





# South Moravia, Czechia

The princely follies, Hobbiton-style wine cellars and subterranean labyrinths of South Moravia offer the key to a region whose appeal lies both above and below the surface, discovers Debbie Ward





**B**ohemia may have unwittingly given its name to the concept of an unconventional and more relaxed lifestyle, but Czechia's South Moravia region isn't short of alternative ways to kick back. Its wines and landscapes can certainly claim to have loosened the collars of many a traveller.

Some 200km south-east of Prague lies Brno, Czechia's second city and the South Moravian capital. Here, cobbled streets and cheek-by-jowl pastel buildings contrast with celebrated Functionalist architecture from the First Republic era. The city also has several fascinating underground spaces that have opened up to visitors, ranging from an ossuary to a nuclear bunker.

In contrast, the subterranean attractions to Brno's north are all nature's work. The topmost part of South Moravia holds Czechia's most important karst area, with an underground river and vast cave systems to explore. The bulk of the region, however, lies south of Brno, stretching to the Austrian and Slovakian borders. This is studded with attractive towns that can be used as bases for touring the more rural areas.

Since the Velvet Revolution put an end to Communist rule in Czechia, South Moravia has been proudly reclaiming its viniculture. Whereas wheat production had previously taken priority over grape cultivation, now the region produces more than 95% of Czech wine. New favourites can be discovered in the stylish tasting rooms of its wineries, with popular varieties including pinot gris, riesling and the lesser known Pálava, which originated here.

Many of the vineyards lie on the 49th parallel, a latitude that also runs through the Champagne region in France. Those spanning this line are deemed particularly favourable for their sparkling wines. And if you head up into the Blue Mountains area, be sure to look out for its dark grapes.

The wine country comes with some interesting historical caveats. Bunkers from the time of the Second World War lie amid the vines near the Austrian border, while the old, rusting watch-towers have been repurposed as bird-scaring posts for use during the critical harvest period.

The region's centuries-old wine cellars also hold surprises. In the town of Znojmo, they were joined together to create an important defensive labyrinth. Elsewhere, charming Hobbiton-style chambers have been cut into the rock and are still used by winemaking families and small-batch producers, some of whom offer overnight stays.

There's culture on a grander scale too. Members of the Liechtenstein dynasty, which later gave its name to the European principality, began a huge landscaping project around Lednice and Valtice inspired by the work of the 18th-century landscape architect Capability Brown. They left behind woodland, fishing lakes and a series of what are now UNESCO-listed follies, which make for a fun architectural treasure hunt.

Among the many châteaux that the dynasty left behind, one has since been turned into Czechia's National Wine Cellar. If you purchase a pass, you can then descend its well-worn steps to enjoy what is perhaps the country's most generous tasting experience. ►

48.9545° N, 16.7677° E

## Ask a local

**"Znojmo was important for protecting the border. Its four-storey cellars were used to store fruits and wine; they were [also] a very good hiding place. In the 30 Years War, people hid from the Swedish army. The city's Rotunda is important because you can find not just religious but secular paintings of the Přemyslid dynasty. Besides the Znojmo underground labyrinth system, there are three or four old churches and Renaissance houses to see."**

Vlastimil Nešetřil, owner of Nešetřil Winery/The Wine House, Znojmo



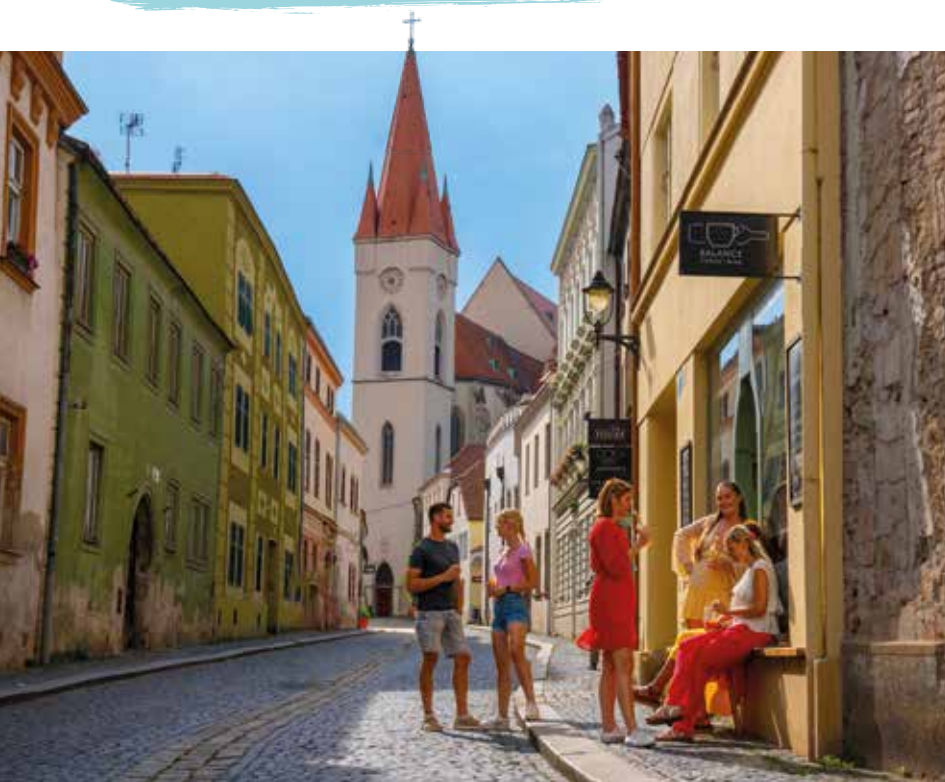
**All in the family (left to right)** Château Valtice was the seat of the princes of the Liechtenstein family from the late 14th century until the castle's confiscation in 1945; Vlastimil Nešetřil knows his wines; the Cathedral of St Peter and Paul looms over Brno; (previous spread) the English-Gothic look of Château Lednice dates from the mid-19th century, when Prince Alois II decided to have it rebuilt as a summer palace to escape Vienna's heat











## South Moravia in five days

### DAY 1: Brno

Admire the historic town from viewpoints in the Old Town Hall tower or Špilberk Castle, then seek out the modern sculptures around Moravian Square. Join the hopefuls around the bullet-shaped astronomical clock, which ejects a souvenir glass marble daily at 11am. If you've pre-booked a ticket, tour the Functionalism design of Villa Tugendhat, then head for the city's trendy microbreweries or try one of its innovative restaurants, such as Element ([elementbrno.com](http://elementbrno.com)).

### DAY 2: Brno

First, explore Brno's subterranean attractions, including the 150-year-old

Water Tanks, the labyrinth beneath the vegetable market and the candlelit ossuary. Try to find time to visit the small Museum of Romani Culture, which preserves traditions and charts the historical persecution of the Romani people, or the Moravian (Moravská) Gallery, which has a huge lobby sculpture comprising recycled balls in its Pražák Palace location.

### DAY 3: Znojmo

Under an hour from Brno, Znojmo is a handsome walled town with river views and a frescoed rotunda. Masaryk Square features Renaissance houses, a Baroque plague monument and a Communist-era supermarket.

Tour, tittle and dining opportunities are offered by a historical brewery and Nešetřil Winery – in which you can visit part of the town's centuries-old multi-storey cellar network ([vinarskydumznojmo.cz/en](http://vinarskydumznojmo.cz/en)). Znojmo is also a gateway for hiking and biking trips in Podyjí National Park.

### DAY 4: Mikulov and its surrounds

Mikulov is a beautiful spot in which to base yourself and has plenty to encourage visitors to linger a little longer, from pavement cafés to a Baroque château with terraced gardens. From here you can visit Vrbice village to see the Hobbiton-style Stráž wine cellars and call at some of the more stylish wineries offering tastings (see *'Things to Do'*). It's also an easy day trip from Mikulov to the Lednice-Valtice area.

### DAY 5: Lednice-Valtice

Valtice was the main seat of the Liechtensteins until 1945. Visit their château here or their equally grand summer residence at Lednice, which has rooms themed by country and a grand ornamental greenhouse filled with palms. The wider UNESCO-listed Lednice-Valtice Cultural Landscape has even more surprises (see *'Don't Miss'*).

**Above and below (this page; above)** The sunny medieval town of Znojmo has a collection of beautiful Gothic architecture and churches that are more than 800 years old; beneath Znojmo lies a subterranean network of tunnels measuring around 27km; the Kolonáda Reistna folly near Valtice is one of many built by the ruling Lichtenstein family, and it is now part of a working winery



# Don't miss...

## INDOORS

### Villa Tugendhat

This beautiful, early-1930s Brno villa by architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe has been listed by UNESCO for its pioneering design. With no supporting walls, its 'free-floating' iron-framed rooms rely on slim pillars. Highlights include a circular rosewood dining area and a translucent onyx lounge wall. Even the air-conditioning system is a thing of wonder. Tours must be booked well ahead; the grounds can otherwise be enjoyed for free. [tugendhat.eu/en](http://tugendhat.eu/en)

### Underground Brno

Brno's subterranean Water Tanks (under Žlutý Kopec) are cathedral-like brick-and-concrete marvels. Down here, echoes can last over a minute. They are also proving a muse to local artists these days, having featured in music videos and hosted pop-up art events. Another subterranean marvel lies beneath St James' Church, where an atmospheric 17th-century ossuary – the second largest in Europe – has been sensitively restored. You can also join a new tour that heads up the church's double helix stone staircase to explore the rafters; this incorporates a light show and bell ringing. [podzemibrno.cz/en](http://podzemibrno.cz/en)

### National Wine Cellar

The wine cellars beneath Château Valtice are so large that the Lichtensteins once conducted tastings here by horse and carriage. Today, visitors armed with a

two-hour self-service pass for a bargain £23 can descend to sample up to 100 of the most celebrated Czech wines. Pace yourself! [vinarskecentrum.cz/en/salon-vin](http://vinarskecentrum.cz/en/salon-vin)

## OUTDOORS

### Hobbiton-like wine cellars

Among the unique charms of South Moravia's wine country are its Hobbiton-style, semi-submerged wine cellars. In a sociable set-up reminiscent of allotments in the UK, many are used by families for their own production efforts. Vrbice is a top spot to see such cellars, along with the communal wine presses.

### Lednice-Valtice

#### Cultural Landscape

The former ruling dukes of the Liechtenstein family left behind neo-Gothic palaces and a series of extravagant follies across South Moravia. The latter range from faux Greek colonnades and an Islamic-style minaret to a hunting lodge styled as a medieval ruin. They form part of a larger designed landscape dating from the 17th century, which now has UNESCO status.

### Moravian karst scenery

North of Brno is the biggest karst area in Czechia. This incorporates an extensive cave system, which allows visitors to take a boat ride on the subterranean Punkva River, see the celebrated stalactites in Balcarka Cave and descend into the mossy and beautiful Macocha Abyss – so deep that legend declares it to be bottomless. [south-moravia.com](http://south-moravia.com) ►

### Lord of the wines

(this page; below)

The Hobbiton-style communal wine cellars in the village of Vrbice have multiple floors that have been carved into the sandstone

## Need to know



### When to go

**April to October** is the most pleasant period to visit South Moravia, with the wine harvest beginning in **August**. Summers average 22°C to 30°C; winter can dip below zero.



### Getting there & around

**Ryanair** ([Ryanair.com](http://Ryanair.com)) flies direct from London Stansted to **Brno-Tuřany Airport** from £30 return. Flights take around two hours. A greater choice of airlines serve the airports of **Vienna** and **Prague**, which are two and three and a half hours by train from Brno respectively.

**Rail itineraries** from the UK start with taking the Eurostar ([eurostar.com](http://eurostar.com)) from **London St Pancras** to **Brussels** and then heading to Brno via connections in **Frankfurt** and **Vienna**. In total, it takes from around 15 hours.

Brno is walkable, but **tram travel** costs less than £3.30 a day. Znojmo, Pavlov and Mikulov can be reached by car, train or bus from Brno. **Wine Tours Moravia** ([winetoursmoravia.com](http://winetoursmoravia.com)) offers expert itineraries.



### Carbon offset

A return flight from **London to Brno** produces 188kg of carbon per passenger. *Wanderlust* encourages you to **offset your travel footprint** through a reputable provider. For advice on finding one, visit [wanderlustmagazine.com/inspiration/sustainable-travel](http://wanderlustmagazine.com/inspiration/sustainable-travel).



### Visa & currency

**Visa:** Not required by UK nationals for stays of up to 90 days within a 180-day period. **Currency:** Czech koruna (CZK), currently CZK29.75 to the UK£.



### Further information

**Brnopas** discounts some key city attractions; for more details, visit [gotobrnno.cz/en/brnopas](http://gotobrnno.cz/en/brnopas).

*The author travelled with support from the City of Brno ([gotobrnno.cz](http://gotobrnno.cz)), Visit Czechia ([visitczechia.com](http://visitczechia.com)) and the South Moravia region ([south-moravia.com](http://south-moravia.com)).*







**Through the ages** (*this page; above*) Chateau Mikulov towers over the town after which it was named. It's hard to believe now but this building was heavily damaged by invading German forces in 1945 and has been painstakingly rebuilt. It also has a long and grand history, having been the seat of the Dietrichstein family for some 370 years; as such, it has hosted the likes of Napoleon Bonaparte and Russia's Tsar Alexander. The grounds, which include one of the largest castle gardens in Czechia, are just as impressive as the main building, which is now home to Mikulov's Regional Museum



# Stay here...

## Brno

### Avion

Fans of Functionalist architecture will love this newly renovated hotel, which is already an established national cultural monument in central Brno. The narrow, ten-storey building is designed with multiple light wells and cleverly incorporates 37 rooms, a restaurant, an art gallery and a roof terrace. Tours are also available (and worth it!). [avion-hotel.cz](http://avion-hotel.cz)

### Grand Palace Hotel

Brno's smartest hotel occupies a palatial 19th-century building on Šilingrovo Square. The architecture is best enjoyed from the courtyard-style lobby bar. [grandpalace.cz/en](http://grandpalace.cz/en)

## Znojmo

### Thaya Hotel & Winery

This modern vineyard edges Podyjí National Park and has a stylish restaurant. Its rooms

are cut Hobbit-like into a hill, and the rooftop garden is a fine place to relax with a glass of Thaya's finest. And if you develop a taste for its wares, it's worth noting that some of Thaya's wines (featuring animal designs) are available to buy in the UK through Bancroft and Rediscover Wines. [vinarstvithaya.cz/en](http://vinarstvithaya.cz/en)

## Mikulov

### Hotel Ryzlink

Fučík Winery's hotel has large, loft-style rooms, many sleeping up to four, as well as views across to the hilltop chapels. In the wellness area, you can even steam or soak in real wine (book ahead). [hotelryzlink.cz/en](http://hotelryzlink.cz/en)

### Hotel Tanzberg

This boutique option is set in a Jewish Quarter building once rented by the Czech artist Alphonse Mucha. It comes with a terrace and a restaurant. [hotel-tanzberg.cz](http://hotel-tanzberg.cz)



**Wine country** (this page; clockwise from top left) Sonberk Winery's vineyards are spread across 40 hectares of loess soil; Mikulov is a beautiful town in which to base yourself, equipped with plenty of terraced cafés and bistros, and it is just a short hop from the Hobbiton-like wine cellars of Vrbice; the National Wine Cellar lies in the bowels of Château Valtice; Thaya Winery has rooms cut into the hillside in which you can overnight

# 4 TOP THINGS TO DO

## Discover

Czech wines at South Moravia's modern vineyards. Award-winning Sonberk ([sonberk.cz](http://sonberk.cz)) has great views over the Pálava Hills and hosts concerts in the summer. Nearby Reisten ([reisten.cz](http://reisten.cz)) has a sun terrace below hilltop castle ruins, Thaya ([vinarstvithaya.cz](http://vinarstvithaya.cz)) pairs well with hikes in the national park, and the more traditional Šlechtitelka ([slechtitelka.cz](http://slechtitelka.cz)) has its own rose gardens.

## PEDAL

between the Liechtenstein follies. These are typically secluded in woodlands or perched on hilltops. In summer, you can catch food and wine trucks as well as live music at the sites. You can also join locals in exploring the region's vineyards by e-bike, which you can hire from Znojmo or Mikulov.

## LEARN

more about Functionalism in Brno. The pared-back geometric style of the inter-war period can be seen in multiple city buildings. The Brno Architecture Manual ([bam.bрно.cz](http://bam.bрно.cz)) has smartphone trails and maps you can follow. Brno Tourist Information Centre ([gotobрно.cz/en](http://gotobрно.cz/en)) also has a booklet of highlights.

## INDULGE

in a grand tasting menu on the Czechia-Austria border at Essens restaurant, which lies within the lakeside Château de Frontiere ([chateaufrontiere.com](http://chateaufrontiere.com)), built by the Lichtenstein family in the 19th century. A hotel and a more relaxed bistro lie just next door at Château Petit. **W**