June 29, 2015

Tourism in Prague Project

My name is Alex Herzog and I’m an American Study Abroad student spending my summer taking classes at Anglo-American University in Prague and interning at the Czech Pirate Party. My official title is Political Affairs Assistant, and my first project was to help the party assess tourism in Prague. Improving tourism in Prague is an important political issue, as tourism is a major industry in the Czech Republic. To tackle this project, I decided to divide my analysis into two parts. First, I assessed my own experience in Prague (I have been living here for exactly a month today). Second, I interviewed tourists to understand their experience when visiting Prague.

In order to gather the most amount of information from as many people as I could, I created a Prague Tourism Survey. The Prague Tourism Survey was created to assess tourism in Prague, and I handed this out to tourists I came across in Old Town Square and by the Charles Bridge. I also created this survey online to collect even more respondents. In total, I received 30 completed surveys.

I was able to draw on my prior experience I gained two summers ago working on a campaign for a candidate running for county executive. I was responsible for gathering as many signatures as possible in a day, to get my candidate on the ballot for the primary. I think this experience made approaching people to fill out a survey for less intimidating and improved my success..

However, I found this experience to be very different than the one I had two summers ago. First of all, in a foreign country, not everyone speaks English. Many people I came up to did not even understand me. Secondly, signing something is a lot less time-consuming than filling out a survey, so less people were willing to fill out the survey for me than I expected. Most of the time I was collecting surveys, I did not enjoy it because I hated bothering people who had no interest in helping me. However, the few times people fill out the survey for me, it was an engaging experience because I was able to meet people from around the world. I even had the opportunity to give some advice on things to see in Prague.

Overall, it seems that the tourists are satisfied with their experience in Prague. Prague is doing many things well: it should continue to advertise clubs and pub crawls, keep the city clean, give guided tours in a variety of languages, host international events, maintain good universities (so that students will study in Prague), and offer “Czech” experiences (beer tastings, shows, etc.). On the other hand, I believe that tourists would appreciate English being more available in signs and the friendliness of locals (in restaurants especially), prevented overcharging tourists (restaurants and taxis), and simplified navigation for tourists (having more maps on streets).

The other part of my research has been through my own experiences. One way I decided to assess this was to go to the Prague City Tourism Office, get directions to a place in Prague, and then see how good the advice is. They were very helpful in giving me directions to main attractions, but some of the information they gave me about getting to the airport was incorrect. I was eventually able to figure out how to get to the airport using public transportation by doing online research, but even then it was difficult for me. In general, I believe that the airport website, public transportation websites, and the Prague City Tourism website should give clearer directions to the airport. I had so much trouble navigating my way to the airport that I can see why most people I surveyed took private transportation from the airport.

In general, I have found the tourism websites to be helpful. I was testing out WikiTravel Prague and Prague City Tourism for this project, and on both websites I was able to find information about events, transportation, and restaurant discounts I would not have known about otherwise. A critique of these websites is that they said the English in Prague is better than it is. As a tourist arriving in Prague, my expectations were that the English would be great, and it was a rude awakening when so many people I’ve interacted with did not know any English. Additionally, the websites warn about exchange rates, but I believe they need to point out the train station specifically as a place where tourists often get ripped off. One of my friends visited me from Germany, and he exchanged €70 for €50 (is that the right symbol?) worth of Czech Koruna. The train station is where many tourists arrive, so I feel like tourists should know not to exchange money there.

The Czech Pirate Party really wants to focus on improving public transportation so that more tourists use the public transportation. Based on my research about half (53%) of tourists use public transportation when they visit Prague. As a student living in Prague for the summer, I take public transportation every day. I mainly use the metro, which I find very convenient. My critique of the metro is that it is not safe for the elderly. Some of the metro stops do not have elevators or ramps, and the escalators move very quickly. My roommate even witnessed a woman fall backwards down the escalator at the Flora stop because the escalator was moving too fast and she lost her balance. I find it difficult to navigate the trams; I think it would be useful if maps of the tram routes were put up at more stops so that people could navigate them more easily.

Overall, I am happy I was put on this assignment. I learned a lot about Prague’s public transportation and how different people have very unique experiences of the same city. I believe the results I have found in my research will help the Czech Pirate Party develop new policies for tourism and public transportation. I am excited to be part of that process and am very grateful I have this opportunity to work closely with the people who will make it happen!