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## TAPON, Francis

### Czech Republic — Eastern Europe's Most Civilized Country

My first visit to Eastern Europe was in 1992, when I had just graduated from college. For Americans, doing a European tour after college is a rite of passage. Just three years after the Iron Curtain came down, those 22-year-olds who craved some edginess stuck a toe in Eastern Europe. In my case, my best friend and I visited Prague and Budapest. Although nowadays Czechs and Hungarians will tell you 10 times per day that they are in *Central* Europe, not *Eastern* Europe, in 1992 they were only saying it about twice a day.

Prague—Eastern Europe's most beautiful city

In my opinion, Prague is not only Eastern Europe's most beautiful city, it is one of the five most beautiful cities in the world. Venice and Paris are the only two major European cities that top Prague in the City Beauty Contest. In 1992, Prague was like a supermodel who had just finished a five-day muddy backpacking trip: you could still tell that underneath all the dirt and grime, there was a hottie.

Today, Prague has not only taken a shower, but she has put on some makeup and a glamorous dress. Tourists have showered the city with money, enabling her to restore herself to her glory days when she was the capital of the Holy Roman Empire and, later, the capital of the Habsburg Empire. Even the worst flood in 200 years barely slowed down renovations—nearly \$4 billion poured in to help Prague bounce back. When I returned in 2004, just two years after a major flood, I couldn't see any damage and was once again enamored with the city's beauty. Today, this city of 1.3 million is a gem on the world stage. It seamlessly blends 900 years of architecture (Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Art Nouveau, Cubism, and Modern) into one tight package. It is not only an incredibly romantic city, but nearly every architectural marvel has a story behind it.

Take the saint's tomb in St. Vitus Cathedral, for example. The Czechs started building this Gothic cathedral in 1344 and finished it almost 600 years later. While it was being built, King Wenceslas IV was suspicious of his queen, so he demanded that John of Nepomuk, the priest who heard her confessions, reveal what she had confessed. John refused, saying that it's against church code to do so, even if the king demands it. The enraged king had John suited up in heavy armor, and tossed to his death in the Vltava River. For his loyalty to his priestly oath, he was canonized a saint and rests in a Baroque tomb made with two tons of silver.

New York has Brooklyn Bridge, San Francisco has the Golden Gate Bridge, but Prague has the *Karlův Most*—the Charles Bridge. Its 30 unique statues can inspire you on a sunny day or frighten you on a foggy night. It's hard to pick Prague's prettiest part, but this breathtaking bridge is my favorite. Built in 1357, it was Prague's only bridge until 1841. It was so well built that it survived the catastrophic 2002 flood. The bridge's best story was in 1648, when unlikely heroes (armed students and Jews) stopped an unlikely invader (Sweden) from crossing the bridge, thereby ending a 30-year war.

### The Czech way to start a war

Even Czech windows have stories. In 1419, someone in the *Novoměstská radnice* (New Town Hall) threw a stone at marching Christian reformers, who, in a vengeful fury, broke into the building and threw a dozen Catholic councilors and a judge out the window. If the fall didn't kill them, the mob did. This event, which sparked a 17-year war, is called the *Defenestration of Prague*. *Defenestration* comes from Latin, meaning *out of the window*. About 200 years later, the locals would start an even bigger war by throwing some other Catholics out of a different window.

That famous window grabbed the headlines in 1618, when the Protestants did what they do best: protest. After convicting two Habsburg Catholic governors of violating the freedom of religion, Protestant nobles ignobly chucked them (along with their scribe) out of the upper window of the Prague Castle. This act is naturally called the *Second Defenestration of Prague*. What history books usually neglect to mention is that the Catholic guys fell 30 meters (100 feet) in a dung-filled moat and were barely hurt. However, they bruised their egos enough to declare war on the Protestants. For the next 30 years, Christians killed each other in a fight that would have an unimaginative name: the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). The Protestant Czechs lost the war, a quarter of the Bohemian population died, and much of Central Europe lay in ruins. For the next 300 years the Germans would beat the Czechs into submission, forcing them to learn German, become Catholic, build baroque buildings, and make tasty beer.

The Wallenstein Palace is another amazing building in Prague with a story of divine justice behind it. Albrecht von Wallenstein was a Protestant until he realized that the Catholics would win the Thirty Years' War. Therefore, like Bulgarians, Italians, Romanians, and Slovaks in WWII, he switched to the winning side. Then he stole all the money from his former Protestant buddies to build himself a sweet palace. When the Catholic emperor found out that Wallenstein was going to switch sides again and rejoin the Protestants, he had Wallenstein assassinated.

After the Thirty Years' War, the triumphant Catholic clerics built the ornate *Malá Strana* (Little Quarter). They emphasized the ostentatious Baroque style throughout the district (and especially in the St. Nicolas Church) because that's exactly what the Protestants hated. Another nice Prague neighborhood is the Hradčany district, where you'll find the Prague's largest monastic library, the Strahov Library. Next to model ships, there's the most unusual exhibit you'll ever find in a monastery: a couple of whale penises.

What makes Prague special is that it's one of the few European cities that wasn't damaged during WWII. That's because the Czech Resistance made a deal with the Nazis: leave freely, just don't destroy any of the buildings on your way out. The Germans honored the deal and surrendered to the Red Army a few days later. Nevertheless, the Nazis did leave a trace.

Prague was once home to 120,000 Jews; today, about 4,000 remain *in the whole country*. For centuries, Jews had cycled between prosperity and persecution. The Vatican was the first to order the construction of a walled Jewish ghetto in the 1200s, because it felt Jews and Christians shouldn't mingle. Prague holds Europe's oldest still-open synagogue, which was built during that era. Over the centuries, the Jewish population grew, but then the Nazis nearly killed them all. The three sisters of the most famous Czech writer, Franz Kafka, were murdered during the Holocaust. The Nazis had plans to exhibit Jewish artifacts in The Museum of An Extinct Race.

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Older than the Jewish Synagogue is Prague's *Staré Město* (Old Town), which is so beautiful that it can bring tears to your eyes. The highlight is the *Pražský Hrad* (Prague Castle): the world's largest ancient castle, covering seven football fields. A story-filled astronomical clock animates on the hour. Lose yourself in the street maze and you might end up in *Nové Město* (New Town), which isn't exactly new—it was founded in 1348. Today, its St. Wenceslas statue is famous for being the epicenter of many Czech protests. For example, one Czech student made the ultimate protest there—he burned himself alive. To understand why, we have to go back to the spring of 1968.

### Prague Spring

In April 1968, the Czechoslovak communists instituted policies that resembled the *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies that the USSR would introduce 17 years later. They released political prisoners, relaxed the heavy economic intervention, stopped censorship, reduced travel restrictions, and encouraged democracy. It's everything that Gorbachev would do 17 years later, but in 1968 the Soviets weren't ready for such radical reforms. Moscow demanded that the Czechoslovaks reverse their policies. The Czechoslovaks called the event the *Pražské Jaro* (Prague Spring), because it represented "socialism with a human face."

The Prague Spring lasted through the summer, until August 21, when Soviet tanks rolled through Czechoslovakia along with 200,000 Warsaw Pact soldiers. That's more soldiers than the US sent to Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein. The Soviets expelled 14,000 Communist Party functionaries and fired 500,000 communist members. Over 300,000 fled the country. The USSR imprisoned rebels and sent educated professionals to labor camps or to become street cleaners. The Soviets sent Czechoslovakia's President to work for Slovakia's forestry department.

A few months after the Warsaw Pact killed the Prague Spring, a student protested the action by burning himself alive. As his flesh burned, he staggered down the steps of the *Národní Muzeum* (National Museum), and then collapsed. A cross-shaped monument marks the place where he fell. What's tragic is that he wasn't dead. It took him four agonizing days to finally die. The next day, 200,000 Czechs gathered in the square in his honor.

When a young Gorbachev visited Prague soon after that student's self-immolation, he saw anti-USSR graffiti and encountered workers who didn't want to talk with any Russian visitors. That trip was an epiphany that made him realize what every Eastern European already knew: that communism was unjust and unsustainable. The Prague Spring planted the seed of *perestroika* into Gorbachev's brain. Nearly 20 years later, when he finally had the power to usher in a Prague Spring all over Eastern Europe, he did.

### Discovering the rest of Czechia

Many countries have long, flamboyant names. One the worst offenders is The United States of America. What a mouthful! Fortunately, we have shorter versions (USA or America). Other countries with long-winded names have a short alternative: The People's Republic of China (China or PRC), The Russian Federation (Russia), and The Republic of Moldova (Moldova). Unfortunately, the Czech Republic hasn't popularized a catchy word to call itself. In an effort to promote one, we'll use the best candidate:

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*Czechia*. That way, when someone asks, “Where are you going?” or “What country makes the best beer?” you can say, *Czechia*, instead of *the Czech Republic*. Now let’s explore the rest of Czechia.

Whenever I told Americans that I was going to spend a couple of years traveling in Eastern Europe, they would usually say, “So you’re going to Prague?” For many Americans, Prague is Eastern Europe. This is ironic for two reasons. First, the Czechs hate it when you say they’re from Eastern Europe. Second, Prague is the least Eastern European city in Eastern Europe. It might as well be in France. The only difference is that the Czechs are polite.

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Francis Tapon’s mother is from Chile and his father is from France. They met in San Francisco thanks to a slow elevator. His brother, Philippe Tapon, is the author of two novels. His family spoke Spanish at home, unless an English swear word was necessary.

Francis was born in San Francisco, California where he attended the French American International School for 12 years. Native French teachers convinced him that France is the coolest country in the universe. He is fluent in English, French, and Spanish. He struggles with Italian, Portuguese, Slovenian, and Russian. If you point a gun to his head, he’ll start speaking other languages too.

He earned a Religion Degree with honors from Amherst College. He also has an MBA from Harvard Business School. After Harvard, he co-founded a robotic vision company in Silicon Valley. Then he decided to change his life forever.

In 2001, he sold the little he had to hike the 3,000 km Appalachian Trail. Then, after consulting for Hitachi, he visited all 25 countries in Eastern Europe in 2004. He consulted at Microsoft before hiking the 4,200 km Pacific Crest Trail in 2006. In 2007, he became the first person to do a round-trip on the Continental Divide Trail—a seven-month journey spanning 9,000 km. In 2008-2011, he visited over 40 European countries, but focused on revisiting all the Eastern European ones. In 2009, he climbed up Mont Blanc and walked across Spain twice (once by traversing the Pyrenees from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, and then by hiking El Camino Santiago). He’s backpacked over 20,000 kilometers (12,500 miles) and traveled to over 80 countries.

He is the author of *Hike Your Own Hike: 7 Life Lessons from Backpacking Across America*. This book can be also ordered at: <http://francistapon.com/shop>. He is donating half of his book royalty to America’s three major scenic trails.

***The Hidden Europe: What Eastern Europeans Can Teach Us* is his second book of his WanderLearn Series, was published as ebook on December 12, 2011, and as hardcover on March 4, 2012.**

In 2012-2015, he plans to visit every country in Africa and write a book about that in 2016. His goal is to wander to all 193 countries of the world, see what we can learn from them, and share it with everyone.

Francis’ website is <http://FrancisTapon.com>

