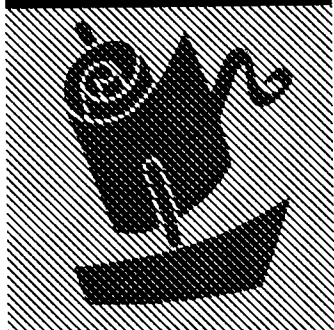


## STUDY ABROAD



For decades, due to political dichotomy, Eastern Central Europe (ECE) remained virtually inaccessible to Americans. Throughout the 1980s, with *glasnost* and *perestroika*, travel and even studying in the region was not unheard of, but remained essentially unique and distant from mainstream destinations.

Among the factors which led to the change of the political regime in 1989-1990 was certainly the influx of westerners to ECE. Today, as old political borders continue to erode and new ones form, the ECE region becomes a more attractive, and decidedly more feasible, destination.

The relatively low cost of living in the countries of the region also contributes to its rise in popularity. An average cost of a semester in most of the ECE countries runs between \$3,000- \$8,000 versus \$8,000 - \$15,000 per semester in London.

### The Varied Texture of the Region

Eastern Europe has traditionally been defined as the region incorporating all of the former Soviet Union,

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# Off the Beaten Track EAST CENTRAL EUROPE

by **CLAIRE COCCIOLE**

and some of the "Far East" region of Europe (Romania, Bulgaria, etc.).

Despite their Slavic roots and languages, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia occupy a category of their own because of their relative progressiveness in economics and trade, even under the past political system. They are joined in this group, known as Eastern Central Europe, by Hungary, which has no Slavic background and is both proud of and frustrated by its linguistic and cultural uniqueness as one of the very few Finno-Ugric language centers, a trait shared only by the Finns and some early Estonian ancestors. (The lack of any Indo-European roots makes the Hungarian language an extremely difficult one.)

In the early days of exchange, many of the programs were designed to accommodate foreign-born faculty at American institutions who sought to link their new country with the old, and bring two worlds together. As an increasing number of American schools sought connections to the region, they had a hard time deciding where to turn. Unless the Central European universities advertised themselves, there was little chance of learning what was being offered.

SUNY Oswego spotted the Budapest University of Economic Sciences in the beginning of its promotional activity, and was one of the early American schools to sign an agreement with the Hungarian university.

Jagiellonian University, in Krakow, Poland, has been very adept

at practicing marketing strategies to attract an American audience; currently four colleges host programs there.

For ECE universities, survival in many cases is determined by how enterprising the school is. In southern Hungary, Janus Pannonius University, facing the typical economic ordeals of the region, has had to turn to new avenues in order to stay afloat. Faculty there quickly discovered the potential of having American troops stationed near them in the wake of the Dayton Accords, and have established courses for them in Hungarian language and culture.

### The Newness of It All

According to the *1994/95 Open Doors*, published by the Institute of International Education, most of the countries in the Central and Eastern European region experienced a dramatic rise from 1991/92 to 1993/94 in the number of American students participating in study abroad programs. (i.e. the number rose 108% for the Czech Republic and 154% for the [former] Yugoslavia. For some of the countries listed, the figures indicate a decrease, but that is misleading because a growing number of American students are able to enroll directly in the ECE institutions, and are not recorded in the report's figures. In fact, much of the study abroad activity in the region also remains obscure, due to the newness of it all.

The established tools for study abroad directors to promote their

wares, such as study abroad fairs, have no history in ECE. Nor is there any organization in ECE which acts as an umbrella for schools interested in hosting international students. The dissemination of information for international study is greatly lacking, due in large part to the dire economic straits of most educational institutions.

Language, as in almost all international programs, has provided a huge impetus for studying in Eastern Europe, particularly in Russia, but the Central European countries have had a more difficult time convincing English speakers of the inherent benefits of learning their languages. Still, almost all of the ECE programs offer courses to teach their own languages. But they have also implemented English courses, out of necessity, for studies unique to their country or for studies that follow a general curriculum. The Budapest University of Economic Sciences, Pécs' Janus Pannonius University, also in Hungary, and the University of Nitra, Slovakia, offer their English courses through their own International Studies Centers. Jagiellonian University holds English and German classes through its own School of Central and East European Studies.

A trait shared by all the countries of the region is their vastly differing educational system from that found in the U.S. In many cases they share a higher education structure which is an amalgamation of German and Soviet styles.

### **Innovative Programs Abound**

While the region has produced outstanding scholars in many fields, establishing study abroad programs to compare with Western European programs has proven to be a challenge. But it has been due to this obstacle that new and highly innovative programs have been designed. ECE administrators, scholars and lec-

urers have exhibited, in many cases, an unparalleled willingness to accommodate their more rigid American colleagues.

Examples of such programs are Boston University's sponsorship of a unique music program at the Technische Universität in Dresden, Germany, which includes courses with such titles as "Introduction to Gregorian Chants, Goethe and Music," "Development of the Symphony in the 19th Century," and others.

The College of Business at Ohio University coordinates a problem-based consultancy program for five weeks each summer in Pécs, Hungary. Students are given an actual problem facing a business in Pécs, and are charged with solving it while on site, working closely with Ohio faculty. Participants in that program receive credit for a combination consultancy/internship. This is a clear example of a mutually beneficial program whereby American students gain valuable, hands-on experience and the Hungarian firms can access current American business thought and practices through the students.

The University of Rochester's semester program in Krakow offers students courses in Jewish History, an appropriate subject as Krakow was at one time a bustling city in Galicia, the former home to many of Europe's Jews.

A number of the programs devised for Eastern Central Europe include multi-site locations. Antioch College takes students to Poland, Germany and England for a semester for a comparative look at the issues of social and political change in the context of ethnic diversity. Syracuse University offers a similarly diverse program, entitled "The Eastern European Identity" which entails visits to Nuremberg, Prague, Dresden, Budapest and Bratislava, where students also have the opportunity to participate in internships in the region through the Council of Europe, which has recently expanded as a way of appeasing the Eastern Cen-

tral European countries who are not allowed to be members of the European Union.

Outside the ECE region, in the Baltics, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire has run a program in Latvia since 1992, the first of its kind there. At the same time that students take classes offered by UWEC and University of Latvia faculty, they are also able to participate in "EuroFaculty," which is comprised of a group of West European faculty who teach courses in English and German at the University of Latvia. This collaborative trend seems to be growing rapidly in Europe, particularly across former lines of division, due to the obvious advantages to both sides.

### **Students Cut of a Different Cloth**

Since study abroad offerings in Central and Eastern Europe tend to be unique, the students attracted to these possibilities are not cut of the same cloth as those choosing more traditional destinations, such as Western Europe, which a majority choose for international study. Participants in study abroad programs in Eastern Central Europe are often those seeking an adventure not found in the western world. Most of the destinations in the region strongly lack infrastructural amenities (adequate telephone lines and other communication links) taken for granted in the U.S. This fact alone indicates that students volunteering for some of these slight inconveniences attached to ECE destinations are serious about their goals.

Students are often also excited about the chance to witness historical political events taking place. Cost considerations also play a decisive role.

As travel to the region increases by leaps and bounds, so too will study abroad opportunities, making this currently off-the-beaten path destination a more common one.