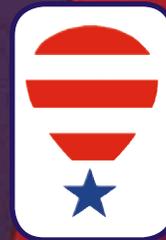


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# Ballooning

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# Picture Postcards from Abroad

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After I had successfully rocked my master thesis defense at my home university in Lithuania, I decided it was time for a spontaneous historically enriching relaxed solo trip. Destination? Big neighbor Poland, and more specifically its Southern region.

Krakov is absolutely beautiful, filled with the most colorful church interiors, an abundance of reminders of Pope John Paul the Second and facades decorated with animals ranging from a peacock to a serious looking little elephant. Time is taken to enjoy life here, slowly, something I had never encountered in the Polish capital Warsaw.

Concentration camp Auschwitz left a sad impression, which was somewhat weakened by the large amount of tourists in crispy plastic rain jackets, using their iPads as camera's. I still wonder if it was some kind of weird sign when a sudden thunderstorm hit the camp as soon as I entered the gates of this hideous place.

Being a young woman traveling alone, I haven't felt unsafe in Poland for one single second, which is something that should be said in times dominated by negative prejudices. Polish people showed to be very open, hospitable and helpful. But that wasn't all. I crossed the Polish border, enjoyed the view of the Tatra mountains and was introduced to Slovakia for the first

time. I could now start a whole story about my train ride and how surprised I was to see villages filled with gypsies only, but I won't.

A small balloon event with around twenty participants was scheduled in the second biggest city of Slovakia, Košice. I was picked up at the train station by the organizer of this event, Ingrid, having short black hair, an exceptionally good looking jaw line and a facial expression in which beauty and intelligence meet. Ingrid lives in a huge wooden house on top of a decent mountain, together with Dutch balloon pilot Arend-Jan and their Rhodesian Ridgeback with which I fell in love straight away. There wasn't much to see from their view, as the moment I arrived a heavy



*Day or night, the tiny city center launch field made for close quarters for balloon teams and spectators.*

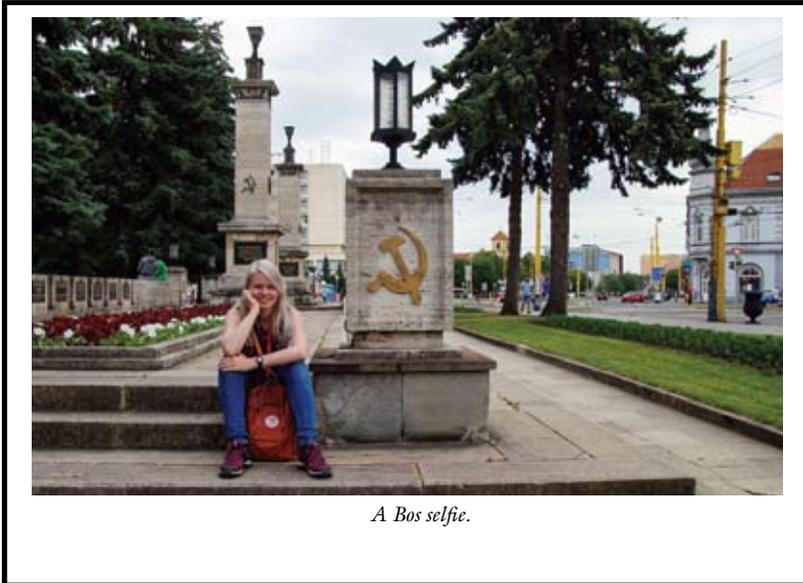
storm struck the city. Rain, hail and thunder resulted in some serious leakage, one neighbor losing its chimney while yet another had his window sill flying through the living room.

Once the sky had fanatically got rid of its tears the weather cleared up, leaving only some unpredictable gusts to occupy the minds of the balloonists. As event photographer I joined team Latvia, lead by what must certainly be the most fashionable female balloon pilot of Europe, Inga Igaune.

Having lived in all three Baltic countries, of which Latvia's beautiful capital Riga is the beating heart, it was a delight to be surrounded with the Latvian language again. During our half hour car drives over twisty forest roads towards the urban launch field I felt like a toddler, speaking in single words with exclamation marks instead of whole sentences. 'Kapi!', being graveyard in Latvian, or 'Sarkanrikliete!', a robin.

This launch field was pretty exceptional actually, located in the very middle of the city center, surrounded by shopping centre and sponsor Aupark and some huge flats (apartments/condos) that were

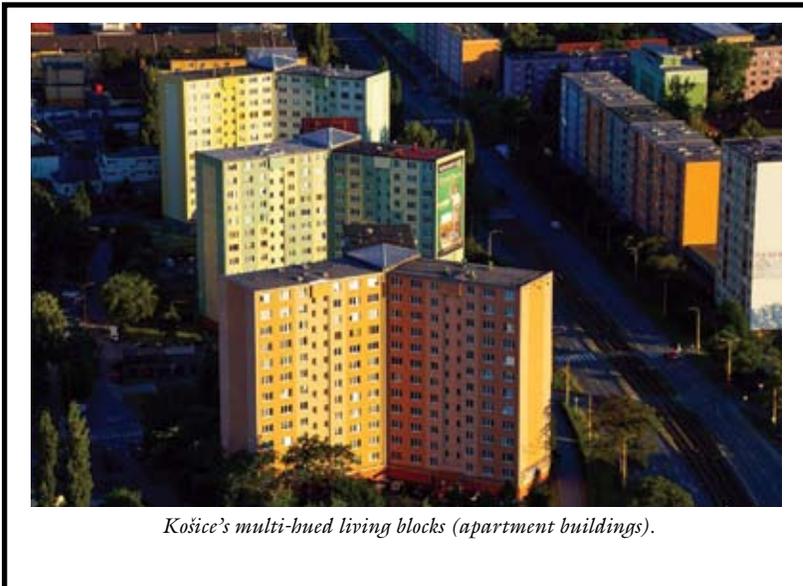




*A Bos selfie.*



*Pilot Inga Igaune shares a dance with local folk dancers.*



*Košice's multi-hued living blocks (apartment buildings).*

connected to each other by electric wires placed at a basket-passing-by height.

Next to the tiny field was a curious memorial decorated with Communistic hammers and sickles, cut out of thin wood and dolled up with a hint of golden paint. Because of the wind we didn't manage to fly every morning and evening, eventually ending up adding only two flights in Slovakia to our logbooks.

Nevertheless, aided by the tiny confines, the atmosphere at the launch field was cozy. The crowd stood curiously packed in between the balloons and many hyperactive children conquered their fear by touching the fabric of the rapidly enlarging balloons. A bride and groom hesitantly asked if they were allowed to spice up their wedding pictures a bit by posing right next to all the balloon action going on.

Inga and I shared a dance and smile with the local folk dancers, while during a crowded night glow the entire audience shook their hips. Only once airborne does one notice the immense color wave spread over Košice's living blocks. Interestingly, there doesn't seem to be a well thought out pattern in the usage of colors that range from canary yellow and dusty ochre to swimming pool blue and fluffy unicorn violet. No matter how weird the colors looked, the warm setting sun made it all look like a happy fairy tale. We were quickly shaken from our daydreams though when a giant jet took off from the airport we had just passed by. The sight of the plane and the balloons at the end of the runway was exciting.

With a shiny Festo balloon next to us, we entered a rural living area where we were welcomed with applause and open mouths of amazement. We landed next to an exceptionally calm horse that didn't mind the Latvian/Dutch/Slovak invasion of his little piece of land at all. The farmer on the other hand wasn't that calm. Even though I don't speak one single word of Slovak, I'm pretty sure he shared a great collection of swear words with us.

A seemingly drunk lad with two

teeth riding a rotten bike eventually showed up helping to pack the balloon, even though he was more occupied telling stories, in Slovak of course. We nodded and smiled.

All in all Slovakia was very good to us, including culturally. The Spiš Castle, built during the 12th century, is surely worth a visit, if not only for the adorable and interestingly named spermophiles (striped squirrels) walking around there. More modern history can be found in the Aviation Museum in Košice. If you're planning to go there, make sure the janitor opens the locked hangars, as they are packed with breathtaking old timers from a.o. Tatra and the well equipped but 90s looking car of the former president of Slovakia.

One last bit of advice to end this story with: when driving through Poland towards the Baltics, stick to the speed limit, otherwise a Barbie doll in police uniform but in an undercover police car will stop you, demanding 67 dollars. Oh well, for some that might be worth it.



*Once outside the city the flying area opened up dramatically.*



*With weather limiting the flying, Team Latvia found time to explore the 12th century fortifications at Spiš Castle and later some more modern military history.*

