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The Czech Republic's Bohemian Paradise is a beautiful protected area – and a UNESCO Global Geopark – rich in nature and culture that lives up to its utopian name.

TEXT BY PETE BALDING PHOTOS BY HERNAN PATIÑO

*Guests of the Hrubá Skála
Chateau hotel relax after
enjoying the spa.*

A SLOW BREAK IN BOHEMIAN PARADISE



Views of the Hrubá Skála Chateau illustrate the charm of Bohemian Paradise.



Stunning medieval castles, brilliant crystal glassware, world-class breweries, and old-world inns and bistros are in abundance.

While popular for decades with Czechs seeking family-friendly outdoor activities, Bohemian Paradise is mostly devoid of foreign visitors. That will certainly change as the appeal to slow-travel enthusiasts for rustic, safe, and affordable getaways beyond the popular tourist destinations continues to grow.

The famous Czech tourist attractions like stunning medieval castles, brilliant crystal glassware, world-class breweries, and old-world inns and bistros are in abundance here. But Bohemian Paradise also has distinctive natural wonders including huge sandstone monuments, idyllic river valleys, vast forests, spacious dolomite caves with underground lakes, and unique geological sites rich in gemstones.

HISTORY IS EVERYWHERE

Approximately 200 square kilometres in size, Bohemian Paradise is located about 90 kilometres north-east of Prague and 30 kilometres south of Liberec near the Polish border. There are no marked boundaries, but the main towns of Turnov in the north-east on the beautiful Jizera River, and Jičín in the south-east, famous for its Baroque architecture, roughly define





Sandstone shapes define Bohemian Paradise.



Czech lager is delightfully refreshing.

The natural wonders of Bohemian Paradise have an almost otherworldly quality.

the area. Both are worth visiting as there are a variety of hotels and restaurants plus the towns make good bases from which to explore.

“The name Český ráj or Bohemian Paradise first appeared 150 years ago,” according to **Jan Mertlik**, a representative of the local tourism association. “It was officially declared a protected scenic district in 1955, the first in the Czech Republic, and in 2005 it was granted UNESCO Geopark status,” he adds.

The area has been at the heart of Central European history for dozens of generations. The ruins of medieval castles like Valečov (14th century), Vranov Pantheon (15th century), and Trosky (14th century) magically rise out of sandstone outcroppings as if built by supernatural forces.

MONUMENTAL NATURE

The natural wonders of Bohemian Paradise do have an almost otherworldly quality, especially the sandstone pillars and ridges that rise in sharp vertical shapes – they look like colossal statues and busts carved by giant sculptors. Prachovské skály and Hrubá Skála, both near Jičín, and Krtola Valley near Valečov are a few of the best places to behold these photogenic marvels.

There are hiking trails and well-marked paths that meander through the sandstone outcroppings. The 19-kilometre-long Rieger Trail (Riegrova stezka) at Semily follows the Jizera River Valley through narrow gorges and thick beech forests that stand as tall and straight as big firs. Canoe trips are a popular option and easy enough for beginners on the gently flowing and scenic Jizera River.

Bohemian Paradise is also the home to the Bozkovské Dolomite Caves near the village of Bozkov in Semily. Guided tours along safe and gently paved paths which pass through caverns rich in stalagmites and stalactites and underground lakes are a unique experience for all ages.

GLASS, CARS, AND BEER

Besides spectacular nature, the Czech Republic is well known for craftsmanship and manufactur-

JEWELS OF BOHEMIAN PARADISE

Assembling a chandelier with world-famous Bohemian crystal



THE REMARKABLE SANDSTONE AREAS:

- Krtola Valley and the nearby Krásná vyhlídka Inn
- Prachovské skály and the Parkhotel Skalní Město
- Hrubá Skála and the Hrubá Skála Chateau Hotel

OTHER NATURAL WONDERS:

- Rieger Trail (Riegrova stezka)
- Bozkovské Dolomite Caves
- Jizera River Valley

An assortment of local produce



CASTLES AND CHATEAUS:

- Valečov Castle
- Malá Skála Pantheon Castle
- Hrad Kost Castle and nearby village Vesec u Sobotky
- Trosky Castle
- Mnichovo Hradiště Chateau

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Vintage racers shine at the Škoda Museum.

Cars and trucks have been manufactured in Mladá Boleslav for more than 120 years.

ing. Bohemian crystal is world famous. Many of the great churches, palaces, and luxurious private homes around the world have chandeliers made of glass cut into gem-like crystals assembled at places like Wranovsky Bohemian Crystal Lamps in Turov.

The Harrachov Glassworks in a beautiful mountainous region 40 kilometres east of Liberec is the oldest continuously-running glass factory in Bohemia. The factory shop has a beguiling collection of wine and beer glasses, vases, and dishes at very reasonable prices. Right next to the factory is a microbrewery and gastropub. The nearby Čerták ski-jumping centre, a World Cup venue, is just within sight from the large restaurant balcony.

Without doubt, Czech beer, especially lager, is often considered the best in the world and at prices

so ridiculously low, it's irresistible. The Nová Paka Brewery near Jičín, one of the four breweries in Bohemian Paradise, offers tours in English and tastings of their long list of delicious brews which are exported around the world.

The city of Mladá Boleslav located on the route to Prague is famous as the home of the Škoda car factory. Cars and trucks have been manufactured here for more than 120 years. The modern and fascinating factory museum is not only an interest for Škoda owners, but for anyone who's interested in the history of automobiles. The nearby Metoděj Vlach Aviation Museum has a captivating collection of vintage aircraft that would certainly interest the same crowd of motorheads.

"We try to encourage visitors to see the countryside and experience the local life," says **Gérard Keijsper** from the Mladá Boleslav Information Centre. "Besides Škoda we have so much to see and experience in this ancient city and area," he says.

Prague is of course a magnificent world city that is justifiably the fifth most visited city in Europe after London, Paris, Istanbul, and Rome, but if you have a few extra days or you just want to experience a more rustic, less crowded, and affordable part of the country then rent a car or take the train to Bohemian Paradise, the hidden gem of the Czech Republic. ●



Pete Balding is a Helsinki-based writer and teacher from California. He's an avid outdoorsman who is inspired by the wild beauty of nature.



Hernan Patiño is a regular contributor to *Blue Wings* who never tires of travelling. He lives in Helsinki with his wife and three children.