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My Awesome Austrian Adventure

By Timmy Prag

Perhaps one of the greatest, most insightful, and epic experiences of my life was studying abroad in Vienna. Not only did I get the chance to see incredible vistas, castles, and works of art, I also got the chance to meet some incredible individuals and evolve myself in the process. From the snow-capped peaks of the Austrian Alps, to the gothic spires of Viennese Cathedrals, to the smoky, underground bars of Budapest, not a dry moment was to be had.

I had the great pleasure of arriving in Europe two weeks before the Austria Program began, thanks to a deep interpersonal connection I made my first year at Linfield. My roommate my freshman year was a Dutch Fulbright student. Throughout the course of that year, we pledged the same fraternity, embarked upon many adventures (e.g. hopping fences and sneaking through backyards, camping at the beach, and other shenanigans), and became best friends. As he was only a one-year student (to his chagrin and that of everyone else around him, including his American girlfriend), we had made plans to meet up again once I arrived upon European soil. Experiencing the execution of this plan was deeply satisfying, and my first two weeks in Europe included an exploration of the beautiful city of Amsterdam, and a ten-day camping trip in the countryside of the Czech Republic (on the shores of Lake Lipno, which, for all you Pok'e Mon players, sounds eerily like "Hypno."). After this idyllic vacation, which included philosophical conversation over fire-cooked meals, hikes through nature reserves, daytrips to castle-studded cities, and the occasional, delicious beer, I arrived in the illustrious city of Vienna.

I was greeted by golden monuments, sky-reaching towers, and stoic statues, depicting mythic heroes and villains alike. Wherever I looked, there would be another amazing "Gebäude" to capture my attention and magnetize my feet. While I had been to many other European cities, I had never been to one quite so regal and impressive. Many cities had incredible buildings, but most of these cities had such crowded skylines that appreciating buildings at a distance was near impossible, as others would get in the way. This was not so in Vienna, and while the city was packed with rich architecture, there was also enough space to appreciate it all. What immediately struck a chord in me was that Vienna was not just a city of buildings, but also a city of green. Wherever extra space could be found, effort had been made to create grassy, tree filled parks, striking a harmonic balance between human creation and that of nature. As I later came to find, over 54% of Vienna is green, perhaps due to the concerted efforts of the Green political party. I had the great luck of being matched with a host mother who lived a mere five minutes from the largest park in Vienna, the Prater, which had previously been the royal hunting grounds – a perfect place for jogging, biking, and picnicking, though it was also home to Vienna's largest amusement park, and some of its most hip and hoppin' clubs.

After meeting the wonderful staff at the Austro-American Institute of Education (AAIE, located in the dead center of Vienna and where we would be studying most of the semester), we hopped on a train to Dorfgastein, a small village in the Austrian Alps. Upon arriving I was struck by the beauty of it all. Surrounded by snowcapped peaks, sitting at the bottom of a lush green valley, the village of

Dorfgastein splayed out before us. For the next two weeks, we were to help teach kids English, design our own programs, and use our creativity to make a positive impact. This teaching would be perpetuated by daily adventures into the alps, forays to comfy restaurants, and conversations with colleagues and locals. Our visit to Dorfgastein just happened to coincide with a festival known as Dorffest, the biggest festival of the summer. Locals, decked out in traditional Lederhosen and Dirndl (sexy barmaid attire), poured into Dorfgastein from the surrounding villages and cities to watch the morning parade and begin the biggest party of the year. As night fell, and the traditional music reached a climax, I was overwhelmed with joy to see everyone – very old and young – (likely drunk) and dancing on tables. While this may have triggered an episode of culture shock in some, this only elevated my excitement about being in a new and foreign culture, with strange customs and silly, but fun traditions. Having made friends with some warm, intelligent (and beautiful) locals, and having cultivated a love for the Alps, I was sad to say goodbye to Dorfgastein. However, a new adventure was about to begin.

Arriving once again in Vienna, I was greeted by my lovely host mother, who I got along with rather well, and who I soon came to regard as an A+ badass (this is a great thing), descended from a long line of badasses. The relationship we built during my short semester abroad was one of shared knowledge, compassion, and respect, and I will forever cherish the passionate, intellectual conversations we would have late into the night about topics ranging from coffee to the deficits inherent in the education system. While I was at first nervous about the idea of living with a host mother, I soon came to love the fact that I had one, as it provided an opportunity to practice my German, to learn about the city, and to live in an amazing apartment (in the city center) with a grand piano that I would have had no way of affording if I had been by myself.

The next few months saw me through many wonderful experiences. On the school end of things, the educational aspect of the program was interesting and fun, and every other class meeting, we would go somewhere different, whether it be an art museum, a cathedral, or a national embassy; absorbing the seasoned knowledge of our teachers, and getting a better tour than any tour guide might have offered us. As classes, in my opinion were not terribly difficult, and did not assign massive amounts of homework, this left plenty of time for exploration of the city. On the social front, I was going out quite often, whether it be to electronic music clubs, jazz clubs, movie festivals, museums, or to cafés. Through the AAIE I had managed to make friends with a few English teachers and some locals (who were originally assigned to be my conversation partners). Through these connections, I also ended up befriending a psychologist (many years my senior) named Philipp, who worked on the top floor of Vienna's main hospital (the Allgemeines Krankenhaus (AKH)), which is the biggest hospital in Europe. As I am studying psychology, this was a wonderful opportunity to learn about the field first-hand, and Phillip even gave me a tour of his work space.

While it would be possible to write a novel on my study abroad experience, for the sake of my time and yours, I will elaborate on only a few of my favorite experiences. My favorite adventures include a weekend in the character-rich city of Budapest (where I stayed in Carpe Noctem ["sieve the night" in Latin], the "funnest

hostel in the world”, as rated by Hostelworld.com – it lived up to it’s name!), where the amazingness of the delicious cheap food, luxurious public bathhouses, and unique architecture matched the incredible liveliness of the international night life – I will never forget dancing in a boat club with travelers from across the globe, or a pub-crawl through old warehouses from the Communist era that had been renovated into the hippest places around. Another favorite was a weekend in Prague, where I had a beautiful night-walk along the Vitava canal (city lights reflecting in the water), went to the biggest Dance club in central Europe, which has five stories, each with a different style of music (where I spend the night conversing with some Austrians, and touring the city), and went to the biggest indoor “rave” that happens annually in Europe, seeing five out of ten of the world’s best DJs. The last favorite to be included here involves my last night in Vienna, during which I went out with Philipp (the psychologist) and a few of his friends, one of whom was a music producer. Finding ourselves in a Jazz club, we chatted into the wee hours of the morning, at which point I noticed the jazz quintet had stopped playing numbers and started jamming. At the urging of my peers, I asked the singer whether I could take a chorus on the microphone. After a curt nod was given to me, I jumped up on stage, grabbed the microphone, and started improv singing to the bluesy beat. I was thrilled when my words and melody compelled all those who had been sitting down to get up and dance. What a way to end my time in Vienna!

Every single one of these adventures had an important lesson to teach me, ones that I am still integrating today. Coming to Vienna, to a foreign country where I had no bases, represented an opportunity to start over. While I was perfectly happy at Linfield, I was also ready for a change, and a new perspective on the world. Being in Vienna, especially trying to communicate using German, presented a new challenge every day – one that I was more than willing to take up. I forced myself to try new things, to talk to strangers on the streets, and to enhance my communication skills, to the point that I could speak German with the same fluidity as when I spoke English. While this took daily discipline, bravery, and self-faith, it also led to profound exhilaration, new connections, and growth in my self-confidence and my understanding of the world. I realized that it does not matter so much what we say, but rather how we communicate it. If we are not afraid of making mistakes in conversation, and accept that any mistakes are simply learning, then we are actually less likely to make mistakes, as our worries and anxieties are not getting in the way of a clear line of thought. The time away from Linfield not only allowed me to remake myself in the exploration of foreign frontiers, but also allowed me to gain a new appreciation for how incredible of an environment Linfield is. I must emphasize that my positive change and learning was powered by a motivation to evolve and to do whatever it took to get the most out of my experience. This again required bravery and proactive effort. It is not the program that changed me, but *my interactions* with the environment that changed me. The program only set up the conditions for change. As such, you should not expect to go abroad and instantly have an amazing time, or expect the program to do all the work for you or create a life-changing experience. Creating such an experience falls on you and your individual efforts.

Chances to study abroad are fleeting, and any opportunities to add a rich tapestry of adventures to your repertoire of life experience should be taken before they are swept out of reach like dandelion fuzz in the wind. If you should decide to embark on such an adventure, I promise that you will not forget it, nor regret it. I wish you the best of luck on your adventures. Not that you'll need it 😊

Prost!

Timmy Motoyuki Prag