Exchange Evaluation

Charles University – Prague – Czech Republic
First Semester of 2013 (NZ)
Degree: BA
Major: Politics

Getting Set – Here and There

Otago University does a fantastic job of liaising with Charles University to streamline the application process. All I had to do was visit the Charles University website, choose a few provisional papers and ensure they would be counted towards my degree at Otago (learning agreement). The international office took it from there and applied on my behalf.

Perhaps the most frustrating part of the whole experience is the visa application process. As the Czech Republic has no embassy or consulate in New Zealand, I was forced to apply for a long-term visa at the Czech consulate in Sydney. This meant sending my passport, along with any other documents required (translated into Czech before being sent), to Sydney. This only becomes a problem if you let the Consulate take the maximum amount of time required to approve the visa. Your passport will be in Sydney when the semester begins in Prague. I recommend ringing the Consulate at least a month before you leave in order to give them a hurry up. This worked for me as my visa was approved the day after I phoned the consulate.

It is somewhat daunting to know that it is all up to you once you arrive in Prague, a non-English speaking country. That being said, you can apply through the Charles University International Office to be paired up with a buddy – a local Czech student with experience navigating the city. I highly recommend doing this, even if you only meet up with them a few times. My buddy gathered me from the airport and showed me to my accommodation. They are also usually available to guide you into the city and show you where you have to go to get to key orientation events.

Accommodation

In your acceptance letters, you will be given a place at a dorm in Prague. Most ERASMUS students (the European Exchange program) are placed in a dorm called Hostivar. It is about 40 minutes by tram from the city centre. All excess European students and those from outside of Europe are placed in dorms that are filled with Czech students who speak little English. I was placed in a dorm called Hvezda. Only one member of staff spoke English. This, coupled with the fact it was hard to find a student who spoke English well, made it quite hard to set myself up in the dorm and make friends there. Although intimidating and frustrating, this had the positive effect of forcing me out into the city and talking to new people at orientation events and lectures.

My accommodation itself was quite basic. Most people are placed in small double rooms (I never received a room mate thankfully). There were two kitchens and two bathrooms (communal) to a floor, and you had to buy your own equipment. If you wanted to grill, you had to hire oven racks and my room didn’t come with a fridge (again, something you had to hire). However, it only cost $40 NZ a week (all inclusive), perfect if you want to save money for beer, food and travel. I spent very little time at the dorms as I was always out and about in the city so the state of the accommodation never bothered me. I had some friends leave the dorms and find private accommodation. You can find apartments for the same price as Dunedin flats (but in infinitely better condition) near enough to the city centre if you find that you cannot handle living in the dorms.
Transportation

Public transport in Prague is brilliant. It's all you'll ever need to get around the city. A 3-month pass that includes metro, trams and busses costs around $50 NZ. This is a ridiculously cheap price by European standards. Regular public transport services run from 5:30am to 12:00am. A night service runs in between these times. I would not recommend allowing yourself to fall asleep on the night trams. Pickpockets ride these trams and go to sometimes-extraordinary lengths to steal your phone or wallet.

A word of warning about taxis: try to avoid these. Taxi drivers will look to rip you off. They have been known to pull all sorts of scams. Only use them as a last resort or be very wary.

Social Life

You will make some of your best friends while on exchange. I made most of mine through attending o-week events and going to classes. While I sometimes get the feeling it is strange to sit down in a lecture and start speaking to other members of the class who you have never met before in Dunedin, this is not the case in Prague, as everyone is in exactly the same position. To add to this, the Charles University International Club does a wonderful job of organizing various events throughout the entire semester. I joined the annual ski trip, went on weekend trips to other countries and enjoyed many of the parties and pub evenings organized by the club. You really do have multiple opportunities to make good friends.

Although I found it hard to meet people in my dorm – most of them domestic students who all work extremely hard and speak little English – Czech locals are very friendly and are always very interested in what you have to say once you get the conversation started. It is polite (and even fun) to learn a few key Czech phrases and words. This will prevent you from being associated with the other ‘tourists’ in the city and set you on the path to becoming a temporary local. This being said, most people understand basic English and are not opposed to conversing with you in English.

Food and Drink

The price of beer and food in Prague, compared to its quality is perhaps one of the best features of this city. I only remember cooking a few times in Prague and that all occurred at a friends apartment. I was able to eat at restaurants and cafes almost everyday. The Social Sciences campus has a cafeteria. You can get a decent meal for around $3NZD (handy as the campus is located a long way out of town). Czech food itself consists of a lot of pork and
is very dense. However, if you find the food too much, there are a wide variety of outlets in the city (Vietnamese food is particularly good in Prague).

Czechs love to drink beer. It is normal to drink beer at any time of the day i.e. you meet a friend for a beer instead of a coffee. The Czech Republic is the home of the Pilsner beer (visit the brewery in Plsen if you get a chance). A pint of Pilsner Urquell costs around $2NZD in a bar or pub. Beer is often cheaper than bottled water.

Academic Life

Classes are noticeably different at Charles University. Most are small and require a lot of interactive learning (presentations, participation marks etc.), making it highly advisable to do your weekly reading. I took 5 papers and had only 5 80-minute classes a week so the emphasis is clearly on a lot of out of class learning. I do believe however, that there is some inherent advantage in being a native English speaker when it comes to studying in English at a foreign university like Charles. The exam period was a strange experience. My longest exam was approximately 40min and most exams had a multiple-choice component. Coming from 3 hour long, essay based exams, this was a pleasant shock for me. It is Charles University policy that every student gets a maximum of 3 attempts to pass the exam for the paper. There are also multiple exam dates to choose from, making it easy to have your exams done early and head off travelling. Overall, it is a highly flexible system.

Safety and the Law

I felt safer in Prague than I do in Dunedin. There are obviously some practices you should avoid however. As stated earlier, always be aware of pickpockets in crowded places. They will go extraordinary lengths. If you are in a dorm, it is advised that you lock your door whenever you aren’t in your room. Of course I heard some horror stories but generally, the Czech people are extremely trustworthy.

The Czech police look very intimidating (SWAT-like) and don’t often speak English. While they may let you away with things for a prolonged period of time, they often exercise their discretions on a whim. By law, all foreigners are required to carry I.D on them at all times. For us, this means a passport. If you are nervous about doing this, carry a photocopy.
Prague and the Czech Republic

A lot of people are interested in basing themselves in Prague as it opens up the possibility of weekend travel. In 5 hours (on a bus), you can be in Berlin, Munich, Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest and Krakow. The airport is small by European standards but budget airlines have regular flights for ridiculously cheap prices.

The Czech Republic itself also has a lot to offer. There are plenty of good ski fields and natural parks to explore. I would recommend spending some time in smaller Czech towns to get a better sense of the country (a lot of Czechs emphasise the fact there is a difference between Prague and the Czech Republic).

In the winter/early spring months, most people can be found in bars and pubs. Prague pubs appear to be entirely on the first floor. However, it is always recommended go to the back of the bar and see if there are any stairs leading down into a basement (or 3). The pubs are an attraction in their own right. When Prague starts to warm up, most people prefer to spend their time in parks or beer gardens. This is a great way to pass the time.

Conclusions

Prague is an amazing city and a great place to live. The university offers interesting papers and does everything it can to assist international students to study and travel at the same time. If you are looking for something completely different, Prague is the place for you. I miss it every day and don’t think I’ll ever regret making the decision to study there.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me via the international office.