

EXPLORER } CZECH REPUBLIC

Peaceful Hiking in Bohemia, a Legacy of the Cold War

By DAVID FARLEY

THE border between the Czech Republic and Austria was less than a mile away, when an old man mysteriously appeared in the middle of the leafy, one-lane road. A generation ago, he might have been shot for being this close to the former buffer zone of the Iron Curtain.

“Dobry den,” I said, wishing him a “good day.” But he just stood there in frozen silence, a you’re-not-from-these-parts look on his face. So I soldiered on, merrily continuing on my scenic hike through the Bohemian woods.

During the Cold War, this slice of Central Europe was verboten to anyone but residents of a few ancient villages and the guards patrolling the frontier. The Czechoslovakian government cleared the buffer zone of locals and populated it with card-carrying members of the Communist Party. That might explain why, two decades after the Berlin Wall fell, a haunted stillness hung over this coniferous landscape of low-rolling hills.

It is also a reason the network of hiking and biking trails in those hills of southern Bohemia remain among the continent’s most pristine and untrammelled.

The Czechs, known for their prowess in making beer and playing hockey, are also a nation of prolific hikers. Etched throughout this Central European country are nearly 24,000 miles of color-coded hiking trails, stretching from Karlovy Vary in the northwest to Ostrava in the east. Much of it is maintained by the Czech Hiking Club, a private organization, dating back to 1889, that splashes painted trail markers across trees and installs signposts.

With so many trails to explore, how does a non-Czech hiker choose the right route? For my wife, Jessie, and I, the answer was simple. We would spend five days walking trails of the Czech Greenways, a network of old trading routes that were recently restored by the Friends of the Czech Greenways, a nonprofit group based in Brooklyn.

The network, also called the Prague-Vienna Greenways, is the brainchild of Lubomir Chmelar, a retired architect who splits his time between New York City and Mikulov, a small southeastern town near the Austrian border. He was inspired by the Hudson River Valley Greenway, a revitalization project in New York that has spurred recreation and culture along the riverfront from Westchester County to Albany.

Mr. Chmelar assembled a team of landscape architects and Harvard MBAs and set off on foot to find the

most scenic route between Prague and Vienna. The result is a 250-mile-long network of trails, zigzagging between the two European capitals past ruined castles, cute villages, dense forests and the once-forbidden Cold War border.

A few weeks before my hike, I met up with Mr. Chmelar, 73, at his Manhattan town house, hoping that he’d help me decide which section of the greenway I should hike. Mr. Chmelar, a tall and dapper man who spoke with an Oxford-educated accent, excitedly threw out numerous itineraries.

Eventually, we settled on my jaunt: we’d start halfway between the two capitals, in the picturesque, Unesco-protected southwestern town of Cesky Krumlov, and zigzag east and northeast about 80 miles to the medieval town of

Slavonice, about a mile from the Austrian border. The hike offered a mix of gorgeous Baroque towns, varied terrain and a dose of history in a part of the country that tourists rarely see.

Mr. Chmelar offered a little history lesson himself. Under Communism, he said, even hiking was politicized. “The government preferred keeping people in the pub,” he said, “not deep in the forest where they don’t know what they’re up to.”

We set out in mid-May, on a cold morning when the majestic castle of Cesky Krumlov cast a long shadow over the town’s quiet cobblestone streets. My wife and I slung on our medium-sized backpacks, filled with two-days’ worth of clothes, bandages (for blisters) and several detailed maps of south Bohe-

Communism kept a border area pristine and untrammelled.

mia. Then we boarded a bus.

Although we would cover most the trail by foot, the cheap and efficient Czech bus system also meant we could hop on buses to keep the daily hikes under 25 miles. The idea would be to hit the trail early in the morning, so we could arrive at our destination for a late lunch and spend the remainder of the day sightseeing.

The bus took us over the steep, sur-

rounding hills and deposited us 15 miles away in Kaplice, a tiny town at the foot of the Novohradske mountains. We found a red-and-white-striped trail marker in the town’s center that lead us up a dirt path. Within minutes, we were hiking through dense pine forests and skirting yellow-poppy-filled prairies, so bright and expansive that it almost gave me vertigo.

About five hours and eight miles later, we entered Benesov nad Cernou, a village that was little more than a square with a yellow-and-white church at one end. That night, we celebrated our first day of hiking in one of the town’s two noisy pubs. We washed down plates of svickova (roasted tenderloin slathered

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PAVEL HOREJSI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A road between Kaplice and Trebon in southern Bohemia. The author hiked much of the way between the two towns on well-marked trails.