

MY STUDENT EXCHANGE EXPERIENCE

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SPAIN

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Hradec Králové was never my first option. In fact, it was the ninth, and I had not thought that I would end up here. A random, small city in the middle of the Czech Republic, a country of which I knew very little about. And when I arrived in the dormitory that first night, let's say that I was not impressed by the post-communist architecture, or by the small-sized, two-bedroom apartment, or the fact that I would have to share it with five other girls. I remember leaving my huge suitcases beside my bed and going back to the entrance to take off my shoes, as it is custom here, and thinking: "Well, I came for the ride."



The night turned into morning, and the sun made everything feel better. Though the parking lot in front of the dormitory is anything but aesthetic, the old sports court surrounded by leafy, green trees and the buildings around, all with their own signature colors, were admittedly a pretty view. Later, I would adventure into the city for the first time, and over time, I would discover a truly charming city.

You see, Czech cities have a way of conservating their charm across the ages, and Hradec Králové is not the exception. The city centre is full of colourful buildings that conserve their original architecture, all the streets are covered with cobblestone, and there is a small garden just up from *Zimní Station* which became a favourite of mine. The rivers enclose the city centre and walking by them with a beer and a friend is one of the most relaxing activities. However, the places that truly hold joy for me are the coffee shops, and I made it my mission to find the cosiest, like the Eggsit (with a wonderful dog called Eggie), Café Na Kole (with wonderful, melted, hot chocolate), or The Good Tearoom (a place that absolves me for hours like no other).


Though I am a person who enjoys solitude, none of these places would have been rightfully appreciated if I had not been in the company of the friends that I made during these months. The first one: Mariana, a Portuguese girl truly invested in never spending a second alone and never missing out on anything. A truly loyal friend who does not mind being stuck in the hospital for hours (it happened, repeatedly), sleeping in freezing train stations in the middle of the night, or randomly cuddling when waves of sadness hit. The next one: Zion, a Korean girl who is the physical representation of cultural shock, and a person who nonetheless understood me in all the important ways. Noemi was a surprise. I was set on avoiding any Spanish person I could meet here, and I ended up finding a kind, bright girl, whose friendship I will retain for as long as I can. Finally, Antonia, a girl whose political inclinations I will never support, but that doubtlessly will become Prime Minister of her country one day.



All of them have accompanied me on my expeditions to the best coffee shops in Hradec, but also on my travels around Europe. I would say that one of the best advantages of the Czech Republic is its trains. As a Spanish person, I can say I am jealous of all these connections and cheap tickets, of the long train rides through snowed landscapes, and of the way in which any point of this continent feels nearby and attainable. Suddenly, traveling felt like the most natural thing in the world. And traveling we did. We explored the beautiful designs of Prague and Český Krumlov, we escaped to Budapest for the weekend, to Berlin for Christmas when our homes felt too far away to come back to. We explored the Moravian Karst (a trip I organized for 14 people, never again), and Trutnov. We also went to Vienna, a city which we hated. And against my best judgment, I went back. Repeatedly. The reason for my repeated visits also plans to come and visit me in Spain, so I guess it was not the worst idea ever.



Now the term is coming to an end, and I honestly did not think I would miss the dreadful postcommunist architecture, or that I would feel sad because of not seeing snow anymore and only feeling the cold in my bones. I wonder when I will see Zion again, or if we will ever be able to meet all together again.



If I will ever find something so tasty as the cranberry-filled pancakes with dark chocolate and vanilla sauce that they make with so much love in Férová palačinkárna. I have never been afraid of leaving things behind, everything has a time and a place. But even as I move into a new stage of life, with exciting new goals and experiences, I will always treasure the time I spent in this random, small city of the Czech Republic.