

BRATISLAVA 26th August to 3rd September 2003

This was my first experience as an ED and some 350 e-mails later, I can now report!

When I was originally asked to get involved with the planning of this exchange, there were strong doubts about whether it would have adequate support to go ahead. Approaches were made to other FF UK clubs but it was only thanks to support from two of our friends from Somerset and a change of plans by Jennie and David that we reached thirteen.

One of the FFI requests is that Ambassadors learn some of the language of their hosts. This and doubts about transport from Prague to Bratislava, finally led us to make a liaison with the Czech Slovak Friendship Society of Bridgewater. We were able to provide a very enjoyable (although damp!) barbecue for some of their young people visiting the UK. They helped by providing us with a day of language tuition, assistance with selecting transport and accommodation as well as providing a charming guide for our stop en route.

Most of the group took the opportunity of staying on in Austria and/or Prague before returning to the UK but it proved possible to keep the total cost of the core exchange down to approximately £320 per person of which £60 (18%) was the fee to FFI and £45 (14%) was the host fee.

We flew from Bristol to Prague with Easyjet, stayed overnight in Prague and then went by minibus to be met in Uherske Hradiste for lunch and a guided tour. Then it was on to Bratislava. Although they had not admitted to this beforehand, almost all of our hosts spoke very good English, so communication was not a problem.

One of our group (Tony) had come prepared to teach us a "thank you" song for our *farewell* evening but, in fact, we had only one group evening and this was a *welcome* party. Naturally, we took this as an excuse to avoid singing, but we were all expected to do something to entertain our hosts - something that was not nearly as daunting as it seemed because of their encouragement.

Nevertheless, there is a warning for future ambassadors to practice their party pieces before they go! Most of our hosts were professional people and, probably inevitably, could not be described as a representative cross section of society. We were very favourably impressed with what they were able to show us of their country and way of life. It was certainly much more modern than many of us had expected. There was none of the depression, which one may feel when visiting towns in Russia or many other Eastern European countries and the atmosphere in Bratislava itself was very peaceful and friendly, even at night.

In addition to all our tourism - spas, castles, goose eating, a fantastic choir, countryside, a fascinating library, etc etc, we achieved much of the main objective of our visit in beginning to appreciate what our hosts had endured in the past and how they see the future. For example: when the communist era ended, one man crossed the Danube twenty times in one day simply to convince himself that he was finally free to do so.

Many of our hosts' present concerns about their government policy mirror our own - recently introduced tuition fees for universities, increased taxation etc etc. In all, we realised that the people of this formerly communist country were remarkably like ourselves and we had little doubt that they represent a country, which we should be very pleased to welcome to the EU.

Most, possibly all of us, invited our hosts to visit us individually in the UK and this fact is an indication of just how close we had come to them and how strong are the friendships forged.

Robin Mather