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Dobrý den, Guten Tag & Hallo!

Greetings from the Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands! I have spent the last several weeks exploring the famed Hapsburg Empire from Vienna to Prague, chugging delicious liters of beer at Oktoberfest, understanding contem-

porary history in Berlin, and leisurely strolling the streets of Amsterdam. I did not think that it was possible for my journey to get any better, but these destinations were particularly enjoyable. As with everyplace I go my only regret is that we could not experience it together.

Prague, Czech Republic

Prague (*aka Praha*) has a reputation as being the most enjoyable city behind the former Iron Curtain. Walking around Prague feels like a trip back in time. The city is dominated by castles, Gothic churches, cobblestone streets, heroic statues, and numerous stone bridges. It feels more like a fairy tale than a capital of a modern country.



Above: Posing with a section of the Berlin Wall near the Brandenburg Gate. Below: With Ginelle in Prague, Czech Republic. In the background a view of the Lesser Quarter of Prague and beyond.



On the balcony at the Hofbräu-Festzelt in Munich, Germany during Oktoberfest. I'm holding two liters of God's greatest gift to man...

Several months prior to arriving in Prague I made plans to travel with my good friend and fellow LMU Lion, Ginelle Howard. We planned on visiting a selection of cities in Northern Europe; specifically in Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic. She was the first familiar person I had seen in months. In short, it was wonderful being able to spend quality time with a close friend. We only had a few short days in Prague so we moved quickly to experience the best the city had to offer.

The premier attractions in Prague are the Charles Bridge, the beer halls, and the Prague Castle. The Charles Bridge is an excellent example of medieval engineering and stone masonry. It was built with hammer, chisel, patience and hard work. The city is divided by the Vltava River and the bridge connects the Lesser Quarter (the name of that section of city) with the Old Town. It features great



views, several baroque religious statues and street vendors selling original art. The bridge is located in the heart of the historical center and is easily reachable from any major attraction. I can only imagine how perfect it would be in winter with a thin blanket of snow, the person you love, and Christmas looming shortly around the corner.

Prague Castle is more of a mountain top compound than royal home. It is a consortium of structures including several courtyards, cathedrals, fortifications, gardens, and noble residences. It sits above the Lesser Quarter and has the best view of Prague. To reach the complex requires determination and a good set of shoes as you must ascend up steep streets to reach it. However, your effort is well rewarded with the ability to explore one of the greatest preserved Gothic castles. While there, Ginelle and I attended Mass at St. Vitus Cathedral. The Cathedral is splendid with massive stained glass windows, plentiful mosaics, vaulted ceilings and amusing

flying buttresses. When the bells tolled I half expected to see Quasimodo of Notre Dame making a guest appearance but I was sadly disappointed.

After a long day of touring we would refresh ourselves in one of Prague's traditional beer halls. Any connoisseur of beer has immense respect and appreciation for Prague's breweries. Their beer typically has a creamy, thick, full-bodied flavor that is exceptional. Drinking at a beer hall is a complete experience as there is traditional food and music to accompany the drinks. If you find yourself in a Prague beer hall in the future just hold up a finger and a pint of the house brew will immediately appear in front of you. It is the best magic trick I have ever seen! A couple of pints of strong ale will improve any mood and refresh the soul.

Munich, Germany

After a leaving Prague, Ginelle and I traveled to the Bavarian capital of Munich (aka München). We were visiting during a during the annual Oktoberfest

festival. Oktoberfest is a traditional autumn festival held every year that is a celebration of God's greatest gift... beer! This year was the 250th celebration of the Oktoberfest and was the largest festival that ever occurred. While beer festivals are celebrated worldwide it is important to note that Munich is the only city that hosts the real Oktoberfest. There is no other festival that can even compare to theirs. I have experienced many amazing things in my life, but next to winning the 3rd grade spelling bee this was a definite highlight of my life.

Oktoberfest lasts 16 days; it starts in late September and concludes

in early October. The festival originally celebrated a noble marriage, but now it pays homage to god of fermentation. It has survived through war, famine and even the horrible music of the 1980's. It will continue into perpetuity to be enjoyed by countless future generations.

Months prior to the festival the prominent Bavarian brewers build large tents in the Theresienwiese Park of Munich. Although called tents they are built like palaces. The second largest tent (and my personal favorite), the *Hofbräu-Festzelt*, can accommodate approximately 11,500 people! During the festival, the tents will



Top: The Charles Bridge and historic Prague at Night. **Bottom:** Ginelle and I enjoying a traditional brew in one of Prague's many beer halls.



The Hofbräuhaus tent in Munich, Germany during Oktoberfest. The tents at Oktoberfest are absolutely enormous, approximately 11,500 people will bring this tent to capacity! The tents open at 10AM and close at 10PM, during that time tens of thousands liters of beer will be consumed.

serve several million liters of beers, countless pretzels, and bring tears of joy to people from around the world.

It is the atmosphere of the festival that sets it apart from other world events. It transcends all demographic, political, and educational barriers; it can be enjoyed by anybody. The tent's menu consists of two items, beer by the liter and pretzels the size of your head (usually covered in cheese). When you first arrive you might be alone, but as the day progresses you become

friends with everybody. Which is a great accomplishment considering most of the people there do not speak English. Everybody has a great time and leaves knowing they will return again some day.

I spent most of my time at the *Hofbräu-Festzelt*, which is sponsored by *Hofbräu München* (aka The Hofbräuhaus). The Hofbräuhaus has the reputation as being the rowdy, young and rambunctious tent. It DEFINITELY lives up to the hype. As Ginelle and I walked up to the tent, a



Middle: Posing with a Clydesdale horse at Oktoberfest. I'm wearing traditional Bavarian lederhosen which is totally awesome! Below: Enjoying a liter of the best lager in the world with Ginelle.

feeling of giddiness came over me. I had been dreaming of this moment for years. From the first time I learned about Oktoberfest I knew I had to come. As we walked inside my anticipation came to a climax. I became overwhelmed with the happy people, brass band music, mammoth liters of beer, people dancing on the tables, and overall ecstasy. Everybody is singing, clicking glasses, hugging, smiling, and having the

time of their life. In my professional opinion doctors should prescribe Oktoberfest instead of Prozac, as it will make even the most somber person jolly!

While most of my time in Munich was spent inside a tent sipping God's nectar, I wouldn't change a second of it. This was one of the most unique, fun, and memorable experiences of my life. I have seen countless beautiful buildings, masterpieces



Above: The Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna, Austria. This palace was the summer home of the Hapsburg empire until 1918. Below: Enjoying the palace zoo. The collection of animals is enormous and diverse.

Vienna, Austria

As Ginelle and I said a reluctant goodbye to Munich, we welcomed our next adventure, Vienna, Austria. Vienna was the epicenter of classical Europe, with the best artists, writers, and musicians flocking to it. Greats such as Mozart, Otto Wagner, and Eduard Haas III (the inventor of PEZ candy) called Vienna home. We toured the palaces, enjoyed a gelato in town, and got lost in the beauty of the city. We even attended

an opera at the *Wiener Staatsoper* (State Opera House), the same venue that the renown composers conducted in some centuries ago.

I have always been a big fan of large palaces, such as Buckingham, Windsor, or Versailles. I find it fascinating that families actually lived there or currently live there. I also like to get ideas for my future chateau... The Hapsburg royal family had a variety of palaces in Vienna, the most magnificent being the Schönbrunn and Hofburg Palace. The Schönbrunn served as their summer residence and the Hofburg as their winter residence. Although both within the

city limits of Vienna, the Schönbrunn is outside the city center and is significantly larger.

The Schönbrunn is simply outstanding, beautiful, and perfectly preserved. It features large expansive botanical gardens, several residences, puzzling shrub mazes, and striking fountains. The most impressive attraction would be the palace menagerie. Most of us might have a dog, turtle, bird or cat but these former residents had a world class zoo in their backyard! Although the collection has changed significantly since the Hapsburg occupation but back then it still included several exotic animals such as bears, tigers, reptiles, li-

ons, and rhinos!

The city palace, the Hofburg, is equally impressive and is located in the heart of Vienna. Over several decades it has changed from royal residence to museum and government seat. However, some of the original functions such as the treasury, art galleries, national library and riding school still exist. The palace treasury houses some of the most important pieces of history such as the cup that supposedly caught Jesus' blood as he died on the cross and the lance that ultimately killed him, the crown jewels of the Hapsburgs and Holy Roman Empire, the Sable of Charlemagne, and other various other reli-



In front of the Austrian Parliament. Ginelle and I visited Austria during their general elections and were able to witness democracy in action.



gious/cultural items. The Hofburg also houses the Spanish Riding School, which is one of the most respected horse riding schools in the world. We attended one of their performances and watched riding perfection. It demonstrated a variety of styles and techniques including piaffe, flying changes, pirouette and collected gait. Considering I have trouble just sitting on a horse, I have profound respect for anybody that can make a two-ton beast dance on two legs.

Our last night in Vienna was the evening of the presidential elections of Austria. At the recommendation of the concierge we decided to attend a post-election celebration party and then go to dinner. We had

no trouble finding a celebration as every political party had built a tent outside of the Parliament building. We chose the nearest tent and walked in. We were warmly received and given pints of beer to quench our thirst and banners to wave. As we walked around the tent we came to realize that we were in the victors tent. Later, a TV news crew approached us and started to interview us. The reporter looked me in the eye and asked (in English) "Why did you vote for the socialist party and are you proud of their victory?" Needless to say I was completely taken back, I am a lot of things but I am certainly not a socialist. Up to this point Ginelle and I had no idea whose tent we were in,



we didn't care as we were there for the free food and drinks. I would like to tell you we marched out of there as we did not agree with their political beliefs. However, since the drinks were cold, the food delicious and most importantly free we ended up spending the rest of our night there. Later we saw the new president give an acceptance speech. By this time, politics were the furthest thing from our minds.

Berlin, Germany

To my parents and their generation Berlin is a city of infamy, the most visible symbol of the Cold War. Berlin is a contemporary city with the history and culture of an ancient city. Its history spans centuries but its recent events are what make it relevant to my generation. In particular, its history as the capital of Nazi Germany and as a divided city during the Soviet era. Germany as we know it today has only existed for about twenty years. It has seen more conflict and hard-



Top: A view of the Brandenburg Gate and surrounding plaza. The United States embassy is located directly across from the gate. **Middle:** The Reichstag, this famous building has been the seat of the German Parliament for centuries. It was the first building torched when Nazi Germany rose to power and was the last building liberated when the Soviets captured Berlin. **Bottom:** A Soviet war memorial. Surprisingly, this memorial was constructed in the Allies sector of Berlin.



ship than most other European nations. While young, it has come far in the two decades since its inception and is a shining example of progress with a sense of respect towards the past.

Although most of Berlin was destroyed during WWII there are still some features that remain today. Such as the Reichstag, the Brandenburg Gate, Rykestrasse Synagogue, and various other buildings. The Reichstag has served as the home of Parliament for many decades both before and after the war. Supposedly in a major grab for power in the 1930s Hitler had the building torched and then blamed the arson on communist

revolutionaries. This act, although a fraud, allowed Hitler to assume greater power and eventually become a totalitarian dictator which was totally not cool. The building has since been rebuilt, topped with a magnificent glass dome and is once again home to unified German parliament.

The Brandenburg Gate, which was originally constructed as a gate into the city, has served as a symbol of enduring Germany. It has been the backdrop to countless historical events such as the Nazi seizure of Berlin, the division point between West and East, and as a podium for American presidential speeches in Germany.



Above: A partially intact section of the Berlin Wall. The wall has almost been entirely destroyed and few sections remain in their original locations. **Below:** At the Brandenburg Gate (built 1788-91). U.S. President's John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton all delivered famous public addresses from this location.

When the Berlin Wall was originally constructed it was built directly opposite the Gate and it cut off the West from the East. John F. Kennedy was the first American president to address the city from that location. In 1963 he gave his famous "Ich bin ein Berliner" address and assured the West Berliners that the rest of the Western world stood in solidarity with them in their hardship. Several decades later Ronald Reagan gave an address with a similar sentiment, where he told Mr. Gorbachev "to tear down this wall". This location has special meaning to me as an American as it demonstrates

our country's influence around the world. Our nation's actions have profound consequences worldwide, our influence is a responsibility and privilege.

No immersion into German history would be complete without a trip to a concentration camp. Many would like to overlook the Holocaust as it is an unpleasant topic but it is an important part of history and must not be forgotten. While Berlin is a sophisticated and modern city only a short distance away is the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp, a stain on our existence. Ginelle and I visited on a crisp autumn morn-



The Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp outside Berlin, Germany. This camp was the location of countless atrocities and crimes against humanity. The phrase above translated into English means "work makes (one) free". Prisoners were told that they would be rehabilitated and released, but almost all were systematically executed.



Above: Like Venice, Amsterdam was built on a series of water canals. Almost any section of the city can be reached by water. Below: The canals at night; the calmness of the water, the unique architecture and the beautiful lights is a one of a kind experience.

ing, which seemed to enhance the experience of the camp. We witnessed the remains of the atrocities that occurred. Most of the structures were destroyed during the Soviet era. However, some buildings still exist such as the Jewish prisoner housing, Schutzstaffel (SS) quarters, the extermination trenches, the crematorium, and forced labor workshops. There are no words that can accurately express the experience of being surrounded by devastating sadness, death and barbarity. I would not describe this as a good experience, but a necessary one. I left the camp grateful for my life and

the people in it.

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Ginelle and I parted ways at the Copenhagen airport. She was to return to Phoenix and I to continue onwards to Amsterdam. When I arrived in Amsterdam for the first time in months I was able to stay in a home rather than a hostel. I forgot how much I enjoyed the comforts of a home! I was able to stay a few days with my good friend and former Wellington rugby teammate, Maurice. I couldn't have asked for a better host and tour guide. The highlight of Amsterdam

is the city itself. To experience the city all you have to do is step outside. There is no admission price, queues, or waiting; a walk through the city is entertainment in itself. It is stunningly gorgeous with lush parks and beautiful houses sitting pretty beside the canals. There is a sense of community and openness that cannot be found anywhere else, the whole city marches to the same beat. I attribute it to a lack of cars. Most of the population walks or rides a bike. You can get anywhere in minutes by a leisure stroll or pleasant ride on a bike.

While in Amsterdam I spent a whole day riding around with no

particular purpose and loved every minute of it. If I am ever lucky enough to live in Europe I think you will find me on a bike patrolling the cobblestone streets of Amsterdam.

In the next edition of my newsletter you can read about my adventures in Russia, China and beyond. It certainly will be one you will enjoy. As always, I hope you enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it. I hope you will keep reading, as there are many more adventures ahead! Expect the next edition in a few weeks. Thank you for being apart of my epic journey.

Cheers!
--Steve



With fellow Wellington RFC teammate and good friend Maurice Bertolini on the canals of Amsterdam, Netherlands. He graciously hosted and showed me the best of the city. It was great experiencing the it from a locals perspective.