



## Expedition Report & Reflections

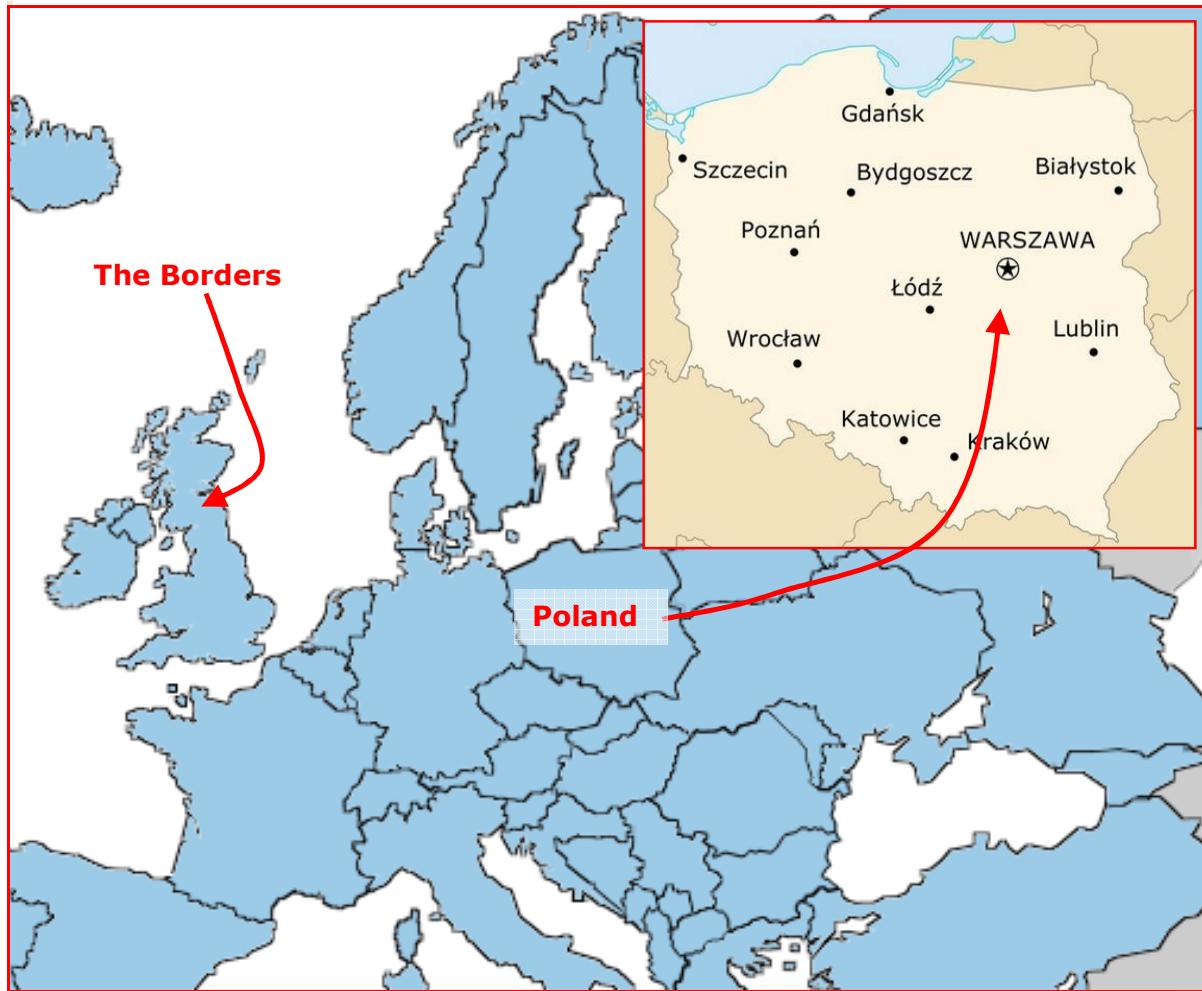
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# Introduction

Welcome to the Poland 2008 Expedition report! It aims to document not only the expedition itself, but the planning, selection and training elements that all combine to form the unique BEG experience. Hopefully it will raise a few smiles and nostalgic moments among the group members, whilst providing an insight to others about the trip, and adding to the "Chronicles of BEG" which must now be well into double figures of post-expedition reporting from destinations all over the globe.

## So... why Poland?



Poland is a country I had long had a fascination with, after taking a pre-university gap year back in 2000, and spending it teaching conversational English at a convent boarding school outside Warsaw (that was a change of scene from Hawick, believe me!). During my time there, I used my weekends to explore the country, culture, history and heritage whilst learning the language and making friends.

Ask people what they associate with Poland, and even today, the answers will often be cabbages, potatoes, vodka, WW2 and communism – which I think is a little unfair! That's not to say they are not important elements of Polish life, history and culture, but Poland also has 13 UNESCO world heritage sites, boasts mountains, beaches, marshes and primeval forests, and is home to wild bison, bears, beavers, storks, wolves and lynx.

It is a relatively unexplored nation by UK tourists, with those that do go generally heading only to the main cities of Warsaw and Krakow, with a few exploring a little further to Gdansk and Poznan, however in large parts of the country and in rural areas in particular, tourist footfall is very low. However exploring the country is relatively easy for anyone that chooses, with an excellent rail and bus network making all areas accessible with a little planning and deciphering of the cryptic train timetables!

Whilst I'm on the subject of trains, I should also add that an integral part of the expedition from the outset was traveling overland from the UK to Poland for two reasons: to reduce the carbon footprint and airmiles; and also to instill a sense of adventure, distance and accomplishment to the trip. It is very easy to spend 2 hours on a plane, travel hundreds of miles, and arrive feeling like you've gone no distance at all. Traveling by ferry and train allows you to observe the changing scenery, languages and people and develop a sense of where you've come from and are headed for. Not only that but it allowed us to stop en route in Amsterdam and Berlin and experience a taster of what these cities had to offer too.

All of these factors combined lead me to propose Poland as the 2008 expedition destination, which was then selected, and saw the team being assembled, the training undertaken, the activities and travel planned until eventually on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 2008, the group were ready to set off for 2 weeks in Poland that would include:

- One ferry, One flight (plus an extra one for Nancy!), 28 train journeys, and a handful of buses
- 5 cities across 3 countries
- Mountains, rivers and plains
- Hostels, tents, home-stays and a boarding house
- 32 letters in the alphabet, many of them unpronounceable
- 100 years of European history
- Hiking, canoeing and backpacking
- A Polish wedding, nuns, mass, ceilidhing in a fire station, a very scenic loo, some epic insect bites, no ticks, and lots of ice-cream!

I think that sets the scene – and is more than enough preamble from me. I hope you find something that captures your interest, whatever it may be, whilst flicking through, and if you make it to the end, you either deserve a medal, or have far too much time on your hands!!!

Ruth Norman (now Ellis)  
Poland 2008 Chief Leader

## Borders Exploration Group

Borders Exploration Group is a non-profit making group run by adult volunteers for young people in the Scottish Borders. Its aims are:

- To assist in the physical, mental and spiritual development of young people through participation in and preparation for expeditions – both international and at home
- To raise awareness of environmental issues in young people through recreational activities of an enterprising and explorative nature
- To help young people develop a sense of identity and self worth, while offering the chance to encounter and begin to understand other cultures and peoples
- To develop communication skills and learn the value and enjoyment of working as a team

BEG was founded in 1991 and aims to run a major international expedition every two years. Countries visited by expeditions since 1993 are Lesotho, Ecuador, Kenya, Mongolia, India, Peru, Vietnam and Zambia with the 2010 trip in planning for Chile.

In 2002 shorter two-week trips in Europe began, countries visited to date being Romania, the Spanish Pyrenees and Norway. A number of shorter expeditions based in Scotland have also taken part.

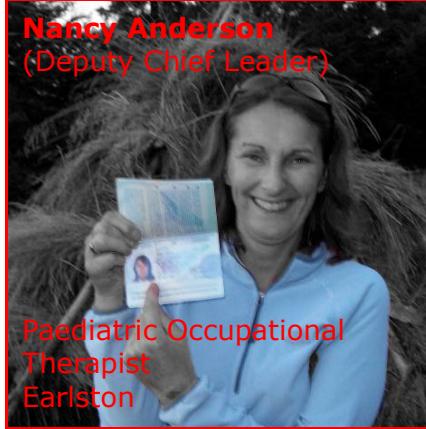
For further information on the Borders Exploration group, please see the website:

<http://www.borders-exploration-group.org.uk/>



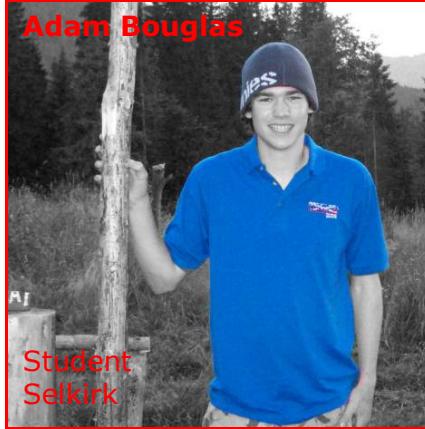
# The Team

**Nancy Anderson**  
(Deputy Chief Leader)



Paediatric Occupational Therapist  
Earlston

**Adam Douglas**



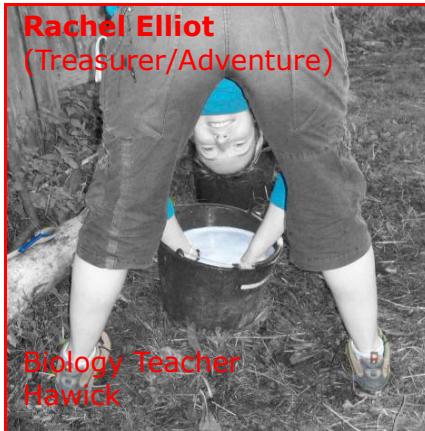
Student  
Selkirk

**Hannah Dalgleish**



Student  
Hawick

**Rachel Elliot**  
(Treasurer/Adventure)



Biology Teacher  
Hawick

**Jono Ellis**  
(Welfare/Adventure)



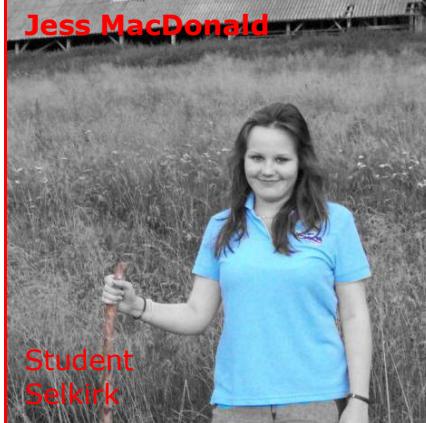
Internet Marketing Consultant

**Robbie Hopper**



Student  
Selkirk

**Jess MacDonald**

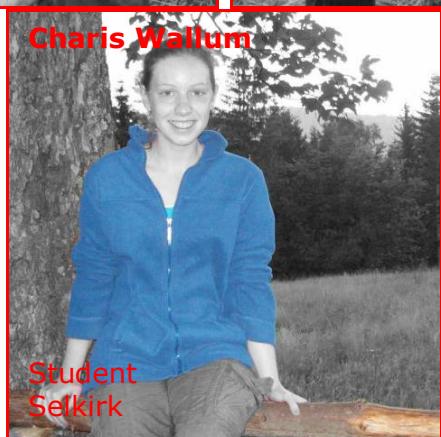


Student  
Selkirk

**Charlotte Mackay**



Student  
Selkirk



# **Expedition Aims**

The aims of a European expedition encompass the aims of BEG, but scaled down to fit a shorter timescale, reduced cost, and generally more economically developed destinations.

At the outset, it was felt that the Poland expedition could provide a challenging and valuable opportunity, for members of the Borders community, as either leaders or venturers, who might not be able or want to commit to the fundraising, preparation and timescale of a larger expedition.

Another important feature of a European expedition is to offer former participants, particularly ex-Venturers, and those new to BEG the opportunity to take on a leadership role, in a potentially less daunting situation.

Major BEG expeditions are composed of 4 distinct phases:

- Community
- Adventure
- Environmental
- Social/Cultural

To incorporate all four phases and fulfill the aims in any great depth on a two-week expedition is a challenge in itself, however the Poland Leader Team felt the inclusion of elements of all phases was important in creating a balanced expedition programme, and a varied action-packed itinerary was then developed to try to achieve this!

## **Adventure/Environment**

After discussing various options, the Adventure activities of canoeing and hiking were chosen: everyone in the group would be able to participate in these activities, whilst allowing an opportunity for the group to get closer to nature and consider environmental aspects too.

## **Cultural**

As a country Poland is an important location in modern European history, and has rebuilt itself after both World War II, and the fall of communism. It offers a huge range of sites of international significance, and excursions to visit several of these were included in the itinerary, after discussion with the whole expedition team: the Auschwitz concentration camp, the Salt mines at Wieliczka (A UNESCO world heritage site), Warsaw old town, Krakow old town, and a historical walking tour of Berlin en-route.

## **Social/Community**

Arrangements were made through a contact, Sister Klara, a Polish nun, to spend several days living with Polish families in the village of Lipowe Pole (a first for a BEG expedition). It was also felt that Poland provided an excellent opportunity to promote knowledge and skills in independent travelling, and wherever possible, the expedition used local public transport that was booked en-route rather than in advance from the UK.

## **Expedition Planning**

- 9th December 2007 – Leader Selection
- 20th January 2008– Venturer Selection
- 24th February 2008– First Training Day
- 18th - 20th April 2008- First Training Weekend
- 6th and 7th June 2008 – Second Training Weekend
- 21st June 2008 - Second Training Day
- 28th April 2008 – Quiz Fundraiser
- May – Parents information evening
- 20th July 2008 – Depart Selkirk for Newcastle
- 3rd August 2008 – Return to Selkirk
- 18th September 2008 – Presentation Night

From January 2008, until the departure date, regular meetings of the leader team were held, with support from a number of other BEG members.

# **Training Events**

Training for the Poland expedition took place over two weekends and one day.

## **Training Day 1**

### **Aims:**

- Start getting the group to bond
- Learn everyone's names
- Assess the physical fitness of the group in order to create a training plan that covers specific needs
- Discussing personal kit/equipment needs for the expedition
- Introduction to stretchering and dealing with casualties
- Getting venturer input into the first draft of the timetable

### **Summary:**

The first Poland 2008 leader and venturer training day was held on Sunday 24th February 2008 at Lindean village hall. We were again fortunate with the weather, and Charis prepared a report for the day.

"It was a cool, fresh morning when we first arrived at Lindean Village Hall. Little did we know what was in store for us...

First of all, we were all introduced to Claire, a Leader on the Zambia expedition, who taught us a few icebreaker games. You wouldn't have thought catching a ball was half as difficult as we made it out to be. However, we did manage to untangle ourselves from a 14-person knot. Maybe just a bit more agile than coordinated!

Next, we had Pat put us through our paces with a circuit involving activities such as step-ups, cross-running and skipping. I hope I'm not alone in saying the one-legged ball manoeuvring was a lot harder than it looked.

Rob taught us about all the various pieces of equipment we'd need on our expedition and took us through the 2 season vs 3 season, roll mat vs Thermarest conundrums. I hope there's a packing masterclass in our future, I have a feeling us Venturers will need it.

After lunch, (tasty soup Dan!) we each shouldered our rucksacks and set off, with more than a little trepidation. As BEG events usually involve a lot of mud, a lot of water or a lot of both and Jim had happily given out a few buoyancy aids, you can understand our worry. Turned out we needn't have fretted... that much. Our task was to get an injured Jono back safely on a home-made stretcher. Everything was going fine until we came across an electrified barrier, surrounded on three sides by lasers, (they do like to make it easy for us, don't they?). Apart from the stretcher almost going vertical at one point, we all made it across successfully and headed back to the hall.



Aimee and Rachel (lifesavers!) ran on ahead and put the kettle on so we all had time to enjoy a cup of tea before starting to put up our tents. These were the ones we will be using when we're in Poland so it was good to familiarise ourselves with them.

Finally came the planning of our expedition, allocating people to activities and pulling up a rough sketch of the timetable. It looks amazing, an afternoon in Berlin, canoeing in the north-east, working near Warsaw, visiting Auschwitz and the famous salt mines near Krakow, hiking in the mountains to the south... For me, the summer can't come quickly enough!"

## **Outcomes**

The overall feeling was that the training day had gone well and that the group (many of whom knew each other already) bonded well. After the weekend the leaders made the decision that the group should continue to recruit for a few more venturers as the feeling was that this would help improve the group dynamic. Some active recruitment was carried out and Adam was added to the venturer team in time for the first full training weekend on 18th - 20th April.

## **Training Weekend One**

### **Aims:**

- To introduce Venturers to camping, cooking outdoors and trekking with full packs
- To give basic level of training in navigation with map and compass
- Make team aware of level of fitness required
- Team building
- Familiarise team with equipment required

### **Summary:**

The first weekend on 18th – 21st April took the form of camping and trekking. We "camped" our first night on Cappercleugh village hall floor at St. Mary's Loch and on the Saturday we walked with full packs along the Southern Upland Way to Traquair. There we set up camp, got to grips with cooking on trangias and some after dinner Polish. Sunday saw us walk over Minch Moor and down to the canoe club hut at Yair.

Read on for the fab report on the training weekend by Robbie and Jess ...

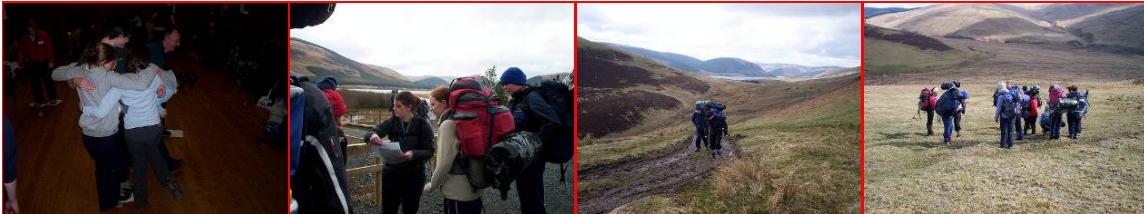
"BEG Training Weekend 18th-21st April 2008

Well, what can we say? The weekend started as it meant to go on. It was freezing. We were in the wilderness. There were no showers (greasy hair, Jessica!). But also, there was good company and lots to be done!

We started with the usual team building: a good game of Guess-Who to break the ice, featuring Brad Pitt (Jono), HRH the Queen (Ruth, obv) and Jordan (Sara). Then began the serious stuff – route plans! All went well apart from the fact Jessica, Hannah and

Robbie forgot how to use a ruler. Duh! We then all kipped down on the wonderful floor of Cappercleuch Hall and did our best to sleep through the snoring.

The day began at 7.00 am with long queues for the sophisticated washing facilities and bacon rolls. After rigorous purging of our rucksack content, Ruth joined us again after a night's recuperation (she went home after feeling too fluey to stand sleeping on the floor) and we set off on our adventure into the wild!



We walked...and walked...and walked...and walked...and yeah, you guessed it, we walked some more...then, out of the mist, strode our saviour, bearing biscuits and a Thermos...Dan! So we sat down and had a cuppa.

We then continued to walk for the rest of the day. Aided only by Ailsa's extraordinary singing talent, we soldiered on until Traquair appeared on the horizon.

We made camp in a field at Damhead Farm among the sheep. We put up our tents without too much mishap (apart from the rip – sorry guys!), dug the toilet pit and put up its tent (once we'd figured out what pole went where) and cooked our tea. We were joined later on at the campfire by Les and Kris and his family who taught us some essential Polish, for example beer, biscuits and potato. After a feast of toasted marshmallows we departed to our tents where we tried to sleep despite the cold and the tent-prodding (yeah, we know it was you, Chuck!)



The next day, we continued up into the forests and hills of the Southern Upland Way. We threw some cheese to the fairies at the Cheese Well and spied the Point of Resolution, where we swore never to walk so far again.

Covered in blisters and begging for mercy, we made it to the top of the Three Brethren thanks to Jessica's life-saving I-Spy game, which continued all the way to Yair despite Ron's attempts to befuddle us with his smarmy intellectualism (so what if we don't know our hills!). Then, just as Aimee was about to kill us I-Spyers and we were all dying of exhaustion, the canoe-shed surfaced before us. We collapsed onto the grass crying with joy...and pain. Nevertheless, we recuperated slightly with tea and cookies and had a quick brief down before we all headed home...to our nice, warm, comfy beds and hot, clean showers!



Oh and by the way, we did actually enjoy ourselves. Yes, it was painful and cold in parts but nothing could beat the sense of achievement we felt at having completed the 21 mile trek. Together. As a team. Go guys! We are the champions! \*thumbs up, cheesy grin, twinkle on the teeth\*

### **Outcomes:**

All of the above aims were met in full. The team got to grips with camping skills and began to appreciate the time involved in setting up and dismantling camp in a group situation. We also experienced the impact our camp made on the environment in a very short space of time. The distance was challenging enough to test fitness levels without leaving people totally exhausted.

### **Training Weekend Two (in two parts)**

#### **Aims:**

- To further develop team building
- To further develop camping and cooking skills
- To allow for a sharing of talents with a view to sharing our Scottish culture in Poland
- To give basic training in first aid
- To ensure all final details relating to tickets, passports, money and emergency contact details are complete
- To check that all have required equipment as per list and to give advice on packing of rucksack
- To provide final details on trip and departure details
- To allow time to learn a little of the Polish language
- To give out expedition polo shirts and sweatshirts
- To have an introduction to boarding, paddling and disembarking from canoes
- To practice camp evacuation
- To agree Golden Rules

#### **Summary:**

Due to the hectic lifestyles of the venturers on the Poland expedition, finding a date that everyone could make for the second training weekend was nigh on impossible. In the end, a two part weekend was the best solution, with the first part held on the 6th and 7th June and the second part on the 21st.

Sophie wrote the report on the first part of the weekend:

"The first half of the Poland 2008 training weekend saw a very streamlined selection of the team(only 5 ventures) assemble at West Morriston. All was not as it seemed however. For one thing it was not cold wet or muddy and the midges ignored us. In fact the only person to get slightly wet was poor Jessica (and that was in the last 10 minutes) and the closest Charis got to muddy was an impressive splattering of brown paint.

Feeling very civilized with our camping knives and forks and paper plates on the Friday evening we enjoyed burgers and sausages straight off the barbecue. Thanks to Dan, inspired by his ridiculous apron we had DIY kebabs followed by chocolate dipped strawberries. Instruments were then summoned from rucksacks, and the peace disturbed by talent both impressive and completely lacking (in defence of clarinetists it is extremely difficult to transpose music by head torch and candle light).

It could have been an idyllic evening – but the old spirit of BEG dies hard, and it manifested itself this time in the form of a herd of rampaging imaginary cows. Just as everyone had got snuggled into their sleeping bags, a code one emergency evacuation was announced, and we all trundled out again some of us sporting pretty sleek PJ's. The cows funnily enough turned out to be imaginary - confirming once and for all the precariousness of the average leaders sanity.

Fun over, the next morning it was to work after a quick bit of emotional team bonding courtesy of a ball of wool and some pretty nifty throwing. In the heat of the sun we battled nettles and paint splashes (ohh ehh) clearing an area of land and painting benches. Despite a few stings and paint splashed clothes a great feeling of satisfaction was had, and it all looked good in the end. We finished the morning with a touch of first aid training. Ron's performance as the unconscious dummy was particularly impressive (a career in theatre beckons) our attempts to manoeuvre him into the recovery position less so (a case of just when you thought it could get no worse).

After lunch it was time to get to grips with Polish. Some of us may be forgiven for thinking it was going to be as easy as ABC. Unfortunately, that was where the problems started somewhere between A and B and after C and so on. Still I can now count to 10 in Polish and tell everyone I am Scottish. Ya yestem shkotcom (not totally true as I was born south of the border).

We finished with a briefing about kit lists, it seems to get longer every time. The tents were de-assembled and the camp swept for litter. All in all I would say it was a really enjoyable half a weekend, and I think I can speak for every one when I say we are all really looking forward to the trip."

Adam wrote the report on the second part of the weekend:

"As Dan, Charis and I were the first to pull up outside West Morriston hall on the morning of the second part of our training weekend we began to worry if we were in fact at the right place. But no sooner than the thought had crossed our minds more people began to arrive and soon we were all present and keen to get started. The day began with most of the leaders having a private meeting to discuss the timetable for the day, whilst Jono went ahead and began to sort out our clothing just as the rest of the leaders scheduled that task for later in the day. But no worries as we soon had the clothing sorted and were ready to begin our training. We then all congregated in the main room in the hall where Ruth went over the itinerary (or itinerarary as she liked to say) for the day. We decided to start with some first aid training, kindly provided by Alan McGee, during which we practised CPR, the recovery position and how to deal with various other scenarios, hopefully none of which will become necessary on the trip. After the first aid we headed down to a local pond to practise some canoeing and have some lunch. Some basic canoeing skills and safety procedures were taught by Jim Macpherson before we all got a shot of paddling in a figure of eight around the pond.

The canoeing seemed to go well (no one ended up in the pond anyway) so we all headed back up to the hall to move on to our next item on the list.



We had all brought along our entire rucksacks with all, or most, of our luggage for the trip which we proceeded to unpack and then repack. This activity started with Nancy giving us a quick demonstration, and some tips on how to pack lightly and efficiently. After watching her pull most of her clothing for the whole two weeks out of an incredibly small bag we all set to work unpacking and then repacking our rucksacks in the most space-saving way possible.

It was then time to go over the itinerary for the trip where, for the first time, we heard exactly what we would be doing in Poland. After hearing details about the various things we will be undertaking on the trip we were all very excited and got to work setting up the hall for the parents meeting which was set to finish the day.

Once all the parents had arrived and were seated we went through the itinerary for the trip one more time for the parents with each of us telling them a little bit about what we will be doing in Poland. There was then a brief introduction of all the leaders and venturers, each of us telling the parents who we were and how we had got involved with the trip. A question and answer session marked the end of a very informative and enjoyable day and left us all feeling a new level of excitement for the forthcoming trip."

### **Outcomes:**

Another successful weekend (in two parts), which met all the aims in full. The Poland team is grateful to all who gave of their time and expertise in all of the training, ensuring the success of the trip.

## **The Expedition Summary**

The BEG Poland Expedition left the UK on the 20th July 2008 for an action packed two weeks filled with culture, history, adventure and eventually sunshine! The key elements of the trip are set out in the following sections, which have been contributed to by several members of the group – many thanks to them for their input.

# Adventure

## Canoeing

The Adventure aspect of the expedition was to come in two parts - canoeing in the North of Poland and then hiking in the mountains in the South. After researching a range of different options the leader team decided that it would be best to hire 3-man open Canadian canoes along with a guide from a local company, offering us the safety and security of a guide but also the possibility of going at our own speed. When we arrived on the banks of the Narew at Łapy the weather was cool, overcast and a bit windy - not quite the shorts and tshirt weather we'd hoped for! The 3-man boats came with 2 paddles, one for the front person to use to paddle and one for the back person to paddle and steer with. In theory!

Despite having had an introduction to canoes from Jim McPherson in the pond at West Morriston I don't think that any of us were quite ready for how hard it would be to get the boats going in the right direction! As soon as we set off a few of the 2-man teams were having collisions (both with the bank and each other, sometimes both at once!) and it took us until almost the end of the second day before everyone felt that they had mastered the skill of coordinating paddling and steering. As the lucky 3 person in each canoe didn't have a paddle they were responsible for taking photos, distributing food supplies, leading the singing and shouting encouragement. Every now and then we tried to find a low bank that we could pull up to in order to swap around, sometimes even to swap between a few boats... it was very lucky that no one fell in (although there were some wet feet!). So... what about the views you ask?



The recent weather had caused a spurt in growth for the reeds and grasses that line the banks of the Narew river marshlands so the views were a lot more "samey" than expected - but on the plus side that let us concentrate on the task of going in a straight line! Our guide, Mariusz (or Mario as he preferred to be known), was a very experienced guide (although we had to communicate with him either through Ruth or through his limited English - which was still vastly better than our Polish!). It didn't matter though - it didn't take long to realise that we were going much much slower than he would have liked - to the point that he decided to dive into the water for a swim and tow his boat along behind him! At the end of day 1 - after 20km of canoeing - we stayed in the small village of Waniewo, by which point the weather was a bit warmer, allowing us to enjoy a meal outside for Ruth's birthday.

On day 2 several of us were woke up with the feeling that canoeing involved muscles that we weren't entirely aware that we had (not knowing if we could handle another 14km of paddling)! Day 2's weather was warmer and sunnier - although it felt like we spent a large part of the day paddling upstream through narrow grass-choked tributaries. The home-straight was into a large, flatter area of water at a village Rzedziany, near to the town of Białystok, allowing us the chance to all canoe alongside one another. To finish up we helped was the boats and pull them out of the water and up onto the trailers. Overall the experience of canoeing was very good and it helped show the group's team-working skills.

## **Hiking**

The hiking section of the trip went well (although it started with a rather hardcore walk in). The hills had an Alpine feel to them: steep slopes with fairly dense pine forest and glimpses through to the other sides of valleys; very pretty. Our campsite had been arranged through a Polish mountain guide named Lukasz now living and studying in Edinburgh. The campsite is a temporary Summer camp set up by the mountain guides with 5 expedition style 4 man tents, a hut for the guides to live in, a campfire, a large army cooking tent, a spring and a long drop toilet. The toilet provided a fair bit of amusement for people - it seemed people were a little distressed by the smell but even more distressed by the lack of toilet door. The toilet has a great view out into the trees so you need to shout on your way down to it to make sure that no-one's in. The spring had been certified by the Polish government as safe drinking water and, sure enough, was clear, clean, cold and tasty. The spring was located about 5 minutes walk from the camp and water was carried back in buckets and bottles whenever people felt like a walk.

Our first dinner in camp was sadly a bit un-appetising - partly my cooking group's fault. The problem was that the noodles were very very salty and turned into a gloopy glue-like paste which didn't really look that good. Gladly the menu improved over the next few days with porridge, couscous, chocolate and soups.

The group enjoyed walks into the hills taking in a local mountain hut which served some basic Polish food and drinks. The longest walk went round the nearby hill range and in to Slovakia. Many pictures of people with one foot in Slovakia and the other in Poland ensued. The scenery was amazing. The hill nearest our camp had a large cross on the top (dedicated by Pope John Paul II) and was visible from miles around. Walks were all marked and were fairly easy to follow but the forest was full of extra fire breaks, tracks and paths - all of this made the navigation a little interesting for people.



The group decided that in order to get the maximum shopping/cultural time in Krakow we should get up as early in the morning as we could manage. 5am early. So at 5am we all got up, bleary eyed, and stuffed our sleeping bags into our rucksacks. We all managed to get to the camp gate by 5.15, before one final sweep for litter or missing possessions. The alternative walk out was significantly easier than the walk in, using a forest track directly down to the village. The photos that the group had taken of the bus timetable to show the guides had not quite been clear enough to show that the bus which we had planned to take did not run on Saturday mornings. An hour's wait before we boarded a 25ish seater minibus, bags on knees, bound for Zywiec and then Krakow, bringing us to the end of our camping stage and almost to the end of our trip.

## **Social and Community**

Social interaction was a key element of this expedition, as with all of the trips BEG has organised. The inclusion of a social/community phase in the village of Lipowe Pole let the group get right into the heart of a Polish community, albeit one in a celebratory spirit, since the weekend of our visit coincided with the golden wedding anniversary celebration, a first wedding anniversary celebration, and 25 years of the priest's service in the village.

We were hosted by local families who warmly welcomed us into their homes and looked after us fantastically. Our meals were cooked and served by the 'grandmothers' of the village in the community hall, attached to the fire station which also served as the venue for a huge party celebrating all of the above events, plus the arrival of 15 assorted Scots!

In the end, despite our best attempts to ensure otherwise, our 'Community' input extended to painting the outside of the fire station, before Polish hospitality took over and we were instead occupied with table setting, cutlery polishing and food preparation for the party.

It, of course, was a fantastic night with music, dancing, tables groaning with food, and toasts a plenty.

The local community were keen to show off their success stories too – children from the holiday club run by Sister Klara, our local contact, sang English songs they had been learning. We were taken on a tour to a local factory that manufactures ladies formal-wear clothing. Not quite to the tastes of the girls in our group, but apparently selling well in Hungary, and now a significant local employer.

The area has many similarities with the Borders – an area of once prosperous industry that has fallen into decline, populated by scattered towns and villages, and situated close to, but somehow still dislocated from a number of larger and much more prosperous cities and towns.

The whole village really were involved in hosting our group and making our stay as comfortable and enjoyable as possible. Aside from those that opened their homes, the fire brigade transported our luggage to and from the train station, others helped cook, and clean up after the party, which I'm sure would still have happened if we hadn't been there, but with 15 fewer mouths to feed! Some of the younger generation of men in the village were commandeered to chauffeur us to a museum of military history. Other residents were dispatched to gather herbs and produce from their allotments for the meal.

And over it all, of course, Sister Klara presided, working to a plan that most probably only she knew, always smiling and tirelessly answering questions, solving problems, and thinking one step ahead.

I would like to think that if the tables were reversed, people in the Borders would pull out all the stops in the same way, but I'm not so sure it would all be done with the same ungrudging enthusiasm!

# Culture

By Aimee Mallin

## **Introduction**

Poland 2008 was a huge success in terms of experiencing different cultures from across Europe and gaining a better understanding of more of the history. In the two weeks of the expedition we managed to visit six European countries - most notably Netherlands, Germany and of course Poland, obviously Scotland and England, and very briefly (and somewhat tenuously), Slovakia – in fact many of the group managed to stand both in Poland and Slovakia at the same time whilst walking in the mountains.

In each country we visited we had a small insight into its culture. Even though we only passed briefly through most of the cities we visited this was still enough opportunity to have a cultural experience - this was often in the form of a whistlestop tour!

Before travelling the majority only knew a relatively small amount about Poland - and its cultures, customs and history - but while there we saw a great deal of things which educated us.

The first real cultural shock actually came while still in British water. This came in the form of the boats decidedly dodgy cabaret entertainment but only Ruth, Rachel and I experienced that in full, everyone else having gone to bed. And it is agreed that the less said about that the better!

## **Polish Language**

The language difference between English and polish is vast one; I found it hard to find many similarities between the two. Despite this the majority of young poles can speak very good English. In addition Ruth can speak a bit of very good polish so could help out if things were going wrong.

It was felt that it is important to have a basic knowledge of the language before travelling to any country. So in preparation for the trip we all undertook two Polish language sessions, during the training weekends, to help with the language barrier. Our teachers were friends of Nancy, Ruth and Jono who kindly gave up their spare time to help us. Also a card with emergency phrases and handy ones were given to every member of the team. Despite these the most used phrases of the trip were "Dzien Dobry" and "Dziekuje", Good day and thank you respectively. When we stayed with Polish families our limited polish improved amazing, even if our vocabulary was still rather small.

## **Cultural Exchange**

The most significant and intense cultural experience of the expedition was the time spent living with host families in Lipowe Pole near Skarzysko-Kamienna. As Ruth is covering this, I will make what this brief. Our time here was organised by sister Klara, who ran the community centre out of the local fire station.

It was here that we were able to sample some real Polish food prepared for us by the women of the village. We discovered their love of pork, clear soups and cauliflower. Also while attending an anniversary party we were introduced to vodka. The Polish drinking culture is very different from ours - food and drink are always paired together. This is really unlike in the UK when alcohol is drank on its own with the purpose of getting drunk.

During our time here we had some brilliant cultural experiences. We were invited as a group to a wedding anniversary celebration; the family welcomed us with open arms. We ate and drank alongside the rest of the family, sang and danced to the local band. It was an amazing night and everyone thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

On our last day we arranged a cultural exchange, where we arranged for us to show the local community some Scottish culture. We did some highland dancing, ceilidh dancing, there was

singing and music. Everyone was able to taste some haggis too. The young kids from the community centre sang some songs in English too. Sister Klara had invited people from the villages and neighbouring villages too; it was a really good turn out with people from all over the place coming to see us. All in all it was a successful evening which allowed us to give a little bit back after the amazing hospitality we received.

While here we also witnessed the dedication of the majority of the Polish population to the Catholic Church. Almost the entire village attended church on Sunday something almost unheard of in the UK. Sister Klara also arranged for us to attend a wedding ceremony in the neighbouring town. This provided the opportunity to witness first hand the traditions of a typical Polish wedding and hear the choir. In the cities at almost every turn we saw nuns doing there daily business. This was for the majority of the group a culture shock in many ways because it isn't something we see often in the UK, as religion is not embraced in the same way.

### **Warsaw**

There were two brief stops in Warsaw; during the visit we took an evening wander to see the old town by night. A large proportion of the main square had been reconstructed after the war using the original blueprints. This was an aspect of Warsaw everyone knew about but this didn't fully prepare us for the reality of seeing it. The workmanship that must have gone into it doing it was immense. This was also where the group had their first encounter with some rather interesting ice creams!?

On our second visit to the capital we took a trip to the Palace of Culture and Science. From the top there were spectacular views of Warsaw in its entirety. From above the difference between the metropolitan capital and the old city is apparent. Afterwards we split and everyone took in different parts of the culture - café culture in the square and retail therapy were both indulged. This is something that I think is really important in any city: to let you take things in, in your own time and relax a bit.

### **Krakow**

The expedition was rounded off with some time in Krakow. This medieval city is seeped in history - there is an old story that there is a dragon that lives under the city protecting it. The city has a really nice contrast between old and new, traditional and modern. We all had time once again to soak up the atmosphere, relax and shop here in small groups.

This was the base from which we went on trips to Wieliczka salt mines and Auschwitz. Wieliczka salt mines are underground salt mines, which established hundreds of years ago in medieval times. The salt here was invaluable to the people and made the area wealthy. There are many underground levels, but we only went 130m underground. The highly religious culture is evident even down in the mines. There are many chapels ornately carved into the salt so the miners could go and pray. There was something very uplifting about the mines - in many ways they were breathtaking.

Auschwitz is such an important part of European history, as well as the history of Poland. The group diary for the day describes it better than I could so, I will not try to. The visit there although harrowing and in many ways indescribable was important. I think everyone should consider going because it lets you see, if not comprehend, the crimes committed during the war. And also the war is such a major part of Poland's recent history it was important in helping to get a better feel for the country.

### **Berlin**

On the way out to Poland, we also spent the morning being shown around Berlin by a guide, who was a British historian specialising in German history. He showed us the main sites including the

Berlin wall and what is left of the Nazi occupation in Berlin (much of which has been destroyed). We were shown the progression of the city from the 1930's until the modern day - starting at the old train station used during the war which is almost destroyed and finishing at the new Hauptbahnhof train station. We saw the change in architectural style, progression of history and the amalgamation of new and old in Berlin. To be honest one of the striking things about the city was how modern it was, in an attempt to move on and forget the past.

In terms of the cultural experience we had in Poland it could not have been better. For such a short time spent in a country we saw and experienced so many aspects of there country: its cultures and traditions. The time spent in Lipowe pole was a completely unique experience that will be hard to forget for multiple reasons!

# Travel

The Poland Expedition used a wide variety of transport, including...

- 1 Ferry
- 1 Flight
- Almost 20 train journeys! Some fast, some slow, all rather warm...
- 1 Tram
- 4 Buses of varying types
- Several car journeys
- 1 fire engine (!)
- And a lot of leg work

At the outset of the expedition planning, the decision was made to travel over-land (and sea) on the outward leg. Not only would this reduce the environmental impact of the trip, it allowed the group to take in two other major European cities – Amsterdam and Berlin – en-route. From a historical point of view, and visit to Berlin is particularly relevant before visiting Poland, allowing and insight into the impacts of World War 2 and the subsequent Communist regime on both sides of the Polish/German border. Travelling over-land also gives a greater sense of the distance travelled, and the changes in landscape, culture, affluence and lifestyle along the way.

Key elements such as ferries, flights, international and express trains were booked in advance before leaving the UK to ensure we would be able to travel on the required days, however the rest was arranged once we were in Poland, and tickets were purchased by the nominated leader/venturer team on the day of travel. Often this had to be done in Polish, and the venturers in particular were keen to get stuck in and put their linguistic skills to the test.

In general the trains and buses ran to time, and all connections were achieved. The only significant transportation issue was during the train journey from Krakow to the salt mine at Wieliczka, during which the heat of the sun during the day had buckled the railway tracks, and the train was unable to continue. However, thanks to some helpful locals on the train, the group were able to catch a bus and arrived only a little late, and were still able to undertake their tour.



## Accommodation

For the trip to Poland we stayed in a variety of different styles of accommodation including ferry cabins, hostels, a guest house, tents and, most memorably, the homes of our host families (a first for BEG I believe)!

### **Ferry Cabins**

The Newcastle to Amsterdam/Ijmuiden ferry - The Queen Of Scandinavia - is quite a nice ferry... and it's all the nicer when you discover once you're on board that it's still possible to upgrade from the cheaper, below the engine room so no chance of a view cabins to the shiny cabins with windows above the waterline! The group were glad of the decision to upgrade and the new cabins were quite spacious with views of passing off-shore wind farms, tiny looking fishing boats and the occasional diving sea-bird. There were four beds (2 bunks) to a room with a small shower/toilet en suite - all pretty standard!

### **Hostels**

Hostels made up a significant part of the accommodation for the trip and were all remarkably similar to one another (despite being spread out over vast distances). The Three Pigs hostel in Berlin was very close to the famous Anhalter Station - now just a single remaining column - and was quite an old building with a quiet little courtyard. Although we spent little time there the large rooms were nice with mostly single beds and not bunks. Breakfast was pretty lush, as was the GIANT round table which seated most of the group.

The hostel in Warsaw had the same hostel feeling (although perhaps with slightly older and creakier floors) and a really big hallway with plenty of tables and chairs and space for us to dine in. The hostel was on the fourth floor with what felt like a million steps to climb with heavy packs on.

In Bialystock the hostel was perhaps the grimmest looking from the outside (a concrete box style building) but that wasn't an issue - the tremendous heat inside was however! Rooms were small (by hostel standards) and each room held several huge wooden bunk beds. We managed to fit the entire group into one room for our evening meeting.

The Yellow Hostel in Krakow was our final hostel (and they graciously allowed us to store some of our gear there when we went to the mountains). Again the hostel was fairly standard and was nicely furnished (although it was stiflingly hot!).



### **Guest House/Pension**

In Waniewo we stayed in a Pension (or guest house or boarding house to give you more of an idea of what that might be like). The owners were very nice, even sorting us out with fresh milk for our porridge making in the morning. Similar to the hostels we'd stayed in the communal areas and dining room were furnished with bare wooden floors (and the occasional rug) to make the easy to keep clean and the building in general was a fairly 60's style with open wooden stairs and quite big windows. We shared twin rooms with our buddies.

### **Tents**

The campsite Przyslop Potocki was really one of the most beautiful campsites that any of us had stayed at. A small hut, a cooking tent and a row of 4-man Army-style tents were pretty much all that made up the campsite as it's a temporary, Summer only camp. A long-drop toilet (without a door to spoil the amazing view!) was positioned a small walk away from the tents. About half a

kilometre away a spring ran out of the hillside and provided fresh water and an area to wash. As well as keeping water on the boil on the camp fire the volunteers that run the small site had been kind enough to put mattresses into (some of) the tents – luxury for the lucky few!



### **Host Families**

Despite being one of the aspects that the group members were most nervous about the prospect of staying with host families was one which the group had all been very keen to do (as opposed to taking tents and camping, which was the other main alternative for the Community phase). I think that everyone was wondering just what our hosts would be like (and where we would be sleeping) as we arrived on the train. Sister Klara had done an amazing job of finding families in the village that were willing to take us into their homes. From a logistical point of view we had agreed that we would try to have one leader with each venturer but this wasn't quite workable so Sister Klara helped rearrange things. The group stayed in mostly 2's and 3's (with only Ruth staying on her own as it was decided that since she was the only one with Polish knowledge she would be most able to communicate on her own). All of the local families were very kind and all had offered as much space as they could spare and were very very generous. Most of the young people in the village were fluent in English, making communication much easier in some houses. The houses in the village were all very nice and many homes weren't too dissimilar to the ones you find in the Borders. Major differences that people noticed compared to at home included the fact that several homes didn't have refrigerators and several of the families had several generations living together under one roof.



## Catering

The catering throughout the trip was very dependent on the situation and phases as obviously this dictated our resources. Prior to leaving a budget of £5 a head per day for food was decided - this is roughly 20 zloty. Each day catering was managed by a group of three people, a mix of leaders and ventures. Each team was responsible for a period of three days and in some circumstances everyone cooked together. The majority of the food was bought at local supermarkets and small local shops depending on the place we were staying and what was available.

An example of a basic menu is as follows:

Breakfast - Cereals, porridge or continental breakfasts provided by hosts and hostels

Lunch - Sandwiches with assorted fillings, fruit, biscuits, crisps and drinks

Dinner - Soups, pasta, rice dishes with sauces, chicken and pork. Ice cream.



During the community phase the food was all provided by the community centre and families involved in our stay at Lipowe Pole. Here we enjoyed real Polish food. We ate a lot of clear soups, loads of different salads with mayonnaise, cabbage, cauliflower and pierogi (stuffed dumplings filled with mushrooms, cabbage, meat or cheese). They were also kind enough to provide us with fresh fruit and cakes, as well as copious amounts of tea!

The cooking was done on a mix of trangias and in the hostel kitchens dependent on location. We used the trangias while canoeing and during our time in the mountains. Before hiking up to the mountains the catering groups responsible for the time there went to Tesco Poland (!) to stock up on supplies. While in the mountains we cooked in our tent groups under the cooking shelter already on site.

As we spent time staying in youth hostels we were able to use their kitchens to prepare food in these situations the catering team did the cooking. A special mention should go to the night in Bialystok when all the venturers undertook an independent supermarket trip and prepared a fantastic dinner to celebrate Ailsa's 18<sup>th</sup> Birthday, complete with 6 litres of ice-cream – just to make sure there was enough for everyone! Also several of the hostels we were in provided breakfast - 3 Little Pigs in Berlin, Yellow Hostel in Krakow and the hostel in Bielsko-Biala.

On two occasions while in Krakow we ate out with a budget of 40PLN a head. The catering team were responsible for picking the restaurant, which was no hardship, as there were a lot of choice, and both times, Pizza won out!



# Equipment

## Personal Kit

Below is the kit list for all expedition participants:

Equipment	QTY	Description
Trousers	2/3 Pairs	1 smart, 1 others, must dry quickly, no jeans or cords and preferably not cotton. Girls - might want to take a wrap skirt or sarong for smart.
Shorts	1/2 Pairs	Lightweight, loose and comfortable - you'll know yourself if you're more of a shorts person or a trousers - make sure you have at least 1 of each, and the rest is up to you
Sweat shirt	1	Poland Hooded top
Sun Hat	1	With a brim to protect your neck too.
Waterproof Jacket	1	A waterproof jacket is essential, shell clothing is best, padded may be too heavy and is bulky - something light that can be squashed up small in the bottom of your bag is ideal
Waterproof trousers	1	Lightweight
Boots	1	A good pair of sturdy comfortable lightweight boots or very sturdy hiking trainers and a pair of spare laces
Trainers	1	A pair of light weight comfortable shoes
Sandals	1	Not flip-flops. Must be suitable for walking around in for long spells
Socks	6	3 for boots 3 lightweight
Underwear	4-5 pairs	
Swimming Costume	1	
T-Shirts/Shirts/Vests	4	Selection of long & short sleeve tops including Poland polo-shirt
Fleece	1	Lightweight
Personal first aid kit	1	Should contain some plasters, blister plasters, painkillers etc. and any personal medication
Towel	1	Not a big beach towel!
Face cloth	1	
Soap and antbac	1	Small bottle of concentrated per tent might suffice. Small bottle of antibac gel each
Deodorant	1	Roll on takes up less space
Tooth brush	1	
Toothpaste	1	Small tube
Shaving kit		If applicable
Feminine hygiene		Work out what you need and take them with you - don't go overboard - you will be able to get more fairly easily once there.
Sun Block	1	No less than factor 15
Nail Brush	1	
Lip Salve	1	Ideally with built in SPF
Wet Wipes	1 pkt	
Sleeping bag	1	2/3/4 season, lightweight, good stuff sack. Depending on how much you feel the cold etc. 2 season should be enough unless you feel the cold a lot. Think about how warm you were during the training weekend...it probably wont be much colder than this and may be warmer too.
Sleeping bag liner	1	You'll need this for staying in hostels too - pertex and silk are good but more expensive - cotton is fine too but not so warm and a bit heavier.
Sleeping Mat	1	Karrimats are good, therma rests better - we will be camping although not with our own tents, so a mat of some sort will be essential.
Head torch	1	Remember a spare bulb if your head torch is not LEDs
Spare batteries (for head torch, camera etc)	1 set	Use longlife, brand new ones in the torch and new ones with you make sure you have the right size for your equipment
Survival bag	1	One orange bag
Watch	1	Something you don't mind getting wet/scratched
Whistle	1	Plastic is best
Matches	1 box	
Pen-knife (optional)	1	Swiss army knives are good, remember not in your hand luggage
Cutlery	1 set	Knife, fork, spoon, teaspoon
Mug/Plate/bowl	1 of each	Non breakable – plastic is good and quite light
Water Bottle	1	At least 1 litre capacity
<b>Other items to remember</b>		
Passport; Money belt; Sun glasses; Personal cash (in Polish zloty) £100 max; Camera; Emergency Rations; A hand-luggage-sized day sack		

We were pretty lucky with the weather so although on reflection it felt like we'd maybe taken a little too much stuff we could have equally had 2 weeks of the same cool weather we experienced whilst canoeing (or even 2 weeks of the horrible rain that we experienced in Amsterdam) so the kit list was actually very accurate.

## **Group Kit**

One of the major benefits of taking an expedition that revolves mainly around hostels and not a basecamp is that you can get away with a bit less shared/group equipment. For the expedition we took the following group kit:

- Stoves - finding gas was a pain and once we did find it we bought far too much because we didn't need to boil as much water as we'd been told to expect to by the local guides. For the future we'd recommend stoves that take more versatile fuels
- Group first aid kit - the first aid kit was prepared for us by Janice XXX? - thank you! - and we mostly only used the blister plasters from it.
- Survival shelter - wasn't used but is always good to have in case of an emergency
- Cooking tools - wooden spoons, scourer, washing up liquid, tin opener, tea towel  
Toilet roll - obviously very useful
- Mobile phones - although we didn't use these particularly often they were vital
- Video camera - this was used throughout the expedition to record the trip highs. Obviously the technology will change lots (and get smaller) before the next expedition but the general thoughts were that videoing was a good idea and that it would be good to repeat for future expeditions. It might be a good idea to use some time at a training day to make sure all of the group are familiar with the equipment before you set off.

## **Health Safety & Welfare**

By Jono Ellis

As the leader responsible for health and welfare, the main part of my role was to make sure that everyone in the group let me know if there were any health problems, keeping note of these and making sure that nothing got out of hand or needed a trip to the doctors. I kept an eye on the group first aid kit in case any re-stocking was needed and I made sure that I was aware of places with doctors/pharmacies.

Overall the health of the group whilst we were away was very good - despite leaving the UK with a tonsillitis victim - and there was no need to take a trip to any doctors. The main complaints seem to have been heat/sunlight related with a few people having sore heads. Hygiene was generally very good, even in the mountains when extra effort had to be made to make yourself clean. The drinking water from the taps in Three Pigs hostel Berlin may or may not have been drinking water - a couple of people didn't feel great the next day despite assurances that the water was safe to drink. Gladly there were no other water or food related incidents. As with any trip there were one or two blisters (mostly from city streets) but again these weren't too bad. A couple of us (myself included) ended up with some mozzie bites from the evening after canoeing - it turns out that they have some pretty evil mosquitoes in Poland as almost two weeks later and I can still feel/see some of mine! Those of us that were bitten weren't prohibited from doing things and the bites tended to go down after a few days. It's a pity that my DEET was so ineffective against bugs and so effective in melting the inside of my day sack. None of us received any tick bites - something that I'm a little upset about considering that I'd paid for my Tick-borne Encephalitis injection! (Only joking - I'm glad that we remained tick free and that the ticks that we did see didn't bite).

Our packs were heavy but the group largely did well getting bags on and off without injuring themselves (or others!) and special commendation should go to Charis who, despite being wee, managed to carry a massive pack. Special mention should also go to Rachel's weird sunburn - I've never seen such perfectly straight lines on legs that were clearly not half in shade down the middle! How it happened we'll never know.

# **Golden Rules**

These rules were decided by the group at the second training weekend, and all members of the Expedition signed up to them as their code of conduct whilst in Poland.

## **Money**

Individuals are responsible for own money, passports and tickets (where not single group tickets)

Personal cash limit £100

Passport, money and tickets should be kept on you at all times

## **Boundaries**

Stay within the agreed boundaries (e.g. how far you can go without having to get permission)

Buddy system is in place at all times

Appropriate boundaries to be agreed in each location

No swimming in freshwater unsupervised

## **Communication**

Personal communication with home only via postcards/letters.

Use of emails and phones not allowed

There will be regular group contact with home, and parents etc will be updated

## **Decision Making**

Decisions will be discussed with the whole group and the final decision rests with the chief leader

A brief meeting will be held every night to review day and make any necessary decisions

There must be a good communication of decisions

No selfish decisions

Breach of the rules will be openly discussed

## **Food**

Try food before complaining (where appropriate)

Don't take/try food from an unknown source

All meals and breaks will be provided but additional snacking is allowed where appropriate

Don't waste food

Follow any advice/rules about wild berries etc.

## **Relationships**

Be discreet and not detrimental to the group

No sexual relations with Poles

No invitations to be issued or accepted without leader team approval

No social exclusion

## **Responsibility**

Behave responsibly at all times and not in a manner which endangers the group

Act as an ambassador for BEG and Scotland

Look out for the general welfare of your buddy

Pull your weight to the best of your ability

Be alert to potential risks and take action

## **Personal Music**

Personals music (e.g. MP3 players) must not be played during social times e.g. work/meal times

## **Privacy**

Treat others as you wish to be treated

Respect others' personal space and need for time alone

## **Respect**

People must go to bed and settle at the designated time

People must get up at the designated time

Don't use other people's equipment without permission

Respect the feelings and opinions of everyone

Everyone is of equal importance

Respect local customs and dress code e.g. shoulders and knees covered in churches and Auschwitz

Trust people's judgement and experience

Respect peoples' individual strengths and abilities

## **Alcohol**

Consumption of alcohol is only acceptable during social group occasions in moderation and is primarily at the discretion of the chief leader

No drunkenness

Everyone is treated equally with regards to the consumption of alcohol

## **Drugs**

No illegal drugs

Declare any medication / drugs in kit

# Individual Reflections

## Adam

As we pulled into the High School car park at Sunday lunch time everything looked set to go. Everyone was present, bags were getting loaded and two minibuses were sitting in the corner, unfortunately though, they turned out not to be for us, ours were in fact still locked up in a vacated garage in St Boswells. However, after this initial handicap we were soon on the road with the help of a few willing volunteers who drove us to the ferry.

The ferry crossing was one of the rougher ones I've experienced but everyone seemed to endure it reasonably well and after a "good nights sleep" we soon arrived in Amsterdam and our trip seemed to truly be getting underway.

After a quick boat tour around the canals of Amsterdam we were ready to embark on our first of many train journeys; this one was to Berlin where we had a guide waiting to give us a very informative tour of the Berlin Wall and surrounding historical sites.

Our second train journey took us to Warsaw where the highlights included an evening walk round the city, a trip to the top of the Museum Of Science and Culture (amazing views all round), and of course, a meal in the Hard Rock CafÈ.

We then headed North East to begin our canoe trip. On the first day we covered about twenty kilometres through amazing scenery (reeds, reeds, and more reeds) before reaching our destination for the night where pasta, beers, I-spy and card-games got us all ready for a good nights sleep. The second day of canoeing saw us covering about thirteen kilometres through yet more reeds before we finally reached our destination. That evening the venturers were put in charge of finding some food for dinner, an experience I think will stay with us all. We managed to cook up a fantastic meal which was followed by a bottle of champagne to celebrate Ailsa's eighteenth.

The next morning we headed on yet another train to Lipowe Pole where we stayed with the most hospitable families I think any of us had ever met. The stay saw us climbing up precarious ladders, painting, partying with our hosts, visiting a war museum and going to the nearby sewing factory. After some near misses in the car with Sister Clara, a lot of food, even more vodka and a few sore heads we were ready to say an emotional goodbye to our hosts and depart on another train, this time to Krakow.

Krakow was an amazing city with astounding architecture, fabulous night life and of course, the late night ice-cream sellers. After a night in Krakow we were ready to take a train into the mountains where we were to enjoy a few days hiking.

The walk into the mountains, although challenging, was one of my favourite parts of the trip and it was a true achievement when we eventually reached our campsite. The hosts at the site were extremely friendly and the facilities, although basic, saw to our needs well. The walking was terrific and the pub over the hill was just the icing on the cake. After a couple of days in the mountains, and yet more vodka (although flavoured this time) we headed back to Krakow where we enjoyed some free time to explore the city before meeting up for a meal out for our last night. Cocktails in the square saw us off to bed and before long we were ready to embark on our journey home.

The trip was an amazing experience and one which I will treasure forever. Thank you to all the people who helped organise it, supported it and to all those who took part.

## Ailsa

The Poland trip was always going to be on to remember for me as I was turning 18 while we were away. Not every 18 year old can say that on their birthday they had to get up at 6am and be on a train to a new adventure by lunchtime, not that I'm complaining...it was amazing! Some of the phases I found more challenging than others, getting the hang of the canoeing was tricky having never been in a canoe before, ever! All good fun though, my canoe friend Charis soon had me taught. I enjoyed the camping the most, as it was really back to basics...having to collect cleaning and drinking water from a stream! As Jess and I discovered when washing our hands, it was reeeeally cold!

Overall the trip was an amazing experience and I think all the members of the group had a lot to do with it.

### **Aimee**

I can't believe Poland is now over after all the preparation and work that went into organising it! I had an amazing time and experiences I will never forget. I also said a lot of things I shouldn't have (to clarify I was talking about ice cream!). The whole team were brilliant - it's always the people that make a trip! Thank you for letting me come.

### **Charis**

P is for passports, eh Nancy? Just kidding, although the journey to Amsterdam was fairly eventful, especially the trip over on the ferry. I must say drinking blue Slush Puppy from a glass makes you feel incredibly classy. As for the live entertainment, well, what can be said? It was indescribable.

O is for Ola, our friendly camp guide and guitar player. Mentions should also go to Hubert, Peter (who would have thought you'd find an Iron Maiden fan in the middle of nowhere?) and Michel, one of the most unique singers I've ever heard. I really enjoyed the time we spent in the mountains, finding the wonderfully convenient pub at the top, trekking to Slovakia and Ron's little Sound of Music moment on the way back. It was nice to be able to rough it for a while, learn how to wash your hair in a mountain spring and watch thunderstorms from the 'bathroom'.

L is for Lipowe Pole, the most hospitable village in Poland. I think all the group can say this was one of the nicest parts of our trip, being able to mix with the Polish people and get to know a bit more about their language and culture. Although it was a bit nerve-wracking at first, it was nice to spend time and get to know our host families, even if most of the communication came via a phrase book. Still, there was always the universal language of card games to pull us through and by the time we had to leave, I don't think any of us wanted to go. Parting is such sweet sorrow...

A is for Ailsa, Adam, and all the rest of the Venturers. You all deserve a Mellie-inspired fist lock, what a team we made! The night we spent in Bialystok was a laugh and a culinary success thanks to you lot (and Aimee, cheers!). Thanks to the whole group for keeping me entertained on the long train journeys and just generally being great company, I really enjoyed spending time with you all.

N is for nights out, our wonderful night-time walks in Warsaw and Krakow. And not just cause they served ice cream till 11 o'clock, though that was brilliant! I thought it was really nice to be able to see such beautiful cities when there were fewer people around and the buildings looked amazing when floodlit. The novelty of being able to walk round at night in just a t-shirt might have helped too.

D is for difficult games of I-Spy in the guest house. B for badger? No, it's a boar! I think the sunset that night was worth a mention too, absolutely glorious. The canoeing was good fun, even if the scenery got a little monotonous after a while, the feeling of achievement at the end was well worth it.

Looking back on what I've just written, it seems like my highlights were in fact most of the two

weeks. True enough, I had a really good time in Poland. Anyone up for round two?

### **Charlotte**

Poland was an eye opener. Although it was a fascinating country, and the individual activities enjoyable, the trip in many ways enforced my limitations as opposed to defying them, and made me feel more disabled than ever. Humbling stuff, but perhaps in the long run it will have positive effects as it forced me to accept the reality – now I know what I can't do, I can work out what I can do(!) That said, it was a great bunch of venturers, and a bizarre and brilliant memory (A cross between 'I'm a celebrity...', 'big brother', and 'Alice in Wonderland...')

### **Hannah**

I could not be happier that I made that last minute decision to go to Poland with BEG.

Although the eventual numbers of venturers was smaller than hoped for, it was definitely not lacking in personality, charisma or spirit. And that's not including the diverse personas of the leaders who looked after us so well.

Surprisingly, it was rather wet and miserable in Amsterdam and somewhat so in Germany where I was lucky enough to be a part of one of the most inspirational tours of my life. I thrived off of the ideas put forward by our guide as we wandered around a lot of Berlin in very little time; history became alive.

Then at last, when we were in Poland, and just as we were nearing the end of aching arms and bruised bottoms on the canoes, the sun came out to shine and never stopped until we were back in Edinburgh. We all loved being in the sun, even though at times it was often too hot for us Scots (and Angle), but we persevered of course, and made the most of it.

On the other hand, never did I expect to stay in so many hostels, having never had the privilege to experience one before, but I am sure that we were all grateful to be sleeping on a bed indoors and having the company of Ron's snoring and the occasional all-you-can-eat breakfast.

My highlight of the trip was being within a community. I never like being in another country and feeling like an outsider, so residing in Lipowe Pole for a few days made me feel like a part of Poland. We were welcomed so warmly, and the people were so happy and joyous that it was difficult for us to have a bad time. I especially loved eating their generous feasts and dancing to the traditional music with the Polish men!

The toughest thing I have ever done in my life might well have been lugging up my rucksack over the mountains in the south. But it is also one of my proudest achievements. It would be hard to find any views alike to the ones that we saw; the glorious sunsets and the perfect clear skies to see the shooting stars (and even the milky way) at night.

Yet this is not even half of what we accomplished: the experience at Auschwitz will be memorable for all of us; the salt mines astounding and massive; or even the shopping at Vero Moda in Warsaw and Krakow. But most of all this journey has given me so much courage and confidence to go off and travel the world, there is so much out there to discover, and I am no longer afraid to go in search of it.

### **Jono**

Having been to Poland before the appeal of the trip to me was perhaps a little different to some of the other group members. The opportunity to live in the community and take part in their celebrations was very special and not something that I'm ever going to forget. The contrast between

the hussle and bustle and tourist-ness in Krakow and the peace and serenity in the mountains was amazing, and very welcoming. I think that Polish people have a confidence and generosity and the country has lots to give for travellers. Some of what we have seen on the trip reflects a country emerging into the modern European community (with it's etickets and expensive fuel) but the contrast between the cities and countryside is still very stark - standpipes for water, cutting fields with syths, using horses to cart out timber from forests and washing clothes by hand. Rural Poland seems to me to be very much Britain 50 years ago whilst Warsaw and Krakow are almost parallels to other European cities. Call me a weirdo but one of the most enjoyable bits of the trip was the chance to sit back and chat or listen to music or stare out of the window during our countless train journeys. Polish railway stock is mostly quite old looking - certainly nowhere near as modern as the Amsterdam-Berlin express - but the trains are cheap and efficient and offer plenty of enforced relaxation/talk time. Visiting Auchwitz for a second time was actually even more harrowing than the first but I think that it is such an important part of Polish history. Sister Klara's story about her father's escape from an Auchwitz bound train (and his meeting of her mother as they hid in the forests) made it all the more clear that this is still very recent history and not something that, as a nation, Poland wants to forget. Obviously the other side of this was our experience in Berlin where it is clear that Germany is still trying to move on - tearing down old buildings and replacing them with new - but still trying to remember their past. Overall I think that Poland is a beautiful country - albeit with a rough and industrial feel at times - but the best thing about Poland is the Polish people and this trip has given us a great chance to experience the Polish community.

### Robbie

I admit I was nervous, scared even, of going to a totally unfamiliar country with a totally unfamiliar language where we would have to craft our night shelter out of a waterproof sheet, ten metres of string and a bivvy bag and hunt for packets of food in the wilderness to survive; where cows would come and attack us in our tents in the dead of night; and where we might have to sleep within snoring range of Ron. However, I had the experience the training weekends had given us all to prepare us for these trials and tribulations and so on the morning of departure I was confident and excited to be finally going to Poland.

Throughout the trip, there were many challenges we had to face as a group, some I expected, some a complete surprise, and although sometimes these trials left me feeling fed up and wanting to go home, I'm glad now that everything happened the way it did. I learnt such a lot because of it and the experience will no doubt turn out to be very useful in the future.

Interaction with the Polish people also taught me a great deal. They are a much warmer people than the British and so staying with the families in Lipowe Pole was definitely my favourite part of the trip. Hearing their music, eating their food, learning about their lives, their work, their religion was all so fascinating. It's something I had never imagined I would do.

Being in the mountains was another high point for me. The scenery was stunning and the rustic villages with their small, traditional houses and farming methods were amazing to see. It was like stepping back into a simpler time, as refreshing as the spring that we washed and drank from yet as comforting as the nineties tuneage on the radio we listened to on the mini-bus.

So, the Poland trip for me was like a really good album. A classic album that perhaps you don't realise is quite so brilliant at first but with every listen just gets better and you eventually begin to wonder how music managed to exist before its release; one that brings you high and low and then just plain sentimental at the end. It hasn't quite sunk in yet that we went to all those places and met all those people. I can't believe that we actually did it. But we did. Win! :D

### Sophie

Poland was certainly a unique experience. Even if the combination of some slightly scary food, some slightly scarier bugs, and some really scary group dynamics did at times give it the ambience of 'I'm a celeb...' (the phone lines, by the way, are now closed. Anyone know who won?), it was a fascinating country and a great bunch of people (albeit with occasionally some greatly differing points of view.) After all, great memories don't always have to be those viewed from a pedestal

through rose tinted stain glass, fantastic times aren't always the easiest, the best lessons aren't always the easiest, the road to self discovery full of nasty surprises, and we're all only human after all – so despite the tears, I'll be remembering Poland with a smile!

## Conclusion

The Poland 2008 Expedition had more of cultural and historical slant than previous expeditions. This emerged after initial discussions with the group indicated that they wanted to find out more about some of the key aspects of the history of the country during the II World War, and this was a thread running throughout the whole trip, however with some precision planning and much studying of train timetables in advance, we were able to fit that around some canoeing, hiking and community homestay. The two weeks became a whistlestop tour of Poland, with a little of Germany and the Netherlands thrown in for good measure.

The decision to travel overland in one direction meant it was possible to follow the historical thread through Europe, as well as providing a sense of distance to the journey.

As with all group expedition, the trip had its ups and downs. You can't take 15 people away for two weeks and expect them all to be happy all of the time! However I am sure that everyone will have taken away some fantastic memories of the trip, be it midnight walks around Warsaw's old town, storks nests in the sunset, 'showering' in the mountain stream, playing games around the campfire, or getting up at 5am to photograph Krakow's old town without tourists.

## Thank-you

A huge number of people helped make this expedition happen, and they all deserve a big thank-you:

- The leader team
- The venturers
- Nancy and Ron, who started life as a training team, and were roped in as leaders!
- The training team (Claire, Jim, Sara, Chuck and everyone else who helped out)
- The parents of all the venturers for getting them to and from the training weekends, and helping out with the fundraising
- The kind parents, and Vicki, who helped out and did an emergency dash to Newcastle when our minibus wasn't available
- The BEG committee
- Everyone who helped contribute to the group or individual fundraising efforts in any way

## Transcript of The Group Diary

Poland Leader Selection Day

A beautiful sunrise on the way down from Edinburgh helped steady my nerves about the day ahead, however unfortunately it wasn't an indication of the weather we were to have for the rest of the day. Sideways sleet is never too much fun! But everyone bore it well and even managed to keep smiling as they braved the elements.



Needless to say the day flew by and my fears that no one would turn up were thankfully unfounded. The potential candidates were all of the highest quality and the thought of having to deselect anyone played on my mind all day.

Tasks were tackled with great enthusiasm (although maybe not the video diary – I could fill pages describing them!) But instead I'm going to just stick to a quick run down of the highlights; the things that made me smile on the way back up the road at the end of the day. So, in no particular order we have....

- Nancy and Calum doing chicken impressions, outside, in the sleet to encourage the birds to flap their wings for a scavenger hunt photo.
- The moment of realisation that the blindfolded "square" the group had created was actually a triangle.
- The detail of the newspaper 'Palace of Culture and Science' complete with turrets, advertising boards, and a clock set to the time in the photo.
- Discovering to my great relief that two of the applicants (who shall remain nameless to save them embarrassment) weren't actually criminals but just hadn't read the application form properly!
- Ron narrating the dramatised history of Poland in full hi-vis gear, including hard hat and goggles!
- The salad that was made at lunch and contained sauerkraut, polish sausage, tomato, sweetcorn, tuna, cheese, dill, pickled cucumbers and crisps!

I certainly had a really good day and I hope everyone else did too. But it left a difficult decision – who to select! It definitely caused me a couple of sleepless nights until eventually I decided that everyone had something uniquely positive to bring to the group, was equally deserving of a place, and on that basis I was justified in offering all the applicants a place.

So the offers were duly sent out and accepted and suddenly I wasn't the only one going to Poland!

Venturer Selection Day

Jono Ellis

The day began well with some up-for-it (but slightly nervous looking) potential venturers turning up at West Morriston, all of them looking like they were ready to tackle whatever was thrown at them. The first challenge was the video camera in the

diary room! Not everyone looked impressed but the videos were fun to watch for the leaders and trainers afterwards.

Trying to make a square out of rope whilst blindfolded proved difficult but the venturers proved that they were great at communicating (and managed to make their square faster than the leaders had made theirs!) "Sculptures" of potential situations that might occur on the expedition were very cool and there were some great interpretations of what people look like carrying a rucksack.

The weather was nice outside so it was time to go foraging / hunting for the food for lunch. It took around 40 minutes to find the various cans / packets to make lunch with (although at least one can of tuna is out there somewhere!) Some not especially friendly bartering (and the purchasing of information from Calum in exchange for a measly one cupasoup) later and everyone was happily munching away. (First time cooking on Trangias for some people – well done to anyone who didn't burn their lunch.)

After lunch the task was to build shelters – screams of "ahhh I've got water in my pants!" perhaps reflected less the quality of the shelters and more the fact that the leaders were throwing the water sideways at any visible gaps. Back indoors for a crystal maze session topped off with some rather nasty food combos to guess – yum.

Well done to everyone who came to the selection day – you all did fab. Places were offered to all of the candidates as the team spirit was already apparent after just one day.



Charis Wallum

## **Robbie Hopper**

**Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> July 2008**

### **Day One**

Embarkment.

Take off.

The beginning.

And so we gathered on this fateful day, in that fateful carpark at Selkirk High School, at that fateful time. Oh yes. One o'clock.

Our adventure began with a slight mishap with the bus; namely the hire company closing at 12 without having informed us. Therefore we had no bus to take us to the ferry terminal at Newcastle. But, no worry! For relatives came to the rescue! Doo doo doo doo d-dooo! And thus we were safely driven to our destination. We even all managed to find the port without trouble.

However, disaster struck once again as we prepared to board the ferry! Duh duh duhhh! Nancy had brought her daughter's passport! \*gasp\* And so, sadly, we had to

leave her behind to catch a plane tomorrow whilst we clambered aboard our fateful vessel. After a hefty trek around to find cabins and a suitable seating area for us to kick back, chill out and swirl some cocktails, we retired to the cinema to watch Juno. And Adam fell asleep! Awww!

We then had another tiresome hike as we had to shift all our rucksacks and whatnot from our original cabins on deck 2 to new ones up on deck 6, which had windows to help Sophie's sea-sickness, As in make it better, not worse.

But hey! The night ended on a sunny note, with the finest entertainment the ferry had to offer. Yep, you guessed it: cheesy Europop and Abba-ness all the way, topped off, off course, with mandatory sequin outfits and grins a mile wide. And of course, a reggae rendition of "Brown Eyed Girl."

"Ayyyyy, yeh mun!"

**Jessica MacDonald**

**Monday 21<sup>st</sup> July 2008**

## **Day Two**

We woke at 7:30am to the Captain announcing that we were nearly in Amsterdam. After a huge breakfast we caught a bus and headed into the main city. I was very impressed to see so many windmills scattered around the landscape proving to those back home that they do not spoil the landscape.

The weather was slightly annoying as it rained consistently but we did not allow that to dampen our spirits. Once we had got off the bus we headed to the station where we sorted our tickets. While on a loo stop I found myself in the most amazing station I had ever seen. I can't actually explain why I thought this but it probably had something to do with the fact that I love buildings especially old fascinating ones with tons of character. It made me smile every time I saw a bike park instead of a car park. It was just such an odd thing to come across.

It was decided, that due to the weather, we would take a boat tour around the City, as we would be able to see more without getting extremely wet. It was fantastic! Some of the buildings were out of this world. I loved them! We even saw Anne Frank's house, which wasn't really what I had expected, but in a good way.

Afterwards, we caught the train heading to Berlin, Germany. After about 30 minutes, we switched trains, and then we were off on our 6 hour trek. I tried my best to stay awake so that I didn't miss any of the scenery and its small perks. They had the most amazing trees that looked as if a child had drawn them – a long stump and a bush on top. There were also windmills with stripy blades. Genius!

I was quite surprised at how flat the land was. There really were no hills which means you can't see very far ahead, only to the horizon. We decided that we needed to stretch our legs so we went for a wander to the café. It was so nice! It kinda reminded of the Grease café with its raised curved seats / benches. Myself, Dan, Rachel and Charis all sat there for ages, relaxing and enjoying the views as they zoomed past.

The train journey in general was fantastic. The scenery wasn't dissimilar to Britain but the houses were distinctly different with their pointy roofs. Ohmygod we passed the Volkswagen factory in Germany! It was a sign that I need a dark green one for my first car, LOL!

When we got to the train station at Berlin, the HBF, I was actually speechless, which doesn't happen often. It had a huge shopping centre all built in with glass lifts and huge walls of glass so that we could see Berlin all lit up looking its best with the dark evening sky as it's backdrop. Me and Robbie seized the opportunity to go for a quick shop (for 10 mins) and I found a Vero Moda, a make which I had only seen in Spain. I was so excited I nearly had a heart attack! I found this lovely blue top, in the sale, which I just had to have! We then headed to the underground and caught two trains to the hostel, the Three Little Pigs.

The hostel was massive. I was terrified as our room was right at the top on the sixth or seventh floor. I kept thinking about what we would do if there was a fire. Would we have to jump? And then I remembered that we had Dan, Dan the Fireman, and my worries disappeared. After a nice cool drink outside, under the stars, we all headed off to bed.

**Ron Sutherland**

**Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2008**

### **Day Three**

Woke up in Berlin having had a very comfy sleep in what was a very comfortable hostel – The Three Little Pigs. Breakfast was a buffet of as much as you could eat, which gave us all a great start to the day. It was eaten around a circle table with large pot plants in the middle in a very large room which had a stage at one end and a few very large chandeliers to light the room.

Once we had eaten we packed out gear and headed to the outside seating in the courtyard area. There was a man and his daughter there who were Canadian. The man was in his eighties, an architect with three daughters who were all very different from each other. He was very pleasant but chatted continuously giving us loads of facts and figures about Canada and his offspring. The guide we were waiting for the walk around Berlin was late but he eventually arrived to take us on a fascinating walk around the city. He was very informative and very interesting and even challenging in his presentation to us. By the end of the walk it was close to our train time so there was a big rush to get there to get our rucksacks from left luggage. We did have a little bit of a fraught time in getting it all out and running for the train but we did get there in time to catch the train.

This train had compartment and so it was a bit more sociable than the one from Amsterdam to Berlin. At first we made very speedy progress passing such places as Wolfsburg where the Volkswagen factory is to be found. Jessica went a bit wild at this point about the car she would buy when she could. After Poznan progress was rather slowed, it seems that slow railways are not only to be found in the UK.

Eventually we arrived in Warsaw into a slightly less salubrious station but on coming out of the station there were numerous buildings that are worthy of attention or at least catch your attention.

On exiting the station the most obvious one is the Russian built "spike" over to the left. Left of that is the shopping complex which is very modern in design, one of which is an "armadillo" type glass house.

All along the way to the hostel we were treated to a host of advertising hoardings that caught the eye. Our hostel was at the top of a very tall building but very acceptable. Soon some leaders and venturers were dispatched to get out food from the shops and

before too long they were back and we were treated to a meal of the usual Polish sausage, ham and various vegetables and fruits.

Once we had tidied up we headed off for the "Old Town". This is a part of the city which has been completely reconstructed after the demolition of it caused by the Second World War. It is an amazing sight to see these all lit up at night with lots of coffee and eating places around the square. We did get a disappointment due to the ice cream shops being closed before we could get to them.

So off to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. We watched the changing of the guard at exactly midnight. We then all wished Ruth a happy birthday as it was now her birthday.

A short walk back to the hostel capped a very interesting day in Berlin and Warsaw.

**Jono Ellis**

**Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> July**

#### **Day 4**

23<sup>rd</sup> July – Ruth's Birthday – Warsaw.

After waking up in the hostel in Warsaw, the first think I heard was that we had the wrong tickets for the train, and so Ruth and Nancy were going to have to go and replace them; a bit of a stressful start for Ruth's 26<sup>th</sup> birthday.

We had all awoken quite early so that we had time to make up our lunches – rolls with cheese, sausage and cucumber. Very Polish. The youth hostel in Warsaw is a bit weird since it is all on the top floor, but we made space a created our variations for lunch. In order to pay for the hostel, buy lots of drinking water, and buy the new train tickets, we split into three groups, re-assembling in Warsaw central station. It was already warm in the city and I was glad to get my big bag off after the short walk to the station – whatever our dinner was going to be it was heavy! Just outside the station is Warsaw's newest arrival: Hard Rock Café (another sign of Poland's many recent changes).

Tickets sorted we boarded the train bound for Bialystok and crushed ourselves into our 8 person cabins bag'n'all. Unfortunately one bag did take a tumble onto Ruth and Charlotte but gladly no-one was hurt. Shortly before we arrived at Lapy Jess was seen being chased along the corridor by a cheerful looking conductor... all was not as it seemed though, Jess thought that we had arrived at our destination and was running to collect her bag. I don't know about the conductor though...

Ruth's fears of there being no-one to meet us faded away as our canoe company contact greeted us off the train. A short transfer by nine-seater vans to our launch site and we were ready for our 22km down the Narew river. Not quite the type of water Adam is used to, the Narew winds its way towards the sea in the North. The main wildlife and vegetation appeared to be reeds, water lilies, and more reeds. Our guide Mariusz or "Super Mario" spoke very little English so he pottered on ahead of us leaving us to float from bank to bank and occasionally turn to face the wrong direction. Our guide told us to keep moving as he thought we were going very slowly so we passed food between canoes. Our 22km went very well with only a few sore bums and arms at the end (Ruth included :o())

The little hamlet of Waniewo was small and quiet with chickens, old tractors and standpipes mixed in with more modern looking houses. Our guesthouse had a small garden with apple trees behind and a very full looking lot with cabbages, potatoes and

other veg growing. We cooked dinner on the grass, sitting round our Trangias listening to / watching a family of storks. The meal was a tasty pasta/veg combo along with some Polish soup. We had our chat about the next day over a cup of Zubr (bison) beer before cards and bed. I think that everyone had a good day, and Ruth - despite here sore arm - had a good birthday.

**Dan Simmonds**

**Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> July**

## Day 5

8:00 Torrential Rain      12:00 Sunshine and clouds      18:00 Sunshine!

Reeds, reeds, reeds! Will it never end? Rations running low, water too. How long can we endure this torture. No contact with civilisation. Reeds, reed, reeds. Am I losing my mind? Will we turn to cannibalism. Who do we eat 1<sup>st</sup>, will someone volunteer?! Reeds, reeds, reeds. Are the damsel flies waiting til we expire before feasting on our bloated, baked carcasses! Oops I digress.

Canoeing – 15kms

Awoken by the thundering monsoon I thought be we might be in for a long wet (from above) paddle. After a hearty BEG breakfast of porridge and dried fruit in drying conditions we were picked up from the guest house by the canoe Co. We said our good byes to Eugene our host (a jolly, happy fellow with the best milk (the only milk) for miles around, or so he said!)

We set off down the Limpopo (infested with, whirligig beetles, damsel & dragon flies, and the occasional CLEG!!)

We soon got into the “groove” and enjoyed meandering from bank to bank (same as yesterday really). We re-grouped regularly under Herr Rachel’s regime! And swapped around as needed. We lunched briefly at a fisherman’s haunt (fishing line, empty beer cans and bottles, which we took with us). We found a large diving beetle. Nancy took photos. Having just lunched nobody wanted to eat it, so it survived to dive another day. The river changed from wide and open farmland to reeds (again) to small overgrown tributaries lush with water lilies and other marshland vegetation. The distance soon shrank to 1km to the finish. Not surprisingly Jess was hungry for the lead, but in true kayaking style Adam and Rachel had saved a bit for a last “kick” to the riverbank!

Whilst boats were cleaned (not Dan & Jess’s) we soaked up some sun. We had enjoyed a good v. sunny trip down some of Poland’s Amazon, although “Slip, Slap, Slop” regularly, we all caught the sun. We now have a masked marauder amongst us. Mmmm let me guess??

The canoe Co. transferred us to an awaiting Ruth & Charlotte at a small but very pleasant Y.H. in the burbs of Bialystok. A plan was hatched for the V’s to go forth and forage for supper, B’fast and P.L. They done good! A feast of stir-fry chicken with veg. Ice cream (albeit not quite enough) for dessert. We started Ailsa’s birthday celebrations early with a surprise bottle (or 2) of bubbly courtesy of Ruth (grand idea!).

We had a quick-ish meeting in the sweat box of the mixed dorm and then “Chilaxed” (good word Hannah!) and not soon enough for some, the light went out on another great day of our Polish adventure.

Dan

**Ailsa O’Docherty**

**Friday 25<sup>th</sup> July**

## **Day 6**

The day started with an early morning wake-up of 6am(!!!) and of course a few Happy Birthdays for me ☺, 18 at last!

Anyway... breakfast was soon made and eaten and then rucksacks packed all before 7:15am! Impressive! We then walked to the station and got on a train headed for Warsaw. The group then got the lift up to the top of the Palace of Science and Culture (or something like that).

The group split up, some went to the Old Town and Dan and Adam went to the Hard Rock Café. Some of us went straight to the shops, not even sunburn could stop Jess from her shopaholic tendencies. In Vero Moda we bought multi coloured pants and then on the way home ate some yummy ice cream! We dashed back to the station via C&A and got back on a train to take us to our Polish families. The train was roastin' and pretty busy but I think most of the group managed a few minutes shut eye. Then came the rain and the Polish Army.

Straight from the train we were taken to the Fire Station for some Polish dinner. There was soup and lot of other tasty treats for us! We then each got a picture drawn by some Polish children from the village. I was surprised with a rendition of Happy Birthday in English AND Polish, along with a cake and a teddy called Paul. Adam was a very lucky boy and received more marriage proposals than you could shake a stick at! Sadly, he declined to much disappointment of the group.

Next we found out what people were staying with what families (I was a bit nervous but the family I'm staying with along with Charis and Charlotte are really nice). We soon all went off to our families, ready with my handy Polish phrasebook. We had cups of tea and wafers and also a couple of games of cards. Charis pegged out some washing at 11pm on the windowsill and then went off to bed.

I wonder what tomorrow will bring...

**Nancy Anderson**

**Day 7**

**Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> July**

Today was "Community Work"

7.20 and I was wakened by the Grandma in my house bringing the breakfast to my room – lovely bread, salami, tomatoes, sweet bread and tea. Then Robbie, Jess and I grouped and headed off to the Fire Station.

We were set to work with cleaning and preparing the rooms for the party in the evening. Some painting of the outside walls was done. At 2pm we were sat down to a lovely lunch of soup, cold pork and salad followed by tea and cake. After this we went back to our families for a short time before travelling by cars to Skarzysko Kamienna for a wedding mass (the wedding crashers!). It was a beautiful service, the choir's singing was lovely and the church was decorated with lilies and silk drapes. We are even in the wedding photos!!

After this we came back to the Fire Station to join the wedding anniversary celebrations. This community really knows how to party and to make their guests feel welcome. Lots of dancing, food, vodka, singing, more dancing, more food, more vodka, more singing, more dancing and so it went on. Some of us made it away at 12:30am while Ron finally called it a night at around 2am. The hospitality and generosity of everybody is

exceptional. What lovely people they are.

**Ruth Norman**

**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> July**

**Day 8**

Well yesterday was a bit hectic, so I'm writing this retrospectively on the train on our way to Krakow – my excuse for the shoddy writing!

It wouldn't be a trip to Poland without some serious churching, and since it was a Sunday, the day started with a trip to mass at the local church in Lipowe Pole. The locals must have a superhuman constitution – given the quantities of vodka consumed the night before I'd have expected sore heads all round (the locals, not the group!) but they were all there at mass. Perhaps incurring the wrath of God isn't really on a par with a hangover. The church was rammed with people in the foyer and outside. Lots of the village children – several from our host families – were in the choir which sang beautifully and Sister Klara with her guitar lent a very "Sound of Music" feel to the service. Dan & Jono read the gospel in English too, and I surprised myself by remembering some of the hymns!

After church we assembled at the fire station, and were packed into cars and taken to the 'White Eagle' museum in Skarzysko – it is a military museum commemorating the battles fought in the region, the efforts of the KA (Home Army) and the town's role as a munitions and military machinery factory. It was a sobering glimpse into the recent past of the region which suffered awfully at both the hands of the Germans and Russians. S. Klara added personal stories from her family's history – how her uncle escaped from a train to the camp at Auschwitz and how her mother remembers going into hiding in the woods, & in her opinion how the Russian soldiers were far more brutal than the Germans, coming through their villages and killing all the animals and raping the women, children and livestock – in comparison the Germans seemed far more gentlemanly, remanding food and resources but with a lesser degree of wilful destruction.

Outside the museum building there was a surreal collection of old military vehicles, planes and even a warship – goodness knows how that was transported from the station to the site! It was quite shocking to see so many rusted metal carcasses of machines that were quite recently in service – and to think that they were only a tiny minuscule fraction of the numbers involved in combat during WW2. I think what highlighted the difference in perspective & experience of WW2 between us in the UK, & Poland and other parts of continental Europe was when Sister Klara was asking for the English names of some of the artillery and guns and none of us knew because we had never been in a situation where we had ever seen one before.

The mood was fairly subdued but a quick stroll to a nearby lake helped lighten the mood, then we returned to the fire station for more food and the preparations for our Polish-Scottish cultural exchange. Not only was it an opportunity for us and the children to perform, it was also a chance for the centre to raise some funds so there were raffles, a cake stall and a sausage BBQ, and about 100 people from Lipowe Pole and neighbouring villages.

Tadek had his dress uniform on, and 2 members of the regional council were there – not that there was any pressure! We had music, singing, highland dancing, haggis to share & finished off with everyone doing some ceilidh dancing – Scots & Poles included (& even the English too! ;-) ) After the performance we were marched off to a nearby sewing factory – a big success which they are understandably proud of – although the

group & even Jess wasn't tempted to buy anything! There was a gorgeous sunset on the way back then more food and shenanigans at the fire station. Jess was chosen to be "Sacrificed" and stay locked in the basement for fattening up, then there were more toasts with vodka (Polish style) & one with tea (English style) – we may have inadvertently started a new tradition. Then it was home to our hosts to pack our bags, exchange gifts and get a good night's sleep before the next stage of the journey!

**Aimee Mallin**  
**Day 9**

**Monday 28<sup>th</sup> July**

Well all I can really say was yesterday was a bit of an adventure to say the least. (But before I start writing I need to apologise for the spelling and handwriting.)

It was a fairly early start because the train from Skarzysko-Kamienna (copied the spelling from Nancy) was at 9:30am-ish. Everyone had their final breakfasts with their host families and said their goodbyes before heading to the fire station.

Things just started to get a bit strange. First all of the rucksacks were packed into the fire engine... not sure if that's legal but anything Tadek says goes.

Sister Clara then went on to say a few words and present everyone with gifts. I can't remember what everyone was given, but there was some pens, sheep and other trinkets.

The group was then packed into cars with all the presents and one huge ass cake for the journey. (I swear they were trying to fatten us up!). I was in a car with Sister Clara, but that is a different story.

The train to Krakow was like all the other train journeys we have had but we had cakes and saw hills (no sheep though). It was a good chance to think about everything we had seen and done in Lipowe Pole and the people we met.

I think I will skip over the bus journey and so on – it was hot and more than v. boring. The hostel we are staying at was called the Yellow Hostel. It is very yellow to say the least but has a corner bath – I was impressed anyway.

Later in the afternoon a trip to the salt mines at Wieliczce was booked. This is when a bit of a big BEG adventure really started (Yes I realise that was geeky and regret it!).

The 'Travel Team' bought return tickets to the salt mines. And getting onto the train was easy but the heat had made the tracks buckle. So the train just randomly stopped leaving us stranded?! Somewhere?? (Nobody is really sure where?) Waiting for a bus that would come in two hours.

By speaking to a really nice and totally helpful guy who spoke good English, Dan managed some how to get us on two buses to the salt mines. I'm not quite sure how we got there but a bit of teamwork and good luck got us there.

The salt mines themselves were amazing. I hope the photos will speak for themselves because I don't think my English skills are up to the task.

To get to the first level of the mine we had to walk down 54 sets of stairs (if you really want to know as Adam, he counted). We only saw 3 levels of the 9 and travelled 130m-ish underground. In the chambers there was mining equipment and sculptures. I should really write more but I don't know what to write.

Getting back was easy because the track was sorted! And at night to the delight of the catering team (Ron, Aimee & Jess) we ate out. The catering team chose a place called the Pizzy Faktry? It was good.

Train journey is over so I give in with writing! Sorry!

Aimee  
X

**Sophie Mackay**  
**Day 10**

**Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> July**

Auschwitz

I will not attempt to speak for all of us. In any case words, in the face of such a dense, invisible, poignant terror, appear useless – almost an insult. No adjective could ever really suffice as a decent memorial to the ghosts of the devastated lives of so many innocents; nor truly exemplify the intense evil of the regime and people that destroyed them. Therefore, before I begin, I apologise for that which follows. I can only offer glimpses of my own individual perspective; the experience of different people will be difference, and at the end of the day it is this experience, and the lasting impression upon the person that is important, not this entry. Only in this way will this terrible history be preserved, granting respect at last for those that suffered, providing a lesson for the present, and acting as a warning for the future

Auschwitz, for me, was a place of many parallels, some of them contradictory. There were two worlds, - that of the material and present, and that of the imagined and past. It sounds awful, but as we wandered between the barracks, I was struck by how far from my preconceptions of the Nazi regime the scene presented to us was: blue sky, sunshine, a reasonably attractive row of redbrick buildings, a tidy line of trees. Yet just as the linguistic barrier hid the real meaning of the arched entrance ('work brings freedom'), these streets guarded horrific secrets. The material carried the weight of a different reality – one of murder, brutality, inhumane turmoil. And perhaps the invisibility of this reality only served to make the experience more poignant.

We fought to comprehend the ordeal of those who died here, yet to comprehend such a thing is impossible. Numbers (large numbers) ultimately mean nothing; dates and other facts fail to deliver any significant insight. Photographs of people, of crows and anonymous faces, remain just photographs; identity is obscured, indifference very easy. Where now tourists idled in sunhats and three quarter length trousers, once there were prisoners – people similar to us in every way but for the wretched times they inhabited, and the cruel fate they had been delivered – those awaiting death, whether it be by bullet, gas, or starvation.

Few of the possessions salvaged from the dead by soldiers survived the attempts by the Nazis to cover their atrocities in the period beyond the liberation. That which did is displayed as a memorial: rooms stacked high with shoes, combs, brushes, clothes – each individual, together a sea of overwhelming loss; echoes of an absence, of the life that gave them usage. One cabinet contained crutches, prosthetic legs, walking aids – originally an aid for their owners, but ultimately the pathetic, sickening excuse for the death sentence. Another houses a pile of glasses without faces, the black frames stacked high and as precarious and delicate as spider legs. Children's' toys and clothes – a doll with a shattered face; tiny, tiny shows – leave such a nasty feeling in the stomach. A vast cabinet near the entrance contains nothing but human hair. A neighbouring cabinet shows the result of the ghastly deathly harvest; cloth, un-extraordinary to look at, yet

atrocious in its implications.

These ghosts have no face. Their presence is felt only by their absence – in this place they were obliterated. In another exhibition we are given the opportunity to appreciate the ordeal suffered by those ‘fortunate’ enough to be spared immediate execution in favour of becoming a prisoner at the camp. Slow death by starvation, and exhaustion. A denial of all dignity, all comfort, any basic human right. Abuse, torture. Emotive photographs of starved victims; impossibly thin, frail, stooped over limbs no too big for them. The cells where those singled out for punishment were either suffocated or starved or made to stand for nights on end. Twisted, surreal cartoons, showing soldiers beating prisoners; made even more perverse, more horrific by their larger than life experience. A simple illustration of corpses being dragged back by returning workers in the evening so they could be counted at roll call.

Outside of the barbed wire, between the first gas chamber and the lawn where the Officer’s children used to play, a gallery commemorates where the man responsible for all this was hung. It seemed a pathetically small attempt at justice. Justice for such an enormous crime can never be achieved. Comfort or reconciliation, of any kind, can only be found when we consider as well the present. Auschwitz is a lesson. As our guide explained at the end of the tour – awareness is the only thing we can offer these people: to recognise our past, and appreciate our present.

Auschwitz, after all, is not an isolated tragedy. Tragedy has always occurred – it continues even today in places around the world. It is our responsibility as individuals to acknowledge this and to live our lives accordingly.

**Charlotte Mackay**  
**Day 11**

**Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> July**

I will write this retrospectively when my feet have had time to recover in the stream and the sun has reached a height in the sky, such that the temperature is bearable. I will write this in such a way as to emphasise perhaps the satisfaction of finishing, rather than the pain.

The day started ironically in quite a relaxed fashion; a leisurely eight o’clock start was made even more luxurious by a breakfast of cakes. This was probably my last ‘decent’ means for a while, (as someone who detests couscous, peppers, tomatoes, pasta and sweetcorn) followed by an hour relaxing in the shade on the platform in the station, and topped off by a bit of shopping. (It should probably be mentioned while I idled about trying to find something to do there was much searching by various other groups for food, gas, etc).

Anyway after a quick train journey in which I contemplated life in general we found ourselves on a platform literally in the middle of nowhere (I think the place was called Sol) in which the civilised world seemed a very long way away. And so we set off, sacks laden with god knows what in shoes totally inappropriate for the degrees we found ourselves in. Up and up and down and up and down again, is it me or can any one else see the sense in having to go down simply to go up again!

We kept on going and the 2 hour walk soon became a 4 1/2 hour one and the conversation soon diverted to people’s emergency rations – (I have to say I am impressed with the varied and quantity of chocolate / sweets some of you have got – all I’ve got is dried fruit) even we had to admit that there is a time and a place for Solero ice cream and half way up a mountain is one of them – anyone fancy making their millions come up with a way of transporting icecream! Anyway, as I was about to

collapse, sorry topple over, the temperature lowered and we reached a height that even my miserable self had to feel that I had actually achieved something. And so we climbed triumphant to the top, where then necessary photographs were taken and henceforth on to the campsite – exhausted, in pain, but strangely elated I have to say I have never been so grateful to see a tent.

And then the Trangias, gas and food were summoned (alas my hope of an early night were dashed) and before long there were noodles, and well, sort of tomato sauce and peppers boiling under the slightly ominous light of 15 or so head torches. It was perhaps the bizarrest and oddest things I have seen for a while. After a ‘slightly’ odd tasting meal (I think the noodles were sweet) it was time to ‘stumble’ into the tents and ‘attempt’ (did everyone hear that group) to sleep. Ah, I love camping!!!

Charlotte

**Charis Wallum**  
**Day 12 – Perfect walking weather!**

**Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> July**

Woke up ridiculously early feeling manky. Ah well, first night of camping and all A couple of hours later and we were all ready to go, our stomachs full with traditional BEG porridge. Ruth and Jono decided to chill at camp (and fix the toilet, cheers!) and the rest of us day-sacked up for our walk. How come the first bit is always the steepest? Luckily the day was bright but relatively cool so before long we reached a cross landmark on the summit of the first hill. A little longer and it was time for a Pepsi break at the most handily placed restaurant in Poland.

After Nancy had had a ‘nice pee’ and made friends with a random St Bernards, we were off with a cry of “To Slovakia!” Unfortunately we weren’t just then but I personally quite enjoyed the scenic route. Eventually we reached the Border, marked by a small metal marker (sorry, my vocabulary is running low...)

After photos we headed back, pausing briefly to let Ron do his Julie Andrews-esque skip through the fields. We headed back to the restaurant for ryvita and chips (chips, Nancy, chips!!). Afterwards the group split up, some to head back to camp and the others to go down to town, pick up some provisions, check bus times and sneak in a quick ice-cream. A tough bit of uphill scrambling later and we arrived at camp. Priority number 1? Try and feel clean again! A load of the girls traipsed round the spring. Might have been one of the weirdest things so far this trip, washing my hair in the middle of the forest.

Back to camp for soup, couscous and chocolate and a brief meeting. Currently writing this by glowstick light and I think most of us are going to head off to bed shortly, it’s been a tiring day.

Goodnight,  
Charis

P.S Quite amusing watching the campfire shenanigans – camp guy was good at cutting wood, but not so good at cooking sausages!

P.P.S Glow-poi may be the most awesome things ever ☺

**Adam Bouglas**  
**Day 13**

**Friday 1<sup>st</sup> August**

We got up around 8 o’clock (a long lie for us) and after a leisurely breakfast and some

very exciting card playing (never play racing demons with Charis) we were ready to set off on our second day of walking. We decided to do the same walk as the previous day but in reverse to plan the route to the village for the next day. We said goodbye to the people who were taking alternative routes and headed down the track to the village. The track was extremely steep and slippy but after a while we arrived at the village shop for a rest and a spot of lunch. After buying some supplies and eating our tuna wraps we headed off along the road to continue our walk.

As we turned off the road we realised that the hill we had to climb was much steeper than it had seemed when we came down it the day before. However we eventually managed to struggle to the top and we were rewarded with a nice cold beer and a plate of chips at the mountain restaurant. Once we had finished eating it was time to head back to camp. A short but steep climb took us back to the top of the hill where we were able to watch a small thunderstorm pass around us. When the storm passed we headed down the steep train back to camp where we met the rest of the group. Before long we were enjoying our tea which consisted of tomato soup followed by spaghetti in a tomato sauce. After our food we had a game of "who's in the bag?" around the campfire, followed by a few drinks and then eventually. After a very long day, it was time for bed.

Adam

**Rachel Elliot**  
**Day 14: Przyslop Potocky**

**Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> August**

"Wakey wakey, rise and shine!" 5am on a Saturday morning. All have managed the rise – not everyone managing to shine, so early in the morning however! We have started the day at this early hour to begin the long journey back to Krakow and ultimately, home.

By 5:15, everybody is dressed, packed and ready to leave. A wash, unfortunately, must wait until later!

So tired and no doubt a wee bit smelly (am I speaking for myself only?!) we set off down the hill towards Rycerka to catch the bus to the train station. The leisurely half-hour walk down the forest track compared favourable within the six hour mega-hike in (only 3 days previously!). And so we arrived only to discover we had a wee while to wait for the bus. We breakfasted on cereal bars, followed by a selection of baked delights from the nearby shop (Pepsi at 6am – NOT GOOD).

Sprawled around the bus stop with out laden packs we must have looked a real site to the local people – all boarding various dodgy looking modes of transport ready for a days work in the forest. For entertainment, quizmaster (or should that be mistress?) Nancy fired up her quiz book and tested us all on our general knowledge (which for some, namely myself, was sadly lacking at 6am).

Soon thereafter, the bus arrived. (After numerous debates regarding how to hotwire the coach at the bus-stop!). Thankfully we boarded the bus at the beginning of the bus' journey, as as we made our way to Zywiec the bus gained more and more passengers, until the 15 of us, plus packs, plus some very bemused (or should I say disgruntled?!) Polish locals were all packed in like sardines... and so we arrived at Zywiec Glowny to catch the train to Krakow, passing the Zywiec brewery on the way (8am beer for breakfast anyone?!).

So, first train journey to Katowice... and the good news is - NO PLASTIC SEATS! Whoop whoop! A brief gap in between trains meant a stop for lunch – as Nancy, Hannah and I scoped out sandwiches crisps and fruit we spot a ... VERO MODA!!!! We don't tell Jess,

as we only have an hour!

The next train arrives, and, much to my delight it's a Swedish coloured double decker train. My delight is however short lived, as that old physics lesson about heat rising holds true, and in 30 something degree temperatures the heat on the top deck is almost unbearable.

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We arrive back at the yellow hostel, and, once reunited with shampoo and shower gel, the race to the showers ensues!

Everybody makes it in the end, and we all head off in our various directions... Jono to buy new t-shirts, "Mum and Dad" for a beer, Aimee and I for ice-creams (and our fruitless search for cider!) and Jess, inevitably, to VERO MODA. Two of them. And needless to say, made purchases in both of them. After everyone is shopped out, we head for dinner in a very nice restaurant, expertly chosen by Nancy, Aimee and myself! After feasting on pizzas, pasta and genuine Polish pierogi, we award the venturers with various accolades based on their (mis!)adventures over the past two weeks, and then presented Ruth with a thank you gift for all her hard work.

It was then back to the hostel for the final night' sleep, not without a stop off for ice-cream & cocktails on the way!!!

Zzzzzzzzzz

Rach xxx

**Hannah Dalgleish  
Day 15**

**Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> August**

6.30am. Someone's tickling my foot. Eep! It was Ron. He will pay! (I apparently spilt his beer on the plane, so now we're even).

We were at the airport all in good time, & thanks to Rachel we got through baggage effortlessly & left with class A tickets. This gave us priority of choosing our seats, & choose the best one we did choose!

But first the group were trying desperately to be rid of their Zlotys, which us venturers were very grateful for. Chocolate all round! Some will have a good night to look forward to back home with all that mint and grapefruit flavoured vodka,

The plane has been a great excuse for sleep. Dan even missed the take off. I'm sure that Jess & Rachel are very sleepy having got up at 5am to see the square all empty.

It's also been rather exciting for Robbie, Sophie, & Charlotte as they've never been on a plane before. Wahey.

But perhaps it is even more exciting because 7 of us are wearing our brand new matching knickers. We are definitely the coolest people on this boat (or plane).

Overall, Poland has been an absolutely, totally, radically, awesomely, immense experience for all of us. We have met some of the most sociable people on this planet & partied hard in Lipowe Pole. We have exercised our arms to the limit on the canoes, and how toned do we look girls?

We have achieved the unachievable: climbed a muckle mountain with our huge rucksacks (definitely worth it for the scenery & sunsets). And that's not even half of what we have accomplished.

Thanks to Ruth and the others I feel that I now have the opportunity to conquer the world, and I'm sure others feel the same!

But now it is time to return back home & wash our clothes. And guess what? It's raining in Edinburgh.

I hope this isn't the end of our friendship, & I doubt it for I ashamedly have never been shopping in Edinburgh, so Jess, Robbie & Charis are determined to take me. And we must celebrate our results which loom ever closer on the horizon.

I really wish the entire group good luck in the future, & I can't wait to see all the photos & videos.

Thank you Ruth, again for all your hard work & to all of the other leaders too who have looked after us all so well, & often laughed at our clumsiness.

In conclusion, & I hope not to offend, Jess is a lesbian (not really!) & I never groped Adam!

Scotland here we come!

Hannah

P.S Okay so we got here in proper Scottish fashion! We were stuck in the bus waiting for a bluttered guy to get off the plane, making an utter arse of himself! Somehow he managed to get down the stairs, without falling on his face, however when trying to entice him away with his bottle of vodka they failed! Alas, the suggestion of putting him in the baggage was also unsuccessful. Anywho, all is well, except for the massive hangover that's in store for him tomorrow morning. Aww....

