

CZECH
ODYSSEY

52ND ISDT

Inside Czechoslovakia

"Many Americans Were Experiencing Big Mac Attacks By The Third Day And Would Have Gladly Paid Four Dollars For One." By Brad Zimmerman

To go from an area like Southern California, where the life-style is extremely free and loose, into Communist-controlled Czechoslovakia to report on the ISDT, leaves one with experiences that are terrifying, surprising, delightful, funny and amazing. You can't help but come home with an entirely different perspective on just about everything, and the realization of how good we have it here in the United States, and in the entire free world.

First of all, I am not the type who goes around waving American flags, but I have appreciated living here after hearing stories from some of my friends who were born and raised in other countries. This was my first trip to Europe and I decided even before coming home that it's going to be an annual event. Most of Europe impressed me greatly, but after spending almost two weeks in CSSR, where everything is controlled, watched and constantly scrutinized, I came away with two entirely different views—one of Europe, and one of Communism. What may never be known is that the things I saw might have been the things the government *wanted* me to see. Regardless, the following is a recap of Czechoslovakia as seen through the eyes of this 1950's baby-boom product, who came home a lot wiser, and a hell of a lot more grateful for the life-style and habits in the U.S.

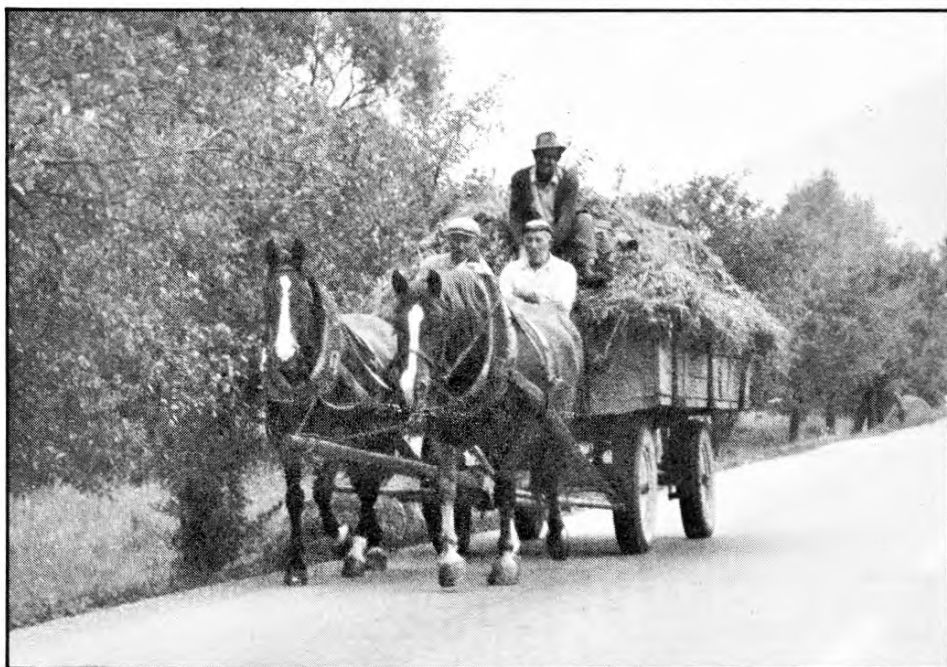
THE BORDER CROSSING

At the U.S./Canada territorial line, you generally zip through inspection in less than ten minutes. At the Czecho border, figure on an ordeal of one-to-two hours, or in some unfortunate cases, eight hours to three days. I was first greeted by a large steel I-beam gate, coincidentally painted red, white and blue (also the CSSR's national colors). There were guards milling about everywhere, dressed in drab green and gray uniforms, equipped with machine guns and German Shepherds sporting loose-fitting muzzles, rather weak-looking leashes and very large ominous teeth. My passport and visa were immediately collected for inspection. Depending on how you

rent your car in Europe, you might need to buy additional insurance to drive in Czecho (in my case \$16 extra was coughed up). When my luggage was inspected, approximately 2000 stickers (earmarked for trading with locals and other world travelers at the ISDT site) were confiscated by the guards, along with some 35mm film, half-dozen T-shirts and the biggest bargaining item in the country—five pairs of panty hose. During the entire border-crossing experience, I found it wise to remain polite, unquestioning and cooperative. When the first inspector found my sticker stash, he called over his buddies and I gladly began handing out stickers. Things got a little out of hand, I was ordered to stand away from my car, and the guards eventually helped themselves to whatever they wanted. I kept wanting to ask what they were going to give me in trade, but merely kept smiling.

Both sides of the road are lined with double rows of 20-foot-high barbed-wire fences—charged with high voltage electricity and sunk approximately 30 feet into the ground to discourage tunneling. Spotlights, guard towers and roaming guards with dogs and machine guns are very visible. No photos are allowed at the

border crossing. When I arrived, my camera was lying loose on the floor behind the driver's seat. It was confiscated immediately upon discovery, eventually returned, but minus the film roll inside. In all fairness, I found that after comparing notes with other Americans, I got more "special treatment" and lost more goodies than most. Apparently the time of day that I came through the border (about



1:00 a.m.) along with the fact that there was no one else there at the time (the guards were bored), that I was heavily loaded down with goodies and that my visa stated "journalist" (frowned upon, I'm told), all contributed to make my trip through the border more "exciting" than average. As terrifying as my experience was, I found out through others (particularly the West Germans) that even more harassment and hassles greet many potential visitors.

CZECHOSLOVAKIAN FOOD

Very few vegetables, lots of peppers, meat of suspicious origin and soup are the basic staples. Milk is sometimes fresh, more often souring, always barely white and served at room temperature. Pepsi-Cola and Coke are available, and until our fourth day in Czecho, were served at room temperature just like the local beer which is available anytime, even with breakfast. Sliced bread is rare, rolls are plentiful, but hard on the outside and very doughy on the inside. Sugar comes in the form of hard cubes which don't dissolve in hot water and must be smashed with a spoon to a size easier to swallow. Coffee is passable, although slightly dangerous towards the bottom of the cup, and tea, while readily available, takes at least two tea bags and lots of dunking to get it strong enough for even the weakest palate. We generally knew what type of soup would be on the following day's menu. If we had meat and dumplings for dinner, tomorrow's stew (actually soup, but they called it stew) was a combination of the two. People in Czecho don't throw away food—it's recycled as something else the next day.

Quite often the tip was figured out by our waiter when money was exchanged. Through the AMA we were

given meal tickets for food, and we noticed a definite lack of service the following morning if we didn't add a little tip to the tickets at dinner. We found that stickers set on the table when we were first seated insured prompt service, both during dinner and for seating the next time. In most of Czechoslovakia stickers were as good as money—often better.

The Americans persuaded the restaurant that fed us to serve ham and eggs each morning, after surprises like heavily peppered goulash and other unexpected and unlikely morning delicacies that more often than not weren't eaten. The eggs were small, with runny whites and yokes that somehow got solidly cooked. Pepsi with breakfast was the norm, although we could get a type of peach juice, watered-down orange juice or something that resembled grapefruit juice, always at room temperature. Dick Burleson was the envy of most; he brought his own box of Cheerios from home, but still had to crush the sugar nuggets and suffer through warm, often souring milk.

Paying for a meal without the provided meal tickets got expensive. Meat, potatoes, cole slaw and a Pepsi ran about \$8, and the portions weren't exactly overwhelming. We found two small bakeries in town with good pastries and just before leaving I stumbled across a place that actually had hot chocolate along with chocolate-frosted cake full of a whipped buttercream filling. There is good food in Czechoslovakia, but it's hard to find and very limited. The average ISDT visitor lost about six pounds during the 12-day stay.

CLOTHING

The Czechs are into producing their own jeans now, but a pair of real American Levi's (pants or jacket) will

go for \$60-\$100 depending on condition. The local fad is to remove the rear pocket and either discard them or re-sew them onto the pants about four inches lower than the original position. Bright clothing is almost nonexistent. Most apparel is dull in appearance and made to keep you warm for a long time—at least five years. In the local department store a wool sweater with no design or pretty colors costs about \$45. In the restaurant there was apparently a bit of a show put on for the visiting Americans. All the waiters wore tuxedos, and according to one employee, it was the first and probably last time they'd ever see or be seen in such an outfit. The day we left, the tuxedos no doubt disappeared.

LOCAL FLORA AND FAUNA

Houses in Czechoslovakia are unlike those in Austria, most noticeably in the lack of window boxes brimming with bright colorful flowers that are so profuse in Austria. Most yards contain small vegetable gardens consisting of cabbage and sugar beets for meals, and corn unfit for humans which is fed to the cows.

John Fero was the first to notice that with the exception of landlocked geese, there are no birds in Czecho. We don't know why, and have no theories at all—but you just don't see birds flying around the countryside anywhere. I saw one dog on a farm, two wild cats and one lop-eared rabbit. No squirrels or rodents were evident, no flies, and absolutely no pets owned by Czech residents—possibly because it's forbidden, or too expensive. Horses are used only to pull farm equipment and not for pleasure riding. Cows fed on corn and beer supply low grade milk and meat. Geese are abundant, both for eating and for feather material in "eiderdowns" and pillows.

MODES OF TRANSPORTATION

For most, trains and buses are the only way to get around quickly, though not dependably. Walking is big in Czecho. If you're above average in income and class you can buy a car. Two types are available—either a Tatra, the status car with a rear-engine V-8, or a Skoda, about the size of the smallest Fiat, with a small four-cylinder engine. There are no model years, no options, both cars have four doors and the colors available are black, white and gray. The high-level government officials ride around in chauffeured Tatras, while the police drive Skodas with "VB" (which means police) emblazoned on the door and a small blue light on the roof. Most of the cars smoke badly, but are still expected to last at least 15 years. Many start coming



Inside Czechoslovakia



apart after five years, but the locals keep gluing them back together and driving on. Both cars have three speeds and are capable of a maximum speed of 100 kilometers per hour—about 62 mph.

Motorcycles are almost entirely Jawa twin-cylinder jobs made in CSSR and built to last. Styling is not exciting, but dependability seems high. An imported BMW quickly draws a crowd, and a Yamaha monoshock, something the Czechs have never seen before, just about starts a riot. Babetta mopeds, assembled in Povazska Bystrica, are everywhere. At the only gas stations in town (government owned "Benzinol" outlets) mixed gas and oil are available right out of the pump.

THE ECONOMY

Czecho goes from the ridiculously cheap to the amazingly expensive in price values. Translated in terms of American dollars, a Pepsi will cost about a dollar and gasoline is approximately \$1.25 a gallon, after the customary 45-minute wait in line to fill up. Many of us who normally smoke cigarettes at home found ourselves cutting down drastically. Local cigarettes go for about two bucks a pack, and are a blend of approximately 60 percent cabbage leaf and 40 percent tobacco leaf. We discovered what kept soldiers awake at their posts at night while standing waist-deep in Siberian snow—Czechoslovakian cigarettes.

On the other side of the coin you can buy crystal, a world-famous Czechoslovakian specialty for about one-tenth of its cost in the United States, with all the legendary craftsmanship intact. Time pieces (clocks, watches) are about one-fifth the price here, possibly due to the cheap labor costs, and because the factories are owned by the government.

At the bank's exchange window, we got about 10 Kronas (renamed "whizbangs" by American riders) for one American dollar. On the street, black market deals are available, for upwards of 25 Kronas for a single dollar. The only drawback to dealing on the street is that you don't get your visa stamped (as you

do at the bank) stating that you exchanged money with the CSSR government. When you leave the country if your visa doesn't have enough bank stamps to cover the merchandise in your possession, it can legally be confiscated.

THE CLASS SYSTEM

Apparently, according to one local girl who spoke some English, the Czechs are divided into different classes. For instance, a Class 3 person will never be permitted to visit other countries, and rarely leaves his home county. Most Class 3 people are factory workers and housewives. A Class 2 individual, one who's had 12 years of schooling, can buy a car and travel around within the country relatively easily. A trip to Russia is possible, but hard to obtain through the government. A Class 1 rating is the top of the line—a highly educated, often bilingual individual. He can, after about a year of paperwork, visit places like Austria or Germany for two weeks (once in his lifetime), provided the individual is married, has at least three children, and leaves the entire family back home—to insure he'll return to the CSSR.

Trips to the United States are generally out of the question, but some do manage to get out and seek political asylum in the free world. However, if escape is somehow managed, it is said that the remaining family can be frequently harassed and awoken at all hours of the night for

years to come. They can lose their chance of ever visiting elsewhere, of moving up in class standing, of ever mailing anything out of the country or receiving mail from anywhere other than Czechoslovakia. Postcards, letters, and boxes are heavily censored and inspected by the government, particularly those being sent anywhere in the free world. An air-mail postcard from CSSR to the USA takes approximately two months to arrive—provided it doesn't contain anything negative about the country, in which case it will never leave the local post office.

PROPAGANDA

We were able to loosen up one native who spoke English to talk about the propaganda situation in Czecho. After about six beers, he said that the people have been told Pepsi-Cola is a Russian invention, and is now distributed all over the world, even to the United States. Coca-Cola supposedly originated in Czechoslovakia, was put on the market in 1964, and is now exported everywhere.

The cars that the Americans rented in Europe and drove into Czecho for Six Days are reportedly the results of our saving six to eight months' worth of pay checks in order to impress the Czechs with our large vehicles (Ford Fiestas, small Fiats and Volkswagens), when supposedly at home we could never afford such luxuries. The Americans reportedly brought all

continued on page 76



INSIDE CZECHOSLOVAKIA

continued from page 52

their best clothes, and really didn't have as much money as they appeared to be spending. Our source would not say, however, where all this information came from, or if the people of CSSR believed the stories to be factual.

In the smaller towns, there are public address speakers mounted on the corners. Anything the government wants to tell the country via mass media is piped through the speakers. Newspapers are rare, television broadcasts only about four hours a day and four radio stations operate in the daylight hours.

THE PEOPLE

They don't say much, don't ask much, and understandably, try to stay out of trouble. You find the friendliest folks out in the country. While shooting photos near one farm, a woman brought me a small stool to sit on, along with a cup of coffee, and helped me identify riders when I showed her the numbered entry list. Where gas pits were situated in smaller towns, the local people often brought out chairs for pit crews to sit on and offered the use of their bathrooms and water supply. Generally the houses have electricity, no

heating, no hot water, and out in the country, cooking and washing water comes from a nearby stream. All the dwellings are owned by the state, as are livestock and farm products. Each house is government-numbered (along with its regular address) and subject to confiscation if the government feels a need to use it.

For the most part though, the people are friendly, curious, a little cautious and very avid motorcycle fans. In spectating sections of the trail, there were upwards of 200 locals sharing beer, applauding the riders, cheering lustily for the Czech team, and when a CSSR rider came through, pointing out the good lines to follow. There are a lot of elderly people in Czecho who appear to be between the ages of 65 and 90. Most are out in the farmlands, and it isn't uncommon to see an 80-year-old woman sharpening her sickle with a stone, getting ready to cut the grass out behind the house.

LIMITATIONS ON VISITORS TO CZECHOSLOVAKIA

As a guest of the country, the government always has you under control. You are logged in at the border with the specific number of days you are allowed to stay, and through paperwork, Big Brother knows what you're driving, where you're staying, what you're eating, how much money you're spending and where you are most of the time.

You cannot drive on certain roads, and if your car isn't wearing the proper window-affixed permit, the VB can legally confiscate the car and the people inside. Wandering around the countryside in your car any farther than about 50 miles from the main town is extremely uncool.

Photos are not allowed of guards, government buildings, factories, trains or military personnel. One visiting gentleman found that by photographing a passing train (under the watchful eye of a soldier), he was rewarded with the confiscation of his camera, passport and visa, and spent a long terrifying time in the local jail before strings were pulled and he was released—minus camera.

It boils down to this: In the United States if you get yourself into trouble and are not a resident, our government threatens to deport you. In Czecho if you find yourself in a sticky situation—they threaten to keep you.

TRIVIA, TIDBITS, AND LAST MINUTE THOUGHTS

The average worker's wage is the equivalent of \$1.40 per hour for a six-day week, with Sunday off. Speed

limits are strictly adhered-to by local drivers. Women don't shave; we were told that the only women who shave their legs and underarms were "streetwalkers and Americans." Ted Leimbach modified pronunciation of the ISDT host town, Povazska Bystrica, to "Perverted Bezerko," a name which stuck. It's not unusual to see girls arm in arm, or men holding hands. After dark, almost all the girls are escorted by a guy with an arm around her waist. Most of the business establishments close between 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. Store hours are from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. Apparently a long lunch or siesta. At about 11:00 p.m. the town shuts down completely. If you're on the street, you'd better have good reason.

There are no fast food restaurants (like McDonald's) in the entire country. Many Americans were experiencing Big Mac Attacks by the third day, and would have gladly paid \$4 for one. A sticker affixed to your car will be pulled off by souvenir-seeking locals within four hours. In outlying towns the canals are used for bathroom facilities, washing clothes and water supply—simultaneously. The Czech riders were reportedly kept about 20 miles out of town in a motel guarded by armed soldiers (we never could find them to verify this). Their wives stayed in town, and only saw them as they rode by. Upon leaving the country, your vehicle is inspected, just like when you enter, with the exception of guards looking underneath, to make sure you haven't strapped someone on the bottom of your car in an attempt to smuggle them out. From what we could find out there were about 60 percent more people working in town than normal (mostly in construction of apartment buildings and such), leading us to believe that the work force was imported especially to impress the visitors. Anytime you drive past a new apartment building or house the speed limit is reduced to afford you a good long look. The gasoline labeled "Super" is the equivalent of the lower-grade Mexican gas. Pinging and dieseling were common in rented cars. Dane Leimbach and I studied travel brochures which had gorgeous color photos of buildings and scenery in Povazska Bystrica, but many of the settings in the booklet were not to be found anywhere in the town. Upon leaving the country, you must pass a large military convoy, whose job is to go up-and-down the road so visitors can observe the massive Czech military in action.

Strangely enough, when we got out of Czechoslovakia and about a mile into Austria, the sun broke out through a cloud cover.

M

hi-performance ENGLE CAMS



FOR THE KAWASAKI Z-1

Enjoy the increased performance and horsepower boost of an Engle camshaft. A complete line of street and competition grinds are available. Included are grinds for use with stock pistons and big bore kits. Ground on new billets (not re-grinds).

ENGLE RACING CAMS

1621 12th Street ■ Santa Monica, CA 90404

THE WORLD'S HARDEST-TO- FIND



motorcycle magazine is ROAD RIDER. It's also the only one published just for the touring rider — and is written and edited by a bunch of road riders who really know whereof they write (usually). RR is available only by subscription and at some more classy dealers. But don't fret — send us \$10 and we'll send you RR for a year. Or if you're kinda leery, send us \$1 for a sample copy.

ROAD RIDER

Box 678-G, South Laguna, CA 92677