

# Czech Republic – people, culture, language

## A guide for businesses



### The country

**History:** situated at the crossroads of Europe, with rich farmlands and mines for precious metals, the old kingdoms of Bohemia and Moravia (now the Czech Republic) have enjoyed considerable prosperity. Prague's golden age as the seat of the Holy Roman Empire under Charles IV in the 14th century saw the establishment of Prague University – the first in central Europe – and the construction of the Charles Bridge and numerous other buildings. The Hussite Reformation was followed by counter-reformation and eventual absorption into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Prague prospered again and a long tradition of metal working laid the base for industrialisation. National sentiments reemerged in the 19th century but the abortive 1848 revolution did not bear fruit until an independent Czechoslovakia emerged in 1918. Between the wars Czechoslovakia was a democratic state and a major industrial power. Invasion by Germany and incorporation into the USSR set back the nationalist cause. Attempts at reform, culminating in the 'Prague Spring' of 1968, were brutally suppressed and democracy was not achieved until 1989 and the peaceful 'Velvet Revolution'. Separation of the Czech and Slovak republics followed four years later. The beautiful buildings of Prague reflecting the Gothic, Baroque and Art Nouveau styles are matched by fairytale castles, medieval towns and elegant spas throughout the country. Germanic and Slavic influences have created a rich culture that has contributed to European art, music and literature.

### The people

The Czechs are a plain-spoken, even-tempered people, revealing a spectrum of cultural, religious and political influences that is surprisingly broad for such a small country – from German and Austrian to Polish and Hungarian, from liberal to deeply traditional, global-thinking to fiercely nationalistic. Czech art and architecture is famous, but Czechs have also excelled at less noticeable art forms, such as illuminated manuscripts,



Picture of the UNESCO protected historical downtown of the town of Cesky Krumlov, south Bohemia, Czech Republic. Source: European Commission

religious sculptures, and marionette and puppet theatre. The latter was officially approved even in the communist era, and Czech performances rank among the best in the world.

**Czech Republic today:** the Czech Republic is now the most affluent of the former Warsaw Pact countries of Central Europe. Privatisation has transformed the country from a centrally planned into a free market economy. It has a western-style democracy, a well-educated populace and a skilled workforce.

**Top five UK exports:** in 2003, these were (in decreasing order): electrical machinery/apparatus, general industrial machinery and equipment, office and automatic data processing machines, non-ferrous metals and road vehicles. In 2002, the UK exported £1.03bn to the Czech Republic.



The Charles Bridge and Prague Castle  
Source: European Commission

### Did you know..?

- The sugar cube was invented in the Czech town Dačice in 1843.
- The word 'robot' comes from Czech *robotá* ('servant'). It was first introduced into English in Karel Čapek's science-fiction play R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots).
- Sigmund Freud was born and spent the first years of his life in what is now the Czech Republic.
- The soft contact lens, now used by 100 million people around the world, was invented in Czechoslovakia by professor Otto Wichterle in 1961.
- The hub of the Millennium Eye, one of London's most popular attractions, was built in the Czech Republic.
- The English playwright Tom Stoppard, who received an Oscar for *Shakespeare in Love* in 1999, was born Thomas Straussler in Zlín, Czechoslovakia (now part of the Czech Republic).

**Official Language:** Czech.

**Other languages:** English and German can be used, with English becoming increasingly popular with the younger generation. Czech businesspeople increasingly use English, but misunderstandings can and do occur. If in doubt, use an interpreter.

**Finding translators/interpreters:** in the UK, you can find local, quality-assured providers by contacting the Regional Language Network. In the Czech Republic, translators and interpreters are readily available – the best place to enquire is at the British Embassy.



Castle Karlstejn, some 25 km west of Prague. The Gothic castle built in 1348 has a unique position among Czech castles. Czech King and Roman Emperor Charles IV used it as a place for safekeeping of the royal treasures, especially Charles's collection of holy relics and the coronation jewels of the Roman Empire. Source: European Commission

## Basic Czech phrases

The positive impression you will make by learning to speak a few basic Czech phrases cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used phrases:

	Czech	Pronunciation
Hello	Ahoj	Ahoy
Good day/ morning	Dobrý ráno	Do-bree rah-no
Good evening	Dobrý večer	Do-bree vech-er
Goodbye	Na shledanou	Na s-ble-da-no
Yes / no	Ano / Ne	Ano / ne
Please	Prosím	Pro-seem
Thank you	Děkuji	Dye-ku-ji
That's fine	To je v pořádku	To ye vpo-rzbabdku
Excuse me	Prosím vás	Pro-seem vahs
My name is...	Jmenuji se...	Ymen-oo-yi se
What's your name?	Jak se jmenujete	Yak se ymen-oo-ye-te

- **Formality:** Czech business people tend to be quite formal and closed at first and may view humour in business meetings as unprofessional. They tend to be wary of foreigners getting the better of them, while being outwardly friendly and hospitable. Although a younger generation of managers have adopted Western management styles and the number of multinationals has increased, you should be aware that 'home grown' companies will display some or all of the following characteristics.

- **Centralised decision making:** Leadership and authority is vertical. Leaders uphold their status and keep a distance from subordinates. Employees respect business leaders who are prepared to exert power and authority and all decisions are taken at the top with little decentralisation. Lower down the food chain there is a tendency not to question decisions or to take responsibility or ownership. Procedures will normally be strictly upheld. Expect to have to remind and persuade people to do things you have requested or agreed.

- **Building a successful working relationship:** Personal relationships are important and are built through socialising and hospitality. No invitation should be refused, as critical business decisions are often made in restaurants or outside the office. Czech business people tend to avoid uncertainty. Expect slow progress in the early stages of negotiation as details are examined and fallback

positions put in place. Then expect action plans to be carried out to the letter. Flexibility and improvisation are not Czech business attributes. This means that renegotiation of agreed points may often be seen as a breach of trust.



Children skating on a frozen pond in the south Bohemian village of Holasovice, well-known for its unique 19th century Baroque architecture. Source: European Commission

- **Working hours:** Czech companies tend to start and finish work earlier than UK companies.

## Sources

- Research and text: Central European Development Agency (CEDA) 01302 367662  
 International House [www.ihlondon.co.uk](http://www.ihlondon.co.uk)  
 Euro Information Centre [www.euro-info.org.uk](http://www.euro-info.org.uk)
- Other Resources: Foreign & Commonwealth Office London [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)  
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- Photographs: European Commission [www.europa.eu/int](http://www.europa.eu/int)

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