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Briefing: Bratislava, Slovakia

While our stop in Bratislava may be one of the shortest ones, it still remains an important part of our tour. We'll be home soon, but stay focused just a little bit longer. The best place to start is with an overview of Bratislava. Recently The Belfast Telegraph newspaper named Bratislava number one on its list of 'top eight must-see transformed cities.' (Bratislava Guide)

In addition to being the largest and most populous city in Slovakia, Bratislava is the state capital. It is located in southwestern Slovakia and borders Hungary to the south and Austria to the west. Other countries that border it are the Czech Republic, Poland and the Ukrainian Republic. It is one of Slovakia's warmest cities, with an average temperature of around 60 degrees Fahrenheit. It spreads over both banks of the Danube River. As of 2005, its population was just under 500,000 people. Slovak is the official language, even though only one third of all Slovaks live within the borders of Slovakia. Major industries of Slovakia include brown coal mining, chemical, metal working, consumer appliances, fertilizers and plastics armaments.

Historical Development

Bratislava is a rather old city, quite like many of the ones that have already been visited on this trip. The history of this city begins in 400-50 B.C., when "Oppidium," an important Celtic town was established on the current territory. It was founded before the 10th century and was originally called Pressburg. Between 1541 and 1784, it was the capital of Hungary. One of the city's more famous moments was the signing of the

“Peace of Bratislava” during the Napoleonic War in 1805. It was signed following the defeat of the armies of Francis I, the Austrian emperor and Alexander I, the Russian Tsar, by Napoleon’s army at Austerlitz. (Bratislava)

Since the 18th century, Bratislava has been an important center of Slovak national and cultural movement. The first railway was built in Hungary in 1840, and it connected Bratislava with Svaty Jur. Eight years later, the city was connected by rail to Austria and in 1850 it was connected to Budapest. The city became heavily modernized and industrialized in the 19th century. (Bratislava Hotels)

In 1918, the city became part of Czechoslovakia. In 1919, the city was named Bratislava and became the capital of the province of Slovakia.

In the years consumed by World War II, Bratislava became the capital of the puppet fascist Slovak State. Germany pulled all of its strings. In 1968 it became the official capital of the Slovak Socialist Republic. Twenty-one years later, the communist regime was overthrown in the peaceful Velvet Revolution and Bratislava became the capital of the Czechoslovak Federative Republic.

On the first day of 1993, Slovakia gained its independence and Bratislava became its capital. Czechoslovakia was disbanded and the Czech Republic and Slovakia were officially created.

Current Political System

The National Council of the Slovak Republic, the Government of the Slovak Republic, national ministries and other state administration bodies are located in Bratislava. (Bratislava)

Slovakia's political framework is that of a parliamentary representative democratic republic. The Prime Minister of Slovakia is the head of the government and a pluriform multi-party system exists. The current prime minister, since October of 1998, is Mikulas Dzurinda. The current president since June of 2004 is Ivan Gasparovic.

Executive power lies in the hands of the government, while legislative power is held in both the government and parliament. The president is elected by direct, popular vote for a five-year term. This amendment was made to the constitution in September of 1998. The highest legislative body is the 150-seat unicameral National Council of the Slovak Republic. The judiciary branch is independent of the other two branches. (Politics of Slovakia)

A current issue going on in the Slovak government is the parliamentary election being brought forward to June 2006. Short-term costs of reform have caused popularity with the current governing party to decline greatly. This unrestful situation is hoped to be relieved by moving the election closer to the present time. We will be in Bratislava right before the elections so there is sure to be a lot of information in the news about this current situation.

On the economic side of things, the country's GDP is expected to grow to about 6% in 2006. Contrary to unemployment and job uncertainty in previous regions we have visited, Slovakia as a whole has an unemployment rate of 3.82% while Bratislava has an extremely low unemployment rate of 2.6%. (Central Europe's...) Slovakia's current economy is characterized by rapid economic growth. (The Economist)

Major Cultural Attributes

Slovak culture is quite similar to culture in the Czech Republic. For those who visited Prague they may have already experienced this, but for those of you who went to Munich here is a brief overview. Slovak language is similar to the language in the Czech Republic which is understandable because the countries were one until their independence in 1993.

While this rule applies to visiting most foreign countries, it is generally well-received to make an attempt to learn the language or at least a few basics of it. Learning simple greetings, such as hello and goodbye show an openness and acceptance of the visiting country's culture. "Ahoj" is a word that communicates various things in Slovak. It can be used to say hello, goodbye and in situations where people have just been introduced to one another. It is also better to greet a stranger on the street than to not say anything at all. Modesty and humility are greatly appreciated in a person. Assuming an ethnocentric way is not a good way to make friends in Slovakia. In social situations shaking hands is customary and punctuality is expected and appreciated.

Business Processes

Slovak business dress and behavior are similar to those of the accepted practices in the United States and Eastern Europe. Do not use first names when addressing people in a business setting. Using formal titles such as Doctor or Engineer is seen as a sign of respect. Many business people can understand English and use it, especially in Bratislava, but German is more commonly used throughout the country of Slovakia. Acceptable gifts for business meetings include expensive pens or ones with business logos on them as well as specially selected wines.

The establishment of a good personal relationship and mutual trust are key aspects of doing business in Slovakia. Usually it is customary to start with polite conversation and not to rush into discussion about business upon entering the meeting. This should be accompanied by a toast with a local alcohol such as a slivovica (plum brandy) or borovicka (similar to gin). Only after the toast should the conversation turn to business.

Faxes and emails should be backed up with a later letter or other form of correspondence that confirms an intended meeting. The technology standards in Slovakia are still well below those of the United States and may require repeated efforts to get in contact with the person. (Business Travel)

Coca-Cola Slovakia Headquarters

While in Bratislava we will be visiting the Coca-Cola Slovakia Headquarters. “Coca-Cola Beverages Slovakia, s.r.o. is the largest subsidiary of The Coca-Cola Company in Central and Eastern Europe.” (American Companies)

Over 9,000 visitors come from over 250 schools from around the globe, much like ourselves. Upon visiting the headquarters a short film will be shown about Coca-Cola, its current activities, and production of non-alcoholic beverages. Pictures of products they have made will also be shown. Different distributed products include: Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola Light, Fanta, Sprite, Kinley, Lift, Bonaqua, Cappy, Cappy Ice Fruit, Nestea, Powerade and Nescafe. (Coca-Cola)

The system of Coca-Cola is set up around the world as the Coke Company and its partners. The Coca-Cola Company, which is the owner of the brand name and merchandising rights, makes the basic raw materials and creates the character and marketing of the individual products. They also offer the basic production and logistics to

distribute the beverages. The Slovakian partner is the Coca-Cola Beverages Slovak CCBS. This subsidiary belongs to Coca-Cola Hellenic Bottling Company HBC. Products are made in particular areas and distributed to specific regions from those areas. The four distribution centers in Slovakia created in 1993 are in the following cities: Bratislava, Banska, Bystrica and Kosice a Luka. Although it took Coca-Cola 30 years longer to find its niche in central Europe than it did in Western Europe, it eventually found its niche in Slovakia. In the 1930s it first found itself in Slovakia but it really took until the 1970s for it to catch on with the locals. During this time the company had to decide under much rule what to make because they were a state company. In 1989 Cappy was introduced. In 1990 Coca-Cola Company became licensed in Slovakia. Coke really started pouring big money into Slovakia in 1993 and in 1994 it located the Bratislava plant which we will visit. It is one of the most modern factories in central Europe. Its main activities include marketing to distributors, merchandising issues, distribution and so forth. (Coca-Cola)

Following the visit to the Coca-Cola plant will go to the University of Economics Bratislava. The school was originally established under the name “Private Institute of Commerce” in 1940. It gained the University of Economics name in 1992. To give an idea of the size of the university, it has 14,200 students and over 530 teachers. “The structure of types of study is... spread over the three levels- bachelor study, full-time master/engineering study and a part-time study.” (History, Past and Present)

Major News

Slovakia has numerous news sources. Online news sites include News Agency of the Slovak Republik, Slovak Spectator and Slovensko.com. The country has around 50 newspapers. The two newspapers of the Bratislava region include Bratislavske Noviny and Bratislavsky Vecernik. The Slovak Spectator is the country's English language newspaper. The spectator is online as well. Many of the country's national newspapers are based out of Bratislava.

In business news, according to the article "Central Europe's Bourses Seek to Cooperate" from kirotv.com, stock exchanges and business are experiencing growth in their capital markets. The most important way to gain this growth is by expanding businesses into international waters. This will intertwine stock markets from Bratislava, to Bucharest, Romania and Vienna, opening these markets to greater capital abilities. As stated in the article, Chief Exchange Officer of the Vienna Exchange, Michael Buhl said "In all [of the region's] countries, the exchanges are symbols of overcoming communism. It's not something they're going to give up easily." (Central Europe's...)

Another current issue going on in Slovakia is the problems it faces with women in the workforce. According to the EU Lisbon strategy is setting out to reform the labor market regulations concerning women. Discrimination against women in this country shows up in three ways: higher unemployment rates than men, higher concentration of women in the worse-paid jobs, or in low positions in a company's hierarchy, and lower wages than males in comparable positions. This discrimination leads to high levels of prostitution and human trafficking, although these levels are not as high as Russia. Slovak women are in much better places then they were in the past.

Another current issue is the Roma or gypsy population. Between the Czech Republic and Slovakia there are over 800,000 Romanies. The gypsy population in Slovakia is something that should not be brought up by the foreigner in conversation. Romany rights have been one of the most important parts of EU accession negotiations. Slovakia has exhibited better treatment of its gypsy population than its neighbor, the Czech Republic. The EU wants to make sure that the gypsy population is not discriminated against, and is granted the same human rights allowed to all humans. These provisions must be discussed because of the constant mistreatment of this large population. These countries have talked about herding this group into ghettos, which is unacceptable in the EU's eyes.

An interesting piece of news that occurred just this week on Tuesday, May 23 relates greatly to our situation and could help us out quite a bit in our travels. A group of students traveling from Hungary were visiting St. Michael's Cathedral in Bratislava. Similar to many places we have visited; their teacher was giving a guided tour of the cathedral. According to the Slovakian police, "...the teacher had broken the law by not having a license to give guided tours and that the pupils had broken the law by listening." (Ananova) This story is just a little something for everyone to think about before our arrival.

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