ 11am–midnight) Housed in a former bastion in the old city walls opposite the train station, this lively restaurant boasts a charcoal grill that turns out everything from buffalo wings to thick T-bone steaks.

Restaurace Atypik (☎ 416 782 780; Máchova 91, Terezín; mains 70–120Kč; ☎ 11am–10pm) Atypik by name but rather typical by nature, this bustling place offers all the predictable local favourites, with an emphasis on stodge and unapologetic meatiness.

SLEEPING

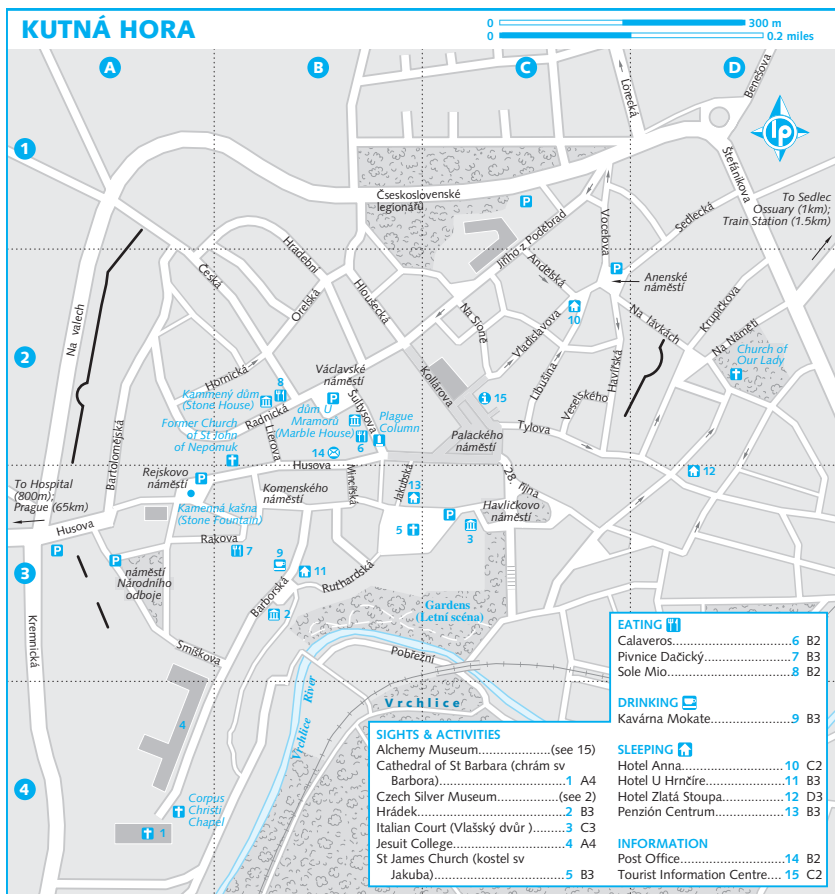
Hotel Salva Guarda (☎ 416 732 506; www.salva-guarda.cz; Mírové náměstí 12, Litoměřice; s/d from 1220/1750Kč; ☎) Litoměřice's top hotel is set in the lovely Renaissance House at the Black Eagle; it also has the best restaurant on the square.

Pension Prislín (☎ 416 735 833; www.prislín.cz; Na Kocandě 12, Litoměřice; s/d 750/1260Kč; ☎) A view across the river and breakfast in the garden are good reasons for choosing the family-friendly Prislín. It's five minutes' walk east of the town square, along the main road.

U svatého Václava (☎ 416 737 500; www.upfront.cz/penzion; Svatováclavská 12, Litoměřice; s/d 800/1200Kč) Tucked away in the shadow of St Wenceslas Church, this pretty villa houses a tip-top pension with sauna, well-equipped rooms and a homely apron-toting owner who whips up a fine breakfast.

KUTNÁ HORA

Now dwarfed by 21st-century Prague, Kutná Hora once marched in step with the capital and, with a little help from fate, might even have stolen its crown as the heart and soul of Bohemia. Enriched by the silver ore that ran in veins through the surrounding hills, the medieval city once enjoyed explosive growth, becoming the seat of Wenceslas II's royal mint in 1308 and the residence of Wenceslas IV just under 100 years later. The silver *groschen* that were minted here at that time represented the hard currency of Central Europe. But while boom-time Kutná Hora was Prague's undisputed understudy, the town tripped out of history when the silver mines began to splutter and run dry in the 16th century, its demise hastened by the Thirty Years' War and finally certified by a devastating fire in 1770. While the capital continued to expand, its sister city largely vanished from sight.



SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
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But that's not to say everyone has forgotten about it. Kutná Hora today is an A-list tourist attraction – it was added to Unesco's World Heritage List in 1996 – luring visitors with a smorgasbord of historic sights and more than a touch of nostalgic whimsy. Standing on the ramparts surrounding the mighty Cathedral of St Barbara, looking out across rooftops eerily reminiscent of Prague's Malá Strana, it's all too easy to indulge in spot of melancholic what-might-have-been.

If you arrive by train, a natural first stop is the remarkable 'bone church' of the **Sedlec Ossuary** (Kostnice; ☎ 327 561 143; www.kostnice.cz; Zámecká 127; adult/concession 50/30Kč; 🕒 8am-6pm Apr-Sep, 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mar & Oct, 9am-noon & 1-4pm Nov-Feb), an 800m walk south from Kutná Hora's main train station. When the Schwarzenberg family purchased Sedlec monastery in 1870 they

allowed a local woodcarver to get creative with the bones that had been piled in the crypt for centuries. But this was no piddling little heap of bones: it was the remains of no fewer than 40,000 people. The result was spectacular – garlands of skulls and femurs are strung from the vaulted ceiling like Addams Family Christmas decorations, while in the centre dangles a vast chandelier containing at least one of each bone in the human body. Four giant pyramids of stacked bones squat in each of the corner chapels, and crosses, chalices and monstrances of bone adorn the altar. There's even a Schwarzenberg coat-of-arms made from bones – note the crow pecking the eyes from the Turk's head, a grisly motif of the Schwarzenberg family.

From Sedlec it's a 1.5m walk (or five-minute bus ride) into central Kutná Hora. Palackého

náměstí, the main square, is unremarkable; the most interesting part of the old town lies to its south. But first, take a look at the **Alchemy Museum** (☎ 327 511 259; Palackého náměstí 377; adult/concession 50/30Kč; 🕒 10am–5pm Apr–Oct, to 4pm Nov–Mar), in the same building as the information centre, complete with basement laboratory, Gothic chapel and mad-scientist curator.

From the upper end of the square a narrow lane called Jakubská leads directly to the huge **St James Church** (kostel sv Jakuba; 1330). Just east of the church lies the **Italian Court** (Vlašský dvůr; ☎ 327 512 873; Havlíčkovo náměstí 552; adult/concession 100/60Kč; 🕒 9am–6pm Apr–Sep, 10am–5pm Mar & Oct, 10am–4pm Nov–Feb), the former Royal Mint – it got its name from the master craftsmen from Florence brought in by Wenceslas II to kick-start the business, and who began stamping silver coins here in 1300. The oldest remaining part, the niches in the courtyard (now bricked up), were minters' workshops. The original treasury rooms hold an exhibit on coins and minting. The guided tour (with English text) is worth taking for a look at the few historical rooms open to the public, notably a 15th-century **Audience Hall** with two impressive 19th-century murals depicting the election of Vladislav Jagiello as king of Bohemia in 1471 (the angry man in white is Matthias Corvinus, the loser), and the Decree of Kutná Hora being proclaimed by Wenceslas IV and Jan Hus in 1409.

From the southern side of St James Church, a narrow cobbled lane (Ruthardská) leads down and then up to the **Hrádek** (Little Castle). Originally part of the town's fortifications, it was rebuilt in the 15th century as the residence of Jan Smíšek, administrator of the royal mines, who grew rich from silver he illegally mined right under the building. It now houses the **Czech Silver Museum** (České muzeum stříbra; ☎ 327 512 159; adult/concession 60/30Kč; 🕒 10am–6pm Jul

& Aug, 9am–6pm May, Jun & Sep, 9am–5pm Apr & Oct; closed Nov–Mar & Mon year-round). The exhibits celebrate the mines that made Kutná Hora wealthy, including a huge wooden device once used to lift loads weighing as much as 1000kg from the 200m-deep shafts. You can even don a miner's helmet and lamp and join a 45-minute guided tour (adult/child 110/70Kč) through 500m of **medieval mine shafts** beneath the town.

Just beyond the Hrádek is the 17th-century former **Jesuit College**, fronted by a terrace with a row of 13 baroque statues of saints, an arrangement inspired by the statues on Prague's Charles Bridge. All are related to the Jesuits and/or the town; the second statue – the woman holding a chalice, with a stone tower at her side – is St Barbara, the patron saint of miners and therefore of Kutná Hora.

At the far end of the terrace is Kutná Hora's greatest monument, the Gothic **Cathedral of St Barbara** (Chrám sv Barbara; ☎ 776 393 938; adult/concession 50/30Kč; 🕒 9am–5.30pm Tue–Sun May–Sep, 10am–4pm Tue–Sun Oct–Apr). Rivalling Prague's St Vitus in size and magnificence, its soaring nave culminates in elegant, six-petalled ribbed vaulting. Work was started in 1380, interrupted during the Hussite Wars and abandoned in 1558 when the silver began to run out. It was finally completed in neogothic style at the end of the 19th century. The **ambulatory chapels** preserve some original 15th-century frescoes, some of them showing miners at work. Take a walk around the outside of the church, too; the terrace at the east end enjoys the finest view in town.

INFORMATION

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 327 512 378; www.kh.cz; Palackého náměstí 377; 🕒 9am–6pm Apr–Oct, 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat & Sun Nov–Mar) Books accommodation, rents bicycles and offers internet access (per min 1Kč, minimum 15Kč).

EATING & DRINKING

Calaveros (☎ 327 513 810; Sultýsova 173; mains 100–200Kč; 🕒 11am–11pm Mon–Sat, to 10pm Sun) This lively (but smoky) Mexican restaurant in the Marble House may not win a golden sombrero for authenticity, but it's not bad for Central Bohemia – the salsa is fresh and the *chimichangas* are tasty.

Sole Mio (☎ 327 515 505; Česká 184; mains 90–120Kč; 🕒 11am–10pm Sun–Thu, to 11pm Fri & Sat) Choose from 40 varieties of pizza at this homely little restaurant decorated with – surprise, surprise, considering the name – lots of suns.

TRANSPORT: KUTNÁ HORA

Distance from Prague 65km

Direction East

Travel time 1½ hours

Train There are direct trains from Prague's main train station to Kutná Hora Hlavní Nádraží (129Kč return, 55 minutes, seven daily).

Bus There are about six direct buses a day, on weekdays only, from stop 2 at Prague's Florenc bus station to Kutná Hora (62Kč, 1¼ hours).

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Pivnice Dačický (☎ 327 512 248; Rakova 8; mains 110-300Kč; ☎ 11am-11pm) Get some froth on your moustache at this old-fashioned, wood-panelled Bohemian beer hall, where you can dine on dumplings and choose from five different draught beers, including Pilsner Urquell, Budvar and Primátor yeast beer.

Kavárna Mokate (Barborská 37; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat, 10am-8pm Sun) This cosy little café, with ancient earthenware floor tiles, timber beams, mismatched furniture and oriental rugs dishes up a wide range of freshly ground coffees and exotic teas, as well as iced tea and coffee in summer.

SLEEPING

Hotel Anna (☎ 327 311 014; hotel.anna@seznam.cz; Vladislavova 372; s/d 930/1350Kč; 📍) Offers comfortable,

modern rooms with shower, TV and breakfast in a lovely old building with an atmospheric stone-vaulted cellar restaurant.

Hotel Zlatá Stoupa (☎ 327 511 540; zlatastoupa@iol.cz; Tylova 426; s/d from 1220/1980Kč; 📍) If you feel like spoiling yourself, the most luxurious place in town is the elegantly furnished 'Golden Mount'. We like a hotel room where the mini-bar contains full-size bottles of wine.

Penzión Centrum (☎ 327 514 218; www.sweb.cz/penzion_centrum; Jakubská 57; d/tr 1000/1400Kč; 📍) Tucked away in a quiet, flower-bedecked courtyard off Kutná Hora's main drag, this place offers snug rooms and a sunny garden.

Hotel U Hrnčiče (☎ 327 512 113; hotel.hmcir@tiscali.cz; Barborská 24; d 750-2000Kč) This beautifully ornate pink townhouse has five stylish double rooms (rate depends on season and facilities) and a delightful garden terrace out back.

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