

---

# Slice of Advice – Erasmus in Charles University in Prague

---

## Slice of Advice – Erasmus in Charles University in Prague

The opportunity to undertake an Erasmus in Prague cannot be justified by any amount of words. Situated in the heart of central Europe, the Czech Republic is the ultimate portal to the rest of Europe, that boasts cost and time effective means of travel, and is host to the distinguished Charles University.

Having arrived in Prague in late September and narrowly missing the mid-autumn sunshine, the city didn't fail to sweep me away with its quaint and whimsical streets that wind their way among historical architecture from many periods varying from Romanesque style, to Gothic and the Baroque era right up until the Art Nouveau style of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. A welcoming opportunity that Charles University offers to its students, is the chance to be educated in one of their many historical buildings that are peppered across Prague city; the newer buildings and so called minicampuses are situated slightly aside of the centre (Charles University does not have a main campus). The Law Faculty building for example (my host faculty), is steeped in historical significance. Its military occupation of the SS in the first half of 1940s, used it to control the wide surroundings during the May Uprising of the Prague People in 1945.

The practicalities and realities of setting up a new life no matter where you go is daunting to say the least. However a few 'heads up' from someone what has been through the ropes of it, might be something of interest to those intent on embarking on the cultural, social and personal voyage that Charles University in Prague promises.

The 'dormitory life living' is a simplistic and affordable means of living and undoubtedly the most advantageous economically and for making friends. The shared rooms and 'walk in wardrobe' sized kitchen and bathrooms require getting accustomed to, but are always a hub of activity and thriving with young students bursting for adventure and travel on every occasion. Erasmus students in Prague can select between the Hostivař, Trója, Větrník and Hvězda halls of residence in their Erasmus online application. If they do not state any preference, the European Office (main Erasmus Office of Charles University) will place them in one of the above mentioned residences based on their study field, so that students of one host faculty are preferably housed together.

In terms of the practicalities of setting up a life in a new country, it can be a bit overwhelming. Attaining your ID or ISIC card from Charles University will allow you purchase the student transport pass for the period you require it while studying in Prague, and allow you to safely avoid incurring any fines. When first arriving, keep in mind that if you are travelling by public transport to your accommodation, you are obliged to purchase an extra ticket if you are in possession of large luggage. You may also consider to avail of the taxi service offered outside the airport as it more convenient if you have a lot of baggage (please, beware of taxi drivers offering their services directly to you in the arrival hall and not belonging to the official airport taxi service, to get the fair price and best service).

Setting up a Czech account can be beneficial in terms of saving money on conversion and avoiding transaction costs from your home bank. Some students attained a worldwide bank card which allows you to send and spend money in over 90 countries, receive a good conversion rate and avoid transaction costs. This proved extremely convenient and economical especially for those interested in travelling around Europe to countries outside the Euro-zone during their year abroad. Likewise, purchasing a Czech sim card can also be cost-effective in this regard to avoid roaming charges. It is vital to immerse yourself in as many activities the University offers in the first few months. It is the pathway to meeting new people with similar interests and perhaps engaging in some extra-curricular activities that will decorate your résumé a bit more. In my host faculty, Charles University Common Law Society, organised mixers and boat parties at the beginning of term that proved invaluable to easing the transition from being a foreigner to becoming an Erasmus student. Bear in mind that an Erasmus is an international exchange and you will most likely befriend more international students than locals at such events. If you would prefer to meet more Czech students, some societies offer a 'buddy' system whereby you are paired with a local Czech student who can familiarise you with the city and introduce to places that rest outside the well carved tourist path. There is also a 'tandem' language exchange service offered by several of the international societies, if you would like to learn Czech on one-to-one basis with a Czech student free of charge.

As the weeks fly by, an influx of friends, family and visitors are sure to grace your doorstep. When they arrive, perhaps for the first time to Prague, you are not exploring the city with them as a foreigner but as a local flaunting the city, that has become your home.

Be it immersing them among the hustle and bustle of Charles Bridge and Prague Castle or indulging in the infamous trdelník pastry that are available on every street corner, there isn't short of something to do in such a vibrant and spirited city. The Zoo and Letná Park with their magnificent views are a must if there is any element of sunshine.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of an Erasmus in Prague is being unfamiliar with the Czech language. Unlike other European countries, the level of English that the older generation possess is significantly lower in standard and that's if they even have any English at all – for most of them Russian was the second language to learn at school before the year 1989. The option to take a module in basic Czech was available to me and it is something I would thoroughly recommend. Another challenging element of adopting a new life in Prague, is learning how to understand and use the currency with ease. It is hugely inflated in comparison to the Euro or Sterling. However the old saying '*practice makes perfect*' is the mantra that will help see you through this hurdle.

The winters in Prague can be harsh with the temperature often dropping to an incredible -15° in the winter season for someone coming from Ireland (the locals would laugh and tell you they remember 14 days of -20° and that for them, the extremely hot summer last year was more difficult to endure with temperatures reaching 40° for several weeks in row). However, the arrival of March sees a drastic change in the weather and sitting outside with a cold beer for less than one euro, admiring the scenery that rests on the fringe of the Vltava River becomes a typical element of your daily routine. Erasmus students take advantage of the warmer part of the year for travelling around. There are many interesting places to go just a few hours away from Prague. Having visited an array of surrounding countries throughout the two semesters, a few places topped the 'must-see' charts. Budapest unanimously came out on top, boasting cheap living, roof top thermal baths looking out over the city and edgy bars. It is undeniably an all-rounder for the student traveler. Its wide-planned streets and Art Nouveau architecture contribute to its ironically intimate vibe. Krakow and Berlin both offered alternative European cultures and accommodate the student traveler extensively by their party hostels, ruin bars and pub-crawls.

Prague is the epitome of a city that accommodates everyone's interest. Its low cost of living (paired with lower incomes of the locals than what is standard in Western Europe) means that it can offer so much more in terms of experience, travel and embarking upon a fruitful Erasmus of memories and fondness. Should you chose to complete your Erasmus in Charles University in Prague, expect to leave with contacts from all the over the world, a broader international education, empty pockets... but an irrefutable longing to go back.

**Aoife Brady** is an Irish International Law student on Erasmus in Charles University. She enjoys observing and reporting on the cultural immersion of Erasmus students and the integration of foreign students studying abroad. She also has a keen interest in travel and is looking to improve her journalistic skills.