

West Bohemia



The famous effervescent liquids of West Bohemia are a balance of virtue and vice, good and (not so) evil, and provide a relaxing distraction from the tourist commotion of Prague.

Virtue is on tap at the elegant spa towns, where visitors can immerse themselves physically and emotionally in the waters bubbling under the classy streets of Karlovy Vary, Mariánské Lázně and Františkovy Lázně. And if you're looking for that extra smidgen of spiritual guidance, it could well come from a sip of Becherovka liqueur, the so-called '13th spring of Karlovy Vary' and the real reason many visitors leave with a spring in their step.

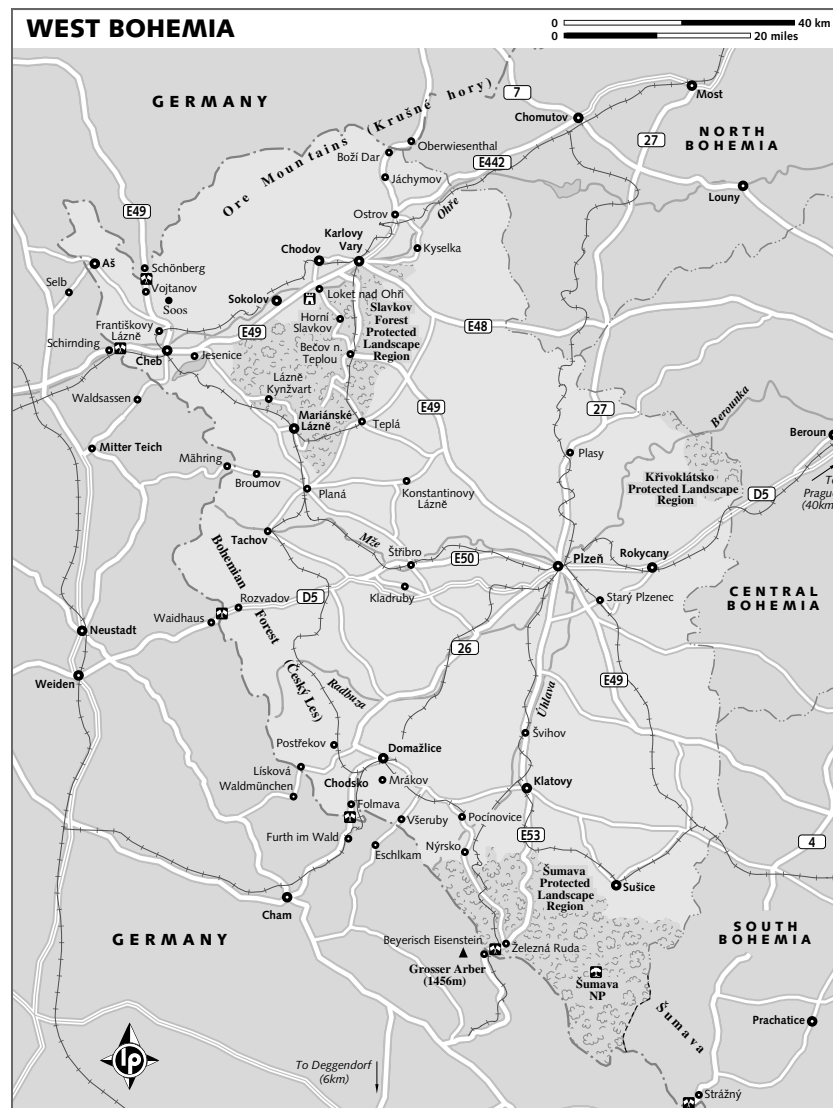
Balance is provided by the healthy and hearty vice of West Bohemia's liquid gold and true *aqua vitae*, Pilsner Urquell, the world's first (and finest) lager. There's no better spot for your first Pilsner Urquell than the bustling student pubs of brewery town Plzeň, or in the underground caverns of the town's famous brewery.

Once you've investigated your own balance of virtue and vice, there's lots more to discover. Active types can explore the rustic woodlands of the Šumava region bordering Germany and comprising the biggest national park in the Czech Republic. The rugged borderlands include the Chodsko region, home of the Chods, the traditional protectors of the border.

And a few days in beautifully sleepy villages like Loket and Domažlice will give you a glimpse into hushed West Bohemian life, well away from the thoroughly enjoyable distractions of bubbling springs and foaming beer.

HIGHLIGHTS

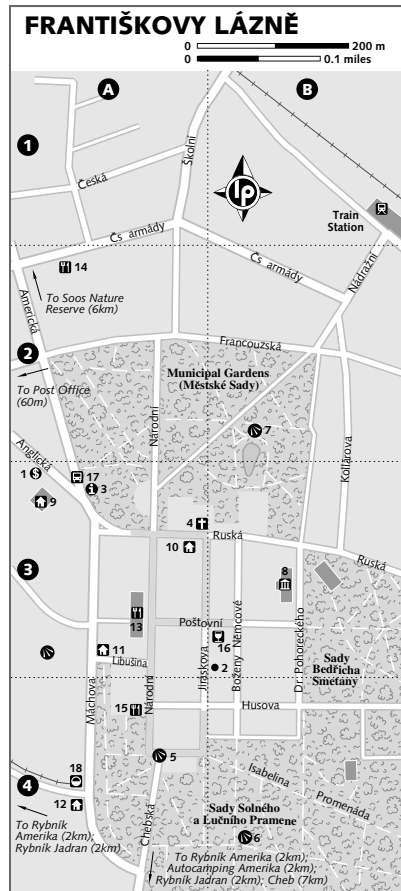
- Boost your cultural credibility at one of the elegant summertime music festivals in **Mariánské Lázně** (p209)
- Savour the subdued Euroglam ambience of spa town **Karlovy Vary** (p211)
- Meet the locals in the lively pubs of **Plzeň** (p223), home of one of the world's best beers
- Wander lazily around the captivating town of **Loket nad Ohří** (p217) and its impressive Gothic castle
- Discover the unique culture of the Chods in the delightfully sleepy town of **Domažlice** (p227)



FRANTIŠKOVY LÁZNĚ pop 5400

With a buttery veneer of yellow paint, and wide avenues with spa patients and tourists walking unbearably slowly, Františkovy Lázně is the archetypal spa town. Well-tended parkland with statues and springs is the only concession to reality in this spa-town 'theme park'.

Beethoven and Goethe were among Františkovy Lázně's most famous guests, but with the spa best known for the treatment of female infertility, they were more likely drawn by a lively café society. Today, the sidewalk cafés are relaxingly soporific, and late-night action is sound asleep in this Bohemian version of *The Truman Show*.



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Česká Spolitelna (Anglická 7) has an exchange and ATM. There is a **post office** (Lidická 8), and the **library** (Dr Pohoreckého 8; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon only on Tue) by the Municipal museum has internet access.

Sights & Activities

Aside from the neoclassical façades, all painted the same two shades of yellow, there is the **church of the Ascension of the Cross** (kostel Povýšení sv Kříže) on Ruská, and the town's central spring, the **Františkov pramen**, at the southern end of Národní.

If these haven't stirred you, neither will the exhibits on the spa's history at the **Municipal museum** (Městské muzeum; Dr Pohoreckého 8; adult/concession 20/8Kč; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun).

About 2km southwest of the city centre, you can rent a boat on **Rybník Amerika** or swim at **Rybník Jadran**. A **mini-train** (mikrovláček; adult/concession 20/10Kč; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Apr-Sep) shuttles to the lakes every half-hour from outside Milano Penzion on Máchova.

Six kilometres northeast of town, in the hamlet of Hájek, is **Soos Nature Reserve** featuring peat bogs and bubbling mud.

Sleeping

The Town Information Centre can help with private rooms. Accommodation here is seasonal. Prices shown are peak season – they may fall by up to 20% out of season.

Autocamping Amerika (☎ 354 542 518; tent 70Kč; ☎ May-Sep; P) Beside Rybník Amerika,

this camp site has double/quad bungalows (340/700Kč) and a restaurant.

Milano Penzion and Kavarna (☎ 604 602 080; Máchova 8; s/d 400/650Kč; P) An enthusiastic English-speaking owner offers snug, modern rooms over his café.

Hotel Savoy (☎ 354 203 000; www.franzensbad.cz; Ruská 4; s/d incl breakfast 1000/1600Kč; P) You're in spa country now, Toto, with recuperating guests in smocks and slippers shuffling through a sleepy reception, and a whole raft of treatments available.

Hotel Centrum (☎ 354 543 156; www.spahotel.centrum.cz; Anglická; s/d incl breakfast 1020/1620Kč; P) Away from the promenading hordes, the best rooms at this crisply modern spot overlook a park.

Hotel Tři Lilie (☎ 354 208 900; www.franzensbad.cz; Máchova; s/d incl breakfast 1700/2500Kč; P ☎ ☎) Quality rooms, attentive staff and the occasional B-list celeb come as standard at this luxury place that's more vibrant and friendly than other places around town.

Eating & Drinking

Videňská Kavárna (☎ 602 460 921; Národní 1; snacks 60Kč, mains to 500Kč) The 'Viennese Café' offers more than just coffee 'n' cake. If you can't make your mind up over the huge list of ice cream, come back after dark when the café morphs into a formal eatery.

Café Slovan (☎ 354 542 841; Národní 5; mains 100Kč) Ignore the frumpy retro décor and enjoy the old-fashioned prices at this café-meets-wine-bar that's the main drag's best value.

Saloon Bažina (☎ 603 236 410; Americká 95/10; mains 130Kč) Break away from your spa-town health kick with a slab of beef at this rustic 'saloon' serving Tex-Mex tucker with live country music.

Selská Jizba (☎ 602 460 921; Poštovní; meals 70-120Kč) No-nonsense and full of loyal locals, this has good, honest Bohemian food and cheaper drinks to counteract the high-priced primness of surrounding eateries.

Getting There & Away

Buses are more direct and more frequent than trains. A daily bus comes direct from Prague via Karlovy Vary (150Kč, 3½ hours), and three a day come from Plzeň (112Kč, two hours). For long-distance options and international connections, go via Cheb, with buses to Františkovy Lázně every 30 minutes (12Kč, 15 minutes).

CHEB

pop 33,500

Cheb (pronounced 'kheb'), another pretty Bohemian old town ringed by grimy industry, conceals a recent history that is fundamental to 20th-century Europe. In 1897 Cheb gave birth to German National Socialism, which later evolved into the Nazi party. Hitler visited here in 1938, just before German troops seized control of the surrounding Sudetenland. Payback came with the 1945 expulsion of Cheb's German population of 30,000. Now, significant Vietnamese, Slovak and Roma populations reflect Central Europe's evolving demography in this town that sits astride the traditional, historical and cultural fault line between Germany and the Czech Republic.

At the city's heart, winding alleys peel away from the raffish town square, and a unique red-brick fortress provides a refreshing antidote to the contrived façades of the nearby spa towns. But leave the quaint centre and Cheb's double life is reinforced, with prostitutes working sullen streets tarnished by years of heavy industry.

Orientation

From the adjacent bus and train stations it's 1km west, then northwest, along Svobody to the old town's sloping, triangular main square, náměstí krále Jiřího z Poděbrad (King George of Poděbrady square).

Information

Infocentrum (☎ 354 440 302; www.mestocheb.cz; náměstí krále Jiřího z Poděbrad 33; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10-2pm Sat, 10am-1.30pm Sun May-Sep) sells maps, books theatre and concert tickets and provides guides; internet access is 1Kč per minute.

Česká Spolitelna (náměstí krále Jiřího z Poděbrad) has an ATM and exchange desk. There's a second branch at Májová 36.

The **post office** (Slikova 15) is just south of the main square.

Sights

NÁMĚSTÍ KRÁLE JIŘIHO Z PODEBRAD

The main square has a selection of architectural treats. The best is the teetering tangle of 16th-century former Jewish merchants' houses called **špalíček** ('the Block'). Another late-Gothic refugee is **Schirnding house** (Schirndingovský dům; náměstí Krále Jiřího z Poděbrad 508), with its crow-step gables.

Orientation

Long-distance buses arrive at the 'Sady' (gardens) stop opposite Hotel Centrum. From the train station it's 600m along Nádrazní and across the Municipal Gardens (Městské Sady) to the centre, which focuses on pedestrianised main street Národní and is well signposted.

Information

The **Town Information Centre** (Městské Informační Centrum; ☎ 354 543 162; www.frantiskovy-lazne.cz; Americká 2; ☎ 6am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat & Sun) provides maps and accommodation advice.

For spa treatments and accommodation, contact **Františkovy Lázně AS** (☎ 354 201 104; www.franzensbad.cz; Jiráskova 3; per person from 1400Kč; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat).