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Wow that's a small train. This was my first thought as I stood on the platform 1 of the station in Zvolen, Slovakia. I was in the penultimate leg of my journey, having flown from Copenhagen to Vienna, then taken a bus first to Bratislava and a final bus to Zvolen. My destination was Banská Štiavnica, a small city in the centre of Slovakia where I would begin my internship at the National Forest Centre the next day. I had never been to, or even knew anything about Slovakia, but while fervently hunting for a summer internship had spotted the entomology position on the IAESTE website a couple months prior and jumped at the opportunity to work abroad. Fast-forward to July 2nd and there I was, blinking at the tiny carriage, sweating slightly in the heat and butchering the pronunciation of Štiavnica while buying my ticket (it's shtee-av-ni-tza). I hopped on board and admired the décor; framed pictures of the train itself from four different angles, journeying proudly through the Štiavnica mountains. The train set off and we trundled through the centre of Slovakia, windows open and honking at waving passers-by. I google translated 'thank you' in Slovak and fiddled with my suitcase, starting to feel the mix of nerves and excitement that always accompany me when I find myself in new environments.



Said small train

I had not given myself time to digest that I would be living in a new country for 6 weeks. Having just defended my thesis, graduated and moved out of my Lund apartment for the summer, it was at the very back of my mind. This left me feeling a little unprepared. I had not known where I would be living until the last second and I was not totally sure what to expect from the internship, just that it would involve identifying beetle species that act as forest pests, and to bring field-boots. As soon as I exited the train, the head of the Forest Centre, Andrej, and the IAESTE coordinator, Rado, were waiting to greet me. Andrej, is undoubtedly one of the most enthusiastic and energetic people I've ever met. He took my bags to the car and we went to the supermarket while he questioned me about my journey and nationality ('Wait you're not Swedish!'). My accommodation was a three-bedroom apartment with a little kitchen and bathroom, located just behind the building I would be working in. After dropping my luggage, Rado took me on a little tour around the city centre and we ordered coffee and ice cream while he told me about the summer weekend activities that had been organised for all interns in Slovakia. He also taught me how to say 'hello', 'coffee' and 'goodbye' in Slovak, information which left my brain as soon as the words left my mouth. My warm welcome was

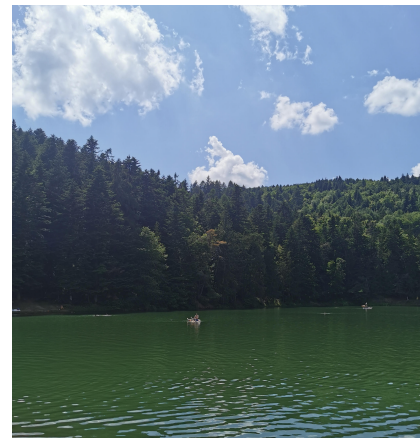
an accurate preview of the rest of my time in Slovakia, and when I got back to my new home I gazed out of the window at the mountains, deciding I had made the perfect choice.



The view from my room



The historic city centre



One of the lakes nearby

The National Forest Centre is an important institute in Slovakia, focused on monitoring the health of forests while also conducting research projects around the forest ecosystem. I was aiding in research around a potential new pest, the beech bark beetle. My work was centred around identifying and counting the tiny beetles, meaning I spent the majority of my time in the lab, armed only with tweezers and a measuring cylinder. I set to work identifying and counting the pile of insects in the first petri dish. After lab days, when I would close my eyes I saw mounds of bark beetles waiting to be counted. There was variety however, as my supervisor Juraj took me to the field to collect the beetles, set up traps, identify diseased trees and take resin samples. I was also able to fly a drone over a couple forests to determine if they had recovered from the severe drought that the country had experienced the year before. At least one day per week was reserved for the field, which not only kept the work interesting, but meant I saw a good chunk of Slovakia during my six-week stint. As a student of Physical Geography and Ecosystem Science I was excited learn how to identify different bark beetle species and to discuss their spread due to climate change with my supervisors. I had also written my thesis on forests and would be doing more fieldwork when I returned to Lund, so identifying different tree species and learning about the forestry practises in the country were very welcome. I learnt a great deal and expanded my understanding of the effects of the warming climate, seeing first-hand the impact of drought upon the health of the forests.

I was pleasantly surprised by my social life during the internship. I had imagined that I would be in the middle of nowhere and therefore would be in my own company for most of the time. However, two weeks into the role, I got a roommate – another intern to help with the beetles! She was from Japan and the staff of the forest centre were buzzing with excitement at her arrival, waiting to ask why on earth she would choose to come to Slovakia. We became friends immediately and on most days would go get an ice cream from one of the many ice-cream places in the centre, talking about the cultural differences between Japan, England, Sweden and Slovakia. The working hours were shifted earlier, as we would start work at 7:30 and end at 14:30, leaving nearly the entire afternoon to go on hikes, get a treat somewhere or go swimming in the nearby lakes. Swimming was my top choice as I was enjoying the consistently warm weather, something that, being from the UK, I was only used to experiencing for a few miraculous days in the summer. We also travelled together for the weekend activities, taking

buses and trains to different parts of the country to see castles or go kayaking with the interns from Bratislava and Košice. One weekend we decided to see Budapest which was a mere two-hour Flixbus away, and planned our trip with her Japanese guidebook, ticking off nearly every suggestion in a day and a half.



A meet-up in Trenčín with all the interns in Slovakia



Intern rafting trip (we nearly capsized)

Work was also more social than I had thought. My supervisors were extremely kind and acted as brilliant guides to all things Slovak. They introduced me to Kofola, the sweet Coke-like drink, and explained that it had been created during the communist regime as an alternative to Coca-cola. ‘Ah. Old school taste’, grinned Juraj nostalgically, after taking a big swig of Kofola at a café. I was interested to hear about the legacy of the communist regime as I had never been to an ex-communist country before. My colleagues gave other insights during our daily coffee breaks, telling us about the options of TV channels growing up: one Slovak and once Czech, meaning they understood Czech perfectly now. They also assured me that Czech beer was the best beer in the world. Not only was I in a different country, but I was a little wiser about the history.

Of course, there were some aspects that were trickier than I was used to, one example being the public transport. The bus timetable proved a challenge to decode and on one Sunday we were stranded at the bus station for hours after failing to understand which symbol signified the bus only ran on weekdays. It was also harder to be a vegetarian if eating out. A restaurant near the Forest Centre was a popular choice for lunch among the staff, with a cheaper daily menu which consisted of soup starter and a main. I ate there a few times, often having to pick the only vegetarian option on the menu (fried cheese with French fries, a Slovak classic) and bypassing the soup entirely. One of the days it was unclear if the soup contained meat on the menu and my supervisor checked with the waitress. The soup was declared meat-free and I was excited. The waitress bought out the soups, little chunks of chorizo bobbing around inside. But these being the biggest issues is a testament to how much I enjoyed my time in Slovakia.

While I had hoped the internship would be enjoyable, I had not expected to be so taken with Banská Štiavnica and so welcomed by the staff of the National Forest Centre. When it came to

my last day I was sadder than anticipated and I knew this would be a treasured summer for me. I was leaving with new friends, some Slovak words finally under my belt (coffee is cava) and the ability to spot a bark beetle a mile away. I sometimes catch myself daydreaming about the beautiful city centre and walking up the steep cobbled streets to reach my favourite viewpoint. Also, the €1.20 beers.

I would encourage anyone thinking about interning abroad to do so, not only for the work experience but for the inevitable cultural and social experiences. It takes a lot of bravery to travel alone to an unfamiliar location, especially without the comfort of a university waiting for you. But I believe this also leads to the most rewarding experiences. I am now working as a research assistant for Lund University and spent two months in different parts of Sweden on fieldwork and am back to working in the lab. Seeing the increase in bark beetle attacks and the spread of forest pests in my internship only made me more determined to work towards tackling the negative effects of climate change and I am grateful that I had the opportunity to work in an ecological field. I am now certain I want to continue in a research environment and would be excited to return to Slovakia if I have the chance.



My roommate and I on my final day, posing in the conference room

