

I wish this were a fiction, but unfortunately this really happened:

Ok. Ok. By now, I'm sure everybody has heard the story of our trip to Prague, but in case you haven't, here goes:

July 4th weekend, 1999

My wife Kristen and I arrived at the Stuttgart, Germany train station at 11:00pm to take an overnight train to Prague. It was a couchette car with 6 bunks. We climbed up to the top bunks and stretched out. Shortly thereafter, our neighbors arrived – all Americans (3 girls and guy named Brandon). I bought Brandon a beer and we started talking. He's a 25 year old southern Californian bachelor backpacking his way through Europe.

So, the girls chatted themselves to sleep, while Brandon and I reached our 3rd beer. We decided to go for a walk on the train to avoid disturbing the girls. The train cars were connected with working doors, so we headed back to the rear of the train. There we met some other travelers who spoke good English and were just as bored as we were. The train, meanwhile, continued making periodic stops. We stopped for a few minutes in Nürnberg and then pulled away again. Around 1:30am, Brandon and I returned to our car to check on the girls ... and to buy another beer.

Guess what? No car.

It turned out that in Nürnberg, the train had split into two sections. Our section barreled down the tracks to Dresden (in former East Germany) while the other section, rocked my unsuspecting wife and her new friends to sleep as it pressed on to Prague. Starting to realize the scope of our situation, we located a porter. She told us that there was nothing that could be done and we should try to resolve things when we reached Dresden. Keep in mind that we had no money, no passports and no shoes. Well, it turns out that Brandon had his passport and a 100 Swiss Franc note stashed in a money belt. I'm going to have to get me one of those.

7:45am - we arrived in Dresden, located the Polizei and began explaining our story to them. Mostly, they laughed at the silly Americans without their shoes. They explained to us that their phones could not dial into the Czech Republic. Frustrated, we headed inside the train station - to talk to the DB (Deutsche Bahn) service center. The attendant was sympathetic to our cause and stuck us on the next train to Prague, which was departing at that moment. In our haste, I had forgotten – no passport. Sure enough the Czech border guards threw me (almost literally) off the train near some bend in the Elbe river called "Bad Schandau". If you want to find it, you'll probably need a 1:500 scale map.

Our impromptu plan was simple. Brandon would continue to Prague, locate my wife and return on the very next train. We both knew that this was doomed to failure because Prague is not small and I didn't have my Palm Pilot with me, which had become a substitute for gray matter, especially regarding hotel names, train schedules and phone numbers. It was like a scene from a bad movie, as Brandon pulls away on the train, waving and telling me that he'd be back and for me to wait for him. Hey, where was I going anyway?

Brandon had left me the 100 Swiss Franc note, so after a 3 kilometer walk into town (barefoot) I found myself in the city center of the metropolis known as Bad Schandau. I was able to change the Swiss note into Marks - the first good news of the day. Soon thereafter, I bought a pair of hard leather clogs (you can't be too picky with size 12 feet and low funds) at a public market in town. Then, I bought a bottle of water and headed back to the bahnhof (train station) to take a nap. Things were looking up, especially since I only got thrown out of the train station twice for sleeping on the benches.

Brandon returns at 4:30pm, still without shoes. This was the first indicator that he was unsuccessful. He said that he had tried everything, even convincing (I don't know how) the Czech train station officials to let him use their PA system. "Kristen from Idaho. Richard and Brandon are here. Meet them at platform 1". I can only imagine the looks on people's faces as a Southern Californian accent graced their airwaves.

It turned out that Kristen woke up when the train arrived in Prague and became angry at our absence. She assumed that we had passed-out in the first class cars. After looking for us for over 2 hours, she decided to make her way to our hotel. There, she called the Czech police and the American embassy, but it was 4th of July weekend and nobody could understand her or help.

Defeated, Brandon and I took the train back to Dresden, sweet-talked another ticket from Deutsche Bahn back to Stuttgart, and arrived home at 7:30am Saturday morning (24 hours of hell). We bummed a spare key from my neighbor, looked up the hotel number and called Kristen. Everything ended good.

Kristen and I returned to Prague the following month. It's a beautiful city rich in architecture and history. We recommend visiting, but just promise that you'll stay in your assigned car if you take the train ... and sleep with your shoes on!