
Teaching the Cross-country Skiing to Erasmus Students

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The annual orientation course for new Erasmus students at Charles University, Faculty of Science has come around again. The new students are invited, by the [Erasmus co-ordinators of Faculty of Science](#), for a 4-day-trip in the Šumava Mountains to a snow-covered village of Prášíly. Here they can meet new friends in a number of different ways. Either through the shared rooms, group cooking or trips to the local pub for a beer or two. They also have the opportunity to take small trips to the snow covered Šumava National Park.

During this trip the Department of Sport of Faculty of Science gives the new students the opportunity to learn a completely new sport. For many this is cross-country skiing. This year, in particular, was a great success because out of 21 participating Erasmus students, 18 had a go at cross country skiing.

We have approached the students and their teachers, Jan Zachař (Department of Sport of Faculty of Science) and Associated Professor David Havlíček (Co-ordinator at the Department of Inorganic Chemistry), immediately after the trip to share their experience with us.

Jan Zachař said that he was really impressed with his students: "This year has been our biggest educational success so far. Normally, only a few Erasmus students want to try this sport – usually it's 3 to 5 students – but this year we took on 16 beginners (14 of them were Erasmus students). Another 4 advanced Erasmus students joined us for a 30 km skiing trip from Prášíly to Modrava. They were all really good.

Our only problem was that we lacked enough skies and shoes for everyone – our Department of Sport doesn't have any skies available so we had to bring some of our own older equipment and use the old skies from the cottage.

This is the reason why we divided the students into 4 groups – 2 groups for morning and 2 for afternoon. The first stage of our skiing trip was up the hill from Prášíly to Prášilské jezero (Lake of Prášíly) and the other from the lake back to Prášíly." We went on to ask Jan Zachař if he noticed a difference in teaching Czech and Erasmus students how to ski. His reaction was that: "For Czech students, a winter sport course is more about recreation than learning something new. It is rare that we have complete beginners among the Czech students. A number of the Erasmus students in Prášíly saw the snow for the first or second time in their life. For them, it is about a new and memorable experience.

One student in particular had a unique experience. Miguel, a Portuguese student who struggled to grasp the concept of skiing at first, enjoyed skiing downhill so much that by the end he was crying out of joy.

Another memorable experience was that of a Greek student, Nena, who fell in the beginning and was so afraid then that we needed to slow her descent down by hand. I needed to ski next to her holding onto her arm. She continued to fall but in the end, once she got over her fear, she was content, too."

All of the Erasmus students enjoyed their day skiing and below are some of the first impressions from students who tried cross-country skiing for the first or second time ever.

Márcio Fernandes Ribeiro (from University of Minho, MA student of Geography and Territory Planning) said: "It was my first time skiing ever. I've only tried snowboarding one time before. But I was not good. I liked the cross-country skiing a lot. I think it is a very enjoyable sport. I especially enjoyed going down the hill – and not falling. It was really fun."

For Márcio "...the role of the teacher was very important – especially when we were learning how to ski down the hill and also how to mount a hill on the cross-country skies. It was great that all the equipment was provided for us and we didn't have to pay anything for the class. That's not usually the way".

Snow in Portugal is not so common and Márcio went onto to say that: "In the continental part of the country, we have a mountain range with the highest peak Serra da Estrela (1993 m), you may call it "Mountain of the Star" in English. In winter people go there to try downhill skiing and snowboard – and to see the snow. Some have never ever seen it."

Sylvie Berthelot (from University of Konstanz, Bc Biology) shared: "For me, it was the first time ever to try this kind of skiing. I have done downhill skiing since I was 6 but I have never tried cross-country skiing before. I didn't even know its English name until now – I thought it was some type of downhill skiing!

But I was very happy to try it today – especially as I think it's very popular for Czech people. I recently went to Kunratický les (Kunratice Forest) in Prague with my Czech flatmate and we saw people cross-country skiing and walking with dogs there.

I was in the group that was skiing up the hill and that was kind of exhausting. I was sweating a lot. But I only had some small problems in the beginning – I fell once and it was difficult to co-ordinate. But after half an hour or so I got the rhythm right. I think I will try cross-country skiing again in the future.

Back at home, I usually go skiing in Switzerland. My home town, Mannheim, is closer to the Swiss Alps than the Alps in Germany but it is more expensive in Switzerland. It's also possible to go to Oberstdorf in Bavaria from Konstanz – so I went skiing also there.

As for cross-country skiing, I think it's done typically by older people in Germany. But people like to watch such sports on TV – e.g. biathlon.

Judith Gellesch (from University of Mainz, MA Geography) said: "Actually, it was my second time to try cross-country skiing but my first time was 7 years ago in Sauerland, Western Germany which is close to my home town, Köln. However, the mountains there are not very high.

I do not remember if I enjoyed skiing 7 years ago but I really enjoyed my experience here. I had fun this morning. The support from the teachers was really good, too. Normally, I do not ski at all because in my home city there is not that much snow. I also didn't learn how to ski as a child, so it's not a sport I would normally do."

We also interviewed a number of more advanced students, such as Anais Volin or Jaana Mihailišina.

Anais Volin (from École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, MA Geography) said: "It was not my first time to try this sport. I usually do more downhill than cross-country skiing, however. I live near to the Alps, so I usually go there. I couldn't go this winter because of travelling to Prague but apart from that I try to go every winter. It's only 2 hours by train or car to Chambéry or Annecy from Lyon. My university has a sport department which organises skiing trips each weekend from December to February. But they only teach downhill skiing because cross-country skiing is less popular in France. It's also more usual in the North of French Alps than in the South. Also, in France we often only borrow the skiing equipment. We do not own our own skies unlike in the Czech Republic.

Generally, I prefer downhill skiing but I did enjoy the trip today – the combination of walking and skiing was great because you are able to enjoy the surroundings more I think. It's also much calmer than downhill skiing – there are often too many people on the slopes. It was also great that I could go down the hill today rather than climb up. That was really nice."

Jaana Mihailišina (from University of Tartu, MA Geography-Physics for Teachers) shared: "I come from Estonia and cross-country skiing is a very popular sport there. Many schools actually have cross-country skiing as mandatory part of sport classes there. Downhill skiing is not usual in Estonia as we do not have any high mountains.

I do cross-country skiing back at home sometimes. This is why I didn't try cross-country skiing earlier today. But I do not like just to ski, instead I prefer to visit my family and borrow my brother's dogs so that they can join me. Basically, I am skiing and one of the dogs pulls me. We have two dogs. Debbie is really good but not that strong, so we cannot do this together very often. Kutt ("Dude" in English) is stronger but quite stubborn so it's more difficult with him. In any case, it's really nice to do it with either of them because I live in the countryside so we explore the free land and the forest together."

The most advanced skier between the Erasmus students, Gardar Gíslason, comes from Iceland. He joined the teachers for a 40 km trip while skiing the whole way from Prášily to Modrava and back. The rest of the advanced students covered 10 km between Modrava and Srní on the way back by bus.

Gardar Gíslason (University of Iceland, Bc Geophysics) commented: "Skiing is not that usual sport in Iceland but as for myself, I trained downhill skiing for 7 years (from when I was 6 to 13). I stopped because at that time there were not as many snow days in Iceland. When I started it was perhaps 100 snow days a year. When I finished, it was 25 days a year. Now it's slightly increasing again but generally Iceland is getting warmer each year because of the global warming.

Currently, in the middle of February, we have 9 °C. Winter average temperature is around 0 °C, in summer it's usually 12-15 °C. If it snows these days, however, the snow stays only for 3-5 days; then it rains and the snow melts immediately."

We asked Gardar if Iceland has any skiing resorts and he replied saying that he "...trained in Bláfjöll (Blue Mountains), one of the biggest centres for winter sports in Iceland, which is only 30-40 minutes by bus from Reykjavík. But the biggest centres for winter sports are in the North – Akureyri and Dalvík. That's where the professional sportsmen train. On the whole, cross-country skiing is not very popular in Iceland. I learnt cross-country skiing myself 2 years ago when I studied in Denmark for 6 months and then we went for a skiing trip to Norway for 7 days. There are no courses like this in Icelandic schools – we only learn swimming when attending the school."

We are very happy that the Erasmus students of Faculty of Science enjoyed a nice orientation programme once again.