
Misadventures in Managing Trips

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There are numerous student associations at Charles University that organise extra-curricular (read free-time) activities for the international or Erasmus students. When I was studying abroad myself, the existence of such events appeared very logical to me – there are international students at the university so you offer trips, country presentations or cinema and theatre clubs to them. But the reality is sometimes much more adventurous and remarkable than the students joining the events may think.

Take the Erasmus Club (of the Faculty of Arts) trip to the castle of Kokořín and town of Mělník a couple of years ago – all thought out to the last detail, the guided tour in Kokořín Castle and a wine tasting in the historical wine cellars of Mělník Castle were ordered days in advance to secure the right time for the tours; maps of the region were borrowed from the library and studied in detail to find the best walking trail to the castle, from the arrival point Mšeno in Kokořín region. And then the reality – students, who had actually been forewarned to wear good walking shoes, coming partly in ballerina pumps, climbing steep hills in the forests around Kokořín Castle bare-foot in the end; a delay in reaching the castle and leaving it on time (mainly due to the very limited bathroom and refreshment options) and then, finally, the biggest shock of the day – the bus connection from Kokořín village to the town of Mělník.

The connection did indeed exist, that was no problem at all; it was after all proved by not only some 25 participants of the Erasmus Club trip, but also another similarly big group and some individual tourists waiting at the bus stop. The big issue was however the size of the bus – instead of the standard Czech regional 45-seat-bus, a minibus of maximum 15 seats and about the same number of standing places arrived at the village; the driver was not too happy that nobody had forewarned him or the company about the exceptionally high number of tourists without their own car, wanting to use the connection that day.

However, I might add that the weather was exceptionally nice, sun shining the whole day, it was middle of May, and a weekend. But, well, the people who planned the bus connection did obviously not take in account that on a nice spring weekend a higher number of tourists might want to use the connection. And, to make things even more complicated, they did not warn about the size of the bus in the timetables – so it was highly unlikely someone would call them in advance to inform them that a bigger group would like to use the connection on that particular day.

What options were left to the organisers of the trip? Bargaining in earnest. The bus driver was promised some extra money if he would take the first part of the group to Mělník and then return for the rest of the trip participants. The promise of extra money evidently worked well – within 20 minutes the minibus was back to take the second half of the group into the town. However, the bus driver needed to reach the town quickly as he was supposed to drive another bus connection soon afterwards; as a result I do not think I have ever had the opportunity to enjoy such a wild and fast (mini)bus drive – not before and certainly not since this trip.

Should you like to know if the trip ended well after all the complications, the answer is yes. We arrived almost on time to Mělník, hurried up the hill to the castle and enjoyed the tasting of the local wines (sadly on an almost empty stomach, as in Kokořín we had been not able to get any more substantial food than small snacks or chocolate bars – which is the reason we were not very sober when we left the wine cellars, to be very honest with you), and then, finally, we had the opportunity to relax for the rest of the afternoon in the local restaurants. Believe it or not, we actually have fond memories of the trip; it was after all one of those events for success of which we had to fight the hardest.

During the history of the Erasmus and international student events at Charles University, which has been offered for over 10 years, there were many other mishaps in organising the trips of the Erasmus Club (of the Faculty of Arts) and other international student clubs active at Charles University.

The International CUNI Club once booked a boat trip in Southern Bohemia and ordered a local bus for the time of the originally planned train arrival, to take the participants from the closest train station to the camp by the river Vltava (Moldau) for the first night, only to get on a train in Prague which was redirected to the South via Pilsen and was thereby delayed by almost two hours.

The Erasmus Club at the Faculty of Arts planned a trip to Karlovy Vary, Bečov Castle and Mariánské Lázně several years ago and ordered a bus for the event which did not arrive on time to the meeting point and was so much delayed in the end that the organisers had to call the bus company. They were informed that the bus driver had not been told by the company directory about the booking of the bus for that particular day and was still asleep!

This year the participants of the traditional late October trip to Karlštejn Castle by the Erasmus Club lost their booking for the more attractive tour Nr. 2 in the castle (= the medieval chapels from the time of the emperor Charles IV. which

are accessible only with an advance booking) because the trains to Karlštejn did not work for several hours due to a sudden technical failure and the replacement buses needed about 45 minutes to arrive to the train station where the train from Prague preliminary ended.

All things considered, it can be quite adventurous to plan and manage such events. But as long as the trip finally takes place and the participants enjoy it, the organisers can take pleasure in planning and organising them. And, perhaps not so surprisingly, it is those trips (or other events) that were the most difficult to arrange that we recall the best and which created the fondest memories. It is after all confirmation of us doing things well.

Abbie Elizabeth Burnett is a BA History student studying at the University of Essex in the UK. Abbie is currently studying within the Faculty of Arts, Charles University Prague for her Erasmus year and is enthusiastic to immerse herself in all the opportunities that an Erasmus year within the Czech Republic can offer. She was motivated to join the international iForum to gain valuable journalistic experience, meet new people and experience other cultures.