

A multi-day hike in the foreland of the National Park Giant Mountains, Czech Republic.

Hiking in the Czech Republic was and is something special for our hiking group.

A little explanation about this.

Before 1989, the Czech Republic was an Eastern Bloc country, behind the so-called Iron Curtain: strictly separated from the West. Communist, a closed dictatorship. On the multi-day hikes we did here, both before the removal of the Curtain in 1989, and immediately after, you tasted an unfamiliar atmosphere. At least: that is what we thought we taste. The complete unfamiliarity with these regions provided us, the visitors, with fertile ground for the necessary prejudices and clichés. Clichés like "gloomy people," "gray and drab." "dreariness", "monotonous flats", "dreary" or "poor". Until you met the people. On the route, at night in the pub or over breakfast in a Pension. Or while eating a sandwich on a wall of a dilapidated ruin where Jakub and Vojtěch spoke to you about why on earth you took that strange path through the forest. Then all those alienating mechanisms disappear and the explanation of us getting lost in that forest or a question like "where can we eat in the valley?" is the start of a great contact. Nothing drab and gray.

Great contacts, as can still happen anywhere.



Giant Mountains

Two countries

The Giant Mountains National Park is located in two countries: Poland and the Czech Republic. The Poles were the first to recognize the importance of the unique nature in this area and give it NP status. The authorities in the Czech district of North Bohemia followed a few years later.

Which does alter the fact that for some time both countries quietly continued all kinds of polluting activities. For example, heavy industry in the area - blast furnaces and lignite power plants - did receive a fine for highly polluting emissions but the state reward for meeting a five-year plan was much higher! And then it doesn't shoot up. Over a quarter of the forests have perished. A European rescue plan launched years ago seems to be working out well.

In 1963, the area became a National Park. The Krkonošský národní park. In 1992 followed the recognition by UNESCO. Along with its Polish upstairs neighbors. There is still a lot of beautiful and challenging nature preserved!

With a great hiking infrastructure!



Forelands

The hike.

We started our walk in Mala Skala, just outside the Park, still just inside the Bohemian Paradise. And whether you had it in your planning or not: you really should first visit the Gothic castle, built on a rock massif, which towers pontifically above the town: the Vranov Pantheon. With already the first beautiful views of the Jizera River.

Near Semily, 16 kilometers away, this river has formed a unique gorge valley. With massive rock formations up to 100 meters high: the Krkavčí skála, or the Raven Rock. But the latter doesn't really sound like it. Then let's go Czech: Přírodní rezervace Údolí Jizery u Semil a Bítouchova. To compare with the wonderful formations in the Broumovsko.

On the way to Jablonec nad Jizerou, your climbing and ascending skills are challenged considerably. You walk into the National Park here. Thirty kilometers further to the east, meadow to meadow, are occasionally the occasionally the first contours of Sněžka (1603m) can be seen. To get used to a real climb.



Mala Skala

From Jablonec via Vyhlička Stráž (782m), just off the red route, a small detour, to Špindlerův Mlýn. Vyhlička Stráž is a viewpoint, (very) freely translated "the watchtower." Phenomenal views of the even higher mountains to the north and the towns in the valleys await you. You can tell by all sorts of amenities that you are walking into a ski resort here. Meanwhile, Špindlerův Mlýn - say Spinnery - is a formidable competitor to the Swiss and Austrian winter sports industry. If only because of the price. To the northwest of Špindlerův Mlýn, the Elbe (or, in Czech, the Labe) rises and, after 1164 kilometers into the North Sea at Hamburg.



Sněžka

During the ascent of Sněžka you walk a short distance along this river, which here is still no more than a boulder-filled fast-flowing stream. The whole climb, including the approach, is over 24 kilometers from Špindlerův Mlýn. Keep a close eye on the weather and the forecast. Days with fog, sudden strong winds and buckets of rain or snow are alternate with very clear and sunny weather. With the latter, the views are unbeatable!

In case of strong winds, check in advance whether the elevator is still in operation. *

Once at the top you walk quite a bit on Polish territory. Over an old Roman road. Not that so much changes but it still gives a special childlike (?) feeling. The Polish Polish restaurants are excellent! The views cannot be surpassed.

At the top of Sněžka there is a weather station, among other things. And a chapel. You can still endlessly, at altitude, walk further, for example to the Skalný Stol (1281m), the Table Mountain. And further. On what has come to be called the Friendship Trail. 80 kilometers long. We took the elevator down down. It had gotten pretty late after so many kilometers.

On to Pec pod Sněžkou, hitchhiking.

If it wants to walk: another 6.5 kilometers of descent. Say 2.5 hours.

Where we started the last stage, via the spa town of Janské Lázně to Svoboda nad Úpou (Freedom on the Upou River). A delightful descent through forests with waterfalls, crystal clear streams, sleepy paths through swampy ground and in the distance a futuristic lookout tower structure where you can "walk" the Timber Trail. But with such rich flora in these fantastic forests, you don't need a tower. It is, however, a symptom of the country's rapid conversion to a free-market economy. There is money to be made from tree canopy in the Czech Republic, too. They have discovered.

** Rübzahl is de weermeester van het Reuzengebergte. Volgens de legende een grillige reus en bosgeest. Onverwacht of speels stuurt hij bliksem en donder, mist, regen en sneeuw van de berg erboven, zelfs als de zon schijnt. Hij kan eruitzien als een monnik in een grijze japon. Naar hem zou het Reuzengebergte zijn genoemd. Opdat u op de hoogte bent van het sterk wisselende weer hier!*

General hiking tips

- The Czech Republic is a hiking country par excellence! Excellent hiking maps are for sale everywhere. The routes are marked with their color(s). So you walk the entire climb to the top of the Sněžka on "the red color". The red stripes are painted on trees, fences, houses, poles or whatever else is painted. And they are maintained!
- At important intersections there are poles with signs showing the destinations, the kilometers and the hiking hours required.
- In the stage towns there are usually plenty of options for good sleeping and meals. In pensions (penzion), hotels or campsites. Wild camping can be heavily fined in the National Park. Prohibited everywhere. Rightly so!
- The Czech Republic's currency is the Czech Crown (CZK). Currently (April 2020), 1 euro is 23 CZK. Check with your own bank about ATM options in the Czech Republic (extra fees!).
- *The density of the bus network is fine. We went from the last stage town Svoboda nad Úpou by bus back to Mala Skala.*
- *You won't regret visiting Prague! The largest museum in Europe. From Špindlerův Mlýn 150 kilometers.*



Roman road on top



“Preparation”





Snow at Easter