



Tourists and locals frequent the Art Deco Kavárna Slavia for coffee and live piano music

# SLICE OF HISTORY

Prague's venerable coffee houses were the centres around which life revolved in the early 20th century.

**Kathryn Tomasetti** stops by for some *sachertorte* and discovers that, all these years later, the historical cafés are still chock-full of charm

During the dying days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, life in Prague centred around the city's opulent coffee houses. Albert Einstein and Franz Kafka were among the authors and intelligentsia that wrote, debated and consorted in these cafés. With the rise of communism in the Forties, there was a move to snuff out the boho venues; some were boarded up or turned into anodyne offices – but their spirit lived on. When the Czech Republic was established 22 years ago, the finest of Prague's beloved coffee houses were re-launched and, ever since, they've been a central part of the city's artsy scene.

The historical cafés remain a window into Prague's past, their ornate architecture largely UNESCO-protected. On the menu are traditional Czech and Bohemian savoury dishes, pastries, cakes and a lengthy list of seriously buzz-inducing coffees. Non-smoking sections and free Wi-Fi are a nod to the 21st century, but these atmospheric enclaves continue to flourish as in the old days, as a place to laugh with friends, people-watch for an hour or simply dream away a lazy afternoon.

## Café Louvre

The headquarters of Prague's early-20th-century intelligentsia, the elegant Café Louvre opened in 1902. Not



A full breakfast at Café Savoy, popular on weekend mornings



A view of Prague over the Vltava River

only was the café equipped with a chess room and a first-class billiards hall, with a dozen handcrafted tables imported from America, but each day two classical concerts were performed here for an audience that included Franz Kafka, Albert Einstein (who was working at the Prague German University from 1911 to 1912), Czech actor Eduard Vojan (who had a table permanently set aside for his use) and local science-fiction author Karel Čapek. The Louvre encouraged its scholarly patrons to make use of the café as their own personal office, with an on-site writing room and a telephone at their disposal.

This vibrant centre of life was shut down in 1948, thanks to a communist coup in February, with its furniture flung violently out the gorgeous glass windows. In the ensuing years the space functioned as offices, before being fully renovated and restored to its former grandeur, reopening in 1992.

Today, large archways splice the pink cerise décor. There's notepaper on every table so visitors – like the Louvre's original patrons – can jot down ideas if so inspired. Hip mums meet for lunch on the petite al fresco patio, tiny tots in tow; more sombre business deals are made (and broken) in the adjacent dining room, under the watchful gaze of vintage posters. The Louvre's main menu dates from a century ago: classic dishes include *svíčková na smetaně* (beef sirloin in a creamy carrot sauce) and the house cheesecake with peaches and Viennese cream. Yet the café is decidedly modern, too, flagging items that are gluten-free and shaking up its own homemade cocktails. 00420-724-05 4055, [cafelouvre.cz](http://cafelouvre.cz)

### Café Imperial

It would be an understatement to say Café Imperial was the talk of the town when it first opened its Art Deco doors in 1914. Covered

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floor to ceiling in creamy porcelain tiles, the unique décor depicted Moorish motifs, ranging from exotic flowers to a rising phoenix. Jaws dropped as patrons cast their eyes skyward to take in the golden floral mosaic that arched above, intricately crafted from tiny ceramics.

The Imperial celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2014 and it remains just as striking today. The building itself is both a Czech National Monument and UNESCO-listed, its architecture an unusual combination of Art Nouveau, Art Deco and Cubism.

Among the café's bronze figurines, distinguished locals mix with American tourists trickling in from the luxurious Hotel Imperial next door. Discreet staff dish up age-old Czech cuisine such as delicately braised veal cheeks, prepared by celebrity television chef and co-owner Zdenek Pohlreich. Unmissable is Pohlreich's Cake Imperial, a chocolate-dipped chocolate cake layered with dates, its flavour reminiscent of salted caramel.

For decades the café was perhaps best known for its quirky Saturnin's Bowl. Inspired



The regal Café Imperial celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2014

by Czech author Zdenek Jirotko's popular novel *Saturnin* (published in 1942), this pile of stale doughnuts could be purchased for 1,943 CZK (AED 290) and playfully pelted at fellow diners. Alas, since the Imperial's renovations in 2007, the bowl of fun is no longer on the menu. 00420-246-01 1440, [cafeimperial.cz](http://cafeimperial.cz)

### Grand Café Orient

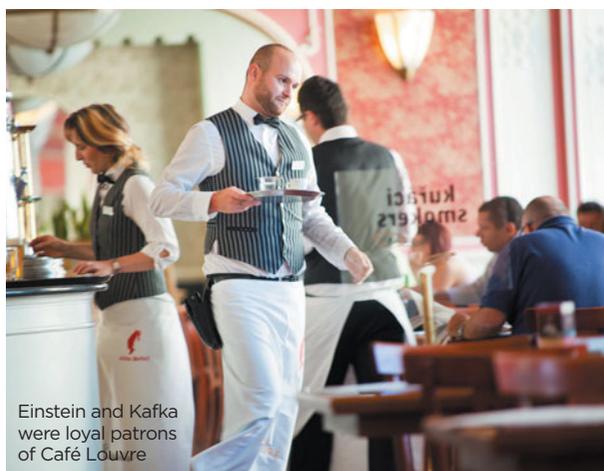
The Grand Café Orient is the world's finest existing example of Cubist-style design. Tucked away on the first floor of the House of the Black Madonna, a former department store designed by Cubist architect Josef Gočár in 1912, the fashionable coffee house – inspired by artworks created by the era's most celebrated artists, like Pablo Picasso – opened the same year. However, the popularity of Cubism rapidly waned and the café closed down less than a decade later.

In 2005, new proprietor Rudolf Brinek recreated the Grand Café Orient in all its early-20th-century glory: bench seating was reupholstered in candy-striped green and Cubist chandeliers were dusted down. The▶

## Food



Grand Café Orient's signature Cubist wreath cake



Einstein and Kafka were loyal patrons of Café Louvre



Candy-striped green upholstery and Cubist chandeliers at Grand Café Orient

café's superb central location, at the heart of Prague's Old Town, pulls in a range of patrons, from laptop-toting college students to chatty resident expats. Come lunchtime there's always a restrained jostle for a handful of tables along the café's narrow balcony. Bow-tied waiters bustle about, serving up elaborate coffee concoctions on stainless steel trays, an elegant allusion to a bygone era.

The menu covers modern coffee house fare, with desserts undoubtedly the order of the day. In autumn, look out for flaky quince pastry pie or classic *Czech jablčný závin* (apple strudel). Summer offers seasonal plum cheesecake and cucumber lemonade. Strong coffee paired with *kremrole* (traditional cream-filled pastries) is popular year-round. The house speciality is the Grand Café Orient's own unique *kubistický věneček*, a traditional Czech cake that translates as Cubist wreath. 00420-224-22 4240, [grandcafeorient.cz](http://grandcafeorient.cz)

### Café Savoy

Slip into the Café Savoy any weekend morning and you'll be in friendly company. Families swap stories, along with plates of scrambled eggs and thick French toast. A young couple – looking effortlessly chic in this season's boho designer threads – bump foreheads as they deliberate over the Savoy's tome of a tea menu. An elderly

local sips a steamy jug of hot chocolate and slips morsels of *ořechový dort* walnut cake to his spotted pup dozing under the table on the herringbone wooden floor.

Opened in 1893, the stunning Café Savoy boasts seven-metre-high Neo-Renaissance ceilings, which were preserved under plaster during the country's communist era, and the vast windows and oversized chandeliers are still intact. Downstairs, a large picture window overlooks the slapping, kneading and dusting of dough in the on-site bakery.

Service may be brusque, yet unlike the menu offerings in some other cafés – which can take a back seat to décor – the Savoy's dishes are well worth seeking out on their own merit. Lunch specials range from potato gnocchi with poppy seed to pear compote; there's a dedicated gourmet menu (dishes like truffle cappuccino with grilled duck liver and apple reduction), top-notch speciality coffee and a pastry case where a mere browse can weaken the hardest of knees.

00420-257-31 1562, [cafesavoy.ambi.cz](http://cafesavoy.ambi.cz)

### Kavárna Slavia

The oldest of Prague's coffee houses, Kavárna Slavia's location couldn't be prettier. The popular café sits on the banks of the Vltava River, its plate glass windows peering out toward the Charles Bridge and Prague Castle

beyond. Perhaps even more enticing is the ornate edifice over the road: the city's National Theatre. Pop into the Slavia and you'll soon spot Czech actors and opera singers unwinding post-performance, plus a scattering of literary patrons either buried in a book or sketching storylines on an iPad.

Poets, playwrights and revolutionaries have frequented the Slavia since it opened in 1881. Big names include novelist Rainer Maria Rilke, Václav Havel – who went on to become the Czech Republic's first post-communist president – and Czech composer Antonín Dvořák. Demonstrations during the Velvet Revolution in 1989 even took place bang in front of the café, offering its patrons front-row seats.

Tourists and locals alike now sip coffee, hot chocolate and warm apple cider as they enjoy the Thirties Art Deco ambience. Cherry-wood panelling and oversized mirrors are juxtaposed with temporary photo exhibitions across the café walls and there's live piano music every evening. Snag one of the river-facing tables, each one also with a prized view of Viktor Oliva's 1901 painting "Absinthe Drinker", and order Czech-style baked duck with potato dumplings, braised chicken in pepper sauce or the coffee house's own version of chocolate Viennese *sachertorte*.

00420-224-21 8493, [cafeslavia.cz](http://cafeslavia.cz) CNT