



MY EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

TRAVEL STORIES BY AZORCAN TOUR PASSENGERS



Vintage Oldtimers Hockey Tour
Germany, Italy, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary & Czech

by Fred Shreenan



azorcan.net

For the Love of The Game by Fred Shreenan

At the time, it didn't seem likely I could cross two items off my bucket list in one fell swoop, yet, in 2018, still a freshly minted retiree, I managed to do just that.

Among my passions in life, hockey and travelling sit atop the list. Both have been ongoing pursuits for most of my adult life, to the extent that a full time teaching career and the role of a responsible adult would permit. Like most Canadian kids, I grew up playing hockey, from peewee and on up to University level, where I first heard the words "You're cut".

The detours of life took me in new directions when I moved out west from my home in the Maritimes, and the prospect of playing recreational sports seemed to get replaced with growing responsibilities for career and future. That is, until I was about 40 years old and the opportunity to play 'beer league' hockey presented itself. I was soon into the rhythm of one late night game a week, albeit at the cost of early to work the next morning. Barely sustainable, but I was younger then.

I got my hockey fix during the winter and I got my travelling shoes dirty during summer holidays and other school breaks. I was lucky to have had a fulfilling teaching career and at times was able to marry travelling with work, on teaching assignments in Australia, Uganda and Dominica. But it was not until I was well and truly retired and owning all of my time, that I was able to enjoy the freedom to develop my interests completely on my schedule.

From another retired person, I had heard of the esteemed 'Vintage Hockey' league in Edmonton, an association for guys over 55. This was an active and well- organized group that played a robust schedule of games and tournaments, sponsored charitable events, and offered a range of social activities to its members.

I felt I had stumbled upon a well kept secret and made haste to join the roster. I could now play hockey on weekday mornings. What a treat - and beats going to work!



Games in Ceske Budejovice and in Prague. Canada Vintage's # 19, Fred Shreenan.

Soon thereafter a unique opportunity arose. A tournament in eastern Europe was being offered by a sports travel company to players in my age group. Playing hockey in foreign countries that I had long wished to visit sounded like the trip of a lifetime. The itinerary looked exciting; 18 days, 6 countries, 10 games, all inclusive. I was sold.

Departure day arrived. It was time to buckle up for the big fantasy ride. We arrived in Munich, Germany, got settled in our hotel and very soon thereafter found ourselves swept up in Oktoberfest, the world famous annual beer gardens festival, a hallmark of German hospitality. Driven by loud Bavarian music, dancing, food and free flowing beer everywhere, getting acquainted with my fellow travelers was effortless! Hockey players and beer seem to mix well together, I've learned.



Munich's Oktoberfest, the Neuschwanstein Castle and Salzburg.

Our first game took us into Innsbruck, Austria, where we got to tour the original arena where the 1964 winter Olympics had taken place. Our game resulted in a win for Canada which put us in fine spirits. Prior to the game, we exchanged tokens of our respective countries with our host opponents, in the spirit of international competition, adding an air of pomp and circumstance to the experience. The level of play and overall skill shown was quite high. We all skated hard and competed to win. All our games were like that, fast-paced, usually close; however we got blown out in a game with the Czechs who were much younger but showed us mercy and loaned us a few of their players to even things out. Every game ended with handshakes and smiles and "good game" from both sides.



Canada Vintage post game photo with the Wild Hogs in Bratislava, Slovakia.

The days that followed were packed with activity in some of eastern Europe's most interesting and beautiful cities, towns and countryside. Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic offered a banquet of sights and sounds for the senses; castles, palaces, historical settings and cultural attractions. But most of us were here for the hockey first, scenery second.



Belvedere Palace in Vienna, Prague's Old Town Square and Budapest's Parliament.

Our tour bus, which started out as a quiet group of people who were mostly strangers to one another, had soon become one big happy family of 'Canucks on wheels'. Our group bonded readily and became a source of ongoing entertainment and impromptu performances, as we all took turns on our excellent tour guide's microphone (at his behest). There were roasts and toasts, jokes and anecdotes, all along the way.

We moved at a steady pace, with short hotel stays and lots of schlepping luggage and smelly hockey equipment (hard to air out), on and off busses and up and down tight stairways of boutique hotels. Hardships were endured mostly with good cheer. Even with built in 'down time', the pace was, at times, taxing, especially when we had a later game time scheduled.

Various stops in our 18 day itinerary included a day trip across the Austrian border into a small village in Italy and later to the magical castle of mad King Ludwig in Neuschwanstein.



Group photo in Bratislava, touring Bouzov Castle and a group meal in Budapest.

Old town Salzburg included a tour of an Augustine brewery (meeting with everyone's approval) and a memorable walking tour of Vienna which delighted the 'Sound of Music' fans in our entourage. An evening cruise on the Danube highlighted our stay in Budapest before moving on to the Czech Republic for more hockey and more sightseeing. In Ceske Budejovice, Czech Republic we played a game at an arena owned by Jaroslav Pouzar, a former Edmonton Oiler.



At the Moravsky Kras caves, Cesky Krumlov Castle and a medieval dinner in Prague.

Prague was my personal favourite stop on the trip. With its famous castle, old town square, and sidewalk cafes on cobblestone pathways, it exuded a particular European charm. It was there that I found enough time to myself to visit the Museum of Communism and a local art gallery one afternoon. Later that evening everyone met for a medieval dinner and performance where, once again, copious amounts of ale were consumed with true Canadian gusto. (Did I mention the hockey + beer equation?)

Finally the tour was drawing to a close. Our wagon train of hockey playing Canucks had survived its pioneering journey. We were at once exhausted and exhilarated. We played hard and were coming home after completing 10 games with a 4-4-2 record. (2 ties). We had made new friends and garnered lasting memories.

Returning home looked nothing like Canadian Olympians arriving to a heroes welcome. No throngs of flag-waving fans to greet us at the airport, no media surging forward seeking interviews, and certainly no ticker tape parade. Just hugs and 'high fives' from family and friends who were going to hear every detail about our shared adventure, like it or not!

Reality notwithstanding, for a busload of hardcore Canadian old timer hockey players returning from a really long road trip, we still had gold medals to share, in the form of cherished memories and the stories they spawned.



Post game photo in Prague. Czech Republic.

My Experience With Azorcan Tours by Fred Shreenan

Azorcan sports provided an all inclusive, hassle free, and extraordinary travel and sporting experience to eastern Europe for our Canadian entourage of hockey players, wives and partners. Well in advance of our departure, a helpful information session was provided with an opportunity to meet fellow travellers and address any questions from the group about ticketing, personal costs, foreign currency, and general concerns. A well planned itinerary provided consistent comfort and convenience as we travelled by luxury coach through beautiful countryside and enjoyed visits in unique and historic locations. A real feeling of group togetherness and friendliness was quickly established on board with the help of a personable and well-informed tour guide. Accommodation, dining experiences, and sightseeing tours were all top notch. The sporting aspect of the trip more than lived up to our expectations. Plenty of "on-ice" action with teams from the countries we visited satisfied our hockey 'fantasy' experience.

As a professional tour host and travel provider, Azorcan showed they have the resources, expertise and desire, to provide an exciting and specialized travel experience for their clients.

I was very impressed with Azorcan and hope to have an opportunity to travel with Paul Almeida and his company again in the future!



Canada Vintage goalie, a great chance in Bratislava and a pair of captains in Prague.

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A Note From Azorcan's Paul Almeida

Thank you Fred for contributing to our "My European Experience" travel stories from Azorcan tour passengers. The eighteen day tour in October of 2018 covered six countries and the team played a challenging ten games. I joined the group in Vienna and I especially enjoyed watching the passion you all have for hockey. I look forward to the next Canada Vintage hockey tour.

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