

India



by Laura Katirayi

Cycling from Prague to Seattle

by Melissa Andrada

Melissa Andrada is a senior Comparative History of Ideas major. She studied abroad in Prague during Spring 2006 and traveled independently in Germany during Spring 2007.

Five years ago, I never would have stepped into a gym. If you had told me that I would be lifting ten-pound weights and doing three sets of lunges at Mieko's Fitness at least twice a week, I wouldn't have believed you. While these numbers may not sound that impressive, they are certainly significant for someone whose idea of exercise was playing a game of speed chess at the Bauhaus Café in Capitol Hill.

I have spent most of my life avoiding sports and exercise. When I was younger, my parents never signed me up for soccer or softball. My family is from the Philippines, a country where intramural sports are almost non-existent. While my parents understood the value of sports and exercise, they did not prioritize them in the way they did education and the arts. Since I was not a natural athlete, I never asked my parents to sign me up for sports. In elementary school, I could never hit the ball past second base or run a mile in under ten minutes. Instead of participating in sports, I played chess and the clarinet, took art classes, and concentrated on my studies. By the time high school rolled around, I had fully accepted my non-athleticism and waived the required two years of physical education through marching band and an overload of advanced placement classes. Sports were not even something I enjoyed doing vicariously as a spectator.

My conception of sports and spectatorship dramatically changed last year when I was in Europe. By coincidence, I was in Europe during the World Cup, which was held in Germany that year. Initially I was not that excited about it. I was studying in Prague when it started and was annoyed that the city was overrun with die-hard football fans. The city was already crowded with tourists who were there just to take photos of themselves in front of the astronomical clock and Prague Castle. To me, the World Cup was just a game, and if anything it was getting in the way of my study abroad experience.

However, after a few weeks, I got swept up in the World Cup fervor and started watching games religiously. I would go with my friends and sister to Old Town Square to watch the games on the billboard-size public screens. Hundreds of fans, decked out in their countries' respective colors and toting flags, would congregate in the Square just for the World Cup. Being in Prague at that time was like being at Carnival: Just imagine three weeks of non-stop street parties and beer gardens. My sister and I got so swept up in the football euphoria that we decided to go to Berlin for the World Cup Final: France versus Italy.

The day of the World Cup Final was insane. I remember walking along one of the main streets in Kreuzeburg, where nearly every cafe and restaurant that we passed had the world cup on, and of course, everyone's eyes were glued to the television. After Italy won the game, cars were honking their horns and thousands of people poured into the street, dancing and opening bottles of champagne. Even though I was rooting for Germany and still don't know very much about football, I felt this incredible sense of community and elation. It was unbelievably inspiring to be in a place where people of so many different nationalities could join together to watch a sport. I didn't think I could ever feel this moved by football, or any sport for that matter.

The other turning point of my conception of sports was the weekend that my study program in Prague went to southern Bohemia. That weekend we biked more than seventy miles in two days. The first day was the equivalent of a Turkish prison. The rental place didn't have bikes for small, slender types, so I got stuck with a bike that was meant for someone twice my size. Also, I didn't know how to use the gears, so I spent most of the day biking in the wrong gear over mountain-like hills and against 10 mile-an-hour winds. Needless to say, I was the slowest cyclist in our class, even slower than my classmate who was two months pregnant. There were many times when I wanted to stop and take the next train back to Prague. However, I kept pushing the pedals and eventually learned how to use the gears and caught up with the rest of the class.

The next day I was upgraded to house arrest. I switched bikes with one of the guys in my program, and his bike and I instantly clicked. The handlebars were within reach and my feet could even touch the ground. By that time, I knew how to effectively use the gears. Having a sturdy bike and knowledge of how to use the gears completely transformed my cycling experience. I went from being one of the slowest cyclists in my program to one of the fastest. By the time we reached the train station in Telč, I felt like I could cycle my way back to Prague. Even though I didn't receive a trophy or medal for my efforts, I had never felt so proud of completing a physical

activity.

This bike trip challenged me in a way I had never been challenged before. It forced me to do something I wasn't sure I could even do. I've challenged myself in pretty much every aspect of life except for sports. The challenge of deconstructing a reading by Foucault or dealing with shoplifters at a clothing store on the Ave. is entirely different from cycling up mile-long hills against the wind. This bike trip empowered me to get in shape and exercise on a regular basis.

Despite my success in southern Bohemia, I still wasn't sure if I could take up cycling back in the States. In Seattle, it seemed like most of the cyclists, donned spandex body suits, fluorescent windbreakers and special shoes, and looked ready to race in Le Tour de France. I was undeniably proud of the 70 miles I biked in southern Bohemia, but wasn't sure if I would be taken seriously in the States. However, my perception of cycling and cyclists changed when I was studying in Amsterdam over the summer.

Amsterdam is a city where bikes outnumber people. Coming from a country where cars dominate the road, it was interesting to be in a city where bikes had priority over cars, trams and even pedestrians. Everyone from kindergarteners to businessmen to elderly folk bike on the street. My experience in Amsterdam made me realize you didn't have to wear spandex or even a helmet to be a cyclist. In Amsterdam, you see teenaged girls biking in miniskirts and stilettos, and businessmen in three-piece suits. Cycling never gets in the way of fashion.

It was thrilling for me to know that I could still wear denim skirts and suede boots while doing something to get exercise and preserve the environment. When I got back to Seattle in the fall, one of the first things I did was search for a bike to ride from home to campus and back. After three weeks of searching, I picked up a Marin Larkspur, a novice commuter bike from Recycled Cycles. The next thing I did was sign up for a membership at Mieko's Fitness on Lake City Way.

Sometimes I can't help but laugh when I see myself doing crunches or lunges in the mirror. However, one thing that I learned through the World Cup and cycling in Europe is that you don't have to be an athlete to appreciate or participate in sports. I am definitely nowhere near to lifting more than fifteen pounds at a time or biking faster than 12 miles-an-hour, but I know that I don't have to wear spandex to exercise and stay in shape.