



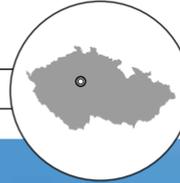
■ THE BIG CITY GUIDE { Prague }

# On trend

Vibrant, colourful and artistic, Prague's Žižkov neighbourhood offers a cool alternative to the Czech capital's busiest tourist spots, says **Robin McKelvie**

# Prague

CZECH REPUBLIC VÁCLAV HAVEL AIRPORT 1.26 MILLION +420 18°C CZECH KORUNA (CZK)



## “The area is like an epic cartoon you drew yourself”

There is nothing cartoon-like or comic about Žižkov's most famous 'resident'. The **New Jewish Cemetery** (1 Izraelská) houses the grave of the notoriously melancholic Franz Kafka, who once said of Prague: "This little mother has claws". The more I delve, the more I feel Žižkov has too. Just across the road is another cemetery, **Olšanské hřbitovy** (hrbitovy.cz), where I make for the grave of a true Žižkov counter-culture hero. In 1969, in the wake of the brutal crushing of the Prague Spring, Jan Palach set himself on fire in the ultimate rebellious stand against the regime.

A striking symbol of Communist-era paranoia still lives on in Žižkov. The **Žižkov Tower** (towerpark.cz) was designed to block TV transmissions from the West, though, ironically, it was not completed until 1992, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Today it's a bar, restaurant and hotel complex.

The regime may ultimately have failed to conquer Žižkov, but café culture is encroaching on its bar scene. Mercifully, it comes with soul. **Café Pavlač** (cafepavlac.cz) is all distressed décor, but it's not just hipster style over substance, as the adjacent courtyard gallery is run by the same people. At nearby gallery and exhibition space **Hunt**



When I first ventured to Prague in 1992, I stumbled into the intoxicating chaos of a place defining what post-Communist cities could be. The febrile atmosphere was one of hope, fuelled by youthful verve and creativity. Somewhere along

the line, that spark went out as mass tourism took hold. I'd heard, though, that the 1990s spirit lives on in the Žižkov district and headed there to explore.

A short walk from the old core, it's indeed another world. Instead of Irish-themed pubs, there are pop-up bars. Instead of faux cultural shows, there are chaotic art happenings. The area was once known as 'Red Žižkov', thanks to Communist-era workers. This sense of community drives residents to proudly proclaim it 'the Žižkov Republic'.

I begin my journey at **Palác Akropolis** (palacakropolis.cz), where it could be the early 1990s. Žižkov's cultural and nightlife fulcrum is home to bars, a restaurant, club venues and concert stages.

"Žižkov has a magical vibe no one is able to describe properly," Eliška Černá, who works there, enthuses. "Unless you live it, you don't know what we're talking about. Once a rundown, poor area, it's now full of big and small cultural venues, hipster cafés and works organically as a cultural hub, mainly for independent culture."

This feisty, positive spirit is exemplified by **Bukowski's** (facebook.com/pages/Bukowskis-Bar/12899236905), one of the hip bars that now straddle the streets alongside the dirt-cheap old beer halls. It's run by Glen Emery, a Canadian who was part of the Paris 1920s-style influx of ex-pats into Prague in the early 1990s. Today, Žižkov is, "the only place I'd be, it's like living in an epic cartoon you drew yourself".

1. Palác Akropolis is always a hub of activity 2. The observatory at Žižkov Tower offers amazing views 3. The Palác Akropolis has one of the trendiest eateries in Prague 4. Žižkov Tower was originally designed to block TV transmissions from the West



PHOTO CREDITS: ALAMY, GETTY

## Three Prague treats you must try

### STREET FOOD

Due to every street corner in Prague being adorned with a street-food stall, it can start to feel a lot like New York. The signature treat is some hulking great meaty sausages, which are cooked right in front of you. To fit in like a local, make sure you devour them with un buttered bread and a liberal smothering of tangy mustard. A meal in itself.

### ABSINTHE

This potent alcoholic drink is most associated with the nefarious artistic community of Paris in the 1920s, but it's also keenly woven into Prague culture. This drink – made in the Czech Republic – verges into opiate territory in its effects. Whether it fires people with artistic inspiration or not, it remains something many revellers in Žižkov are keen to experiment with.

### PLENTY OF PORK

Prague's citizens adore their red meat and pork takes on a semi-mythical status. You can find various cuts – and many offcuts that you might not be ready for – and many dishes are delicious. A national staple is pork with dumplings, usually served smothered in a rich and creamy sauce, with a splodge of tart berry jelly to take the fatty edge off.

- 5. Eat authentic, beautiful food at Pho Vietnam
- 6. The Hunt Kastner gallery features regular art fairs and some striking works by Czech artists



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**Kastner** (huntkastner.com), you won't find cheesy images of Prague, but instead startling works by Czech artists.

Most things in Žižkov come with a twist. At bike repair shop **Bajkazyl** (bajkazyl.cz), you can enjoy a glass of Únětické Pivo 12° and recline to music from a record player. Across the road, **U Slovanské lípy** (uslovanskelypy.cz) – a recreation of an old Czech beer hall – offers a postmodern twist. One of the latest additions to the café scene is Vietnamese **Cafefin** (facebook.com/cafefinvpraze), opened by the people who started the pho revolution in Prague. Over a steaming bowl of the traditional noodle soup at **Pho Vietnam** (facebook.com/photuanlan) a couple of doors along, student Andulka tells me about an underground festival that takes place each year. Started a decade ago by a bunch of 16-year-olds, **Žižkovská Noc** (zizkovskanoc.net) is now a mainstay on the thriving local arts scene.

Back at **Palác Akropolis**, where I began my journey, I meet Eliška Černá again, who brings the curtain down on my Žižkov discovery: "Once you start living in Žižkov, you'll never want to leave it. Locals don't say, 'I'm proud to be living in Prague.' They say, 'I'm proud to be living in Žižkov!'"

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## Meet a Local Steve Gove, founder and director of the Prague Fringe



"I've lived in Prague for almost 20 years and could never leave. Despite Prague seeming like it's gone all upmarket, the underground vibe still lives on. In fact, the atmosphere of many of these places today still has a great sense of how things were when I first moved here in the 1990s.

"There are still cheap underground cinemas, pop-up bars and clubs in disused factory buildings, and partly used railway goods depots. Although old school does still exist, the hip side of culture has been embraced by young Praguers. Prague's heart is its young, vibrant underground.

"The Žižkov district has a constant energy that bursts through its veins. I'm a huge fan of Venuše ve Švehlovce (venuse-ve-svehlovce.cz), a theatre company that performs in a beautiful old hall deep under an art nouveau apartment building, mostly in Czech, but they are well worth a look." *The next Prague Fringe is 25 May – 2 June 2018. praguefringe.com*

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