

TIME TRAVELING IN CZECH

Story and photos by
Colleen Friesen



TONY MILLER



enhancing way. Sylvia is traveling with Helen Williams, who at 59 is also “between dates.” Helen is a Scottish-born woman with focus and panache. Her

“As we are, you shall be. As you are, we once were.” Lada Ptacek pronounces each word carefully as he translates the sign over the graveyard’s entrance. A slow September rain drips down the dark and oxidized words. We lean against our bikes, silently sorting through our thoughts and memories from yesterday. We are in Trebon in the Czech Republic, and in so many ways we are a long, long way from where we started only six days ago.

For my husband Kevin and me, this Greenways cycling tour had started with our instructions to take the train from Vienna, Austria, to the town of Breclav in the Czech Republic. From there we would begin our week of cycling on the Vienna-to-Prague tour.

As usual, I hadn’t done my homework and didn’t realize we didn’t actually cycle from Vienna to Prague, but that we were simply embarking on the route network called Vienna-Prague Greenways, part of an elaborate countrywide system. It includes over 500 kilometers of well-signed trails, country corridors, and repurposed centuries-old salt, amber, and silver routes. We are to begin our trip in a town called Mikulov after a short van ride from our train stop in Breclav.

We meet Ron vanHuuksloot, 49, and Lisa Haas, 47, in the van. He’s a Canadian engineer working on transportation systems for Siemens, or as he says, “I’m still playing with trains.” He lives in Los Angeles with Lisa, an anesthesiologist. We don’t know that very soon we will be looking to Lisa for explanations for

words we’d rather not know.

For now, we discover they’re both keen cyclists and that they chose this trip for its lower mileage and slower pace than the other European tours. Lisa explains, “We want to have lots of time to take photos.”

There is no shortage of photos to take.



Mikulov sits up on a rocky hillside, high above the surrounding fields. The walls and towers — part of a 13th-century castle — become visible as we get closer. Baroque and Renaissance facades tumble together in the cobble square. It feels like we’ve stumbled into a pop-up storybook.

We meet the rest of the group in the Vivaldi Hotel that night. It’s a veritable onslaught of Kiwis. There’s Sylvia Mcquilkan, 59, the drama teacher, who will later teach us all to say brush instead of cheese. She demonstrates how “it lifts your face in a much more photogenic way.” Well, of course. There is not a photo taken for the rest of the trip without us all enunciating “brush” in a most assuredly

studied calm is the perfect foil to Sylvia’s keen drama. The two are continually amused.

The rest of the group also loves to laugh and, along with their interest in cycling and travel, have a warm way of including everyone. Given their back-home tradition of honing in on a good coffee stop, they have dubbed themselves the Lazy Latte Cyclists.

Tony House is in his sixties and a semi-retired doctor with a heart condition. He checks his monitor religiously to tell him when it’s time to walk his bike or hop



in the van to avoid the steeper hills. Tony, like Lisa, will later patiently explain words like subdural and epidural hematoma and inner meningeal.

His wife, Mary Finlay, with her spiky blonde hair and funky glasses, is an avid reader. We will soon be exchanging book lists.

But the most compelling person is our guide, Lada Ptacek. Because he is local, he's one of the reasons we're on this trip. We booked through Bike Tours Direct (BTD), a U.S. company that represents over 40 European cycling tour businesses, including this Greenway tour we're on. The attraction for us was that BTD had already screened these cycling outfits. There'd be no web-based pig-in-



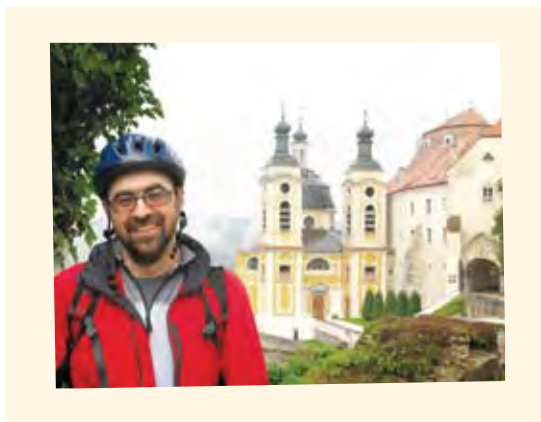
a-poke gamble for us. Considering the mess of choices on the internet, it was great to know someone else had done the homework.

What this also meant was that (1) there was a direct and positive impact on the local economy and (2) we would be touring with a born-and-bred local rather than the typical North American-based tour company and its requisite American guide. Not to mention the trip would be cheaper than most other European tours we could find.

The owner of Greenways Travel Club is Tom Leskovjan. Tom meets us in the hotel parking lot. He introduces his 21-year-old daughter, Barbora, whose name — given the Czech tradition of adding "ova" to a woman's name — is Leskovjanova. Tom tells us, "We are part

of the Society of the Friends of Jewish Culture. Barbora will take you to the Mikulov Jewish cemetery."

Barbora explains as we walk down the cobbled street. "At the first half of the 15th century, there were 3,500 Jews living in Mikulov. To really put this place in perspective, you need to know that when



Prague had 16 synagogues, Mikulov had 12. This was a thriving and important Jewish community. Now? There are no Jews left in Mikulov."

There is one synagogue left, but it's a

Nuts & Bolts: Vienna-Prague Greenways Tour

Bike Tours Direct is Jim Johnson's labor of love. Johnson, an Adventure Cycling member for more than two decades, felt inspired by all the articles he'd read in *Adventure Cyclist*. In 2003 he finally took his hobby and passion for European bike touring and made it into a full-time business. He says, "I really feel I'm in the business of making people's dreams come true." BTD represents over 40 different European bike companies, bridging the gap between the usual trip offerings of either high-end or self-contained tours. With BTD tours costing 50 to 70 percent less than similar tours, it seems Johnson's nailed it. More than 40 one-week tours offered through BTD cost less than \$700. Visit www.biketoursdirect.com.

What to take: Bikes, helmets, and water bottles are supplied. Bring your own pedals and shoes if you prefer clipless. A Velcro-attaching mirror is a cheap and handy addition to the handlebar. The BTD website provides a handy packing list.

Weather: There are over 40 tours to choose from, which means an incredible variety of climates. Each link within the BTD site lists expected weather conditions and type of accommodation, as well as route information.

Route maps: Detailed maps are provided with each trip.

Before you go: Once you've decided on a destination, pick up a Lonely Planet or other travel guide for that country and go

to the suggested reading list. They often list fiction and nonfiction books set in the country, a great way to layer another story onto the landscape.

Vienna to Prague: If you pick this tour, make sure you add on a few days at either end for the namesake cities.



Johnson's favorite hotel in Vienna is the Austria Classic Hotel Wien (www.classic-hotelwien.at). If you're ready to splash out after all the money you've saved on this trip, check out this luxurious Prague hotel: www.buddha-bar-hotel.cz.

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museum, a museum that Adolph Hitler helped to build in his perverse plan to create a remembrance of the very people he was intent on annihilating.

She takes a huge skeleton key from her bag. The iron gate grinds and creaks as she pushes it open. There is the sugary sweet smell of dying leaves. We enter a cemetery with headstones tilted, stacked, and piled.



The weak morning light gilds the bare branches.

The Jews were restricted from expanding their cemetery — or anything else for that matter — so they built up. Headstones were piled to make retaining

walls to create the next terrace, which was then backfilled with dirt to create more burial space. There may be as many as six to eight terraces. We stand in the shifting autumnal light among stones and tall grasses, knowing there are thousands of bodies beneath our feet.

Tom and Barbora are part of this group of about 10 dedicated people — all with no Jewish background. Barbora is learning Hebrew so she can help when visitors come to trace their roots. She, along with other volunteers, transcribes and records each headstone. When people come looking for their relatives, they will guide them to the right place.

They do it because they believe all this needs to be honored and dignified by the very act of remembering. It stuns me. Our capacity for hate, and then — seeing Barbora with that skeleton key and her passion in telling these stories — our capacity for love and redemption.

Each day we cycle through staggeringly beautiful countrysides with leafy lanes of poplars, lindens, and oak trees, and then onto hard dirt tracks among pine forests. We follow Lada onto paths that reveal cas-



ties and mossy statues, all of it conspiring to bring back fairy-tale remembrances.

But instead of fairy tales, we listen to him tell us real stories, stories that inform the landscape and make it alive. With each story, it is becoming apparent that Lada is the real treasure of this trip.

He is standing in front of the rusty fence of the Iron Curtain, helping us imagine growing up within a barbed wire border. “You probably believe that you will always live within a democracy.” Lada pauses, his index finger doing his habitual push at the bridge of his glasses. “I am here to tell you that you cannot assume this. Systems change. Regimes come. There is no guarantee of how it will be.” His English is studied as he tries to convey

his truth. At 42, he is living proof that change can be profound. He was 22 years old when he was beaten for his part in the Czech Republic’s 1989 Velvet Revolution. Communism died soon after.

“My grandfather was born in 1909. If he would have lived three more years, he would have been a citizen of seven different countries, and he never moved from his home.” Lada continues, “Like my father, he believed you could choose to be bitter or philosophical about these things.”

Alex Ross, 64, has an architect’s appreciative eye for all that we’re seeing. That night he’ll tell our table about growing up in Napier, New Zealand, the son of one of the four communists in town. He’ll tell of how the gossip went round town that his father got the money from Russia to open his Main Street shoe store, a more innocent anecdote than Lada’s version the next day.

“Under communism, we were not free to travel, but we still needed to do something so there are now 30,000 kilometers of hiking and cycling routes crisscrossing this country.” I suddenly think of hamsters and those stupid wheels. What would it be like to be confined within your country’s borders?

Our route seems to be more of an intricate web than a singular path. We meet endless streams of walkers and cyclists and travel back in time into villages that seem to have remained unchanged for what looks like forever.

Lada smiles as we oooh and aaah each time we enter another town. “Villages like this, so near to the border of Austria, were cut off from any progress. Czech people were not allowed to travel here because of the possibility of escape.”

It feels like we’re time traveling. In Slavonice, only one kilometer from the forbidden zone of the Austrian border, graffitied buildings display top-to-bottom illustrations like medieval woodcut prints, depicting the inevitable Hapsburgs as well as Greek mythological figures.

Of all the

former communist countries, only in the Czech Republic does the Communist Party still have a political role. Lada tries to explain. “There are some who just want everything to go back to the way it was. I don’t understand it, but they do not want this change.”

He tells us the story of his Catholic grandmother. As a young boy, he came home from school to tell her that his teacher said that Jesus didn’t exist. His grandmother said nothing.

Now, as an adult and a parent, he feels the sadness of that. “She couldn’t pass on to her grandchild her personal beliefs of how the world worked. She knew that if I went back to school and said, ‘but my grandmother says that’s not true,’ she would have endangered all of us. Within our own family, we could not speak the truth of what we thought because it had implications for all of



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us. To me, the worst damage was not economic or environmental or whatever else you can imagine. No, the worst damage was human — to learn so fast to distrust everyone.”

The landscape is often hilly and always beautiful. There are miles and miles of government-owned plum and apple trees lining the roadways, each one numbered and individually licensed for people’s use, although that system is slowly being abandoned as the consumer culture becomes more entrenched and the government declares the trees a road hazard. But we stop and fill our handlebar bags with ripe plums.

I know I’ll never ever eat another plum without seeing Anah Dunsheath in her black-and-white striped tights, floppy black hat squashed under her helmet, holding her pink jacket away from her like an apron as she fills it with plump purple fruit. Anah may be a respected antiquarian bookseller

and an artist, but in my mind’s eye, I’ll see only the bright eyes of a delighted girl.

The days feel perfect and somehow poignant. We eat and laugh our way through delicious pub meals of potato pancakes, sausage, and cabbage while Lada’s stories



provide depth and shadow to the sunny scenes. Kelly green winter crops provide a vibrant contrast to the golden stubble of corn and the endless fields of dying sunflowers. The silver and green leaves of the lindens flicker and spin, some with branches already turned to gold. I am reminded of the

Emily Dickinson

line, “That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet.”



It is on the fifth day that it happens. Greenways has another group of cyclists behind ours. Sometimes we end up at the same hotel, and as they too are

all from New Zealand, many of our group know them. There are friendly exchanges and some friendly rivalry. We joke about beating them to the next hotel so that we won’t have to contend with their bigger numbers.

When we find out one of their cyclists is staying behind to be with her friend at a local Czech hospital because of suspected H1N1 flu, we throw around extra hand sanitizer and joke about avoiding them altogether.

On the way to Jindrichuv Hradec, I am coming down a fairly steep hill that curves to the right. There is the warm sap smell of pines, and my downhill grin is pasted to my face. I notice some cyclists clustered across the road at the bottom of the hill. I slow down to join what I think of as “us.” But it’s not us. It’s them. They urge me on. I’m thinking they seem less friendly than usual.

Then I see Kevin up ahead on the right. There’s a few more of our group with them. Their faces make me stop. Kevin touches my arm. I look back and now realize that the others are gathered around someone lying on the side of the road. Someone beside me says, “Oh, my God.”

It is amazing how fast the ambulance arrives. Local people in this little village of Brandlin stand in front of their one-story homes. An older woman wearing a

crimson fleece and a woman in her thirties carrying a chubby-cheeked girl try to talk to us, but our few words of Czech are useless.

Lada arrives. The conversation begins in earnest. The women tell him that no one saw it happen.

The injured man’s name is Perry Knight. It is his wife, Linda, who is back with the woman who has the flu. The locals tell Lada that a helicopter is arriving. Perry is flown to the Ceske Budejovice Trauma Unit with a severe head injury.

It’s been said that each new grief drags up all our other pains and losses. So it is no surprise that Judy Jordan is distraught. Judy and Trevor Bayly have been married five years. Judy had described to me only a few nights before that she was stunned at her fortune in finding such a wonderful man after the death of her first husband, who “in just 17 weeks was dead of a brain



tumor.” Trevor has his arm firmly around Judy’s shoulders as they walk across the road to support their friends.

We stay back out of the way and then finally decide it’s best to keep going. The locals give us long hugs as we leave. Long hugs. No Czech translation is required.

That night Lisa and Tony field the group’s questions, explaining the medical terminology as Lada gives us ongoing updates from the hospital. After a two-hour brain surgery, Perry is in critical condition. The next morning the doctors declare him brain dead. The following night it is final. Perry Knight is pronounced dead.

Like all of us, Perry was an experienced

rider. He was wearing a good helmet. Maybe there was a small patch of sand or gravel, maybe he decided to make a sharp left, maybe he looked away and lost his balance, maybe none of that happened, maybe, maybe, maybe.

Anything might explain, but nothing will ever satisfy, the mystery of his death. My heart continues to go out to his widow, family, and friends. I cannot pretend to imagine the scope of their pain.

What I do know is that everything has a shadow and often we cannot see what is true without that dark outline. To me, that bright truth is the bitter reminder to be aware of the fragility of each breath and how easily it can all slip away.

It reminds me too to honor the stories, to do what you love, and be fully engaged with each moment so that you live as if you surely know you are going to die.

“As we are, you shall be. As you are, we once were.” **AC**

Colleen Friesen is a travel writer whose previous story “Twenty Years of Shifting Gears” appeared in the March 2008 issue of Adventure Cyclist. For more information about Colleen, visit www.colleenfriesen.com.



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