

Staff Evaluation of Comenius Trip to Turkey

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The excitement was palpable as we convened bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at our meeting point in Birmingham International Airport, eagerly anticipating the unknown adventure that lay ahead. We had an early flight to catch and before we could afford to relax, we faced the arduous task of lugging six outrageously heavy suitcases to the Turkish Airlines flight terminal (not easy when you're all weak and wheezing from laughter!). We might add that the weight was due to the cases being jam-packed with gifts, mascots, slabs of cheese, jars of Marmite and Branston Pickle [amongst other consumables] for the delectation of our hosts - as opposed to us each of us packing an obscene amount of shoes!

After months of preparation and a culmination of hard efforts from Mrs Bateman and the Post 16 Comenius Crew (designing logos, creating Power Point presentations and a website from scratch, rehearsing songs and dance routines, etc.), We were delighted to be accompanying four of 'BGGs Sixth Form's Finest' on the first Comenius Project mission – destination Turkey!

Our flight (which we came close to missing!), though only 4 hours in duration, was a thoroughly pleasant one - complete with delicious traditional Turkish nosh. Upon arrival at Istanbul Airport, we had a window of two hours spare to eye-up the goodies in the Duty Free department before it was all eyes peeled to spot our Comenius contact – 'Olgus', who we Brits would later affectionately refer to as 'Ozzy'.

Departure for the next leg of the journey – a gruelling 6 hour coach ride to a city none of us had ever heard of - could only take place once all parties were aboard. This meant waiting what seemed like a lifetime for the Romanian and Polish to follow suit and land on Turkish soil. Whilst waiting, we had opportunity to familiarise ourselves with the French cohort, who'd beaten us onto the coach.

Playing host to the plethora of international guests was an incredibly advanced and well-equipped school called TED, located on the (rather rural and strikingly barren!) outskirts of the newly nominated 'Cultural Capital' of Turkey – 'Eskisehir'. It was 1 a.m. by the time we reached the hotel and all were exceptionally weary and fatigued, only to receive the joyous news that we had to be up and ready by 7 a.m.!

Day 1 kicked off with breakfast in the school canteen. We had a traditional Turkish style breakfast and were formally introduced to our 'Comenius family' (Team France, Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey). Before we could digest our breakfast, we were thrown in the deep end to start of the project by delivering our presentation on all things English along with an overview of our school. During the presentations we learnt about the diversity of the cultural, educational, political and social diversity of the other nations.

As the day progressed we were given a tour of the school and were simply astounded by the sheer size, 3D cinema, lecture rooms, sports facilities (including tennis, basketball and volleyball courts, football pitch, swimming pool and gymnasiums!) and art work and displays around the school (including the school name engraved on just about every pillar and post!).

Before we left for our tour of the city, we met the Mayor of Eskisehir who warmly welcomed us to his city. The afternoon was a little less formal and was spent in the town centre eating kebabs, visiting old houses and Ottoman museums where we saw Islamic calligraphy in the making and Alabaster artefacts.

Day 2 was a day full of creativity and celebrations. The morning was spent in an art workshop during which students and staff from the different countries worked together to produce their marbling masterpieces!

The afternoon was dedicated to the celebrations of one of the teachers Henna ceremonies. The Turkish staff and students showcased a real henna night for one of the teachers who was getting married in a few weeks' time. The celebration was fabulous and we were all encouraged to join with the Turkish singing and dancing. During the mock ceremony we danced around the bride and offered her gifts of money, gold and other valuable (thank God the school provided these and we didn't have to pay out of the school budget!)

Day 3 butterflies fluttered in our stomachs as the focus was on us more closely as we took centre stage to perform a traditional English song and dance. It may not have been as traditional as the elders amongst the group were expecting as we took the floor by storm with a rocking performance of One Direction, you don't know you're beautiful. At least all the girls were loving it! In fact, the boys weren't too ashamed to join in either!

Our students later joined the others to socialise more casually as they went out for an evening bowling and shopping and getting to know one another more personally.

Day 4 the foyer of the school was dressed with table displays creating an international bustling market style atmosphere to celebrate all things typical of each represented country. Everyone derived great pleasure from donning the masks of The Queen, Beckham, Mr Bean and James Bond and eating traditional treats...can't really go wrong with food can you!

Next on the itinerary was a trip to one of the local bakeries that specialised in a local delicacy - Cioborek, a fried pancake type puff pastry. They were churned out by the dozen and we were even given the chance of assisting their production team. If Mary Berry was around, she surely would have been proud of us.

The group was later split in half with some on more serious business matters meeting the local dignitaries at the town hall to discuss relations between countries whilst the other half enjoyed a more casual afternoon visiting the Science Museum, seeing the local area and exercising in the local park (yes, they have outdoor gyms!).

Back in school teachers were brought together for a 'Comenius G8 Summit' meeting to evaluate the week's activities and share ideas about forthcoming visits to the other countries. The day finished off with some fun and games. As we attempted to play tennis and football in heels and stockings, it wasn't long before we learnt our lesson about the importance of PE kit.

The trip concluded with a visit to Istanbul where we had guided tours of the impressive Blue Mosque, Hagia Sofia Museum and Topkapi Palace. We learnt more about the history of Turkey and were left amazed by the beauty and richness of Turkish culture.

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Our visit to Kazanlak, Bulgaria, May 11th- 16th 2014.

Sunday 11th May

We all met up at Birmingham International airport at 11am but Mr Chand had to go back home as he'd left his Bulgarian Levs at home (typical !). Our flight was delayed due to bad weather in Frankfurt. When we arrived in Sofia, we were gutted when the luggage carousel ground to a halt and unfortunately we found out that our cases had been left in Germany! As we had to wait for the French party (who'd missed their plane from Munich) we finally arrived at our hotel at 3.30am in the morning.

Monday 12th May

After breakfast we had an early start at the school of tourism & light industry where we were greeted by the Principal Mrs Chervenкова and staff and made to feel really welcome. Each country gave a presentation in the lecture theatre about their own school. Mr Chand was interviewed for local T.V . Mrs Hall met the Lady Mayoress of Kazanlak a report of which appeared in the local newspaper.

Kazanlak is known as The Valley of the Roses as they use the petals to make perfume, soaps and jams. The Rose Museum and the historical house visit followed where we were shown how they make the perfume from rose petals. We followed this by exploration of a Thracian Tomb, where the ancient Bulgarian Kings were buried. It was great to have an insight in to the past history of this beautiful country. On the evening we all had a welcome party where we danced the night away with all of the other countries. Still no luggage!!

Tuesday 13th May

A full day excursion to the town of Gabrovo via the Valley of the Roses. On route we stopped off to look around the beautiful church at Shipka which had

been built as a monument to the men who had died during the Liberation of Bulgaria. It was extremely ornate and its golden onion domes decorated the landscape. The next stop over was at Etara, an olden day museum style replica of what life was like, with its quaint buildings and methods of wood carving: washing clothes and leather making. We were treated to an al-fresco lunch in the sunshine which was very pleasant in such lovely surroundings.

The next part of our journey took us to the Museum of Humour & Satire in Gabrovo apparently the only one of its kind in the whole of Europe. It contained various jokes and exhibits but Bulgarian humour is very different to ours. When we got back to the hotel thankfully our luggage had arrived.

Wednesday 14th May

After breakfast we travelled to the school where each country set up their own table in the gym with iconic items particular to their country's heritage. There was a wealth of information given through this exhibition and we all learnt something about the other countries.

Every country took it in turn to present a power point about Spring Festivals in their country. In the afternoon we were treated to demonstrations on cocktail making (very popular with the teaching staff!) paper flower making: dolls made from wooden spoons & flowers created out of discarded water bottles. Everyone had some souvenirs to take away from this event along with the opportunity to mix with the students from other countries so it was really successful.

Thursday 15th May

Today was spent visiting the fortified university town of Veliko Tarnovo. An English speaking guide showed us around the castle remains, telling us all about the history of the town. The wax museum presented Bulgaria's proud history through wax figures of their King and Queen. The free time gave us the opportunity to explore the winding back streets and do some more souvenir shopping.

Evaluation – Poland/ Krasnik Comenius project – 05th October – 11th October 2014

The Comenius Project brought together six schools together from across Europe. Its aim was to bring about greater understanding between our European neighbours, to explore and share cultural differences and to building stronger links between school communities.

Mr Dhaliwal, Mrs Jan, Anisa Khan and Jamila Ara were privileged to have been hosted by the Polish members of the Comenius Project in the beautiful city of Krasnik. The initial meeting consisted of formal introductions and presentations by each of the countries. Each very different and unique with their respective culture, identify, customs and foods. Yet as the week went on, it became quickly apparent that whilst distance and language separate us, there were also a number of similarities which bonded us altogether.

Meal times was the most sociable part of the trip, where we could get the chance to talk and socialize with the other members of the project and share some of our cultural differences, mostly related to food! Although initially there were reservations with the food, it was an eye opener in the sense that not all parts of Europe cater for Halal eaters!

One of the most unforgettable days of the trip was the visit to the Madjanek concentration camp in Lublin. Hearing and learning about concentration camps in school is a sad part of History. Yet seeing the scale of the death and murder of innocent victims is something that will last long in our memories. Poland has a very sad and turbulent history, yet the future is looking bright. Its economy is beginning to take off and although it experiences a lot of outward migration, those who do return bring back a number of skills and knowledge with them which ultimately benefits the country.

There was a fantastic opportunity to meet a Polish MP who was aiming to get elected in the local elections. Mr Dhaliwal took great pleasure in asking about some of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and how this may have an impact on Poland. To our surprise, Russia has a greater influence than many of our fellow Europeans imagined!

Each of the other days gave an insight into different parts of Poland and Polish life. The trip allowed us to understand how Polish people view themselves and their place in the European community but also allowed us to overcome some of the misconceptions we had about Poland. Poland has a very long history which we got the chance to explore at Sandomierz and is cultural very rich, particularly in its Catholic heritage. Which again is something we perhaps do not realise coming from inner city Birmingham.

Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learnt in light of recent events in Greece have transpired, is that cultural exchanges and joint projects serve to partner us together and to strengthen bonds within the European community.

OUR VISIT TO ROMANIA – MARCH 2015

BY SIBGHA WAQUAR YEAR 12 AND KHOMAL ARUGE YEAR 13

We landed in Cluj-Napoca in Romania just after midnight on Sunday 22nd March and took a short taxi ride to our hotel.

The next day we had an hour or two to see around the city before we set off for the train station. We were surprised at the amount of pharmacies there are in Romania! Once we got on the train we set off for a 5 hour train journey, realising we were stuck with each other for the next few hours. However, by travelling such a distance allowed us to see the stark contrast in wealth between the city and rural areas. Our destination a small town in the mountains called Campulung and once we arrived, we realised that the views were astonishing.

On Monday we had the chance to meet the other students and teachers from the other countries of Romania, France, Turkey, Poland and Bulgaria over breakfast. Each country had to set up a table with traditional objects and food to display to the other countries.



We then had to present in front of each other about traditional crafts, some were interesting and some, well, they just lasted a long time. After the presentations we tried Romanian food for the first time and it was interesting... Personally I didn't like it much and really missed the food from back home!



All I can say about Romanian food is that I don't think I will ever have soup again... After lunch we went to the Wood and Carpentry Museum where we discovered that about 70% of the local area was actually woodland. It was interesting to find out about 100 years ago that people from the area were able to make practically anything by hand out of wood, be it weaponry, cutlery or even mini cars! The university also provided us a first aid demonstration where we were taught basic CPR and how to respond to emergency situations and Miss Best volunteered to practice CPR on a dummy. Before dinner, we had free time so we decided to explore the town and we found Lidl! The first thing said by Khomal as we entered was "Miss! It looks exactly like the Lidl in Birmingham!" During dinner we were once again served traditional food, however locals had come over and performed their traditional dance to us, they even had us join in at some points!

On Tuesday we visited the Painted Egg museum which something that really spiked Khomal's interest. We got the opportunity to look at a collection different eggs from around the world.



We were shown the delicate and intricate procedure of painting eggs and Khomal even had a go and proved it's harder than it looks! After this we went on an old steam train and we had a detour of the town, we were once again exposed to the beautiful natural setting of Romania. After lunch we went to the first of many monasteries, we saw how unique the Romanian monasteries are compared those of other countries, as they had paintings which told a story on the inside and outside of the monastery. We were also told the history behind them, and found out there are 46 monasteries in the area alone. Afterwards, we went to meet the local authorities, including the town mayor who told us about the town.



On Wednesday, we went to another monastery to begin the day and got to stop on top on a mountain on the way! This was followed by a visit to the Museum of Ceramics, here we were given a demonstration of how pottery is made and Khomal even had a go at making her own pot! During lunch we were faced with the most difficult task we had ever faced... To eat a whole fish that still had his head and eye balls! We tried to tackle through it but failed. After lunch, we visited yet again... Another monastery! This is when we realised that the monasteries all look predominantly the same... As Miss Best wisely said "once you've been to one monastery, you've been to all of them".

On Thursday we visited the last of the monasteries we were going to see, but we were delighted with how lovely the nun, Sister Helen was. After this we visited the Fortress Village Museum, where we got to see what a small village would have been like in Romania 100's of years ago, for example how they made their clothes, gathered their food and what the local pub looked like! We also got to see how the birth, marriage and death ceremony would have been carried out. We then went to the ruins the Mighty Stefan the Greats castle, who had built the 46 monasteries after a victory in a battle and was a very prominent character in the history this particular region of Romania. We were then taken to the shopping centre and were left on our own....This is when we discovered that Romania has H&M! We made good use of the time by finding souvenirs and hunting down ice cream. Once we were back on the coach set out for Campulung, we had a realisation that people from the town would have to travel 2 hours just to reach their nearest shopping mall... Imagine travelling all the way to London just to buy clothes!

On Friday, we first experienced sorrow when we had to say goodbye to the Polish students. We then got on with the day and visited the Wooden Spoon Museum and saw how beautifully carved the spoons were and we were told the meaning behind each one of them, for example, there were spoons that would be gifted to couples at a wedding. More interestingly, there was a have one spoon with lots of rattles on it which you would have to give your wife if talks too much. Afterwards, we went to the Village Museum where we

were greeted with the traditional Romanian greeting of bread and salt. We had a wander around the Museum and saw the traditional clothes and what the old classroom and shops would have looked like in the past. But after all this the dreaded moment came of us saying our goodbyes... We got our luggage and left for the train station and were very upset to leave everything behind!

We had learnt a lot from being a part of this project and visiting Romania. Generally, a lot of people attach negative stereotypes to Romania and the people who live there, however once we got there it completely changed our perspective on everything. It was very different from how we imagined it because when we arrived we found Romania to be a beautiful country that isn't built on money or the economy, but rather more so on its natural aesthetics. Another thing we found pleasant was to get away from the busy city life and just to get lost in the surroundings and enjoy nature which is something we don't get to do very often. The trip also gave us the opportunity to see what different parts of the world are like by hearing about their way of life and how it differs from ours. We met lots of fantastic people and made some really good friends. We realised that we had a lot in common with students from the other countries for example, we all really liked cards and taught each other card games in our spare time! It really was astonishing to find that teenagers in general, whether they are from Turkey, Poland, France, Bulgaria or Romania are in fact very similar. I'm really glad that I took part in this trip and I would definitely visit Romania again. We would like to take the opportunity to thank Mrs Rai and Mrs Mughal for organising the trip and allowing us to go. We'd also like to thank Miss Skipper, Miss Best for being such good company and putting up with us for the week! The most important thing we learnt is that there are some things that you have to go out there and experience. There are some things that can't be learnt in a classroom..

Evaluation – France/ Lyon Comenius project – 18-22 May 2015

College Boris Vian, St Priest, Lyon is named after a famous writer, here we were greeted by the Head teacher, members of staff and students for whom the Comenius visits are important events. The tram trips and morning walk to the school all added to the French experience, fuelled by croissants and coffee.

The main event, of the week, consisted of a dance project that integrated the traditional dance and music forms, of all the countries involved, choreographed to display the Comenius logo in the project finale; we all learnt a few steps.

Having been welcomed by the local politicians, at the town hall, we witnessed the (mock) republican wedding ceremony of a Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes, followed by refreshments.

In the visits into the center of Lyon we were taken on tour of the silk weaving district after witnessing the age old way of manufacturing silk; the cost is not for the faint hearted. The Institute Lumiere, museum of cinema, presented an interesting journey into the origins of the moving image. Clips from the first films and projectors were on display, along with a wealth of documentation based on the fathers of French Cinema. A dance workshop in the studios of a famous French choreographer allowed students to partake in a class culminating in a performance. A tour of the dance theatre and a lesson in various dance techniques, via a video presentation, were also part of the day; the evening ended in a dance show followed by food.

Seeing the old and new Lyon was like taking a trip from the past to the present, ranging from the breathtaking beautiful Basilica Notre-Dame de Fourviere and replica of the Eiffel Tower and remains of a Roman Theatre. Painted buildings serving as an optical illusion, gothic architecture, sculptures of Louis XIV, while mythical figures of antiquity appeared in the form of fountains. The famous Guignol puppet was also an integral part of the cultural experience; he even visited England. Not forgetting the natural beauty of the rivers and panoramic views of the city.

We delighted in French cuisine and, with the help of Mrs Lohman-Malone, French conversation. If, however, pizza or Turkish food took our fancy we were able to indulge in that too, during the evenings when we were free.

Finally the project finale served up songs, dance (some more entertaining than others), food, presents and goodbyes. A thoroughly enjoyable experience which provided us with the opportunity to delve into the world of French life.