

The Czech Republic today – as for many decades – is one of Europe's top beer destinations – if not in the world. From Plzeň (Pilsen in English), a city in western Bohemia just over 50 miles (c.90km) west of Prague, is known worldwide for its Pilsner beer, created in 1842. It's also a country where the wine culture should not be underestimated.

Created by Bavarian brewer Josef Groll on October 4, 1842 in this very city, which celebrated its role as 'European Capital of Culture' in 2015, the beer was the world's first Pilsner 'golden beer' – Pilsner Urquell. It has been produced in the same manner ever since and with a capacity for 120,000 bottles rolling off the production line per hour.

But let's not forget that brewing in Pilsen goes back to the 13th century and the brewing heritage in the Czech Republic ranges from big brewing concerns to smaller micro-breweries dotted around the entire country.

Pilsner Urquell, which produces this flagship beer as well as other brews like Gambrinus, is currently owned by SAB Miller. The brewery is the undisputed number one domestic brewery in the country and has inspired more than two-thirds of all the



Above, a brewery delivery truck in the mid-20th century. Below, the entrance to the Pilsner Urquell Brewery today

that has been in operation since 1926 with animals from around the world including Komodo dragons, cheetahs, leopards and lemurs. It's the second oldest zoo in the republic. The city is also home to the

award-winning microbrewery in Dobřany (Modrá Hvězda) – the Blue Star Restaurant – 20km from Pilsen that has been renovated in recent years. Brewing here dates back to 1378. In 2012 a small brewery museum was

Where beer is a national phenomenon by Roger Aitken

world's beers labelled pils or pilsner. Don't miss out on a visit to see how the legend is made with a beer tour.

It is followed by Staropramen in second place, Heineken CR in third and the famous Czeke Budweiser in fourth spot which is exported to 65 countries. The latter, of course, is not to be confused with the US version of Budweiser – where a dispute between the Czech and American brewers dating back a century has meant the Czechs successfully saw off their US rivals in trade mark matters.

European City of Culture: Pilsen

Pilsen, where Arsenal goalkeeper and Czech international Petr Čech was born, entertained more than one million tourists and saw hundreds of participants – local and foreign partners and institutions – taking part.

A visit to the Pilsner Urquell brewery is a must on your itinerary. It's where you will learn about the history and secret production of the eponymous lager and see authentic vats as well as the historical and contemporary brew houses.

Each year on October 4, the 'Pilsner Fest' takes place commemorating the famous anniversary when the first batch of Pilsner Urquell was unleashed on the world. For fans of the amber nectar it's unmissable.

At the end of the museum visit next to the world's first beer trains that ran to Vienna, Paris and beyond you can refresh yourself at the Na Splice restaurant, which can seat more than 500 people in its underground beer hall. It serves traditional Czech cuisine like Svíčková, a dish comprising beef sirloin in cream sauce with dumplings.

Elsewhere in the city you should also step inside the city's Great Synagogue, which is the second largest in Europe and the nearby line where American forces liberated the city from the Germans towards the end of World War II.

Pilsen also has a zoo and Botanical Gardens

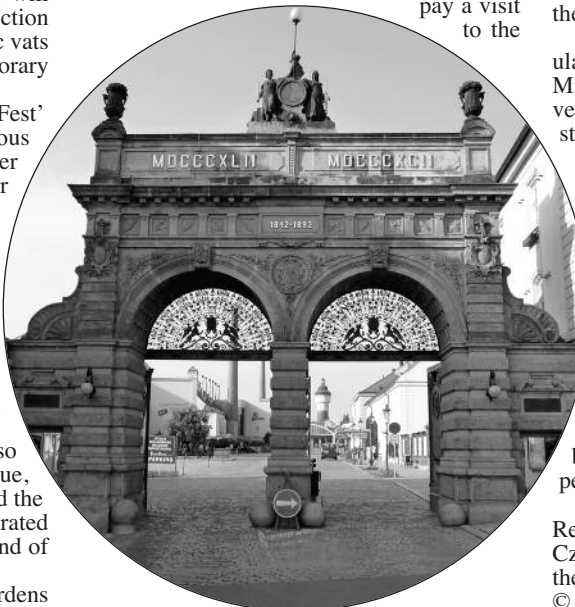
Techmania Science Centre (www.techmania.cz) based by the former industrial hall and canteen of the Skoda works.

Micro Brewery Scene

Outside the city, excursions can be made to the Temple of Hops and Beer in Žatec, which has more than a 700-year-plus tradition of growing Saaz noble hops used by more than a few breweries. It has influenced and played a pivotal role in beer production globally through its quality hops.

Check out the museum which will intrigue a broad range of visitors – young and old alike – among sample sacks of hops exported to places like New York and Buenos Aires. The ornate astronomical clock positioned outside on the main building is a wonder. The beer temple, produces its own beer and hosts 'Dočesná', its hops-related harvest festival every year.

My top tip is to pay a visit to the



opened with more than a thousand exhibits ranging from the 18th century to 1950.

At Modrá Hvězda you are presented at the bar with beer in its natural state without pasteurisation at less than CZK30 (£1) a pint, ranging from 10° (plateau) bright, 12° light lager, 14° dark Special semi-dark 16° Special, 17° light special, special flavoured beer and even beer schnapps. Is that beer heaven?

While microbreweries in the Czech Republic have been growing exponentially in recent years and today number around 350 (with a new one popping up each week), collectively they still only account for just 1% of the entire nation's beer output. Highlighting the gulf between the big and small players, Modrá Hvězda's annual beer production is 500 hectolitres. That contrasts with Pilsner Urquell's hefty 600 hectolitres per hour.

There's a chance to follow up with lunch at the medieval tavern U Meluzína in Domažlice, which is unique and has an array of medieval armour, helmets and weapons on the walls. It's like stepping back in time.

Meluzína was a mythological creature popular in legends and heraldry back in the Middle Ages. Dishes on the menu include venison with rosehip sauce and Hungarian-style chicken.

Czech & Moravian Wine

For those wanting to mix the travel and wine experience there's an organised tour with Wine4Life (www.wine4life.cz) run by Daria Harrison in Brno. A variety of day-long, weekend and week-long tours are offered such as Rosé and Romance, the mystery of Moravian wine and Cute Cuvee.

Interestingly, wine producers from this region won 500 medals (gold, silver and bronze) last year at international wine competitions in Europe, Asia and North America.

Clearly there's far more to the Czech Republic than its jewel, Prague. But as the Czech proverb goes, when paying a visit to the pub don't forget your wallet. Na zdraví!