

Eastern Europe: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland
May 16 to June 1, 2007
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Exchange rate \$1.28US / 1.00 Euro

Wednesday, May 16, 2007

Caught the plane in San Diego to Atlanta at 8am without trouble. A 2 hour layover and then an 8 hour flight through the night to Frankfurt, Germany.

Thursday, May 17, 2007

Frankfurt, Germany

1 Euro = \$1.28 US

Arrived at Frankfurt a little earlier than expected, so I attempted to call my Couchsurfing.com Frankfurt host, Oliver Lein, but had amazing difficulty figuring out how to use the phone there. After a visit to the tourist information desk, they provided instructions on where to add a zero in front of the cell phone number to make the call.

Got in contact with Oliver and we soon met up. He drove me in his car to Frankfurt, only a short 10 minute ride from the airport. We stopped at the train station and I purchased an overnight ticket to Vienna on May 18 for 108 Euro. Oliver said something in German to the ticket agent that ended up being very helpful to me because the price I paid was lower than the original listed price.

Oliver then drove us over to his neighborhood and we shared breakfast with his girlfriend Maria, her brother, wife and child. We had a continental breakfast with a mix of bread, cheese, spread and café au lait. They had to help me with ordering because I couldn't understand any of the German on the menu. True to European form, we finished breakfast around 11am.

It was just a few block drive to Oliver's generously sized flat, a 2 bedroom affair, with one room playing as the bedroom while the other was the den. Oddly, the den was the larger room and hang out place. The kitchen was small but very functional and Oliver moved between each with expert aplomb.

After getting settled, by setting down my backpack, and cleaned up, Oliver went over a complete explanation of how to get around town, what passes to purchase and some of the places to go. He wrote down some interesting locations and his phone number should I run into any trouble. He then accompanied me to U-bahn 7 Habsburgeralle station, which is just down the block and around the corner from his flat. He explained which station to get off at and saw me off. Here we go!

I took the U-bahn to Romerberg, the main market square, to look around. It took me a while to get my bearings in Frankfurt. It seems my travel soul is still lingering in Atlanta and I don't quite feel up to speed yet. Jet lag just makes you feel funny that way. The Zeil, or main walking and shopping district, is rip with people watching opportunities.

I followed Rick Steves' Germany and Austria 2007 walking tour of Frankfurt with fair success. The History museum (Historisches Museum) was good on the ground floor

for 1 Euro. The facades of Frankfurt, both today's construction and those built after the devastating bombing of March 23, 1944, were fascinating in juxtaposition. There really wasn't any left of the city after the bombing other than rubble and the St. Bartholomew cathedral.

A quick walk down Saalgasse (Hall Street) is an interesting exploration of post-modern architecture, complete with a robot-shaped mailbox in front of one flat building to top it off.

Chasing Charlemagne ended up being a theme on this trip. I started by visiting the ruins in front of St. Bartholomew's Cathedral. The ancient stone structure was fun to explore, though there wasn't any building left, but only a constructed stone wall pit with curious stone shapes and patterns. I grabbed a photo of a Roma (gypsy) girl while playing an accordion. I pointed to my camera and then to her once I got her attention. She nodded and kept on playing. I took my shots and tossed a few coins into her instrument case. For some reason earlier, there was a man heatedly speaking to her in French. I couldn't understand it due to the speed and ferocity of the communication. One didn't need to know French to understand what was being said.

The cathedral itself was interesting due to the red sandstone construction rather than the traditional white limestone found in so many other cathedrals, giving it more of an old, dramatic feeling yet making it feel more like it was made for the common person. Yet, it still dominates the Frankfurt skyline along the river.

Being hungry, I wandered over to the Romerberg again and enjoyed a Bratwurst dog of some sort and stood among all the other loitering people. It was a fun experience, even if I didn't put down a stein of beer for fear of having to hunt down a water closet after finishing the drink.

I searched for the Goethe House in vain. Finding the German equivalent of Shakespeare just wasn't that compelling. However, I couldn't resist hunting down the famous red light district of Frankfurt. Now that is entertainment.

Apparently Frankfurt has been a European prostitution capital for some time. There are many 5-story buildings called Eros towers all throughout the district. They are laid out like a sleazy hotel. Men march up and down the stairs and investigate each floor with an open door and a prostitute standing in the doorway, inspecting each for whatever quality they might be looking for. Each is looking for the right deal with a lingering, licensed and scantily clad prostitute. Prices range from 25 to 50 Euros, depending on the quality of the building and not the look of the woman. Places with videos playing in the entrance tended to be of higher quality. Most women, though, appeared to have been living this life for a while and barely broke a '5' on the rating scale. Most men wandering the towers fared at least that badly on the rating scale, looking as though they hadn't had a date in quite a few.

I caught the U-bahn back to Strassalle, not wanting to be late for Oliver's supper. He cooked up some massive white asparagus with his Greek girlfriend Maria. It was a pleasant, uncomplicated meal. We chatted well into the night before bedding down.

Friday, May 18, 2007

After sleeping in until late (9am), Oliver shared a continental breakfast and I was off to explore more of Frankfurt. The first goal was the Main, pronounced 'mine', Tower to see the city. The line wasn't long and an elevator whisked me and a car full of bodies to the top of the massive tower for a look. It's quite an impressive view.

However, getting down the tower proved to be more troublesome than ascending it. After 15 minutes of waiting for an elevator, I and others piled in and waited, only to have a gruff German bark over the intercom that we should get off the elevator. I only knew this because I followed the others like the sheep I was, as I had no idea what was really going on. It took a good half hour before finally leaving the tower, past a now ponderously long line of patrons waiting their turn to be trapped in the Frankfurt Main Tower.

The day was really getting on and there was still much to see. At the United Colors of Benetton store, there is a restaurant, lounge and tower where one can see the center of the city from, without the expense and inconvenience of pesky elevator holdups. I rushed over to the Museumsufer area to take in the film and history museum, only to be met with a modest offering of art and history.

The stomach commanded and I went over to Sachsenhausen for a classic German sausage plate with sauerkraut and beer. Yum! The day was late and I began trekking over to Oliver's only to get decently lost and severely punished in schedule by the slow evening train and bus connections that added over an hour to a normally fast transit across the city. This was due to the less frequent rides, with up to 15 minutes in between each transit.

Not anticipating this problem made me incredibly late to Oliver's flat, much to his chagrin and my embarrassment. Fortunately I had packed that morning and was ready to rock. We practically ran down to the train. Had we missed one U-bahn train connection, I would have missed my overnight train ride to Vienna, as I arrived to the main train station with only 10 minutes to find my train and get on. That was darned close. Too close.

My couchette was for 6 people but only one other German guy shared it with me. The night ride was mostly sleepless, being bothered by cutting it so close with someone else. I don't mind it when I blow it and make thing stressful but not when I have to involve someone else. Also, the bed is only 1.9 meters long and, with the curved walls, I'm just 3 inches too tall for it. I slept diagonal, with my feet and head resting against the walls of the compartment.

Saturday, May 19, 2007

Vienna, Austria

1 Euro = \$1.28 US

The train arrived into Vienna, Austria, right on time to Westbanhauf station. My next Couchsurfing.com contact, Iris Wennintger, was there to meet me in short order and she guided me to her nice flat. It is a single room affair, with the bed and living room mixed together and the kitchen and shower stall mixed together in the entry way. There is a small toilet closet just inside the entryway. Originally these flats had neither shower nor toilet inside them but these amenities were shared between flats on a floor. Iris's flat is nicer than others because it actually has its own toilet while others still share. The shower stall, all 3.8 square feet of it, being inside the

kitchen is an interesting architectural adaptation. All of this can be had for a heavily subsidized 130 Euro per month. I don't think it's possible to live that cheaply except in a tent in the States.

Iris and I chatted for quite a while, she teaching me a little about life here, much to my appreciation. She explained how everything worked and then gave me a key and left for work and then to spend the night with her boyfriend. I did the dishes as a trade appreciation gesture, then geared up and was off.

Again, I was lost for a few hours, trying the manly technique of not asking directions, catching the wrong metro and such. When I finally broke down and asked someone directions, I easily found the famous opera house at 1pm.

The #2 tram runs anticlockwise around the city center, exposing you to all the main sites of the city within half an hour. The Rick Steves' map is good but getting your initial bearing fix is the tough part off a hand-drawn map in a book. It's much easier to ask someone and get that wandering lost part over with much quicker.

The city hall looked more like a cathedral, with dark towers and large windows. A large city fare was going on front of the building with a food and emergency preparedness circus taking over the front promenade. I enjoyed feeding on a tasty and light chocolate cake and cola for 5 Euro. I then finished the tram ride and proceeded with Rick Steves' walking tour of Vienna, starting around 3pm - a little late but effective anyway.

The walking tour was a nice way to see the inner city's major sites and well worth the time invested. Starting at 9am would have gotten me to see inside more buildings, but that wasn't going to happen today.

Instead, I opted for a night jaunt, checking out and photographing sites at dusk, with the city lights on. That is the way to really photograph cities. I caught part of the video projected opera outside the opera house while walking around. It was impressive and fun for the whole 5 minutes I enjoyed it. The sun falls very late here in spring, well past 8pm with dusk not being over until well past 9pm, making it easy to get around and grab photographs. But, it makes for a very tired traveler.

Finally breaking down to the call of hunger, I ate at a café on Kohl Market and Graben, eating an Italian pasta dish washed down with beer. Tasty. Viennese eat very late, at 8pm. That is, compared to home. A quick run over to the Kunst and Natural History museums for some night photography finished off my first day in Vienna.

Thank goodness I photographed and video'd the street signs near Iris's flat because navigating them in the dark ended up being a real challenge. Once I got back, I showered and washed my clothes in the same shower in a kitchen. Sleeping in my compact sleeping bag liner with my polyester jacket as a pillow, I fell asleep to the distant sounds of Vienna.

Sunday, May 20, 2007

After staying up so late, I made sure to sleep in until 8am to insure the body and brain had enough rest to avoid catching my usual international cold. I've been taking Airborne as a supplement and Cold Eaze the instant I feel anything. Just in

case. Since the local shops are closed on Sunday, it was necessary to trek into the city center to have breakfast. I bought some yogurt and stored it in the tiny refrigerator at Iris's behest, so I wasn't famished while heading out the door.

Today was the visit to the Schonbrunn palace and gardens, allegedly the only match to Versailles on the continent. We shall see. I took the #58 tram from Iris's flat over to Schonbrunn and it dropped me off directly in front of the entrance. This was far better than the suggested U-4 route in Rick Steves' guidebook. Following that direction drops you half a kilometer away.

If you call in and purchase your tickets, they can be picked up at the little store just inside the gates. As I didn't bother, I got in the surprisingly short 5 minute line at the palace entrance, on the left hand side facing the massive building. Watch which lines have a green light illuminated and you might be able to move quicker. My ticket entrance time was for 4 minutes after my purchase time so I was able to immediately enter. Rick Steves warns that if you wait until the last minute, your entrance time might actually be the next day! I walked right in and picked up an audio guided tour. Highly suggested. You can amble along leisurely, though the occasional guided tour might run you over.

Photography inside the Schonbrunn is banned and most people observe the signs. However, some were blatant with their flash and photography. I chose to step on to the dark gray side and take some hip-level images as I saw something interesting, forever keeping an eye out for the palace harpies with their unfriendly gaze.

The hall where Kennedy met with Khrushchev in 1964 was an impressive ballroom, fairly comparable to Versailles in size and grandeur. The one dark room in my photographs is where Mozart performed his first concert for the Empress at the tender age of 6. Although the inside of the Palace was reconstructed in the Rococo-baroque style with occasional Japanese and Chinese inlaid black lacquer walls, the place just doesn't match Versailles. But, it is still well worth seeing.

I tramped up the hill behind the palace in the heat and humidity of the day and was rewarded with an excellent view of the city, though an ugly stage and scaffolding marred the lower part of the scene. The day was getting on and I had more to see. I made a short stop at Iris's flat to drop of the polarizer and clean up, and then was off for the Hoffburg Apartments and the Royal Treasury, both the "Secular and Religious Treasure room", with the Weltliche und Geistliche Schatzkammer.

Steves' description of the rooms was handy because the place is large, the biggest collection on the continent. And that really does say something. Seeing the jewels from Charlemagne's (Karl Der Gross) reign was the highlight for me. I've always held a mild fascination with his bringing Europe out of the Dark Ages in 784 and into the Middle Ages. To listen to every audio description in the Treasury would have easily consumed half a day. This is a half day I just didn't have.

It was neat to see the Lipizzaner Stallions, even if it was through a terribly dirty window glass. They stared at me momentarily as I looked back at them in their stalls. Since I'm not knowledgeable or terribly interested in their history, I skipped the museum. A quick walk brought me back to Khol Market, right on Graben, both walking-only zones, to St. Stephan's Cathedral. By the Plague statue, I photographed a pretty early 20's Roma (Gypsy, maybe?) girl expertly playing the violin after tossing a few coins into her black with red velvet violin case. She did me

the favor of looking up while I took the photographs. In retrospect, I should have showed her the images on my digital back, but at the time I was hurried to get to St. Stephan's Cathedral before Mass began.

St. Stephan's Cathedral was duly impressive and I enjoyed my shooting from the rear of the nave. Had I come earlier before Mass, I could have taken a short tour around the monumental stone building for a small 3 Euro fee. It seems that to do this city right, the better part of a week is necessary. But then again, how many paintings can one look at?

Near the cathedral is a café suggested by Steves, Gigerl Stadtheuriger, a buffet-style place with excellent meats and traditional foods. It's nice because you can see what you're ordering, a nice change from the usual guessing I live by. The very classic white meat was excellent and moist. All the while, a violinist and accordionist serenaded the patrons with a lively melody of music. If you ever come to Vienna, you MUST try the Apfelstrudel with cream colored sauce along with a fruity white Austrian wine. It was one of the first foods I can declare that is to die for. A massive meal, desert and two hearty glasses of wine were had for 20 Euros, with over 2 hours of entertainment and people watching. I was off to capture more night images.

During these long, European late-Spring days, you can stay out well past 9pm to capture images. Parliament, City Hall (Rathaus) and the Burg Theatre, Austria's national theater, were great night subjects. I wanted to shoot Belvedere Palace at night, but I didn't want to arrive too late at Iris's flat and be rude. So, I called it a night and rode the U-bahn and trams over to her place.

I was cleaning up when Iris came home and then we chatted until 1am. She shared her experiences of being a woman working in Zambia for a year on a mission for the Baha'i faith. It was amusing to learn that she had to learn to stop making eye contact or saying hello to any of the school guards there because the men there take it as an invitation that you are physically interested in them. She said, too, that any time you went to visit a male worker, villager or otherwise, it was very wise to go with at least a group of four women, otherwise it begins the bad rumor mill of indiscretion.

Yet, in the same vein, she learned to always curtsey like the girls there when meeting someone, as you never knew if you were dealing with a head of state, village chief or other important character. After a year of doing this, she returned to Austria curtseying and not making eye contact with any males. She said it took month to return to the Austrian mannerisms. It's interesting to come to Europe to learn about Zambian living and experiences.

Monday, May 21, 2007

These late nights are killer, making me wake up at a terribly late 9am. Then again, the sun has been up since 5am. Iris was off to the dentist and then to see her boyfriend, so I bid her adieu in the Eurostyle with the double cheek kiss for acquaintances. Cleaned up, prepped to leave, then caught the tram and metro down to the opera house at noon. Breakfast was a mere yogurt cup, but it held me up for a few.

Uh oh, the first tour of the Opera house was at 2pm and my train to Bratislava was at 3:18. Crud. It won't be possible to do the tour, get back, mail postcards, grab my things and catch the train. Nor could I get to the Indian buffet "Der Wiener Dewaan" on Liechtenstein Strasse, exit U-2-Schottentor, where you pay whatever you feel is the honest price of the meal. You could literally go in, eat a feast, pay 25 cents and leave. Really!

Well, the most important thing to do is tour the Opera house, so I hot footed it back to Westbahnhof station and mailed 10 Euros in postcards. Yowch. Then, hustled it back to Iris's flat, left a thank you note and the keys to the place, then hauled me and my backpack and repeated the exact route I had just done an hour before. I'll have to change my approach to departure days and just suffer hauling around my backpack.

A ride on the U-3 and U-2, then the same long walk through St. Stephenplatz brought me to the State Opera house with 12 minutes to spare before the tour. Plenty of time. Man, never miss a metro connection here...

The Opera house was duly impressive, with the gargantuan 3-ton crystal chandelier with a ceiling elevator for maintenance. The ceiling drops down to meet the crystal sculpture rather than trying to raise an elevator up to it. The back stage is hydraulically controlled as well as the symphony pit. Both can be moved up and down as the needs of the particular opera require. It's all quite a show for a tech head. The daily preparations were going on while the tour went through and the group enjoyed watching things be worked on and moved around while being a tourist. Just as I was enjoying myself, I realized it was 2:50pm. And my train was to leave in less than 30 minutes! The tour had run longer than normal due to the number of people and the wonderful singing interlude our group had. It was worth the time alone just to hear that woman sing. I wished I had time to finish the tour, only one more section of the Opera house, but I didn't want to miss my train. I left the group. I ended up meeting a couple from Chula Vista, Riverside and someone who knew another person who ran part of Callaway Golf's website. I came half way around the world to run into a bunch of people I could have easily known.

Jogging back to the Opera house U-bahn station, I enjoyed the cigarette smoke filled corridors of St. Stephansplatz and then took the U-2 to Volkstheater, ran to the U-3 at Westbahnhof, took a few minutes to find my ride to Bratislava Hlavna Stanica (Hl. St.) and caught the train with 10 minutes to spare, happily covered in sweat. There are actually other stations in Bratislava, so one has to be quite careful.

Bratislava, Slovakia

\$1US = 24.9 Slovak Crowns (Slovak Koruna)

The ride to Bratislava is easy and smooth, only with two unfriendly Slovakian border agents asking for your "paskontrol" (passport). One comes by, checks you and then moments later another character does the same. They examined my passport for a second, nodded to each other, handed it back and went on. Strange. Do these police (polizei) guys ever smile?

The massive concrete flats coming into Bratislava give you an idea of how life in communist Slovakia might have been – the ultimate uninteresting concrete jungle. I'll soon be in that jungle and get a chance to taste how it might have been.

It's funny, you can tell a place by the quality of the concrete. Bratislava enjoyed a period of Soviet-controlled roughshod construction and it shows. The train station is dark and uninviting. After coming through here, I really appreciate a good architect and designer. Even the Chinese communist stuff had some sort of Chinese art influence. It was like tasting Orwell's 1984 here.

I found my host's place at 530pm without any trouble. Jolan Nisbet is a nice Canadian young lady teaching English in Bratislava. Right now, the students are having their final verbal 20 minute exam. The boys have to wear cuff-link quality clothes and the girls wear prom dresses to this test. Apparently, the suicide rate takes a huge jump around this time due to the intense pressure of passing the tests.

Jolan lives with 2 Slovak men and 1 Polish woman on her floor and with several other Slovaks in the attached flat upstairs. Living the student and instructor life is always an alter experience. Aga (Polish woman), Michael and Peter are all very nice people. On hearing I'm from California, Aga asked why I'm not an actor and if Hollywood was beautiful. In retrospect, I should have just said that the Hollywood area is gorgeous. Heck, Beverly is close enough and it's pretty, so it's just an extension at that kind of distance. It seemed better not to bust down some impressions. It certainly wasn't intentional but it didn't occur to me at that moment that the portrayed reality of California is important to keep up in peoples' minds, even if it's not totally true.

Jolan took me for a walking tour of the old part of Bratislava and showed me where the student travel agency is. I had huge trouble trying to purchase a train ticket, 499Sk (Slovak crowns) to Budapest. The only arrival time I could get out of the ticket agents at the train station was 11pm. No way, I am not going to arrive that late into a huge, unknown city. Jolan suggested I just stop at the student agency where everyone speaks English and purchase a far cheaper bus ticket to Budapest. As Jolan related, everyone pretty much under 25 speaks some English here, as when the Soviets pulled out, people quickly figured out they have to learn English to survive in this world, being a very small country with a complex language. She said the ticket agents still have the communist approach to service and just aren't required or motivated to help you out. Yes, I did try and stumble through some Slovak phrases but that got me nowhere.

Jolan and I had a pleasant conversation over a dark Slovak beer at a café near the Slovak National Theater (Slovenske Narodne Divadlo), across from the now-fenced off American consulate, full of unfriendly looking types. It was a great way to spend an afternoon. How could I go wrong by hanging with a Canadian in Slovakia?

All of the women dress fashionably here and show more skin than their Eastern European neighbors and they really look good doing it. Being a university city, many of the women are younger, too. The girls here look much better than the Austrians or Germans. I can see why so many Slovak women have come on to the international fashion and modeling circuit. They just look better on average than most places I've been. Though, they don't share lingering eye contact with you. Jolan explained that the eye contact thing is a remnant of the Iron Curtain, where you just distrusted everyone, creating a shifty-eyed populace. Too bad, some of the girls here have great eyes. However, if you catch someone's glance, say 'Hello' in Slokan (Doh-bree-dem) and sometimes you can crack a longer glance and a smile. That's better than home. Girls here must not be as spoiled. No complaints!

Jolan took me over to a nice Slovak restaurant near her place, down a very non-descript street. It was a breaded chicken and spiced and chopped potato supper, a classic Slovakian meal. Also, she introduced me to Kofola, a communist throw-back Slovak national cola that the people here are quite proud of. We wandered back to her place and bid goodnight to her gaggle of roommates and crashed out on the makeshift couch. Quite comfy, really.

Tuesday, May 22, 2007

Woke up, cleaned up and enjoyed my communist breakfast of a cellophane-wrapped cookie for breakfast. I'll have to pull the name from a picture I took. I can only describe it as a cookie, though it was much lighter and crunchy, not sweet at all, light and pleasant. This, too, was a common staple in communist time and still survives to this day. It was neat and tasty the first time but I can imagine that it would lose its charm quickly if I had to live off of it.

The Rick Steves' Bratislava walking tour was fairly on target, with all the interesting sights covered in about 7 hours without going too deep into anything. The suggested chocolate store was wonderful. And the girl running the place was cute, too. I didn't bother with any of the museums because based on the directions and signs I read, I didn't anticipate the museums would be that interesting. And thus, I followed Steves' suggestion.

The day was getting to be quite warm and humid, reducing me to self-humidified clothing. A stop in St. Martins cathedral was a nice respite from the sun. The conditions are not that terrible, just not quite comfortable.

The crypts of the cathedral were quite cool, though the exposed lead sarcophagus was gated off. And I'm sure for good reason. Apparently the young male Brits have a very bad reputation for extraordinarily drunk stag parties and really tear up the city. They've ruined several statues in the city and caused the parks to be closed at night, when they used to be open at all hours. Strange. Europe has always been terrorized by one invading group or another. It just now happens to be young Brit males looking for a cheap, good time while leaving destruction in their wake. I'm not sure how much irony there is in that situation, though.

I was disappointed with the Bratislava castle because the 280' deep well was closed off, so I couldn't throw my 1Sk coin down the well to wait the 4 seconds to hear the kerplop. Again, I didn't bother checking out the museums there as the pictures enticing you to visit just didn't look that interesting.

By now, I'd blown through 80% of my Nikon D200 battery life shooting 500 photos today. My chimping rate was killing my battery. And it was only 3pm. I had to take my best guess at some things because I didn't have my spare battery with me. The bright, hazy light tended to cause underexposure of 0.3-1.3 stops, depending on the brightness of the foreground items. Even though the camera takes the approach of avoiding blown out exposures at all costs, I don't always like that so I have a tendency to adjust on the fly. This is at the expense of battery life.

Finding a public phone to make phone calls is a challenge here. Figuring out how to make the phone call is even more difficult. I ran across a T-mobile "handy" store (they call cell phones 'handies' here) and bought a 200Sk (\$9US) phone card to call my other couchsurfer.com contact, Michelle. She didn't get out of work to meet me

until 6pm and I had to be back at Jolen's by 7:30pm. Why is it, that you come all the way around the world and you end up with only an hour to visit with someone?

I met up with Michelle and she drove me to the top of a hill and we went up into an old Soviet-style architecture tower with a rotating lounge at the top. The place had a commanding view of the Carpathian Mountains leading to Poland with Austria and Hungary in the hazy distance. If one were on a date, I can see how the place is rather romantic, but you must have a car or a taxi to take you to this place. We passed the Slovakian movie studios where Hollywood makes their movies in this country on the way down.

Michelle was interesting because at 36 years old, she said she liked the communist state days better because there was no overt drug use, obvious prostitution problems, but at the expense of having difficulty traveling anywhere. You were "taken care of" by the state and she was nostalgic about that. She enjoyed living in Canada for a while because they have a similar socialized system there, but I wondered silently if she had to have anything actually done, for sometimes in the socialized system you would be dead before you ever had your free procedure done.. She works for Lenovo, the IBM personal computer spin-off company.

She enjoys the work but wishes to leave her home of Slovakia because it has nothing for her. She says life in the city is good with the conversion to a capitalist system but life in the country for people is much worse, because there is no system to take care of them and they have great difficulty competing. Communism was probably better for the country folk. I never anticipated in my life finding someone who longed for the communist way of life. But then again from her perspective, under the communist state, she could have run away and gained asylum, easily becoming a permanent resident in a western country. However, with the open border now, it's impossible to gain asylum because you can come and go as you wish. And it takes years and years to gain citizenship, if ever. It was an eye-opening conversation and visit.

Time was running out, so my 6'1", blond, thin, tight-pants Slovakian guide drove me back to the city. It was peculiar because her conversation rhythm only opened up in the last 20 minutes of our visit and she grew comfortable with eye contact - just as Jolen had said about people here. The icy rift between East and West only melted a tiny bit. Michelle zoomed through the city and after a comedy of my bad directions due to a lack of familiarity and directing her down the wrong way of one-way streets, she dropped me off. We shared the Euro-cheek kiss. I still don't quite have it down because I tend to bump cheeks a little hard. Oh well, you can't expect to get this all down in a few days.

Jolan had prepared a tasty spaghetti and meat dish from a recipe she had learned while living in Italy from her adopted Nana. We added some Hungarian chili for extra kick and enjoyed it in the back yard. As we chatted, her female roommates did yard work while the guys, Jolan and I sat around. I loved it! All the while, we swapped stories and shared laughter.

After the wonderful dinner, I rushed down to the President's Palace to take some shots and then down to old town to grab some night shots. There was some big-wig at the Slovak National Theater, as there was a red carpet, a hoard of police and clapping as the important people emerged. These people were escorted by a 5-car security detail.

I didn't get back and to sleep until past midnight. Terrible mistake.

Wednesday, May 23, 2007

Okay, sleeping in late was a mistake. I'm an hour behind schedule. I crammed all of my stuff into my bag in a hurry and jogged down to the annoyingly unmarked post office, mailed my 4 postcards for 100Sk (\$5US). Being very late, I had no choice but to take a taxi down to the Autobus international terminal for 120Sk (\$5.50US). That doesn't seem like much until you compared it to the 3 hour bus ride to Budapest which cost me 100Sk. A 10 minute Mr. Toad's Wild Ride across the city cost more than transport between countries.

All this effort and the bus was a good 20 minutes late. Good thing, because it took me a few to figure out where to stand with others carrying ridiculously massive backpacks touring Europe.

We were at the Hungarian border in no time and here I am, on the student transport bus.

Budapest, Hungary

\$1 US = 191 Hungarian Forint

Do not change money at the bus terminal unless you absolutely have to at the bus station. They'll kill you here. You only get 140Ft (Forints) per dollar here while on the street, you can easily find 180Ft / \$1US. Owch.

I headed over to the Ibis hotel I found on Steves' map near the end of Vaci Utca and pretended to have a reservation. However, that ploy didn't work this time as they claimed to have no rooms. But, they happily made reservations at another Ibis location more in the middle of the Pest side of the city, right next to a metro station. It ended up working better, anyway. Apparently the show-up technique doesn't work here as well. You have to call ahead just a bit, like in Japan. Just a day advance call works much better. I'd stayed in Ibis in Morocco and was really happy for the amenities versus price and service, so it was a sure bet.

After walking 20 minutes across the city, showering, cleaning up and downloading photos, I struck off to the railway station to purchase my overnight sleeper to Prague. I ended up standing in the wrong line for 10 minutes (it was 14 minutes before ticket sales closed) only to be redirected to the international garden. I bought an 18,000Ft (~\$108US) ticket to Prague. With minutes to spare before the ticket window closed. That was terribly close for comfort.

Walking down the street to the city's not-so-central park, I discovered a street that everyone seems to walk their dog on. The old building facades were quite beat up, with some showing exposed lapboard and plaster. It was fun to be off the beaten path from the tourist routes.

Hero's Square is awesome. It contains massive bronze cast statues of Hungarian historical figures. They all looked imposing and unfriendly. One interesting statue on top of the back columnade represented "packing light while traveling", so says Steves' book. I liked it.

I headed over to the replica Transylvania castle in the central park to get some evening shots. The place was fairly deserted and had the creepy raven watching you from dark trees feeling about it. Unfortunately, the castle lights weren't cooperating and lighting up the place for me. However, I heard music in the distance and decided to investigate. I wandered over to find a bunch of Hungarians parting out to a Beatles and 60's to 80's cover band. Needing an emotional lift, as I was tired, I bought a tasty Hungarian beer and lightened my mood a bit. The band was pretty good and the old folks hanging out really cut up the dance floor. It was odd. I came all the way to Budapest, Hungary, just to catch an American and British music cover band. Right then, hunger called. Screamed is more like it.

Rick Steves' suggestion of Bagolyvar (Owl's Castle) was pretty tasty. It would have taken reservations to have a patio seat, so I landed a seat inside the restaurant all to myself, listening to the conversation outside. Just then, an annoying couple showed up and pestered the head waitress about an outside seat. Every 5 minutes. Every time the waitress returned from their table and passed me, we traded a knowing and humored look. Eventually, they snagged an outside seat and left me to eat in peace.

The meal was good, though that empty seat across from me sat staring, unblinking...

Although I wanted to photograph Transylvania replica castle at night, missing the last metro of the evening for it would have cost me a 40 minute walk back to the hotel when I was already quite tired. That just wasn't attractive at 11pm. So, I ditched the photo op and caught the metro station back to Oktagon, then walked the rest of the way because I hadn't totally figured out the metro system. To sleep at midnight.

Thursday, May 24, 2007

I slept in decently but had to get myself up and going. The beds at this Ibis Emke are fairly stiff, so your back won't let you stay in them forever. Today was the walking tour of the Pest side of the city, with the Buda side of the city to be captured this evening. I rode the metro down to the Great Market Hall area. I walked past the Hungarian National Museum to get there and was fairly tempted to visit by an exhibition of the Mongol Empire. However, I skipped because Hungarian descriptions of museum artifacts and descriptions would do nothing for me.

The Great Market Hall was pretty cool, with grocery vendors on the ground and tourist junk and food vendors on the mezzanine. I tried Hungarian fried bread with veggies on top. Should have skipped on the cold veggies part, though. (Now, looking back on it, that could have been what killed me later, but it's weird that it would have taken 6 hours). The food looked better in the photo. The bread was good, though.

The walk down Vaci Utca was pleasant enough, with a short stop in a pretty cathedral. And, it was nice to hide in the cool air inside. Seeing the first McDonalds behind the iron curtain was fun. It was a large establishment, bigger than a good portion I've seen at home. However, a grouchy guy made it clear he didn't like my taking video of the place very much. Though he spoke in Hungarian, it was clear what he was communicating. Seems that most commercial establishments are that way all around.

Visiting the House of Terror was an unnerving experience. This WAS the incarnation of Torture Room 101 in the Ministry of Love out of the Orson Wells novel *1984*. For decades, this building is where people were imprisoned, tortured and eventually killed. If you ever thought Nazism and Communism were ever good ideas, then you have not toured through the House of Terror. I cannot recall if I have ever been to a worse place of evil. Just for example, one cell was filled with 6 inches of fetid water that a prisoner had to stand in 24 hours a day. If you wanted to lay down, you were laying in the water. Constantly. Another cell was 2 feet by 2 feet, making it nearly impossible to kneel or lay down. There was a light bulb hung so it dangled right in front of your face, the entire time. I actually stepped into this cell and closed the door. It couldn't have been much more spacious than your average coffin. But at least there, you could lie down. If that wasn't your best deal, you could enjoy the 4 foot tall cell where you could never stand up straight. Though it sounds like a better deal than other cells, try staying stooped over or laying on concrete for months on end. And, those are just descriptions of the accommodations of the House of Terror. Imagine how the torture, interrogation and re-education rooms were. Scary. Truly scary.

The rebuilt chain bridge is quite pretty, even in harsh mid-day light. It was originally destroyed in World War II as the Germans and Soviets fought for control of Budapest. Walking over to St. Istivan (Ivan) Cathedral, I had a chance to speak with construction workers about how they lay the arched pattern cobble stone. The one lead guy claimed they could finish off 6 parcels a day, but only seeing one actual guy laying the stones, I questioned that in my mind. The most amazing thing was that all of the construction workers' English was good enough that I had no problem understanding them and they had absolutely no trouble comprehending my sloppy American English. They explained that one guy would push wet sand into the gaps and two guys with push brooms would follow the squeegee guy around. They said that it was far easier to handle wet sand and it packed much better than dry. Amazing the things you learn when you travel.

St. Istivan's Cathedral is huge, with dark, intricate woodwork filling the massive stone structure. One of the bonuses of checking out this particular cathedral is seeing the 1,000 year old shriveled hand of St. Istivan. There's just something about those relics that is attractive to me. I figured I would grab a quick snack on the way to the hotel, relax a few and then head over to the Buda side of the city and take some impressive night shots. I picked up a pastry and a Fanta and ate on the way back to the hotel, arriving at 3pm. The pastry tasted fine, so I thought. Maybe it had sat there for days on end. Who knows. Pastries are almost always a safe bet. So I thought.

It was about midnight before my Budapest hell ended. I lost count of how many times my very empty stomach tried to empty itself even more. Had I been wearing shoes at the time, I would certainly have had a chance to taste shoe laces as they came up. This made the food poisoning I had in Egypt look like a picnic on a sunny day. Thank goodness I was in a hotel for another full night by myself. It would have been terrible to have been in someone's place, surfing a couch this particular time. Right around 10pm, after 7 hours of wrenching and bowel movements, do you start thinking that the Med-evac insurance for \$39 doesn't seem like such an extravagant expense. The good part was I didn't have general nausea, only being hit with the need to visit the toilet every 20 minutes like clockwork. Every quick move, a roll, head turn or anything would set being sick off. I didn't want to die but times like these make you think about the possibility of just ending it all.

Friday, May 25, 2007

I think I finally fell asleep at midnight, though it was tough to tell. My stomach muscles were terribly sore from the unpleasant ordeal. My body was completely worn out, no energy in me and completely empty of fluids. That was a rough place to be in a foreign country.

Thank goodness breakfast was served at Hotel Ibis, so I had to only ride the elevator down and shuffle my feet to the buffet area. By 7am, I was living off of grapefruit juice, chopped pears and corn flakes. All eating was agonizingly slow. After that hefty workout of lifting spoons and walking, I went back to sleep until 9am, when I got some more breakfast. I knew that if I didn't get energy and fluids into my body, I would be in a terrible world of hurt. Two more hours of sleep and I was forced out of my room by the checkout time.

By now, my body was feeling fine, but there was just no energy there. After sitting in the lobby for half an hour just to rest from packing and getting out of my room, I was able to strike out into the city, catching the tram down to Oktogon Square and then I walked the a block. I was forced to rest for 5 minutes, then I walked another block until I found the metro to Szechenyi Baths.

The Szechenyi Baths were just what I needed to lift my spirits. After a slow plodding walk, I was able to finally make it there. Rick Steves' entrance instructions are on target but they are overly complicated for the average user. Just buy a 2,400Ft 3 hour card, pass through the barricade by passing the card you receive over the scanner and you are in. Find the gender appropriate locker room, search out an empty locker, put your stuff it in, grab the attention of an attendant and receive a roped ID. Whatever you do, do not loose that tag or forget your locker number. You will be toast because there is no way to recover your things without that tag.

There are a dizzying array of bath temperatures and options. Try them all. Plus all the saunas and steam rooms. And check out the underground sauna with ice chip maker to scrub down with. That sauna runs around 80 degrees Celsius or 176 degrees Fahrenheit. You can't stay in there very long. Going through these different baths lifted my sagging spirits. Just something about playing in the water, though doing some bikini watching definitely helps, too. I grabbed an expensive but worth-it fruit ice cream and sat around people watching.

I ended up using almost all of my 3 hours and still got back 300Ft as a use refund. I wasn't sure how that all worked but I wasn't complaining. It was really a good deal. Rick Steves was right – of anything you do in Budapest, you must check this out. Just make sure you bring your own swimwear unless you are bold enough to rent one. To germophobes, that's a big ewwww. The Americans and Canadians I spoke with about the massages described them as an "interesting" experience. It's not quite what you might think and if it's too rough, it's difficult if not impossible to communicate that. I didn't try it, but perhaps next time.

By this time, my guts were starting to feel a little bit off. That's to be expected after a night of hell. I caught the metro and tram back to Hotel Ibis, hung out for a few hours resting and then took the metro back to the train station. Again, catching the train was a stress inducing activity.

My train was slated to leave at 19:45 and it was 20:25 when I noticed other people I talked to about the train becoming rather shifty and agitated, too. No one seemed to know which platform the train was on because it just wasn't announced on the clattering flapper schedule board. At about 20:30, the platform of the train finally came up and there was a mad rush of people toward the platform.

Within 10 minutes, the train was moving. If you were in the restroom when the announcement came, you could easily miss your ride. Once the train time passes, you just have to suffer and wait for the late announcement because you don't know just how tight the departure time is. And, your destination isn't even listed in the first column of the display, as one might expect. Also, the words are written in the local English characters. In my case, I was headed to Prague but over in Eastern Europe, it is referred to as Praha. So, at best, you are guessing. It's pretty scary, really. I met some other Americans on the way and we shared our confusion and frustration. Funny how you think things aren't all that easy to understand and are slow at home. We've got it so good.

I'm berthed with a Japanese PhD student studying cate brain/eye interaction in Budapest. Apparently there's quite a Japanese community, due to Toyota and other large companies, in Hungary. That was something else completely unexpected. This train is not an ICE (Express) fast train, so we seem to stop at every possible station along the way as we rumble into the dark landscape.

There were two passport checks during the night. Combine that with the slight fear of having your bags ripped off and a slightly uncomfortable bed and you have a poor night of sleep. I sleep with my legs on my backpack turned upside down. At least that might wake me should someone try to steal my pack.

Saturday, May 26, 2007

Prague, Czech Republic

\$1 US = 20.5 Czech Crowns (Koruna)

Welcome to Praha or Prague. A very early arrival into Prague and before too long, my host Clabbe appeared to meet me. He's a tall, dark hair Swede. Aren't all Swedes supposed to be tall, blond and blue-eyed? Apparently not! Yes, I'm staying with a Swede in the Czech Republic.

Clabbe was good enough to take me through all the main tourist sites in the morning before the crush of tourists arrived that he warned me about. The old town section of Prague is very pleasant, with an amazing quantity of architectural variety. All one has to do is look up from the Soviet cleansed ground level arcade and there the beauty of Prague will be.

The Astronomical Clock is a sight to behold. The time is shown in many ways, daily time, astrological time, monthly, Roman, Gregorian and every other possible way of keeping time. Individual days of the year are marked and there are some other ways of representing time I've never seen before. Fascinating! The characters on the clock move about from 9am to 8pm. Too bad we missed that, being there at 7am. But, as I learned, missing the unpleasant crowds and pick pockets was a decent trade.

The two cathedral spires in the city square, kiddie-corner to the astronomical clock, are stunning in comparison because there are over 1,000 differences in their construction. Normally, cathedral spires are made to be the same but not on the Prague cathedral. Just looking at the two large wooden windows in the top of the towers makes their differentiation easy to note.

The Charles Bridge is filled with fun and enjoyable trivia, too. There is a plaque worn to a polished state by all the countless hands that have touched it. One side is good luck for the person, the other side is good luck for the owner's pet. Both sides were quite shiny. I only sampled one side.

Across the river, there is the John Lenin wall. This was the second incarnation after the first was destroyed, I think by flooding. It has endless graffiti, layers upon layers. Funny thing is this is on a wall of a church courtyard. The church officially donated the side of their wall to replace the destroyed one. The graffiti is invited up to a point. If there is something that bothers the church, they have covered up the offensive writing. But, with so much mess on the wall, one would be hard pressed to detect that. From the looks of things, this particular church tolerates quite a lot.

I began to realize that Clabbe is quite an expert on Prague. He explained that he was fed up with Swedish complaining, requirements for Japanese-like conformity in appearance and actions and decided to do something about it. He began applying for jobs on the internet and landed a job as the distribution manager for the Anheiser-Busch related beer exporter out of the Czech Republic. Not a bad gig. After getting the job and knowing nothing about Prague, he spent a great deal of time cruising Wikipedia, sponging up an inordinate amount of information about his new city, both in current physical and historical knowledge. He has a breadth and depth that I have only seen in a very few persons around the world. And he's not paid to know this.

We visited the high water marks from the 2002 river flood. The water was 8 feet deep, 1/3 a mile away from the river channel. That 500 year flood turned the city of Prague into a Czech version of Venice for a few weeks.

Clabbe hadn't slept at all the night prior to my arrival due to a Couchsurfing.com party. He artfully ended our tour and guided me on the tram back to his flat in south east Prague, where he gave me his only key and locked himself in his flat. Without me, he had no way to easily extricate himself. I could do as I want while he got some much needed rest. Being feet-dragging tired myself, I hoped the exploration of the city would recharge me.

Leaving Clabbe literally locked inside his flat, for the door was a double deadbolt design, I began leaving digital breadcrumbs on my camera so I could find my way back to the #6 tram to Lavender Street. I didn't want to be lost or late, as Clabbe was hosting another Couchsurfing.com get together tonight at Dogs Bullocks, a local pub.

I should have just stayed at Clabbe's and slept. My body was dead tired and unenergetic. I took the tram for a while, then walked, then grabbed another tram. It was a very slow method of getting around the city. I discovered just how bad the crush of tourism really was in Prague. From a distance, at 11am, the Charles Bridge looked like it was Main Street Disneyland at noon in July. Egads.

Pushing to the Old Town square, eating an overpriced sandwich and soda, I decided it would have been better to just rest and recover myself. All the while walking around, I made sure to have a good grip on my camera to slow a snatch and grab attempt. My wallet was buried deep inside my front pocket. And I had some cash in my other hiding places just in case. People even wear day packs on their chests, making it clear just how bad the Old Town area really was.

I slowly struggled back to Clabbe's flat at 4pm and I crashed out hard on the bed, just after a few seconds of laying my head down.

Clabbe woke me at 6pm so we could do laundry the Czech way. We walked over to a laundry mat, put our clothes in the microscopic 0.8 cubic foot washers and went to the other room to have a tasty Czech beer. Now this is how laundry should be done. At least one could pass the time pleasantly while the drone of the washer and dryer machines filled the other room.

I showered and cleaned up before heading out to meet other couch surfers, taking my body's edge off since it was 31 degrees Celsius and 80% humidity. Yuck! Dog Bullocks was nice enough and it was a happening place. I even got to enjoy the Prague and Czech specialty of steak tartar. You take a bunch of spices, mix it into the raw ground sirloin and blend in the raw egg. Since Clabbe led the charge and ordered the same, I had no choice but to be brave on my still unstable stomach. Always try the local specialties, especially when someone else leads by example. It was really fun to meet some other Pragians, a large Indian contingent of Couchsurfers out for a long weekend out of Germany. We partied and drank until a paltry 1am, when I and others threw in the towel. Most of these people had been up until 5am today so they had a good excuse and mine was wreckage recovery. When Clabbe and I returned to his flat, I was out in one minute flat.

Sunday, May 27, 2007

Morning seemed to come too early. I got a taste of how it feels to be a late bird, a morning hater. That's really a painful way to start the day and go through life.

Clabbe and I met up with Vickoff, one of the local Pragian guys who is hosting Sarah, another Couchsurfer in the city. Vickoff is a pretty funny, laid back guy. Sarah is a Harvey Mudd graduate touring the world for a year before heading back to school in Boston to do HIV research. We went over to the massive city graveyard, containing over a million buried people, explicitly created to house all of the Plague victims in the 1600's. Ironically, we encountered Danielle, a Pragian we partied with last night, touring around with her Indian crew visiting from Germany. How funny. The entire city to wander and you run into the same people you saw last night in a place far, far away from where you are now. We all joined forces and went on a graveyard architecture tour and then continued on through the city.

We moved quickly through Old Town and Clabbe shared his extensive Prague knowledge with our now enlarged group. Really, he could have held a little tour guide flag and we could have easily followed him, his descriptions and directions were so engaging.

We moved across the city on trams and made our way up to General Big Horse (General Smitckey?). This is the largest man sitting on horse statue in the world. I've seen plenty of bronze statues and this one definitely takes the cake. The

interesting thing about this place is it's not on the regular tourist route and there were only a few people around. The mausoleum is covered in communist and Soviet art. It's well worth going out of your way to see this, if nothing else to get away from the crushing crowds and to see something totally different.

Some people believe the mausoleum is full of black magic, especially because it is rarely opened and some sort of strange aura surrounds the place. I can't tell you about the magic or the aura of the location, but only that there is a huge statue of a very successful general who was blind. He and his horse have a commanding view of Prague. We were completely off the tourist circuit. The park was almost deserted, save for a few couples wandering around. This was a nice respite from the crushing crowds of old town.

Lunch was 187Ck for 2 Fantas (0.3L), Czech onion and garlic soup and goulash, all Czech specialties. I provided quite a bit of entertainment to the Czechs at the table because I ate my goulash incorrectly, not soaking up the oily sauce with the bread and scooping up the meat. No matter how right you think you have always been about how to eat something, you'll be proved wrong somewhere.

Riding the tram up to the massive Prague Castle and Cathedral made our visit more enjoyable. The walk up would have been a significant undertaking and, given my schedule, walking just wasn't an option. It was the first cathedral I've seen with true large-scale flying buttresses. These are found on cathedrals built in the 1400's and later, well after the age of cathedrals began in the 9th century. It took designers and engineers a long time to figure out how to construct a flying buttress and even longer how to prevent it from collapsing.

By the time our group arrived at the cathedral, the building was closed for the day so we were only able to gawk at the outside. Interestingly, there were several stones carved with different locations on them well up on the wall of the cathedral. One was Transylvania. I wondered if this was just ancient graffiti or an indicator where the stone came from or who worked on it. Maybe one day I'll find out.

A pleasant walk through the main city park brought us back down to lowland Prague where Clabbe and I took our leave of our Couchsurfing compatriots. We caught the tram back to Clabbe's flat, and, grabbing my seemingly lead-filled backpack, we hopped back on the metro and made it over to the train station with plenty of time. Clabbe and I then grabbed drinks and hung out, idly chatting until my train was to depart. I took leave of Clabbe and thanked him for his excellent guiding and generous hospitality and boarded my train.

It took a moment to find the correct car because this train also goes on to Warsaw and then Moscow. Don't want to make a mistake here! I didn't end up with a couchette sleeper berth this time, only with a wide backed couch. Fortunately, there was no one in the berth so I was able to lay out and get some sleep. On to Krakow.

Monday, May 28, 2007

Krakow, Poland

2.9ZI = \$1US, ZI is a Zlotty

Poland is a beautiful countryside nation. The morning light caressed the tall, lush grasses as a man carrying a tackle box and rod slowly high stepped through the dew

covered field. It was a picture perfect image and it was impossible to capture as I saw it given my limited gear and the moving train. It is something that will always be in my mind. Wonderful. I will save the reader from a more in-depth description.

About 20 minutes outside of Krakow, the train passed through the allergy zone. All of the sudden my nose stuffed up and eyes watered, all the while hearing sneezing all up and down the car. It wasn't just me and that somehow made my happy for my discomfort. It passed after some time.

Since I didn't have the chance to check my email before leaving, I didn't know if my English host in Krakow sent any meeting instructions. I looked wide and far and then tried to call with my two effectively worthless calling cards I'd purchased in other countries. I decided to take the direct route and follow Danielle's directions to her flat in hopes of catching her before she took off for her morning classes.

After a little wandering through still sleepy Krakow and I found Danielle's flat. She's a nice young English lass studying for a year in Poland before returning to London to pursue her university work. She's studying to be a teacher in England and she shared her experience of how the English kids are beginning to go nuts and grow fat, just as Oliver of Frankfurt, Germany had shared of his German students.

It looks like America isn't all by herself wiping out its next generation. Danielle shared information about dietary and psychological experiments that have "figured out" that giving kids healthy, junk free meals virtually eliminates insane behavior in mere days. Then to complete the test, the kids were allowed to consume soda 2 weeks after the experiment began and within half an hour, they were fighting and were wrecks the rest of the day. The parents in the experiment didn't look at the greasy fried chicken fingers and soda as bad, but ended up learning just what they were doing to their children.

After visiting, learning and sharing stories, Danielle had to get to class and gave me directions on how to get to Auschwitz and the things to watch out for on the way.

The ride to Auschwitz is done only on bus and it takes out of the bus terminal behind the train station. You pay 7 ZI (\$2.40US) directly on entering the bus. The bus leaves very punctually. I made it on the bus with a whole two minutes to spare. Things are getting rather tight in my event timing. I hope not to miss anything when I'm cutting things this close.

The ride to Auschwitz is 1 hour 45 minutes from Krakow to the museum parking lot. The main Auschwitz museum and Birkenau, Auschwitz II are separated by 3km by a punctual shuttle. Again, Rick Steves' Best of Eastern Europe came in very handy. The descriptions inside the book added a lot of depth to the visit and made it possible to spend my very limited time efficiently. Don't miss the shuttle bus between the locations because you will then wait half an hour for the next. The driver left after 30 seconds of the designated time. Crazy.

The Auschwitz I camp sight was clean but depressing. There wasn't anything directly shocking or scary like the House of Terror in Budapest. However, the half train car load of hair clippings, mountain of reading glasses, bays full of collected luggage and such gave you an idea of how bad things were. All of this sadness is hidden inside of the buildings which are surrounded by beautiful trees, grasses and floating cotton fluff. This outside beauty is directly contrasted by walking inside the

buildings and learning of the murder and brutality at this location 63 years ago. I didn't take too many photographs but rather spent my time projecting in my mind how things might have been here generations ago. The guided tour in English was totally unnecessary for me here.

Birkenau or Auschwitz II is a whole different place than the original Auschwitz. It is a half mile walk from the famous train entrance to the back of the camp and the whole place is even wider than that. The size of this place can't really be grasped by just standing in the train lookout tower, staring at the vast expanse. Part of the camp is literally as far away as you can see. Walking to the back of the camp to the memorial and seeing the ruins of the crematoriums, soldier barracks and horse stables where the few prisoners who were let live for a few months is a necessity. The walk must be done so you develop a physical sense for just how big this place really is.

After you walk to the back of Auschwitz II, take count of how many rows of barracks and stables there are. You will lose count. Then, try and remember how many rows of chimneys you saw looking out on the fields. There are only chimneys left of the prisoner horse stables, as they were all burned or torn down. Now, after you do this, you might have an idea of how millions of people could have been executed here.

When prisoners arrived at Birkenau, a doctor sized the person up as they stepped off the box car. The people who looked like they could work were pointed in one direction and those to be executed immediately were pointed in the opposite direction. Those to be immediately executed were told to hang their clothes and carefully place their belongings to make the victims think they would be back momentarily. This helped prevent a possible mass riot that might have broken out should the people on the trains learned was their true fate was to be in a few hours.

The immediate kill victims were then directed to a concrete bunker with fake shower nozzles installed in the ceiling. The door was then slammed shut and many canisters of Zyklon-B (hydrogen cyanide) gas were dropped inside of the bunkers through ports in the roof. Those ports were then closed shut. After a few minutes, the screaming ended and the 4,400 people a day were extracted from the bunkers and their bodies were picked over. Gold teeth, glasses or anything else of value were removed from the bodies. Those bodies were then hauled toward the incinerators. There were greasy, wet pools where thousands of tons of ash from the incinerated bodies were dumped.

The poor unlucky people who were not executed were directed to endless rows of horse stables. The people slept in hay and on rough cut wood. Sometimes the soldiers would take a person out, remove their shoes and make them stand barefoot in the snow until the person's feet froze. Sometimes, they were beaten to death. Ultimately, people were only allowed to live a few months to insure that no underground operations could efficiently develop to fight back against the Nazis.

Even as I write this, I am stunned at the factory efficiency of the operation and the scale of the operation. Actually being there and seeing the place brought home the horror of the place, something no aerial photograph and comparative scale of the place has ever done for me.

I arrived back in Krakow just in time to walk over to the massive, 6 foot tall bronze head at one corner of the city square to meet Danielle for dinner with a whole 5

minutes to spare before being late. Good thing she made our meeting time 6:30pm otherwise I never would have made it. We sat and had a delightfully tasty vodka apple drink which went down smooth and easy. We chatted a while before her friend Jo, an Irish girl living in Krakow for school, met up with us.

They took me over to an impossible-for-a-tourist-to-find incredible Polish eat place. Funny thing is that the Polish eat supper much earlier than everyone else I've seen in Europe. After convincing the girls that I really had no idea what to order and that I fully trusted their suggestion of traditional Polish fare, they chose a hearty stew in a Sheppard bread bowl with a little lid and even a bread handle on top of that lid. It was a nice finishing touch. We enjoyed our meals and Danielle graciously shared a bite of her meal to give me some variety without having to eat more than one meal. The tables were huge hunks of trees, expertly cut and polished. We were the last to leave the darkly lit basement located restaurant.

My two British Isles guides took me over to the old Jewish Quarter to a little brick and iron courtyard café and we ordered a wonderful bottle of French Cote du Rhone wine. (100Zl / \$34). It was worth every Zlotty and I was quite impressed. Listening to English and Irish girls talk back and forth in a mix of Irish and English lingo at a snappy speed was a funny experience. I had to interrupt them on occasion just to figure out what they were saying. There were so many words I'd never heard of that it made it a total experience in learning English. Danielle was handy at using a second American English word following her British English word just so I could follow along.

We chatted the night away. During the conversation, Jo related, with some glee, that she was attacked at night a few months ago. She gleefully recounted the story of how, once she had repelled her attacker with Irish ferocity, had gone over to Danielle's flat to show off her black eye. Jo seemed to be quite proud of receiving the blemish and making it through the experience none the worse for wear. Both women were quite calm about it and laughed while telling the story. After several other stories, I concluded people from the British Isles seemed to remain much calmer and accepting of their circumstances than Americans. As the night finally grew late, Danielle and I took our leave of pleasant Irish Jo at midnight.

Back at Danielle's flat, her flatmate Anne (a French girl) was drinking, chatting and smoking the night away in the kitchen with three other French students. They shared their bottle of California Blossom Hill red with Danielle and I. It was a terrible bottle after such a wonderful French Cote du Rhone. The irony of the situation, peoples and drinks was not lost on me. They offered to take us out to a bar and drink the night away until thoroughly drunk. Though tempting, I can only handle so many 4 hour sleep nights in a row, without getting sick or ill. The French students understood so they shared a good, tasty spiced vodka shot with Danielle and I and were off into the night.

It was funny to hear Anne speak English because it had that deep, throaty accent that you might hear in a movie or cartoon. That, along with eyelashes at least as long as mine, helped me understand how guys can be so attracted to French women. Funny!

Tuesday, May 29, 2007

Danielle took me to a quaint book store doubling as a coffee and bagel shop. This is what I had in mind while touring Europe rather than sitting at a Starbucks inside a Barnes and Noble at home. The experience of the two places is literally a world apart.

We sit on our slightly creaky, thick plank chairs and table, with light filtering through the store front window while a short burst of rain fell outside. The music of the water splashing off the cobblestone was foreign to my ears. The sound of how the rain echoed off the hard cobblestone and bouncing around the narrow alleyway is completely different than hearing rain on an open asphalt street. This only added to the Old World experience, along with sitting with an English woman inside of a Polish book and coffee store. Only through Couchsurfing could this have been possible for me.

I learned that I enjoy beginning my days this way, enjoying a bagel, tea and chatting with someone in a street café. This was very similar how I began nearly every day when I visited Paris several years ago. There is just something about this that I like. But comparing this to grinding a hour in a car through traffic rushing to a cubicle farm is idiotic at best, foolish at worst. Krakow was beginning to grow on me.

Today I didn't feel like hauling around a guide book of the city. I wanted to be freer in my approach and thinking. But, I did need something so I wouldn't become totally lost when I had a schedule to keep. As Danielle and I were walking past the oft-American visited Sheraton, I walked in and got a map from the concierge. Danielle was a little surprised at this maneuver but she saw it was easy to do. She said only Americans could afford to stay at such a hotel. Using the map as a guide, she suggested that I visit the castle, market hall, front defense bastion and the old Jewish cemetery. She left me to return to her class essay writings and I thanked her for her guidance.

Right at the base of the city side entrance of Krakow castle is a picturesque cobblestone street, quite popular on the postcards. The light right now didn't have the right character for something interesting, however. Another time might yield something better.

Construction of Krakow / Crakovia castle began 700 years ago. The castle is built on a large hill and has a commanding view of the city. It was fabled to even once have its own dragon, known to routinely kill off virgins. Purchasing a ticket to the castle jewel and armor exhibit afforded me a chance to look around the grounds before it was time to enter the museums.

Every room and building costs money to get in here, so I only went with the 15 Zl armor museum. Though it's not much, I guessed that there really wasn't much to see and certainly not much I could read. Bright puffy clouds in the clear blue rain washed sky provided a great background for the castle cathedral and other buildings. I was even able to send off a few postcards, something I had missed doing in Prague.

The armor exhibit was pretty good and had a respectable selection of war instruments from the 12th century and younger. The most impressive items were the German 16th century double handed swords. These things were 5 to 6 feet long. How in the world would one effectively wield such a weapon? People must have

been much more hearty back then. The other rooms held a decent collection of things and fairly justified the time and expense.

Walking back down from the castle, I meandered over to the city square and, on the way, purchased a spicy and tasty kebab sandwich to ward off hunger. This one of the better kebab / dooner sandwiches I've had the entire trip.

St. Mary's Basilica, at a corner of the square, was immense in size. Although the building is not as wide as other cathedrals I have been to, the ceiling is incredibly high and the craftsmanship inside is tough to match. It is interesting that you have to pay admission to visit and an additional cost to take photos and even more to take videos. Some people didn't care and took their digisnaps out to take a few photos, but I couldn't exactly hide my hulking SLR camera. It's an extra 5ZI (\$1.75) but it was easier to just purchase the sticker than be constantly trying to sneak around and work inefficiently in stealth mode.

The front fortification of the city was under construction and inaccessible. I opted to wander around outside of the garden, following the path of the original city wall. There are markers where every tower stood and a plaque explaining which guild was responsible for maintaining the tower. This maintenance scheme seemed to insure that every group of people living inside the city also had a direct hand in the defense and upkeep.

Examining the map, I concluded that the lateness of the day and the significant walking distance to the old Jewish cemetery was not a good combination given my dwindling time. I instead opted to wander back behind the city castle and check out the dragon statue and cave.

The Krakow dragon is the most entertaining kinetic sculpture I have ever seen. Every 1 to 5 minutes, unpredictably, the statue actually breathes fire from its mouth for a few moments. I stood with wrapped fascination, testing different capture modes with my camera and just watching, enjoying the entertaining spectacle. It was fun and well worth the time to go find.

Finally, I returned to Danielle's flat in plenty of time to shower, email and download pictures so I wasn't in such a general rush. I actually left myself a moment or two just to enjoy the place. Danielle was plowing through her studies, so I left her alone as I prepared to move on.

On the way to school for Danielle and the train station for me, my couchsurfing host took me to a Georgian (country, not the state) restaurant just off the city square. The food was great! It especially tasted very good because I knew I wouldn't have a significant meal for 14 hours after leaving her flat, as I was traveling to Berlin next. The spiced chicken and French fries were tasty and filling, both something I needed.

We talked about the differences between England and America and it was intriguing to learn a different viewpoint from the other side of the pond. The most interesting were the British Pikies who constantly harass and rob people throughout England. There was a man who reported being robbed by Pikies but the police did nothing for fear of their mafia tactics. They claimed they could do nothing. But, when the man finally caught the thieves in his home (they had robbed him 20 times!!) and shot one, the poor terrorized guy was prosecuted for defending his family, home and

himself. That's a pretty messed up system. I'd heard of this before but hearing it from someone actually living there makes it concrete.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was incredibly late, so we hurriedly paid the bill. This is difficult to do in Krakow, as the servers retain the terrible communist service timing and responsiveness. I said thank you to Danielle for her hospitality, kindness and guidance through Krakow.

The walk to the train station was quick but not a full jog, allowing me to purchase drinks for the train since that's not possible on board. My 6 person couchette was completely full. This was a first for me. We passed through the annoying allergy zone 20 minutes outside of the city and people responded the same way, so it wasn't a fluke the first time.

The countryside and sunset light were just as beautiful, two days later. If one wants to visit a pastoral place, Poland is difficult to beat. The ride through the night was uneventful.

Wednesday, May 30, 2007

Berlin, Germany

1 Euro = \$1.28 US

The train did not arrive at the new main station, Hauptbahnhof, so figuring out which station I should get off on was impossible. I rode the train to the end until I was forced to get off and then quickly hopped on the S-Bahn (S stands for schnell which means fast in German) and hoped that I could recognize a station or line that matched my Berlin Couchsurfing hosts' direction. After looking around, I saw an electronic billboard outside the train flash the name I wanted, so I quickly jumped back off and bought the 6.20 Euro day pass to eliminate any troubles and hopped on the correct train. While on the S-Bahn, I scanned the train map until I found the correct station name on the U7 line that I was to meet Teresa at. Since the train arrived 45 minutes late into Berlin, I skipped purchasing my ticket to Frankfurt because it was far more important to meet my Couchsurfing host since she was waiting inside a train station and had to get to work.

The instant I came off the U-Bahn train, Teresa caught my gaze and I smiled and she didn't look away, so I knew it was her. Thank goodness! Since she had to be at work in an hour, we walked down to a local café and had a pastry and tea continental breakfast, something I've grown accustomed to here.

We chatted and shared travel stories, like how she lived in Argentina for a while and her impressions of Buenos Aires. Teresa is Italian, so she shared a different perspective from the Germans around her. She shared that joining the European Union really saved Italy from its own economic malaise. But, as I learned later, current members of the EU weren't too happy bailing out countries that didn't have their act together. Though prices in Italy jumped when they switched over to the Euro, wages did not. Things were beginning to improve there but it was still difficult to find work. That's why she is an Italian woman in Germany, working for a distribution company and doing web development work. Web work seems to be a fairly popular job on the continent.

Teresa gave me her personal map book, directions to her flat and her keys. We set a location and time to meet and she was off to work. I took the U-Bahn to her flat, showered and did some laundry.

Since Hauptbanhauf, Berlin's main train station, is right in the middle of Rick Steves' day walk of Berlin, I opted to immediately begin the walking tour and hit the station en route in the interest of German efficiency and timing.

Routing around the huge city on the different U-Bahns, trains and busses takes quite a while from Teresa's flat since she's on the edge of the core of the city. She lives in a Turkish neighborhood where most of the people living there are from the Middle East. This type of neighborhood makes it easy to find places to eat. I wanted a schwarma chicken sandwich, prepared just like I had in Egypt. The taste was just as good as I remember it a year ago. I then went on to the Zoo to catch the #100 city tour bus where I began my exploration of Berlin.

My day pass allowed me on everything, so it was worth the 6.10 Euro. We immediately passed the only remaining bombed out building in Berlin that I saw, the Kaiser Wilhelm memorial church. It has been left just as it was after it was destroyed in World War II.

Teirgarten and the Victory Column in the gargantuan Berlin central park were both quite impressive. The 400 acre park is covered in lush greenery and cut by paths wandering all over. You can wander at your leisure. The Victory Column, moved from the Reichstage building by Hitler as an anticipated center piece of his victory marches was originally built by the Prussias when defeating the Franks years before. Instead of being a centerpiece of celebration, the bullet chips from the granite structure are the reminder of the Allied forces drive into the heart of the Nazi empire. These chips have never been repaired. There are quite a lot of them, so one can imagine that the fighting around this large, empty area was intense.

Stopping by Hauptbanhauf, I opted for the 4pm train to Frankfurt tomorrow because it's only a 4 hour ride, not justifying an overnight train. This time I made sure to make a reservation at Hotel Ibis in Frankfurt am Main. I made sure to create the lowest possible stress situation for myself when I had to catch my flight.

Back on the #100 bus, I was soon near the Reichstag building, staring at the 45 minute lines Rick Steves wrote about. Although I am sure the inside is impressive based on description, I didn't come all this way to spend my day standing in a ridiculously long line. Had I been able to arrive first thing in the morning or ponderously late at night, there would have been no line. Instead, I opted to head down to the Brandenburg gate, once contained just on the communist side of East Berlin. The Brandenburg gate is a massive columned affair, topped with a chariot rider heading down the street. Just down the street from the gate is the Jewish Holocaust Memorial, a sea of rectangular blocks, presumably representing coffins. Apparently, Goebells bunker was discovered during the construction of the memorial. However, like every other Nazi site in the city, the bunker is unmarked to prevent neo-Nazi types from erecting memorial to the murderers of the 20th century.

Lunch was at an Asian place inside a metro station. German food does not seem very prevalent in this city, so I adapted to what was available. On to the very reason I wanted to stop in Berlin in the first place – to see the Berlin Wall. Checkpoint Charlie, the most famous movie spy location in the world for over a half a

century, was fascinating to visit. It was unimaginable when the wall came down that fateful day over 16 years ago. In our minds, it was as permanent a reality as any other mountain on the face of the planet. It's a good thing we were wrong. A preserved section of the wall still stands, protected by fencing, to preserve the memory of that place.

Checkpoint Charlie museum was one of the wildest and most random collections of 20th century German political material I've ever seen. They even had the strip from the street that divided east from west across from Checkpoint Charlie. The nice lady at the ticket counter forced me to accept the student price, though I could produce no identification proving that. I smiled, thanked her and gave her a wink. At first, the place looks like a rip off, but as you wander deeper into the bowels of the building, you begin to appreciate the breadth of the collection. Many things seem out of place and random but after seeing the whole place, you can see how it organically developed over the years.

Drinking my Lipton lemon ice tea, I sat for a long time just staring at the old military building of Checkpoint Charlie, watching tourists gather, photograph themselves and then leave, just as I had done. My mind wandered to this and that around this famous location. There was so much intrigue, loss, surprise and anguish associated with this intersection.

Walking along the Unterden Linden to see more of the city sight was a fun enough way to pass time until I was to meet Teresa for dinner at 9:30pm. I didn't bother with any of the museums along the street, including the Egyptian. Though the bust of Neffertiti would have been interesting, just being on the street and watching people wait to get into the German National Opera House was even more interesting.

After Teresa and I found each other after a few calls from a payphone to clear up a little miscommunication about which sphere we were supposed to meet under, I learned that paying coins for pay phones is ten times cheaper than a credit card for a fast call. Teresa guided me to old East Berlin. This area is easily identified by the funny characters in the walk and don't walk indicators on the street lights. We stopped at a Spanish Tapas bar.

It's odd staying with foreigners in a foreign land who themselves are foreigners. Teresa shared how the EU finally saved Italy from itself, gaining much from the economic alliance. She said that she's met some many people of different nationalities who are working in different countries just to find work. She was hopeful that the cultural exchange will help people improve their outlook of others.

We stayed quite late, talking and sharing, until almost 1am. The annoying part of the metro system in most cities is that they shut down completely at night. We were forced to navigate the night owl bus service. Fortunately, Teresa had made this trip before so it was not so difficult for her to guide us across the city and make the connections that would have been impossible for me to find. Should one miss a bus, you are forced to wait a whole half hour unless you wish to walk. I would have been doomed, as we were in a place well off the map and so was her place. It would have been impossible to direct a taxi even to get where I needed to be. Finally, we slept at 2am.

Thursday, May 31, 2007

Rolling over and looking at my watch through a foggy haze, I saw that it was 10am. Oh geeze! I snapped away, sprang out of bed and looked over to where Teresa's bed was. She was done and had left a note with instructions and pleasantries for me. She had let me sleep while had left for work. Once I realized I wasn't late and neither was she, I calmed down and reverted to the normal morning cycle in silence. Earplugs to drown out sounds and let one sleep are amazing little things. I downloaded pictures, charged batteries, showered and packed. The only thing I had to do today was visit the largest chocolate store on the continent.

The Fassbender and Rausch chocolate shop, largest in Europe, was beyond description. It houses four chocolate sculptures. An 8 foot long Titanic, 3 foot tall Brandenburg Gate, 6 square foot Reichstag building and a 4 foot tall Wilhelm Memorial Church. All were completely made out of chocolate. The Reichstag sculpture weighed an impressive 800 pounds. "Wow" is all I could stupidly mouth. Looking at my watch, I realized it was time to go and began working my way through the huge Berlin transport system to Hauptbanhauf station.

I did a little tourist shopping and suffered through a bland tasting slice of pizza from Pizza Hut. I had to try it, you know.

I love train travel. It's civilized, comfortable and has all the amenities you want. Thinking of amenities, I made my way to the dining car to enjoy a beer as the German countryside flew by at 120kph under partly cloudy skies. I would much rather do this for 4 hours than have a one hour misery flight which ends up taking 4 hour total by the time you get to the airport in time, figure it out and get through the other side. Heck, if you want to stand the entire time on the train, you can.

Frankfurt, Germany

The outside of the train station was barely familiar, as I had come in my metro underground to here two weeks ago. An 8 minute walk brought me to Hotel Ibis on the Main river. This time, I had a reservation and no troubles. A little clean up from the trip today and I was off the the Apfelwine old down area.

The tourist map at Hotel Ibis was terrible compared to the excellent one Oliver provided me. I ended up walking the starving half hour to Stadarea (Apfel). I finally found the area and went to the small courtyard at the very south of the district and sat for a meal. I still have not acquired a taste for apfelwine but the hearty sausage plate with sauerkraut helped me get through that. It's not bad but just so different; I wasn't sure what to think. I drank anyway.

The night trains are infrequent here, 20 minutes in between, as I had learned two weeks ago. Fortunately I wasn't under a rushed schedule this time. A little luck and boldness and I made it back to the hotel without having to take another half hour walk while sleepy.

Friday, June 1, 2007

The wakeup call came two minutes after I woke up. I ran down to eat some breakfast and emailed out a reminder for my parents to pick me up at the airport and then went back to clean up. It was a short walk to the train station. I made sure to arrive early because when I was here last, there was something wrong with the airport train service and the trains were running two hours late. This is one where I didn't want to have to take an outrageously expensive taxi to the airport.

International flights close 60 minutes before flight time so you have to show up quite early. I decided to check my backpack so I could get my communist Kofola drink back home without having it confiscated. I put my critical items in my mesh net bag as a carry on. That worked better than I imagined since I had an effective spare bag without the trouble of one. Hopefully I will be able to recover my bag since my layover in Atlanta is only 2 hours.

There are only 2 people at immigration control, so the lines were long. The lady at the first x-ray baggage check greeted me with a courteous "Hello, sir..." I was impressed and chatted for just a moment while the machine did its thing.

Then from there, you walk to a fairly empty area with only a scary looking sushi place with smokers standing right next to it. Tasty. Then, you have your bags x-rayed again, you are wanded and your pockets are physically checked.

I ended up having an entire row to myself on the half full plane. That hasn't happened in 7 years for me. A pile of pillows, my jacket and I was able to sleep on and off for 5 hours. That was great. The international meals are really good, too. Hagan Das ice cream, complementary German beer and such are a cherry on top. I then spent the last few hours of the flight watching Wild Hogs, generating crazy ideas in my head. Flying with a full row to myself almost makes me want to purchase 3 seats all the time just to have a little zone of comfort. It's still cheaper to do that than to purchase first class.

Atlanta is nice for international to domestic connections because you toss your bag right back in the system once you clear immigration and customs and they are confident you haven't brought back rocket launchers. While waiting for my connecting flight, I hung out at Brookstone and enjoyed a calf massager. It was great after 2 weeks of all-out walking. Though the machine is decent, it's not as good as a real masseuse. It was funny to see people walk by with a, "Hey, that looks nice" look on their face.

I caught my fairly empty plane back to San Diego and met up with my ride without incident.

End of trip report.