
Karlštejn Castle Trip - a True Experience of Czech Heritage

Karlštejn Castle Trip - a True Experience of Czech Heritage

A checklist of the Czech Republic's most historic and beautiful sights is not complete without the inclusion of Karlštejn castle. A candidate for UNESCO World Heritage Site, my trip there last month with the Erasmus Club of the Faculty of Arts demonstrated just why that is. Standing tall on the picturesque hillside of Karlštejn village, it represents a truly alternate era of the Czech Republic's history, from a time when monarchy ruled the lands and Catholicism was the order of the day.

A national holiday in the way of Independent Czechoslovak State Day gave us students the chance to make the most of no classes and use it to find out more about this part of Czech history throughout the centuries. We were rewarded for our curiosity by beaming sunshine and cloudless skies, all which proved very beneficial for the dozens of photographs which were taken! Just forty minutes on a train from the hustle and bustle of Prague and we were transported back to medieval times.

We were fortunate to take advantage of the last week of the year which offered us the tour including the Chapel of the Holy Cross, the place in which the Crown Jewels and over 5.000 holy relics were kept. And so we began our journey throughout the castle and throughout history, seeing and hearing about many of the features of the building including the Church of Our Lady and the Chapel of St. Catherine.

The man behind the construction of the castle was King Charles IV, well known to us Charles University students as he also serves as the namesake to our college. Both Charles University and Karlštejn castle were founded in 1348, seemingly simultaneous projects for the busy monarch. At this time however his title was not just King, he was also Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, thus leaving his mark throughout not just the Czech kingdom, but all of Europe. In Bohemia however, he founded Prague New Town and as it was known then, Prague University, he rebuilt Prague Castle and also a number of other castles throughout Bohemia.

Karlštejn however became the most important of these castles. His intention initially for the castle was for it to serve as a summer home, but gradually he began to concentrate various valuable objects here, most notably with the transfer of the imperial treasure and crown jewels here by the time of the castle's sanctification in 1365. Karlštejn thus effectively became the symbolic centre of the Roman Empire.

Many of our group were amazed to hear the extent of fortification of the castle done to protect such valuable items, with some walls almost eight metres thick! Measures like these helped protect the castle against any major damage from various attacks, such as that of the Hussite's in the early 15th century. The survival of much of the castle's beautiful original artwork was also a point of admiration. Some as old as the 14th century still remain intact on the walls, such as the Reliquary Scenes in the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, which depict Charles IV receiving holy relics and storing them in the castle. The walls of this Church also feature some stunning paintings of scenes from the Apocalypse, showing inspiration from the New Testament and the catastrophes it recounts of the approaching of the end of the world. What makes the survival of these ancient pieces even more remarkable is the various reconstructions the castle has undergone over the past number of centuries. Its original Gothic style was reiterated in the late 1400s when damages to the castle were repaired. At the end of the 16th century however a Renaissance style was introduced with several modifications to the buildings' original arrangement. Finally, on the orders of Emperor Franz Josef I, several modifications and repairs were made and architect Josef Mocker was appointed in 1887 to save the important monument of the Czech past. His office still stands preserved in the castle today and was another feature we were shown on our visit. He worked on restoring the original Gothic style of the castle, removing some of the Renaissance modifications.

The importance of the castle was clear to us on this trip, with the timeless architecture and beautiful features making this a sight not to be missed. From the gold plates on the wall of the Chapel of the Holy Cross to the winding staircases and intimate nature of the Chapel of St. Catherine, the whole castle oozed character and significance. As our group gathered for a hearty lunch in the elegant and charming village of Karlštejn, the mood was high and I think I can speak for everyone when I say it was a great outing and a perfect way to experience more Czech culture and understand its heritage. I know Karlštejn's got my vote for the awarding of an official UNESCO site!