

Dear Rotary Club of Punta Gorda,

Ahoj! I would like to update you about my experiences in the Czech Republic as I have been here for about a month now. I am writing this a little bit early due to the fact that I will have inbound orientation in the next few days which will definitely be very busy.

I arrived on August 23rd which was a very eventful day. I had to run as fast as I could through the Paris airport after nearly missing my connecting flight to Prague. I was greeted by my wonderful host family as well as two students who were friends of my host sister who is currently in Reno, Nevada. My first thoughts when leaving the airport was that the weather here is beautiful! It was about 65°. In the past few weeks it has gotten colder and it can sometimes be around 40°.

On the first day I had already noticed some small differences in everyday life. For instance, most people are specific about not wearing shoes in the home, there is no air conditioning, it is very uncommon to put ice in your drink, lunch is the biggest meal of the day instead of dinner, most people have a garden which they eat things from, and instead of saying "bless you" they say pro zdraví which translates to "for health".

Overall I think that the biggest difference for me is the school system. Instead of having 7 classes a day, I now take about 14 classes that I have 2 to 4 times a week. When students arrive at school they go straight to the hallway full of lockers to change into their school slippers and hang up their coats. Throughout the day I stay with the same group of 28 kids which I actually think is much better for me considering that it was easier to make friends. In-between class we have breaks that are 5-20 minutes long and for lunch we have a full hour. For lunch we can eat at the school canteen or leave and walk to the nearby town square to find food to buy. It is very helpful that most students and a few of my teachers speak English very well. All of the students will take a trip to London in April in order to improve their English and I also may be able to go (depending on if it isn't the same time as eurotour). I have already given a presentation about myself to my English class in which I discussed my life at home and how I became an exchange student. I was even invited to give the same presentation at my host cousins 7th grade class and it went very well.

I have also been to 2 Rotary meetings where I introduced myself in Czech and I got to meet the other exchange student in my city who is from Alaska. I think that the Rotarians were impressed by how much Czech I already know. Learning Czech is a very difficult task and although I have improved, I am far from being fluent.

In the past month it has been wonderful getting to know my host family. I have a 5 year old host sister, a 10 year old host brother, as well as my host parents. We all get along very well and I play lots of games with my host siblings. Recently, we all took a trip to the Moravia region of Czechia to visit a Mountain resort. We got to ride a ski lift and travel up a sky walk to see all of the surrounding mountains from above. Then we took a rollercoaster ride down the mountain before going on a giant swing. Last weekend I went with my host family to a traditional Czech wedding. The wedding was for my host dad's brother who also happens to be my RYE country correspondent in the Czech Republic. I was surprised that the wedding was not really different than an American wedding.

During my first week I also got the chance to meet Lucie who was the Czech exchange student in Punta Gorda 3 years ago! Even though we only got to spend a few hours together it was great to talk about my experience so far and what she has missed in Punta Gorda recently. We spent our time getting dessert at a cafe and then walking through the city.

In the past few days I went really far out of my comfort zone by attending the traditional dance classes. Each year students from grade 10 and 11 go to the traditional Czech dance lessons with a partner for 10 weeks. I have only been to one lesson so far and it definitely wasn't easy. I was surprised by how fancy all of the students dress for just a practice. There were about 100 students and 50 viewers. I love how this is something that the students are enthusiastic about because I know that getting students to ballroom dance on a Friday night would be extremely difficult.

I would once again like to thank you with all of my heart for giving the opportunity of a lifetime. I am extremely grateful to be able to grow and experience new things everyday in this wonderful country. I will make sure to send updates similar to this one every month. Hope everyone is doing well.

Sincerely, Emma Giordano.