

Great Drives to the Opera

The Czech Republic



The countryside and landscapes of the Czech Republic abound with musical and operatic associations. Smetana's *Bartered Bride* is a groundbreaking work that in 1866 established a national style of opera, drawing on the traditions of Bohemian village life. Meanwhile Dvořák, a national musical hero, caught the flavour of Czech romanticism in folkloric operas such as *Rusalka*. And in the 20th century, Leos Janáček applied a gritty social critique to tightly knit communities in his native Moravia through operas such as *Jenůfa* and *Katya Kabanová*.



I set out on a Great Drive around the Czech Republic with my wife and son to experience the natural settings and historical backdrops that inspired these archetypically Czech operas. Travelling in style, we picked up our Alfa Romeo in Prague and took to the road.



Discovering Smetana

BEZDĚZ MOUNTAIN STANDS PROUD OF ITS surroundings for miles around, but as we drove north into the Bohemian countryside, it was lost in cloud amid a dark and gloomy sky. In the village at the foot of the mountain – barely more than a hamlet really – rural traditions still have a powerful pull on people’s lives. It’s a peaceful, unchanging setting, and just what Bedřich Smetana might have had in mind as he was composing his youthful comic masterpiece *The Bartered Bride*.

In our waterproofs and strong footwear, we climbed under dripping trees up a rough, slippery track to Castle Bezděz, the ‘ruin on the mountain’ of Smetana’s late opera *The Secret*, composed in 1878 just as Smetana’s health was failing drastically and he had begun to go deaf.

The Secret returns to the village setting and themes of *The Bartered Bride*: once again there are family feuds and financial skulduggery, but love triumphs in the end. The opera had some immediate success but then more or less vanished from the repertoire until it was revived in the early 20th century. It is set in Bezděz, and the mountain is the scene of the town councilor Kalina’s hunt for treasure and a meeting place for the lovers Blaženka and Vít.

Built in the late 13th century, Bezděz Castle served as a royal palace for Wenceslas II before being turned into a Benedictine Monastery after the Thirty Years War. In 1686, Stations of the Cross were built along the path to the castle, still visible to this day. By the time Smetana wrote his opera, the castle was a ruin. Today, some of the complex has been restored and one of the larger rooms is now in use as an art gallery.

Heading east, Litomyšl is a delightful city, dominated by a fabulous Renaissance chateau whose striking external walls are covered in rich sgraffito decoration

(produced by applying layers of plaster tinted in contrasting colors to a moistened surface) in the form of 8,000 love letters.

In 1823 Smetana’s father became brewer to Count Waldstein, the owner of the castle. It was in the family home across the square that the composer was born in 1824. The house is now a museum with the Smetana apartments re-created to a semblance of what they might have been like in Smetana’s childhood. The old brewery, meanwhile, has been converted into a training centre and hostel.

Detour: Jabkenice

To the south-east of Bezděz is the village where Smetana lived in the home (a gamekeeper’s lodge) of his eldest daughter Žofie from 1875 until his death in 1884. There’s a memorial to the composer there.



START GREAT DRIVE

Discovering Smetana

PRAGUE

BEZDĚZ

Head north via Routes 10 – 38
1hr 15mins

LITOMYŠL

South then east via Routes 38 – 272 – D11 – 35
2hrs 30mins

The Janáček Trail

LITOMYŠL

HUKVALDY

East via Routes 35 – E462 – 486
2hrs

LUHAČOVICE

Southwest via Routes 486 – 58 – 69 – 492
1hr 45mins

BRNO

West via Routes 55 – D1
1hr 30mins

At Home with Dvořák

BRNO

VYSOKÁ U PŘÍBRAMĚ

Via Routes D1 – 12– 3 – 18
3hrs 45mins

PRAGUE

Via Route 4
1hr

END OF GREAT DRIVE



The Janáček Trail

South of Ostrava in the far east of the Czech Republic is Hukvaldy a delightful mountain village that is the birthplace of Leoš Janáček. The house in which the composer was born is now a free museum housing a small collection of memorabilia.

The house stands adjacent to the grounds of Hukvaldy Castle – one of the largest in the Czech Republic – set in the midst of a national park. (A sign in broken English invites you to discover ‘25 pieces of highland goat’ in the park!).

Still in the mountains, but 100 km to the south, is Luhačovice, which Janáček adopted as his second home in later life. He regularly stayed at the splendid Hotel Augustiniánský Dům and it is here that he set down the score for one of his most loved operas, *The Cunning Little Vixen*. Meanwhile *Osud* (Fate) is set in a spa town and such was his fondness for Luhačovice it seems probable that he had the town in mind when he wrote the opera.

Whilst he may have holidayed in Luhačovice it was Brno where Janáček spent most of his life. The city is home to a music conservatory and an opera house named after the composer, and there is an annual festival that celebrates his music. The Leoš Janáček Memorial Museum, at 14 Smetanova Street, is in the house that Janáček had built in the grounds of the organ school of which he was director. The Janáček family moved to the new house in July 1910. It was cosy and had electric lighting (still a novelty) and Janáček found peace and tranquility here for his work. The building now houses the musical archives of the Moravian Museum, of which the Janáček Museum forms part.

Detour: Polička

Just a few miles due south of Litomyšl is the birthplace of the 20th-century composer Bohuslav Martinů, whose operas *Julietta* and *Greek Passion* have grown in critical stature and popularity in recent years.

At Home with Dvořák

Vysoká u Příbrami, some 50 km south-west of Prague, was where perhaps the most celebrated of all Czech composers, Antonín Dvořák, spent most of the last two decades of his life, initially staying in the steward’s lodge on the estate of his brother-in-law, Count Václav Kounic.

The Count and his family lived in the lovely Neo-Renaissance residence he’d had built in 1878, which is now the Antonín Dvořák Memorial, a splendid museum devoted to the work and life of the composer, where the extremely knowledgeable head guide is the composer’s great-grandson, Peter Dvořák.

Dvořák the composer was clearly very much at ease at Vysoká; in 1884 he bought a plot of land on the estate from his brother-in-law and built a family home which he named Villa Rusalka after one of the lakes – in reality a large pool – in the grounds of the mansion. It was this pool and its surroundings that inspired him to write the opera of the same name, following the tragic fortunes of a water nymph who aspires to marry a prince.

While the Antonín Dvořák Memorial is very much open to the public, the Villa Rusalka isn’t. So I was very privileged when Peter Dvořák extended me ‘journalists’ visiting rights’ and took me on a tour of this tranquil house, set in walled garden and orchards.

Inside, things are, I was told, much as they were when the composer lived here. I sympathised with the dilemma facing the family members who now own the property: it’s difficult to see how visitors in any number could be accommodated, but without museum status in some form or other, there is no funding to maintain the house, which could benefit from some restoration befitting the home of a national treasure.

Then it was back to Prague, and a chance to actually see and hear some of the operas.



Far left top:

The mountain and castle at Bezděz were an inspiration for Smetana’s operas

Far left bottom:

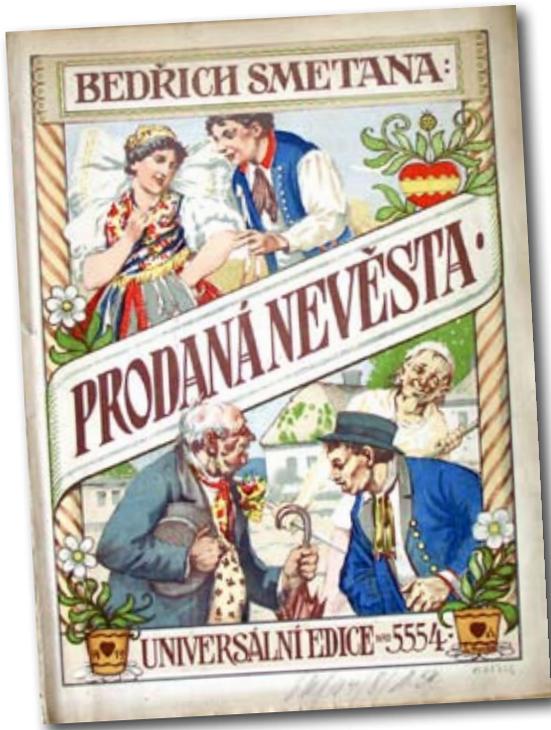
The Renaissance castle at Litomyšl. The Smetana family were in the employ of the castle’s owner

Left:

The splendid Hotel Augustiniánský where Janáček wrote *The Cunning Little Vixen*

Below:

The Antonín Dvořák Memorial museum



Three keystones of Czech Opera

Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* (1866)

The first true Czech Opera, bouncing along with folk melodies, dances and scenes from village life in Bohemia. One of the most popular operas in the repertoire, the story unfolds with zany energy, telling the story of how a clever pair of lovers manage to circumvent the legal niceties of a contract for an arranged marriage and end up living happily ever after.

Dvořák's *Rusalka* (1901)

The story of a water nymph who longs to become human in order to marry a prince – with tragic consequences for everyone.

Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen* (1924)

A stirring and inspiring celebration of the cycles of nature, the opera follows the fortunes of a feisty fox who escapes the clutches of a trigger-happy Forester.

Our Car

What's to like?

For our Great Drive we used Alfa Romeo's latest model, **The Giulietta**. A five-door hatchback, it combines the best of Italian drivability and style, while being practical for a small family with lots of luggage. The model we drove had Alfa's two-litre turbocharged diesel engine, which pulls like a steam train.

The Giulietta rode the Czech Republic's variable road surfaces with commendable poise, demonstrating beautifully balanced, neutral handling.

There is a dynamic (sport) mode which sharpens up the throttle response, weights up the steering and enhances the turn when cornering.

Any problems?

None – except maybe a rather rubbery, notchy gear change, a far cry from the light, slick action in other Alfas. In a car with sporting pretensions this was a disappointment. However, the vehicle was new and the gears did improve noticeably during our trip.

Left:

The score of *The Bartered Bride* in an edition dating from 1919

Holidaying in the Czech Republic

GETTING THERE

Going overland to the Czech Republic from our home in Scotland was delightfully seamless. DFDS Seaways provides transfer buses from major train stations to its ferry terminal at Newcastle and, after the crossing, onward to Amsterdam Central Station. From there we caught the train to Prague and picked up our car. www.dfdsseaways.co.uk

OVERNIGHT

Prague

Superbly positioned on Vaclavska namesti overlooking Wenceslas Square, the **Hotel Jalta** was built in 1955 – it once even had a nuclear bunker in the basement. Refurbished in 2008, it has friendly, helpful staff and comfortable rooms. www.hoteljalta.com

Luhačovice

The super-luxurious **Hotel Augustiniánský Dům** is where composer Leoš Janáček wrote much of his celebrated opera *The Cunning Little Vixen*. Built originally in 1904 as an Augustinian monastery, it re-opened in March last year after a spectacular restoration providing excellent accommodation with a first-class Wellness Centre. The hotel is even planning to launch an opera festival. www.augustian.cz

Brno

We stayed at the very amenable **Hotel Pegas**. Its ground floor restaurant is superb. www.hotelpegas.cz