

Ždánice Trip Report

By

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The journey

Finally the day had arrived - it was months since I had been accepted onto the Eucan trip to the Czech Republic and it was a long time in coming. I was off assist with the conservation of butterflies in the small town of Ždánice, enjoy the culture of a foreign land, assist with habitat reinstatement and of course integrate with my fellow Europeans. Then of course there was the perk of spending two weeks in a foreign land all expenses paid, getting to drink cheap beer, and being outdoors in the sun. Yes, delve deep into the psychology of this and the reasons for going are pretty obvious – I was not an isolated case! What won't be clear at the start though is how mind sets change and how the desire to achieve as much conservation work in two weeks takes over. Again, I was not in isolation.

I left for London from Bristol, regretting having spent so long in the pub the night before celebrating the last day of work for 2 weeks. I had thrown some shorts and t-shirts into my rucksack but as long as I had packed my two bottles of factor 50 sun cream I should be okay. The coach trip started quite peacefully until it was shattered at the first stop out of the city centre. Four Germans got on and sat in front of me and spoke as if they were addressing a few folk at Nuremburg – it wasn't a quiet journey from there to London. Great, Europeans – got to love them and I am about to go into the thick of their heartland! I thought it would be interesting to see how much more European I felt by the end of the trip!

The London hostel was only a short walk and tube ride from the bus station. There I met up with a few familiar faces from the training weekend held in the Kingcombe Centre a few months before and subsequently joined by the other participants who I had not yet met. From there we headed to an Italian restaurant for dinner and to plot the journey to Ždánice in our heads. Sounded straight forward until we found out that the train times didn't match up – European efficiency at its best. Well, at least there were no strikes forecast. All we had to do was avoid France as much as possible! A top tip for future travellers is to find out who snores in the hostel and ensure that you do not become room mates for two weeks while abroad.

Before heading to the station for the Eurostar we went to the Natural History Museum to see the types of butterfly we may encounter in Eastern Europe. Looking at the size and colour of some of the specimens was an eye opener as to the diversity of butterflies which may be present in the Czech Republic. It was all the more impressive given that what we saw was only a small selection. Before leaving we had time for a quick tea break and a foray around the main part of the museum to look at the tigers and dinosaurs.

It was my first trip on the Eurostar – it was only a short part of the overall journey but going through the tunnel would be interesting, if a little uneventful. Well, I fell asleep and missed the lot – both entering and exiting the tunnel! I would have to wait until the return trip to see if I had missed anything. We arrived in Brussels at the same time as a downpour – not the best introduction to the high temperatures we were expecting on the continent.

From here it was a couple of hours to Köln where we would catch the night train to Prague. It was all going well but there would be a short sprint to get to the train given that the times did not match up. This wasn't helped by the train breaking down. Yes, I hear you ask – a German train breaking down?! Believe me it happened, and some jolly members on the trip made it quite clear that things like this did not happen in England. Breaking down did help in the long run as the train for Prague was held on the platform until we got there so there was no need for a mad rush between stations. Gotta love German efficiency!

The night train was an experience. It was the closest experience to feeling like a sardine I have ever felt. Six of us in two vertical rows within a steel can – just add ketchup. We rattled through Germany via Berlin and Dusseldorf sometimes at such high speed that you felt that a derailment was inevitable. It wasn't the most comfortable experience but coffee and biscuits the following morning and looking out at the German and Czech countryside was tonic enough. It was wildly different from the UK as we travelled along the banks of the River Elbe. Travelling by train was certainly the way to see Europe.

From Prague it was only a couple of hours to Brno where we would be met by the trip organisers and take a forty-five minute minibuss ride to the small town of Ždánice in south Moravia. After travelling for a day and half we were all looking forward to sitting down, some with a cold beer, and soaking up the atmosphere in Eastern Europe. Also high on the list of priorities was a trip to the much discussed swimming pool. Being so far from the sea the locals had a large, open air swimming pool to cool off in the high summer temperatures. Once we had checked into the Hotel Radlovec, similar in décor to Colditz, and had chosen our non-snoring room mates it was feet-up time down by the pool – well for the time being at least.

Weekend activities prior to work

Before we commenced work we had the weekend to acclimatise and get used to the high temperatures in which we would be working. It also gave us a chance to meet and get to know some of our hosts as well as get to grips with some basic phrases: "two beers please – thanks"; or for those wanting to be more advanced – "three beers please". I kid you not – try and say three in Czech! Short of intentionally spitting in the face of the person you are speaking to it is pretty damn difficult.

On the Saturday we made a trip to the park to see the Histopedal Festival. This was a festival to celebrate the bike through the ages, with the cyclists dressed in traditional costume. There was an old wooden one ridden by a Napoleonic Soldier, metal ones ridden by aristocrats, some supported by Resistance fighters, and one by a child dressed as a Waffen SS officer. Yep - not sure that would go down well in the UK.

In the afternoon we made a trip to Butterfly Valley where we would concentrate our efforts for the next fortnight. It wasn't as big as I expected but it was covered by dense stands of *Robinia* and ash trees, as well as large concentrations of golden rod, another invasive plant. Certainly the work would be tough going and it seemed that we would at best achieve clearance of a small area. However, to distract us from the task ahead was the diversity of the butterflies flying around – there were brown ones, white ones, yellow ones and blue ones – in fact just about everything was a shade of blue! On the first trip they flew past me, their identity unknown, but it became apparent from the direction of Nigel and Kathy that with a little application identifying them to species could be achieved.

After the trip to the valley our Czech hosts took us to two reserves near the town of Bukowice which were under different management regimes. One was composed of rough grassland and was under threat of being consumed by adjacent stands of *Robinia*, while the other was situated along a steep embankment. Perhaps the biggest excitement for me was the capture of a sand lizard – a bright green male. Suddenly, the chance of seeing and catching various herps focussed my mind on the ground. Butterflies? What butterflies?! Unfortunately the weather had taken a turn for the worse during the outing and we returned to the hotel to warm up and dry off.

Remind me – it is supposed to be hot over on the continent?! After dinner we returned to the park for the evening events laid on as part of the Histopedal festival.

Despite the rain the party was in full swing – live music intermixed with some DJ-ing by what would appear to have been the local vicar. The chap was wearing a dog collar throughout but perhaps it was a requirement given the entertainment later in the evening. After countless beers and Czech hotdogs the majorettes appeared. Young girls still in high school in not much material throwing batons in the air – no wonder the DJ had to be a priest! Given the direction I could take this part of the report I shall cease now – for those who think of going on a trip to the Czech Republic in the future I shall leave it to you decide on the merits of majorettes. Once the awkward hour was over – hardly something a normal adult bloke wants to watch, the participants took to the floor. We danced the night away, consumed more beer and the more adventurous amongst us started on the Czech spirits.

The following day started slowly – primarily due to the excesses from the night before. However, the rain had passed and the sun had broken through – at last the weather we were expecting! The day before work commenced we were treated to a trip to Mutenice fishponds under the guidance of a local birder, Karel Simecek. Karel's expertise in ornithology soon became apparent as he identified small specks on the horizon to species level. Sure enough inspection with binoculars as the birds approached confirmed that he always seemed to be right. We were fortunate enough to see a range of species, including a multitude of raptors. The latter included honey buzzard, black kite, common buzzard, marsh harrier and osprey. Perhaps the high point though was seeing a large flock of European bee-eaters and two black storks.

In addition to the birds, a number of other species were seen. Common lizard and grass snake were found on the banks of the fishponds, fire-bellied toad and other frogs were caught jumping across the paths, while a trip to a small airfield added brown hare and souslik to the species list. The latter is quite rare in the Czech Republic and has suffered as a result of habitat loss and fragmentation. Unfortunately sousliks are quite secretive and the approach of 14 enthusiastic Eucan participants quickly sent them down their burrows. We bade farewell to Karel in Kyjov as the sun was dropping and headed back to the hotel for beer, food, more beer and an early night.

Work in the valley

The time had come for us to earn our keep! However, the work programme had been planned to perfection – early rise, breakfast, activities in the valley, and then an afternoon of either free time or excursions to local reserves. The initial visit we had made to the valley suggested that the work would be arduous – primarily as a result of the high temperatures, but also because it became clear that *Robinia* was a relatively unpleasant plant to deal with. The long black thorns coupled to the fact that it grew in dense stands, sometimes interspersed with thorny dog-rose, meant that tackling it would inevitably lead to cuts and grazes. In addition to the plant life, the hornets and red ants would keep us on our toes when carrying out our task.

Armed with chain-saws, brush cutters, bow saws, axes, loppers and machetes we threw ourselves in. It wasn't long before we could stand back and see progress. Six of us were spread in a tight line through an area of ash trees felling everything in our path whilst two others dragged the felled saplings back to the path. By the time the first tea break arrived we had pushed the tree-line back some 20m, albeit it six individual paths 5-10m wide. Tea breaks were timed to occur two hours after work commenced although we had many water breaks to keep ourselves hydrated. The temperature rose fast when the sun appeared from behind the adjacent forestry.

Occasionally the silence was interrupted by the cry of “TIIMMMBBBBERRRRR” from the adjacent hillside followed by a loud crash. Those on the hillside were felling more substantial trees in order to link an area of grassland cleared of Robinia scrub the year before, to an area further up the valley. Dealing with the saplings was hard enough in the heat, but those with chainsaws had to endure the high temperatures in full safety clothing – not my idea of fun. After an hour and half of chopping and lopping it was break-time. Kathy had done a shopping trip first thing in the morning to pick up fresh fruit and juice so that we could get rehydrated under the shade of a walnut tree. Coupled to the fresh water from the well it gave us all a new lease as life – just as well seeing as the sun was beginning to show itself over the tree line. It was not beginning to get quite hot.

For the second half of the morning we continued as we had begun although stops were more frequent due to the heat, sore hands, but most frequently to find out more about the other people who were also on the trip. Given that there was about half a dozen of us in one area it was interesting to find out what other people did back in Blightey and how they had come to be in Ždánice. Responses varied from doing something proactive for the environment; having an interest in butterflies; enjoying foreign cultures; trying to learn a new language to those who had heard about Eucan projects through a friend and thought they may commit to it. Amazing, 13 people and noone mentioned the idea of having two weeks in Czech Republic on an all expenses paid jolly. Politicians – every last one of us!

On chatting to everyone it was clear that we all hailed from different backgrounds – some worked in administration in one form or another, others for Local Wildlife Trusts, one in electronic software for mobile phones, some for engineering firms in various capacities, in fact too many to remember! Given the variation in backgrounds there was always something to learn, discuss, or humorous stories to tell and hear. The second part of the morning, although perhaps the most demanding was also the most fun. Two more weeks of this would certainly change a few perspectives for sure. For now we were here to work, all waiting for the second shout of break-time... and then it came.

Despite being thousands of miles from home, tea-time was a thoroughly British affair. Tea brewed in a pot, real milk and cakes – great big cream doughnuts and pastries. This was certainly the high point of the morning! Here there was a chance to swap chores to get a different view of the valley, discuss progress or just collapse in a heap. It was now, during the tea breaks that I could see a diversity of European cultures shining through: tea in a pot – typically English, cream doughnuts and cakes – typically Scottish, siesta time – typically Spanish.

Following tea breaks it was now time for the final push. The saplings that had been chopped down had to be put in piles adjacent to the track, felled trees chopped into logs and piled up, grass and yellow rod which had been felled by the brush cutters raked into piles and burnt. Raking the grass into piles and throwing it onto the fire was perhaps the most unpleasant job. Arms got scratched, the grass fell into your t-shirt, ants bit your arms, the grass kept falling off the fork, you were working in the valley floor with the sun beating down on you, and the smoke from the fire was forever blowing into your eyes. Despite these small *pleasures* it was satisfying to look back at the end of the morning and see a large swathe of ground cleared of vegetation.

Once all equipment had been gathered up we could wander back to the hotel. At this time our thoughts could wander to the need for a shower, how many beers it would take to quench our thirst and the pool. We hadn't been able to get to the pool

perhaps as much as we hoped because the afternoons were packed with trips. However, whenever there was a chance we would all take it!

The goats

During the first week we were also introduced to four additional helpers who were to help munch through the vegetation on the valley side cleared of scrub the year before. At first sight they seemed quite interesting, but after a few hours it quickly became apparent that they smelled really bad – especially the alpha male Stuart. The reasons for the smell quickly became evident and save submitting this report to some top-shelf publication shall remain unwritten! To offset the disgusting habits of Stuart there was a little kid goat who was more appealing. Getting the goats up to the valley went smoothly enough but to avoid the need to keep taking them to and from the hotel daily some volunteers were supplied with tents and were able to stay in the valley overnight.

Unfortunately the temperature was a bit different in the middle of the night in the valley compared to that during the day. In a nut shell it was bloody freezing! For those who think camping on the continent in the summer would be good fun obviously hadn't done it with an inadequate supply of blankets. Nevertheless, beer, marshmallows, and a night sitting under the stars next to a roaring campfire were worth it.

Following the first night with the goats it became apparent that they could not be left outside on the hillside during the night. To this end it was decided to build a goat house in the valley. I and two others started fashioning a structure made out of ash saplings and *Robinia* branches. Although none of us were engineers we managed to produce a robust shelter big enough to house the four goats. It even had a hinged door made out of clematis stems! Two months after it was built the house still stands – whether it can withstand a Czech winter remains to be seen.

Excursions and Events

The trip to the Czech Republic was centred on the need to clear a valley of *Robinia* but our organisers had arranged several trips with our Czech hosts. In addition to the trip with Karel Simecek in the week preceding the work, we were fortunate enough to visit other reserves in the local area and see other sites of local interest.

For those interested in botany and butterflies there were guided walks by Janos and Filip. Janos was highly knowledgeable in butterflies and showed us how to differentiate the various species of blue butterfly – of which there seemed to be loads. However, by holding them in his fingertips he was able to point out distinguishing characteristics which is almost impossible when looking at a fluttering butterfly in a scratched plastic pot. By the end of it I had managed to familiarise myself with at least three new species – well it's a start! Filip also demonstrated his wealth of knowledge on the local plants – pointing out a variety of species unfamiliar to most of us. However, the highpoint of Filip's walk was the sighting of a melanistic adder sheltering under the base of a hedge. Apparently adders were previously unknown to occur around this area so the sighting was of some ecological significance. Indeed the debate as to what it could have been went on for several weeks after returning to the UK.

For those interested in history our local language tutor, Anastasia, took us to the local museum. It was full of interesting artefacts from the surrounding area, from tools used in agriculture, bits of pottery, collections of semi-precious stones, the remains of some animals, and paintings of the Napoleonic Wars. Although limited to less than

half a dozen rooms the museum was packed full of items. Given that you didn't have to wrestle with crowds it was easy to take your time and see as much as possible. Additionally, the group went to the Templar Wine Cellars of Čejkovice which was established in 1248. It stores 500,000 litres of wine with another 600million litres in factory buildings in the local village – certainly enough to have a few parties! Perhaps the most enjoyable part of this trip was the wine tasting at the end of the tour of the cellars. It was pretty cold underground so a few glasses of the local brew quickly heated us up.

On two occasions Anastasia also taught us some useful phrases in Czech. To be honest most of us had already mastered the important basics – “two beers please; *dva pivo prosim*”; “three beers please; *tri pivo prosim*” – and so it continues.....Mind you, to be able to ask for small or large glasses of beer, tea, coffee or a soft drink the courses were invaluable. Although it may be difficult to master languages, especially Czech, I'm sure with more time available Anastasia would have had at least some positive results with some of us.

As well as the formal trips we were treated to a music festival by some of the Czech hosts in the hotel, guided on a walk through the local forest by Mrs Rabbit and her dog, and gained an insight into the history of the Czech Republic under communist regime by an old friend of one of the volunteers. To cap off all the trips we had a formal invitation to a party in the Mayor's personal wine cellar. Here we were treated live music by the Mayor himself, his son Adam, and two friends. There was ample food and wine provided and at the end all the volunteers were presented with certificates from one of our hosts, Zuzana. This was to thank us for our hard work and the contribution we had made to conservation in the local area. The hospitality of the occasion and the sincere thanks relayed to us made all the long mornings chopping trees and working close to the fire worth every second.

Homeward bound

After a fortnight in Ždánice it was time to reluctantly head back to Blightey. Although we had a long trip ahead of us we were able to sit and relax knowing that we had done a good job and had more stories to share. On arriving back in Köln there was a spare ten minutes between trains to make a dash to see the Cathedral. Having missed it on the way out I was determined to see it. Fortunately, the doors were open and it was possible to walk around, albeit briefly, and admire the architecture. This cathedral is certainly worth a visit and needs more than the few minutes we had available to appreciate it. After a several more hours on the local trains, then the Eurostar, we were back in London. It was here we all went our separate ways after swapping numbers and emails so that we could keep in touch.

The trip to Ždánice was an excellent experience. Although at the outset it may have been considered as a cheap holiday we certainly worked our keep and were able to look back and physically see the contribution we had made. Although I would relish the chance to return and see if our efforts have been maintained by the local people, the appreciation shown by the Mayor and other hosts should ensure that those who live there can make the most of our efforts. Hopefully, with the extra land cleared it will be possible for some type of agriculture to take place and keep the *Robinia* at bay. However, should this not happen and my services are required again then I would jump at the opportunity. That leaves me just to convey my sincere thanks to Nigel and Kathy for organising every aspect of the trip. Of course, the same applies to our Czech hosts who made the experience complete – I trust that they will be made aware of how enjoyable they made my time in Ždánice.

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