

REU Prague Trip - Report

>From my perspective as the REU Graduate Student Coordinator the Prague trip had two components: one academic, and the other cultural. The academic component consisted of daily lectures primarily during the first week, and the Midsummer Combinatorial workshop (MCW) during the second. The cultural component was built up from the trips and outings led by the Czech REU students and the hosts of the MCW. Both components were phenomenal.

The lecturers who spoke directly to the American group did an outstanding job of catering their talks to the interests and ability levels of the students. Also, the quality and quantity of problems they posed to the students seemed very appropriate. I wouldn't change a thing about this for future groups.

Regarding the MCW, most of the American students had not been to a conference or workshop of this caliber before. I think it was above their level, but I don't believe this to be a bad thing. The workshop gave them first hand experience observing mathematicians discuss contemporary research problems. It also showed them that even mathematicians don't know everything (nor do they always follow all of the talks that they hear). This is a strange concept, especially for undergraduates coming from American universities. However, I believe being aware of this is incredibly helpful when they are first posed with the challenges of graduate school. In conclusion, the MCW should definitely be kept in the curriculum as well.

The cultural component too was remarkable. We went on trips all over Prague as well as to a number of locations outside of the city. In particular, I would like to thank Bernard, Vojta, Jozef, Lukas, Lukas, Martin, and Pavel for all of their hard work and help during our trip. They definitely made our stay the amazing experience that it was. They were extraordinary hosts.

Finally, I have two recommendations for next year. The first is to incorporate some occasional free study time in the middle of the day. More precisely, this year the typical day for the students went as follows:

9.00 - 13.00 Lecture/MCW;
 13.00 - 14.00 Lunch;
 14.00 - 18.00 Outing;
 18.00 - 20.00 Dinner.

Though this schedule is exciting and culturally/mathematically enriching, it doesn't leave much of the daytime for the students to do their own work.

I suggest the following: Two of the week days should be as described in the previous paragraph. The other three days should be identical, except the afternoons should be left open for independent study rather than an outing. I think this would also lessen the load on the Czech student hosts, which is the issue content of the next paragraph.

My second recommendation comes more as an observation. It seemed (both this year and last) that the Czech REU student hosts went above and beyond in their roles as hosts for the American group. We almost always had at least two Czech students helping us through the day's activities. This was great from our perspective, but I could tell the Czech students were sacrificing much of their own daily lives to help us out, and some of it was (in my opinion) not necessary. For example, I don't feel it is necessary for one or two of the Czech students to always be present in the room during the lectures. They should, of course, be welcome to attend if they are interested in the subject matter; however a mandatory presence does not seem necessary, from my perspective at least. The same goes for lunch.

Here is my suggestion on this matter: It would be nice to have a few Czech students accompany us for all of the activities during the first few days. This would give the American students a chance to get a feel for their new environment. After that, I recommend only requiring that a few Czech students be present for the outings. Their attendance at the lectures and at lunch should be voluntary. I feel this would make their job as hosts far

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more reasonable, and we (the American group) would still be recipients of a
great experience in Prague.

Please contact me if you have additional concerns or questions.

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