

Relive the magic of many a Hollywood blockbuster in this versatile Czech city

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IT HAS passed off as Zurich, London and even Israel. You've seen Tom Cruise race through its streets, and Vin Diesel knock thugs off its bridges.

Prague is a film-maker's dream. Like a versatile actor, its landmarks and edifices evoke the look and feel of other metropolises.

And it's affordable. Sandwiched between Austria and Germany in the Czech Republic, Prague is often a cheap alternative to its pricey neighbours, yet its style and history allow it to saunter elegantly just like any other western European capital.

Dubbed the "City of a Hundred Spires", the Czech capital is renowned for its dramatic skyline, fairytale castles and medieval towers. Downtown Prague, meanwhile, is a gleaming modern centre. The eclectic combination makes the city an ideal setting for a variety of films — from contemporary to historical, to action — which a tour of film locations in Prague amply shows.



Doesn't the Astronomical Clock at Old Town Square resemble a scene out of *The Brothers Grimm*?

## PRAGUE Film-makers' playground

PRAGUE PHOTOS: NELLIE HUANG

### OLD TOWN SQUARE

I joined a group of film fans in the city's historic centre to relive famous movie scenes shot here. The Old Town Square, which en-

compasses baroque churches and the crowd-pulling Astronomical Clock, resembled a setting from a Grimm Brothers' fairytale.

"Many Hollywood movies were filmed

in Prague," said our guide as he led us past alfresco cafes and fountains. "*The Brothers Grimm*, *Blade II* and *Mission Impossible*, among the most famous ones. You've also seen it

posing as other cities, such as Amsterdam's red-light district in horror film *Hostel*, and a stand-in for 1900s Vienna in *The Illusionist*."

Right where we stood, the gothic steeple of Tyn church was the setting of action movie *xxx*'s opening scene. We continued along Celetna Street to follow the movie's trail to Obecní dum, the Municipal House. Glittering with colourful mosaic tiles and a golden facade, the art nouveau edifice was the backdrop for Vin Diesel's lunch scene with actress Asia Argento.



a couple of Swiss policemen.

Meanwhile, the exterior of the nearby Lichtenstein Palace was passed off as the American Embassy in *Mission Impossible*. Visitors who venture beyond the doors will see lavish rooms and grand views. Indeed, the palace has a glorious history, having hosted prominent personalities such as Queen Elizabeth II.

### PRAGUE CASTLE

We climbed the steep Nerudova Street to get to Prague Castle, a sprawling royal residence poised high above the Mala Strana district. The cobbled path was flanked by Baroque buildings. At the end was Matthias Gate, the main entrance of the castle where crowds had gathered to witness the changing of the guard.

According to our guide, this gate posed as the entrance of Buckingham Palace in Jackie Chan's Hollywood hit, *Shanghai Knights*, and was a stand-in for Vienna's Leopold Castle in Edward Norton's *The Illusionist*.

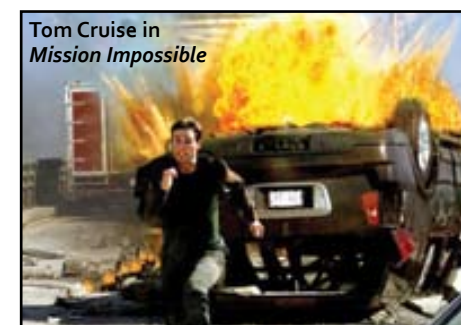
We entered the castle's grounds (entrance fee starts from \$18.50) to wander through bejewelled chambers and basilicas until we reached the main attraction — St Vitus Cathedral, a beautiful vision of wrought-iron gates, stained glass windows and gargoyles hanging from the roof's edges.

As we stood by the castle's edge, looking out at the city's skyline — where turquoise cupolas poke out and spiralling towers spring into the sky — I could imagine what film-makers saw in Prague: A place where various locales can be realised, be it a historic or modern setting. Prague is a city that bends and twists, revealing a multi-faceted personality.

### KAMPA ISLAND

We walked over to the island, traversing the "Devil's Stream" that connected it to Central Prague. A natural islet formed by Vltava River, Kampa Island is often referred to as the "Venice of Prague" by locals who go there on weekends to enjoy the sun.

Kampa Park doubled as a Zurich site in the blockbuster *The Bourne Identity*. It was there that Matt Damon's character discovered his lightning quick reflexes by flooring



costs about \$10. Hotel prices range from \$18 per person (Arapacay Hostel) to \$200 for a four-star hotel room (Hotel Julian).

### MOVIE TOUR OPTIONS

1. Prague Walking Tours offers customised itineraries to explore film locations. The cost varies according to the size of the group. [www.praguer.com](http://www.praguer.com)
2. Segway Fun organises three-hour movie tours on segways for 1,500 koruna (\$110). The price includes the use of a portable DVD player. [www.segwayfun.eu](http://www.segwayfun.eu)
3. Do-it-yourself. Pick up a map that indicates major film locations from tourist offices and information counters.

### WHEN IN PRAGUE ...

**Go:** Numerous airlines fly from Singapore to Prague with one stopover for about \$1,500. The best time to visit is in May or September, when the weather is mild. Prague's continental weather sees hot summers and cold winters.

**Getting around:** The best way to get around Prague's Old Town is by tram, which stops at most of the attractions. Subways also run through the entire city, making the commute to new neighbourhoods fast and easy.

**Budget:** Food and accommodation are cheaper here than in most European destinations. A standard restaurant meal

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