
Searching for Sophie in the Náprstek Museum

Searching for Sophie in the Náprstek Museum: My Afternoon with some Czech Schoolchildren

I visited the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures at Betlémské náměstí, Prague, with a charming group of Czech school children who were completing an interesting programme called *Searching for Sophie*, created and supported by the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague.

I was pleasantly surprised that Charles University has such links with local schools and institutions, offering the children greater opportunities and an insight into higher education and thought. The *Searching for Sophie* scheme consists of two groups each semester (winter/summer) of 25 youngsters who tour a list of educational hotspots and sights of interest in Prague together, including the Náprstek Museum. The programme is extremely popular and oversubscribed a teacher informed me, with the spaces being filled in just one day, especially since it upgraded from an exclusive project for children of the school's employees only to one where all can apply.

The children tally their visiting experiences through their special *Searching for Sophie* booklets designed especially for the scheme, and they mark each visit with a sweet blue owl stamp with "Hledá se Sofie" on it. The personalised aspect of doing this evidently gave the children a sense of individuality, achievement and self-appreciation, and they all rushed to get their page stamped as our visit came to an end, and I was delighted to receive one myself on my iForum notebook. I met the children outside the museum in the hidden, cobbled streets of Bethlehem Square (Betlémské náměstí), a charismatic area near Old Town with many unique cafes and dainty shops. The museum, located in a former famous winery and brewery, was tucked away before an brick archway and walls of climbing ivy, one of numerous secluded treasures in and around Prague. In 1826, the building was bought by the Fingerhuts family as a distillery and brewery, marked by the script and symbols of wine-making encased in stone above the entrance. Later, the son of the owners-explorer, ethnographer and Czech academic Vojta Náprstek- converted the building into a private museum when he brought back numerous indigenous items and research specific to Asian, African and Native American cultures from his travels. Inside, we were simultaneously astounded at the richness and depth of the exhibitions now available to the public. Against the other museums I have come across here in the Czech Republic, it is amongst the best and most understated. It's also inexpensive and largely written in English in addition to Czech, so I highly recommend it as both a must-see tourist attraction in Prague as well as a stimulating educational facility concerning the fields of anthropology, cultural history, world history, war studies, politics and Czech history.

The building itself is old and deceivably large inside, so there's a beautiful contrast between its classic exterior and modern refurbished interior. The museum possesses two huge permanent exhibitions; the *Cultures of Australia and Oceania* and *America* (although note this has been temporarily closed for reinstallation) and the current *Age of Discovery*, which is due to remain until the end of 2014. This extensive collection ranges from artefacts and models to videos and skeletons, which was exhibited across many floors and rooms individually dedicated to specific ethnicities and cultures, presenting various key themes of this conflictual and colonial age to visitors including European conquests, war, trade, scientific and geographical discovery through the artifacts recovered from the hands of conquerors, pirates, slaves, scientists, religious missionaries and natives. Amongst the most impressionable relics on display were the original maps and diagrams of a Medieval world, sea navigation compasses, fine jewellery and trinkets, totem poles, native weapons, tools and clothing and bones of the those deceased from diseases and infections exchanged between European and non-European communities. For the children, there was an interactive model globe illustrating the routes undertaken across the seven seas by European voyages, prototypes of pirate and explorer ships, samples of exploited spices that they had to guess by smell, plus their tour guide teacher escorting them from room to room to tell them exciting tales of the expedition adventures.

It goes without saying that Náprstek's original collection has since been greatly improved and expanded, and you can now find glossy pictures, profiles and billboards depicting famous settlers such as Christopher Columbus, John Capot and even Czech travellers and researchers such as Dr Pavel Durdík. I admired the museum's separate commemoration of Czech history and figures as this voice can be unfairly but easily lost amidst that of general and Western European history, making the museum a great source of Czech antiquity and a safeguarder of its Czech patriot founder.

The children were keen listeners and enthusiastic participators, asking many questions and trying their best to answer those posed to them. They took an avid interest in the exhibition, the famed Czechs and in the sensory activities and I have to comment that I have rarely come across such a well-behaved, attentive, respectful and eager group of young children- this is in contrast to my personal attendance on trips as a pupil and then as a prefect in secondary school and

later a volunteer in schools, where British children would run havoc shouting and screaming from start to finish with their teachers losing authority and control on numerous occasions...

At the end of the tour, the children were handed a test to complete on what they'd seen (including myself, which I completed with the help of translation!) and a mask tracing to decorate and show. From that short experience I had of the Czech education system, I noticed prevailing values of self-accomplishment, praise, worth and individuality. I was additionally told that the kids receive a graduation ceremony at the end of their school year hosted by Charles University, which furthered this impression I had and I commented how much of a wonderful idea this was. I was interested by the maturity of the children and the subjects they had the opportunity to study in comparison to the UK, which they approached mutually conscientiously with readiness and thought. Their teacher informed me that her motivations of taking the class to such a place were to encourage worldly perspectives, to diminish the dogma that science is boring, to invigorate creative and individualistic potential and to learn about life and culture outside of European existence, culture and thought. I thoroughly agreed that such a trip was one of numerous fantastic opportunities for the children on the *Searching for Sophie* programme to step outside of the classroom, broaden their understanding from a young age and have a balanced, inspiring experience of school life. *Searching for Sophie* and this specific trip was an accurate depiction of this, a great insight into the Czech approach to education and a progressive mean to increase knowledge and cultural awareness, giving children the potential to grow as a generation with an international attitude devoid of prejudice.

As we waved them goodbye, the children were asked what was the highlight of their afternoon, to which most, including Klára, Julie and Jirka commented "all of it", Lily said "the boomerang" and we replied hoping to see them in years to come at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University. Whatever they decide to do, I'm sure such positive schemes supported by our university, will amply encourage the budding Czech children that I had the pleasure to meet.



Poppy Gerrard-Abbott is an Erasmus student studying BA Humanities at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University and her home university is the University of Essex in England. She chose to write for the iForum to build on her journalism skills and meet other aspiring journalists; to grow closer to the social and creative life of Charles University and to learn more about Czech culture and life in Prague through attending local events and researching Czech issues and current affairs.

Poppy saw the iForum as an exciting opportunity to pursue her interests in politics, culture and history whilst meeting other Erasmus students. She thinks it's a very worthwhile and fun experience that has brought some exciting opportunities her way, extended her writing skills and her knowledge of the Czech Republic, and hopes Charles University continues to offer such placements to future students.