

Beer Bottles and Butterflies: A blend of Czech Tradition and Nature Conservation

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In August 2008 I was blessed with the opportunity to join 12 others on a visit to Zdanice, a quaint little town in the South Moravian region of the Czech Republic. The aim of this visit was to allow a group of volunteers from the UK to travel to the Czech Republic and help European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) and its partners (biologist from the University of Budejovice and a local NGO, Daphne) with management work on an unimproved meadow.

Since this was a no fly operation, it meant we were able to enjoy the scenic routes across Europe from the windows of our mini bus. This also allowed us to set up camp in three different countries, with our first stop being a strange little campsite in Bernissart, just west of Mons in Belgium. Next was a spot in Wertheim, just west of Wurzburg in south central Germany, where we enjoyed a few beers on the banks of the River Main. Our final stop was Durnstein, west of Krems in Austria (about 180 km from Zdanice). It had a great atmosphere and excellent view of the Danube.



Campsite in Wertheim

Making Friends and Feeling at Home in Zdanice

Folk festival

On the day we arrived in Czech Republic, we had lunch in Kyjov and then made our way to our accommodation at Zdanice FC. That evening we attended a folk festival in Milotice. It was dark when we arrived so flame torches were used to light the area surrounding the stage and compliment the vibe. The people there were really friendly and some were feeling festive enough to wear the traditional attire. There was even a special performance by a group of Maori performers.



Boys of Zdanice FC

I was surprised to find that there was actually a place where the barman pays for you to play him and his friends at foosball and then offers you free shots of rum – especially when you lose.

They even invited a few of us to train with them during football practice, hang out with them at the bar, and introduce us to their families.



Unbeknown to me at the time, was that the people of South Moravia are renowned for their hospitality – so I think it was a bit of a culture shock when I experience it first hand.

Honza & Marketta

For lunch and supper we would often eat at a small pub on the edge of the town. It had a great atmosphere, which I feel was largely due to its owners, Honza and Marketta – who were both very pleasant as were their two sons.

We were served tradition dishes, such as roast beef in cream sauce with bread dumplings (as seen in picture below). It was usually quite filling and in my case, followed by a power nap.



Some call it Bolero

Bar Bolero (also known as the gambling sex bar) somewhat resembled Pleasure Island in the

story of Pinocchio – except in this tale of a young man's journey, Candlewick was a woman and despite acting like a jackass I must have missed the part where I grow long ears and a tail.

It was basically a youth club that served alcohol, had fruit machines and a foosball table – and the music was good too. The jukebox transformed Bolero into a 70's disco with ABBA tracks on loop.

Histopedal and my birthday

The Histopel festival is an annual cultural event that takes place in Zdanice. Traditionally, the locals come out to showcase their collection of vintage bicycles while dressed according to its time and origin (as seen below).

After the morning procession, we rested at Zdanice FC but returned in the evening after a brief interval to celebrate my 23rd birthday. Things were now in full swing, with 4 litre bottles of wine being passed around and what seemed like the whole village having a great night out. Of course there were lots of free drinks and kisses for the birthday boy – definitely a night to remember.



The Mayor's wine cellar

On the last day of our Czech visit, the mayor of Zdanice, Mr Miroslav Procházka invited us to join him and his son at their 17th century wine cellar. I was quite impressed with the blazing log fire and rustic furniture, which it quite surreal. We were treated to wine and snacks followed by a live performance by a local folk band and the mayor himself. There was even enough time to learn a few folk dances and a brief ceremony for certificates and gifts.

Blood, Sweat, and Mantis

The practical side of things



On the morning of our first workday the mayor invited us to a reception at the town hall. It seems his idea of a warm welcome was a double shot of Slivovitz at 10am, which was gratefully received.

On site we were joined by our partners from the University of Budejovice and three local volunteers - and then briefed on the job at hand. Our main task involved scrub clearance, which was largely made up of Hawthorn, Dog rose and the invasive species, False Acacia.

The work was physically demanding, but it's not every day you get to go insane blitzing bramble, dragging trees down the

side of a hill and then build log piles – it was definitely a lot of fun.



To be honest, it was probably only manageable due to the substantial amount of food we consumed (all provided by EuCAN) and time to rest. However, all this hard work did not go unpunished and by the end of the 2 weeks we were all covered in scratches and plucking thorns from our limbs. As you could imagine, the rest was well deserved.



Besides a few cuts and bruises, the downside was greatly outweighed by a sense of satisfaction not to mention improved fitness and overall wellness.

Even so, why would any sane person put himself or herself through all this trouble? I suppose we did for the love of the butterflies and other critters. Although I did often wonder how many of those little guys must have been diced up in the blade of my brush cutter, but then I was

assured that the casualty rate wasn't so high.

Beautiful coloured wings

Upon arriving at Butterfly Valley (BV) we were greeted by an assortment of blues, which unbeknown to me, was only a teaser for all the eye candy that was yet to come. In truth, I had led myself to believe that the abundance of butterfly, dragonfly and insect species seen during the preparation weekend in Dorset was paradise for a budding ecologist such as myself. However, all of this paled in comparison the moment I saw a Swallowtail butterfly swoop overhead and across the meadow. I immediately felt that I was truly privileged to have this experience but somewhat deprived at the same time – even more so after seeing the Queen of Spain Fritillary!

There are currently 56 species of butterfly in Britain and Ireland, all of which are under threat from unprecedented changes to the natural environment. So I was amazed to learn that in this small pocket of land, 41 species of butterfly had been identified, 14 of which are not found in the UK. In total there are 161 native species of butterfly in Czech Republic ^[1], which gives a true comparison between over there and here in the UK.

The importance of protecting such a place becomes apparent when you consider red list species (classified as vulnerable) *Minois dryas*, not found in a survey ^[2] between 1996-2005 spanning 55 locations (within Czech Republic, Central and Northern Bohemia, Melnik, Ceska Lipa districts) was frequently seen fluttering across Butterfly Valley.

Most notable sightings included eggs of the critically endangered *Malcolinea alcon rebeli* (Mountain Alcon) and two other species protected under Czech law: *Papilio machaon* (Swallowtail) and *Iphiclides podalirius* (Scarce Swallowtail).



Polygonia c-album

The Wood for the Trees

After returning home and enough time had elapsed for the excitement to wear off, I started to think about what I had actually gained from this experience in Zdanice and how it would affect my life in the UK.

In terms of my personal development, at first glance I didn't really notice any difference. It wasn't until I returned to conservation work back home, that I realised that not only had I developed a greater sense of confidence but also I had become more adept in supporting my colleagues. Other improvements include better moth and butterfly identification skills, which will no doubt help me in my desired career path.

I also recognize and can appreciate the conflicts between different interests i.e. the needs of local people in a less stable economic climate versus nature conservation.

Despite having only visited a small area in Czech Republic I feel I have gained a better understanding of the people as well as their history and culture. As a result, I now find that it is easier for me to establish relationships with people who are of Central or Eastern European origin. I would definitely love to visit the Czech Republic again, although my next visit to Central Europe will most likely be Hungary.

The Butterfly effect

Due to the success that EuCAN had on their original conservation visits to La Brenne in France and the Aggtelek National Park in Northern Hungary, they were awarded a further €197,000 to fund projects until 2010. Aside from continuing work with present partners, the money has allowed them to establish new partnerships and projects in Poland and Czech Republic.



EuCAN programmes are designed to stimulate personal growth and interest in the natural environment by providing a series of activities and training sessions. They strive to encompass both an environmental and cultural aspect to all visits, with numerous visits to local museums and festivals, guided nature walks, practical sessions in butterfly identification and a guided canal cruise.

These programmes are free to all participants, so I highly recommend them to anyone with an interest in the natural environment and love for other cultures. (For details on how to contact EuCAN please see below).

References:

[1] Benes, J., & Konvicka, M., December 2003, Butterflies of the Czech Republic: Distribution & Conservation. Spolecnosti pro ochranu motyli

[2] Vrabec, V., 2006, Lepidoptera of Kokořínsko Protected Landscape Area - preliminary results, Bohemia centralis, Praha, 27: 365–398

About EuCAN

The European Conservation Action Network was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust, a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset, dedicated to conservation and environmental education (Reg. Charity no. 1054758), in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. The project is funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme and has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland.

For More Information

Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559; email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).