

What Volunteering Has Done for Me

A Youthful Perspective on the Joys of Heritage Restoration

by Rupert Emery



As wonderfully bizarre experiences go, there is nothing like a week volunteering in the Czech countryside to open your eyes. Indeed I think it is safe to say that some of my most vivid memories, and the ones that cause my peers to think I'm a few bricks short of a Mauricovna, are those collected over the last three years of working holidays with The Friends of Czech Heritage. I discovered The Friends completely by chance in the summer of 2014 while looking for a way to explore the Czech Republic and it was undoubtedly one of the best things I ever did.

To provide some background, I am a 22-year-old language student, currently in my third year studying German and Czech at university. I settled on Czech mainly as an appropriate pairing with German and because I knew there wasn't a lot of competition, but somewhere along the way I fell in love with it, challenging though it may be. I imagine it is a safe assumption that anyone reading this can sympathise – the Czech Republic, for all its flaws, is a paradise of sorts.

The first working party I joined took me to Červený Dvůr. As an introduction to the world of Czech volunteering this was perfect: I was surrounded by a wonderful group of colourful characters, sharing meals with sanatorium patients in the canteen of a Baroque summer palace, and strolling across the fields to while away the evening in a typical Czech pub. I learnt useful words like 'cihel' (brick) and 'míchačka' (cement mixer) from a gap-toothed Czech builder who otherwise communicated only in grunts, gestures, and German. I'd like to think I proved my worth on that first trip: in the interest of Anglo-Czech relations, my garbled attempts at ordering beer managed to bring a smile to the face of our Czech waitress, something my fellow volunteers had previously thought impossible!

This first taste of volunteering with The Friends made me hungry for more, and the next year I made my first trip to Krásný Dvůr. While I have

many fond memories of the château and its hermit's grotto, the one that I often reminisce about is the daily commute, as it were, dragging an unwieldy and seemingly homemade wooden trolley on bicycle wheels uphill through the beautiful grounds. That, and the obligatory 'Ruská zmrzlina' at the end of the day, a hard-earned inch-thick pat of ice cream that makes it all worthwhile.

The final location, at least until this September, was the Villa Stiassni (and the Josef Arnold Villa) in the Moravian capital Brno. The second-largest city in the country, Brno is a thriving student hub and home to some fascinating and unexpected architecture. The staff at the villa were friendly and welcoming, and the Czech volunteers of the Kulturní Centrum Josefa Arnolda even more so. This positive experience played a large part in my decision to spend a semester at the Masaryk University as an exchange student, and the connection to the Villa Stiassni led to a translation internship, so once again I find myself indebted to The Friends of Czech Heritage.

It can be easy to focus on the humorous elements of these trips, highlights of which include the drunken barman in Český Krumlov who spent 15 minutes trying to stamp on a moth, charged us a 'foreigners' tax', and told us that we weren't welcome, that it was a place for Czechs; or on the less pleasant moments, most notably the vicious Czech mosquitos with their particular taste for English blood; or on the ways in which we the volunteers benefit from concerts in the castle to exclusive guided tours of places the average tourist never sees. However it is also important to acknowledge the importance of the work, and how rewarding it can be. The Mauricovna is a good example, despite any complications along the way: the end product is not just a piece of heritage, but also a space to help with rehabilitation. The Arnold Villa and the grounds of Krásný Dvůr present another aspect: a helping hand from The Friends, be it literal or financial, goes a long way towards validating these places, and the value of that is visible in the genuine gratitude of 'Paní Kastelánka', or when the mayor buys the group a round of beers as thanks. Deadheading plants in a Czech garden might not seem glamorous, but the sentiment behind it is a noble one and the main reason I anticipate many more years of volunteering.

Rupert Emery is a student at St. Anne's College, Oxford. He has been volunteering with The Friends every year since 2014