

# Teaching English in the Czech Republic - All Aboard for Bohemia

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Teaching English in the Czech Republic

“All Aboard for Bohemia”

**By Andy Schell**

I registered for **TEFL Worldwide Prague**'s certification course in July of 2007, sitting behind the desk of my dull office job back in the U.S. Once bitten by the travel bug, resistance is futile, and looking back, it is surprising that I lasted as long as I did behind the desk. Seven months later, I was living and teaching in one of the world's most beautiful and interesting cities—and learning even more.

Very surreal...the Beach Boys “Get Around” plays on the stereo, immediately following an original version of Led Zeppelin's “Kashmir” on a local Czech radio station. I am sitting alone in the spacious bedroom of an apartment located in Hloubetin, and the ceilings are surprisingly high. My front window overlooks a busy street, and my back window overlooks an adjacent apartment complex. The subway station is less than a half a block away. It doesn't quite register to me that communists once lived in this apartment.

Prague is old, sprawling, confusing, beautiful, scary and home to an oddly large number of marionettes. I would like to say something to the effect that Communism still reigns supreme and that people are only just starting to adjust to Western culture and capitalism. But that is not true at all. Capitalism is everywhere, encouraging yet sickening at the same time. Paradoxically, money from tourism simultaneously maintains the authenticity of the city by helping to preserve the appearance of Prague's historical sights yet kills it by destroying the feel.

Back in Time

Evidently, Paris is a bit farther from Prague, at least meteorologically. When my plane landed from Sweden, after descending through three layers of clouds, the pilot announced in no less than three languages that the temperature on the ground was minus 6 degrees Celsius. I exited the terminal *sans* jacket and promptly froze waiting for my ride to the TEFL Worldwide school. For some reason I did not get a stamp in my passport, which is disappointing, because up until now every country I have visited has left its mark in the little “Blue Book of Freedom.”

Via shuttle bus, I was granted a short tour through the Old City en route to the Hotel Pivovar, the headquarters and classroom site of TEFL Worldwide Prague.

My initial reaction to the city was one of amazement. The cab driver tore through the cobbled streets, our sense of speed amplified by the incessant vibration of the ancient pavement. A few observations instantly stood out; cars were parked on the sidewalks; trolley cable cars zoomed down the center of the main streets; church spires stood like palace guards over every visible section of the city; and the enormous castle loomed over the entire city while the river peacefully meandered through its ancient center.

The first passenger was dropped off under the famously beautiful Charles Bridge, where an old mill, built in the 1350's, was visible. As the cab departed, I noticed a sinewy, soldierly looking man

in his 30's, running through a park adjacent to the river—in shorts. I was reminded that I am in a former member of the Soviet block, and that these people are probably a lot tougher than I am.

## Teaching English and Making Friends

It is the second day of the 4-week program and we are being fed to the lions—we are teaching. A half-dozen faces of my Czech students in my class stare at me as I attempt to write my name on the whiteboard, not yet frozen by my nerves. The benefit to the Czech students is a price-reduction on English lessons, since they are being taught by a bunch of rookies. The benefit to us student/teachers is an unparalleled, heart-stopping, and authentic experience in front of a decidedly intimidating audience.

I begin my lesson with a “warmer,” a simple five-minute game of photos to get the students talking to one another—in English, of course. I show them pictures depicting beaches, mountains, sports and celebrities. The students laugh when they recognize something, and humble me with their blank expressions of things misunderstood. Apparently Lance Armstrong is not that well-known in the Czech Republic.

Strangely, I immediately know that I am cut out for this. Yet two people in my class of 24 will call it quits before the first week concludes, testament to the challenging nature of the course.

It is now the second week. My lessons suddenly have a clearer focus, and I actually feel confident at the front of the class. The Czech students look forward to our classes. They know me now, and I know them.

We establish our routine of class in the morning with Terry and Pete (two outstanding teacher trainers from the U.K.), and student-teaching in the afternoons in groups of three. When not teaching, we observe our peers and extensively critique each other during the evening debriefing, often with our trainers present. This immediate feedback is essential to in order to mold us into effective teachers—for the next lesson is only a day away, and it is imperative that we improve on a daily basis. After all, our students are paying to be here.

I am sitting in the lounge of the Hotel Pivovar, one-on-one with Cheryl, a middle-aged Czech woman attending the class in the evenings. She wants to focus on her English conversation, so after class three times a week, we sit and we talk. I correct her mistakes and encourage her to tell me stories about her family and friends; we discuss things that interest her and interest me. This is the final stage in the class, and is a chance for the Czech students to really get their money's worth. When one-on-one with another person who may not speak our language very well, there is nowhere for teachers to hide. The sessions with Cheryl provide an outstanding opportunity to hone teaching skills, using gestures, pictures, and “graded” language to communicate effectively.

## Back to the Future

It's 8:32 p.m. now, and I'm on the balcony of my girlfriend's apartment back in Sweden. It's even colder here than it was in wintry Prague. But I can't complain.

Three years around the globe... New Zealand, Fiji, Sweden... life turned upside down and backwards at every turn, and an identity changing with the scenery. And now Prague could be added to the list—a place I might have never visited if it were not for TEFL Worldwide. I found something very special in an organization that was as passionate about teaching us to teach English as I am about travel and adventure. The students who leave Prague as new teachers are thoroughly prepared to spread the English language the world over, and will without a doubt be successful.

Heading back to Sweden on the plane, I watch as the historic center of Prague disappears into the clouds. The memories of lessons learned, people met, and the students taught remain priceless. I will be heading to Portugal soon to finally put my lessons into practice. The adventure bug has bitten again. Now I am prepared to travel with a purpose, to enlighten others' lives as mine has been enlightened over the past few years.

### For More Information

Prague is the perfect city for TEFL training—historic and compact, yet incredibly different from what most Westerners are accustomed to. And TEFL Worldwide Prague provides excellent housing and logistical information for your stay.

Undoubtedly a central part of your experience will be the travel, and Prague is situated in the center of Europe. Riding the rails to Germany and Austria highlighted the weekends, and friends made in the classroom will last a lifetime.

I chose TEFL Worldwide Prague because of their reputation and the student-teaching relationships fostered. Being put on the spot on the second day of class tested our mettle and really made us think twice about our commitment. Undoubtedly many travelers choose TEFL simply as an excuse to visit a foreign land—TEFL Worldwide managed to successfully weed out the uninspired by the second day.

By week four, we were sufficiently comfortable to plan and execute a 45-minute lesson for as many as 20 Czech students ranging from beginner to advanced English speakers. We were prepared to answer the grammatically challenging questions we would receive—despite not understanding much of it ourselves at the outset. Terry and Pete were godsend, and watching our peers advance from that very uncomfortable first day was an experience in itself, a serious morale booster—we had finally become teachers.

Teaching English was unexpectedly enlightening, and is proving to be yet another way to experience the many cultures of the world. Check out [www.teflworldwide.com](http://www.teflworldwide.com) for class dates and other information.

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