

Zdanice 2008: What it meant to me.

Background:

Before I embarked on an amazing two weeks in the Czech Republic I had finished school and spent a year working and then travelling around SE Asia. Meeting new people and living with different cultures left me hungry for more experiences. My dad said there was a free space on a conservation trip the Czech Republic because one person had dropped out. I couldn't believe someone would miss the chance to go on a completely free trip with the opportunity of sampling the social life of the 'fun-loving' Czechs and getting fit on the sunshine laden plains with some practical conservation. Perhaps, I didn't foresee this but it was definitely the eventual outcome.

I had done a little bit of conservation at my father's local woodland project, sawing down trees and hacking down nasty blackthorn to make space for some moorland for butterflies to flourish. That was as far as my environmental portfolio went so when I caught the train to meet the rest of the gang, I was hoping I would fit in ok.



Setting Off:

Outside the train station I met the group and was surprised they were of all ages, we had a really mixed group but it wasn't long before conversation kicked in and I found out that 'environmentalists' could be a laugh!!! We caught the ferry and went all the way across Europe until we reached Zdanice. It was great way to get to know the group and we camped in three different countries and saw some amazing scenery and I particularly enjoyed the currywurst in Germany. Confined to the space of mini bus was a genius way for the group to gel and I found out that there were people from all walks of conservation from wildlife rangers, to group volunteering managers and teacher of environmental studies. My stereotypes were tested and broken as everyone became friends. Soon enough we were driving through the sunflower fields of the Czech Republic with old fashioned cars and quirky villages, towards Zdanice.



Zdanice Village

The Culture & Czechs:

One of the most amazing things was how welcoming and hospitable the Czechs were to us. On the first day we met up with two young friendly Czechs who were experts on the nation's butterflies. They told us our basic aim was to be working with them on a conservation project to extend the desirable habitat for butterflies around Zdanice. After an amazing meal and my first chilled jug of fresh Czech beer (the best I've ever tasted!) we headed to a local folk festival, another first for me. As we arrived at the festival it was like taking a step back in time and had got confused on the way. There were people wearing traditional garments, and then a Maori performance of touring New Zealanders! After many more 60 pence fresh beers I found myself within a huge gathering centred around a great fire with a band singing some warming tunes. It was such an enchanting start to the trip.

Zdanice was the equivalent of a village or small town in England with no tourism connections and a very genuine communal feel. Over the two weeks we were lucky to sleep at the focal point of the village, the recreation centre. It was the base of the men's football team, had a huge brand new swimming pool and a bar below our sleeping quarters. Could this get any better?! The trip was made by the genuine friendliness of the Czechs in Zdanice, even though a few could speak good English everyone would try to talk and indefinitely buy you a drink. Within a few days we all felt part of the village, and when the Czech Republic against England football match was on TV it was actually hard to decide which team to support.

The best time I had was at the village's annual festival, Histopedal! Every year the village has a festival over a weekend celebrating bicycles! Bicycles of all shape and

sizes and from every time period imaginable were paraded around the village matched with complementary costumes. There was even an imitation of Napoleon with a wooden foot-powered bicycle. At the end of the festival, at night, a drink and food marquee was set up, a wooden dance floor and I live band. It was set outside with fairy lights on the trees and the whole village must have turned up. We were dancing long into the night hitting all kinds of shapes and mass bundles did occur.

The Mayor off the village had welcomed us in his office with a shot of betteroffka and on our last night in the village he invited us all to his private wine cellar that had a roaring fire, another live acoustic band and steady supply of wine. We all ended up learning and 'practicing' traditional folk dances and by the end of the night I really felt part of the village and didn't want to go home. Even though, many of the villagers had been forced into communist political regime, gained independence and split from Slovakia in their lifetimes they still had their merry, and sometimes surreal, communal culture intact. I like to think that Zdanice will always be as warm as it was to me and full of music, dance and fun. I thank them for such an amazing time.



Histopedal bicycle festival in Zdanice

The Butterflies:

I guess you think this trip was more of a holiday than a conservation trip, but that was not the case. Somehow we managed fit about 4 weeks experiences of a holiday into just over a fortnight, however most were severely sleep deprived by the end. I went into the trip with an open-mind on conservation, nature, butterflies; to learn as much as possible and see how I felt about it. The trip was a great tester for this, as I was surrounded in people truly inspired and dedicated to conservation and in particular of this trip, butterflies. We went on several excursions to sample and see the local nature

of the area. This included a bird watching trip, and eye-spy for sussesliks on airfield and numerous butterfly and insect searches. With such limited experience in these practices I was surprised how much I got out of these excursions. To me it became very appealing as it was almost like a game, spotting birds in camouflage and running through meadows to catch a new-looking butterfly. There was something thrilling about it and it beat shooting zombies on a game station. As the time went on I began to learn the different species of butterflies and how to identify them, I couldn't believe how many types of butterflies they were and found myself always on the look out for butterflies and was further motivated for the carnage we set out to do.

For 9 of the days we would get up at 8 go to a huge field that had been covered in a variety of nasty plants, including my nemesis blackthorn and a new enemy acacia and commence battle. We had a team of chainsaws, brush cutters (including me) and hand jobbers (commando hand fighters). We spent long hot and sunny days ripping to shreds acacia, dragging bushes, hacking at stumps, throwing logs and getting extremely hot and sweaty. It was amazing team performance and every day we were helped by Czech locals. We were even reported in newspapers and on TV for our tremendous victory. By the end of the trip we had cleared a whole field for wild flowers to flourish and butterflies to play on. It was a lot of hard work and very exhausting but the fitness I gained from it and the feeling of completion and helping make something was really refreshing and fun.



Catching butterflies for a species list near to our site of work

The Experience:

Overall, I had a thoroughly amazing time on the Leonardo da Vinci conservation trip in the Czech Republic. I made some great friends both Czech and English and will keep some very fond memories and surreal experiences from this. I definitely gained an appreciation for conservation and believe it is such an important issue, especially now, that needs to be continued to protect the beauty and existence of earth. I will try to continue and help in conservation projects when I can locally because it is great way to meet people, have exercise and help preserve something I feel attached to. I would like to thank everyone involved in the trip and especially Nigel and Cathy for such a truly awesome time.

I would recommend this trip and any of the other trips to anyone with a just little interest in the nature around them. As long as you are prepared to get your hands a little dirty and work in beautiful hot sunny days then you will definitely get a lot out of this trip and have a genuine experience with wonderful people. If you are interested, which you definitely should be! Contact details are below the picture of a preying mantis eating a butterfly!





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