

## An American Abroad: My Exchange Year in Slovakia

When my family moved from Sioux City, Iowa to Fairview in 2015, my world fundamentally changed for the better. Finding my footing in a new location led me to step out of my comfort zone and discover many fresh opportunities. I started to supplement my homeschool education with classes at A-B Tech, intern at a local climate research institute and volunteer at the WNC Nature Center. These endeavors helped me to develop an understanding of my passions and pushed me forward toward my future. Yet the most substantial opportunity I discovered in North Carolina led to a change even more drastic than my move halfway across the country.

Another homeschool family from Fairview, whose daughter was then spending a year in Italy, introduced me to the Rotary Youth Exchange program. They encouraged me to apply, stressing just how valuable time abroad can be and how perfect it was for me. Leaving everything for the unknowns of a foreign culture is intimidating and I struggled to accept the 11-month duration of Rotary exchanges, especially since I had never been away from home for more than a couple weeks. Yet, my desire to travel overpowered that fear. Years of watching travel shows and reading Jane Austen with my mother instilled in me a longing for the history and elegance of Europe. In the end, I recognized just how unique a chance it was and I seized upon the opportunity, knowing I would regret it if I did not.

Over a year has passed now since I first applied to the program, and my time in the small, Central European nation of



Hiking is one of the most common pastimes in Slovakia. The entire country can be walked by trails alone.

Slovakia will come to an end in July. Living here, experiencing diverse perspectives and seeing so many cultural, artistic and historical wonders has made me into a more worldly and empathetic person. Even more importantly, however, this exchange produced a complete and utter shift in my reality. A change which, much like the move which made it possible in the first place, allowed me to break out of a perception of my life that had been tunneled by routine and decide with clarity where I really want to go and what I really want to do.

Slovakia is a small nation—half the size



The double cross is the symbol of Slovakia, often used to mark mountain peaks.

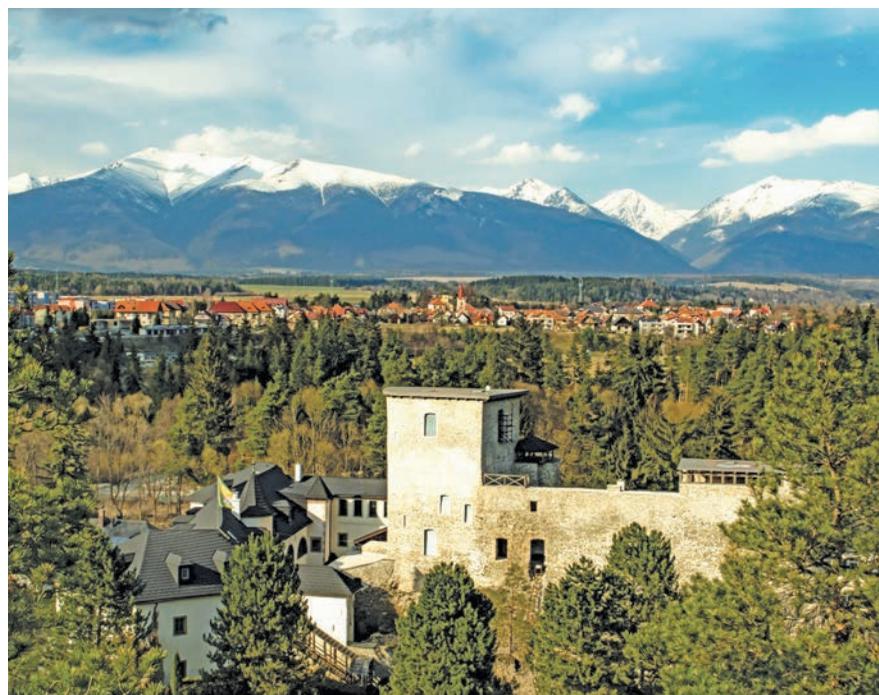
of North Carolina in both population and area. The people here have a strong sense of community and identity, one which flourished despite a thousand years of suppression. From the 10th century to 1993, one foreign power or another has controlled Slovakia. Slovaks only gained true independence when they seceded from Czechoslovakia to form their own republic.

Despite this turmoil, Slovaks' cultural and physical heritage both lie surprisingly intact. Majestic castles, both ruined and restored, stand over cities and villages with long histories and modest skylines. The town I live in, Stola, is 400 years older than the United States. With such a long history, it is no wonder people here take great pride in their folk heritage, often attending and participating in the many festivals that exhibit traditional music and dance or visiting the craft fairs that demonstrate traditional Slovak handwork and folk costumes.

### "Good Day"

There are a wealth of differences between the US and Slovakia, but one struck me immediately. Slovaks, and Europeans in general, are not as outgoing as Americans. They are just as kind, but friendly interactions with strangers are not a social norm. Smiling or waving to a stranger will usually be met with a frown, but a quiet "good day" is perfectly acceptable. In a similarly reserved way, Slovaks do not speak of politics frequently nor get very passionate about it. I attended a protest one dreary afternoon and it was unlike anything I have ever seen in Asheville. A throng of what appeared to be mildly dissatisfied Slovaks stood quietly in the rain beneath their umbrellas and listened to a speaker, only occasionally (and tamely) expressing their assent.

Political differences are the most intellectually striking cultural difference to me, but the food certainly had the most



Top, Spišský Hrad (Spiš Castle) is the largest fortress in Central Europe. It stuns me every time I see it. Above, smaller castles dot the landscape, like Liptovská Hrádok, set in front of the Tatra Mountains.

physical effect. My culinary shift was not difficult in the way it can be for exchange students in Japan or Taiwan, eating deep-sea oddities and the like. In fact, it was the exact opposite! I was eating the most normal food I could imagine—predominantly grains, pork, cheese and a lot of potatoes. Their two national dishes are bryndzové pirohy (savory dumplings covered in a zesty sheep cheese and bacon) and bryndzové halušky (a uniquely Slovak gnocchi with the same sheep cheese and bacon topping). Other common foods are vyprážený syr (a breaded and fried block of cheese), kapustnica (cabbage and sausage soup) and buchty (large rolls of sweet bread, sometimes full of jam and covered in cream or chocolate... and eaten for lunch).

As unhealthy as all this sounds—and is—Slovaks balance out such an extreme intake of calories by staying very physically active. In the winter, skiing downhill and cross country are very popular

pastimes, while hiking and bicycling take their place in the summer months. The intensity and frequency of exercise here required no little bit of adaption on my part. I have always been healthy but not terribly fit—at least not until I started following my host family and friends up a mountain every weekend. Nevertheless, even these workouts haven't kept me from taking on a few extra pounds from the Slovak menu.

### Life-Changing Adventure

I cannot express adequately the gratitude I owe to Rotary International for their support. Without them, I could not have taken on this life-changing adventure. Rotary sponsors exchange students to travel all across the globe, learning languages and customs, becoming part of a new culture, learning about the very things I have described above.

Any student age 15 to 19 is eligible to stay in locations ranging from Japan to



Slovaks still live in villages (top). They may work for modern industries, but they respect traditions at home. Above, exchanges connect students from all over the world with mutual experiences. I am so grateful for all my new friends.

Argentina on both long- and short-term exchanges. Students and their families are usually responsible for paying the flight ticket and insurance costs, but scholarships are available when support is needed.

If you or someone you know is interested in the Rotary Youth Exchange program, or you would like to volunteer as a host family for a student coming to the US, all you have to do is contact your local Rotary club. There are a few in the vicinity of Fairview and they all take exchange students. I would recommend contacting William Bauman (at wbauman@warren-wilson.edu) to get oriented.

An exchange isn't a vacation. It is work and at times it can be a real struggle, but

moments are born from this effort that are absolutely priceless. They come as grand as standing atop a tower of a fairytale castle surrounded by picturesque villages and fields of wildflowers, the sound of a lute echoing from the courtyard, while the unintelligible babble of the people below is evocatively indistinguishable from the haggling merchants and laboring farmers which once filled the space; and they come as small as meeting an elderly woman on the streets of your village for the first time and chatting with her, realizing that just a few months prior you couldn't have shared a single word. In this very way, every exchange opens a door to some part of the world you couldn't have fully known otherwise.

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