

The First Day of Travel

For my trip to Prague from Amsterdam, I chose a train. It was a twelve-hour train journey which needed four transfers, some of them unnervingly close. Yet, when I did do those four transfers—in three different countries: Czechia, Germany, Netherlands—they were all amazingly smooth, prompt, and clear. In fact, I realized that I am more able to follow the directions in an EU station, written in an unknown language, than in an NYC subway station, written in English! The thoughtfulness given to the public transport traveler in the EU is superb.



These were the directions given to me by the hostel.

From Václav Havel airport: Take bus 119 to the last stop "Nádraží Veleslavín" and there change for tram 20 and go to the stop "Malostranské náměstí" and walk from there.

I tried to read these words that read totally unpronounceable, and could not imagine myself asking for those directions and navigating public transportation at 11 p.m. at night. So secretly, I gave myself permission to take a taxi instead.

Yet, as I took my baggage from the surprisingly easy walk to the baggage claim, I also easily saw the kiosk for the bus tickets right in front of it. There was a trio of American girls who were also trying to go to the main station area, so I found myself too following their lead, and randomly clicking on the buttons on the screen to get a thirty-minute ticket for the ludicrously cheap price of 30 CZK (\$1.50).

Amazingly, the bus stops were right outside the gate as well, and the bus showed up in front of the terminal in five minutes! I was blown away by all this efficiency and simplicity. Here I was on a public

bus speeding to the city center in less time than it would take me to get to the internal Airtrain at Newark airport!

From the bus I switched to a sleek tram system—there was also a metro system connected—I was not sure how to pay for this one but rode on for dear life anyways. The landscape passing by felt strange and desolate in the night, but the clear electronic signboards and the melodious announcements continued to give me confidence that I was indeed moving towards my destination.

In one final swing, the tram rumbled into the beautiful Old City and as I stepped out of it at Malostranske Namesti, I felt that I had stepped into a James Bond movie. It was a dazzlingly lit large cobblestone square (Namesti literally means square) surrounded on all four sides by gorgeous buildings and a lively scene yet ongoing even at this late hour.



As I lugged my heavy suitcase up the cobblestone hill though—“wow, some of these cobblestones are actually made of marble”—trying to look nonchalant, I ruminated on what was making my luggage so heavy.

It is not clothes, glad to share, dear reader, that I had the good sense to not bring too many clothes to adorn myself; in fact, I was on my last pair of undies as I trudged my way up to the hostel. It were all those Just-In-Case things! The Swiss knife, the torch, the medicines, the scotch tape, the sunscreen, the extra connectors and chargers. I mused that I need to start getting rid of them, should discuss with my travel guru, Kenneth.

I finally reached the hostel after all that uphill walking...only to find that it was the wrong hostel! I had mixed up my dates and had come to the hostel which I had booked for a week later.

I slumped down on the chair in the tiny reception area. It was 11:50 p.m, and I could not face those cobblestones again. There was a young Asian looking girl manning the desk.

I asked if they had a room, and they did. Excited I said, “ Ok, could I please book it, at least for the night?”

“Oh, you don’t need to” She replied.

“What? Why? No, no, I need it. I am too tired, and it feels too late to go out again” I was slightly embarrassed to say this as just behind me a group walked out, obviously all ready to hit the night outside.

“Oh, no worries. It is all very safe.” She smiled.

Rummaging under the desk, she pulled out a map.

“See?” Tracing a finger over the map she showed me how if I just went back down the hill to the tram station and got onto tram 22, for the mere cost of another 30 CZK, I should be at my real hostel in less than twenty minutes. Easy-peasy.

“Your booking will not go waste” She smiled happily.

Happy was not what I was feeling; I felt like throwing a tantrum. I am too old! Don’t make me do this!

But she seemed quite firm about it too. I guess they were more used to students counting every penny.

Resigned, I acknowledged my new cultural norms, and walked out, my suitcase again rattling on the cobblestones. Firmly declared to myself that I will switch to a backpack for sure!

Mercifully, I saw a taxi, who kindly stopped and took my luggage, and I sank into the seat in relief, to heck with the cost.

Well, this was a learning moment for international travel, as the driver added some kind of spurious night charge, and I ended up being ripped off for \$40 when it should have cost me no more than \$5. Of course, that cab fare was nothing during my NYC life - I could plonk down that much money in one trip to Midtown - but I was determined to make this a low-cost trip and every mistake hurt.

Anyways, the taxi took me to a dubiously lit district, with flashing neon lights advertising “Cabaret”, “Sauna Club”, “Erotic.cz”. This was after midnight now, and I got a bit scared. Too late I recollected the vague question I had when I had read the name of my hostel on my booking: “Globe Hostel ADULTS”. No wonder!

It turned out to be pretty nice though. Spacious, safe, and the shower was out of the world. I was also grateful to find nice towels, since my small hand towel was still wet in my suitcase.



Dating Internationally!

Dating internationally is quite interesting. To add to the complex dance of showing interest, communicating, progressing, flirting, there is now a new layer of a language barrier. Even before we get to the different cultural contexts, there could be yet more prosaic issues like translating the meaning of the phrase even though it is perfectly spoken.

Case in point: when my date—a Finnish guy I had met on a hike—and I were traveling back from Sapa.



Sapa is a large Vietnamese area; Czechia has a very large Vietnamese population, dating back to their strong ties in the Communist era. Pho restaurants are ubiquitous. It was interesting to me to see hundreds of stores devoted to a singular South Asian culture, standalone, not even blended with Chinese culture, as how other Little Asian places are, in other cities.

As we started our travel back to Praha, I started a search for a toilet (WC). But trying to catch the connections on time, we continued to lose opportunities at every key point or change of station.

Finally, we panted our way on the last leg of the tram, caught our breath and relaxed.

My date, who worked as an accountant for a global company and spoke perfectly great English, then checked in with me, “And how is your water level?”

My water level? I checked my water bottle. “It is pretty good!”

“I meant your *water* level.” He quirked his eyebrows.

I blinked. Then it dawned on me that he meant the water level slushing around INSIDE me! Inside my bladder, to be specific.

With barely a straight face, I replied, “It is in equilibrium, don’t worry!”

Another cultural snafu moment happened when we were returning from Divoka Sarka, where the tram service was relatively infrequent.

We had just purchased our tickets on the app but not yet “activated” them. This is the only beef I have with the Czech system: you buy a ticket for say thirty or sixty minutes but must wait a full two minutes before you can use it by “activating” it.

When our tram showed up, I jumped straight in. My date, with all his Scandinavian respect for the rules, offered restraining feedback.

Perhaps thinking that he was speaking to an American and that he should use a low context, high positive style, he began, “Uh, you have a good idea there, but I think it may be better to wait a few more minutes.”

But the Indian Mumbaite me was all agog - what are you talking about, here is the tram, we don’t know when the next one will come, we need to grab this one and survive! I overrode his polite reluctance and pushed us in.

We got in while the activation clock was at forty seconds. He was yet trying to explain the process while I was laughing in glee, when a third person also joined our conversation.

In crisp English he asked me to show my ticket, my passport, and since we were twenty seconds pending for full activation, a fine of \$40 each. My accountant did a quick math—it was a 1333% fine.

