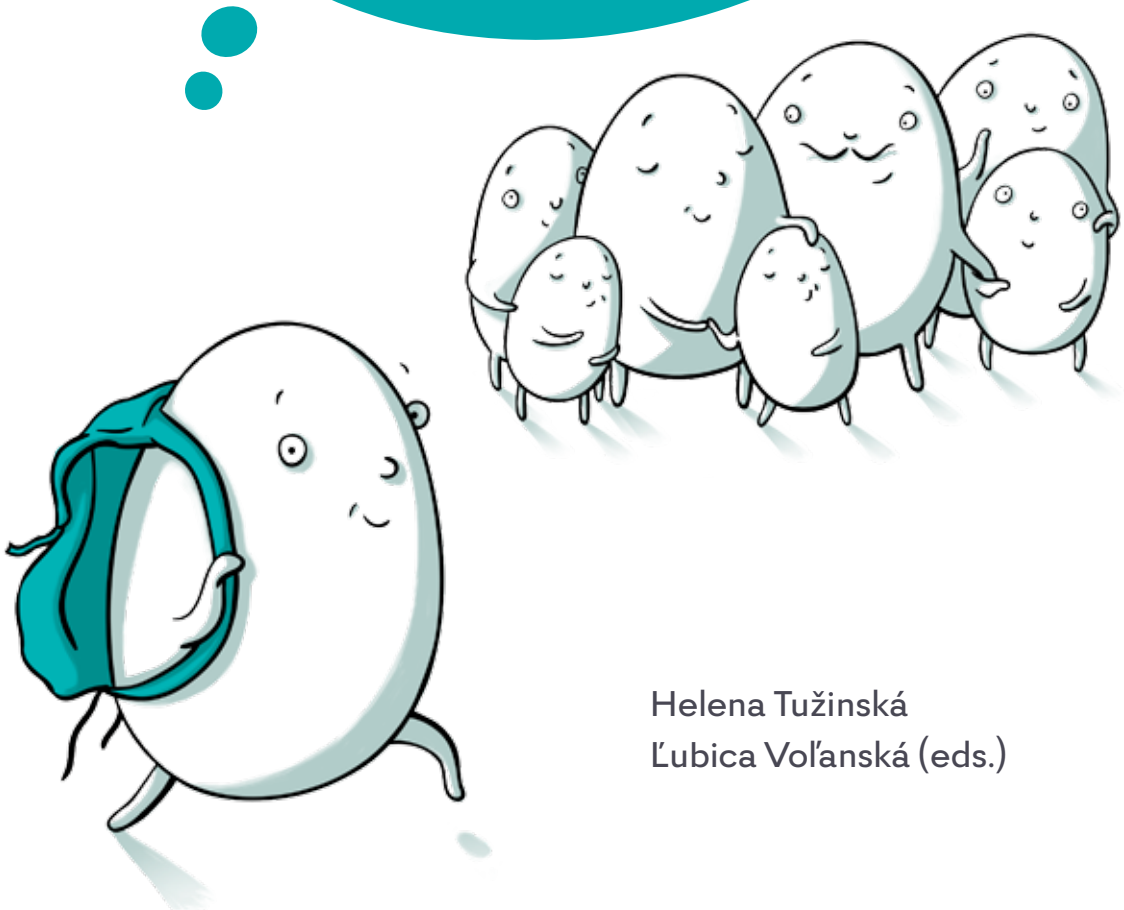
Slovakia: In_different. As Told By Foreigners



Helena Tužinská
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As Told By Foreigners

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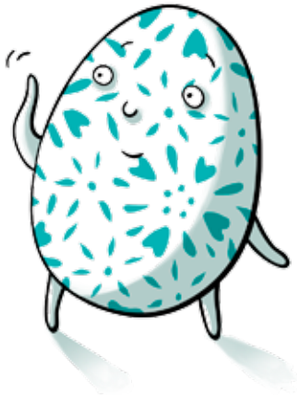
Dedicated to all those foreign men and women whom we've got to know or will get to know.



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A Baedeker from Foreigners to Foreigners

The idea for the project *Intercultural Guide to Lives in Slovakia* came from the constantly recurring questions concerning daily life in Slovakia which we are asked during our work by incoming foreigners. The great number of them surprised us at first, we still do not have an answer to some, and it is evident that for many questions no simple answers exist.

Our idea was a book that looks different to the ordinary guidebook for a country. So then, do not look into it for facts about the country's area, number of inhabitants, or precise instructions on what you may and may not do. Our guide, by taking the qualities or strangenesses of Slovakia as perceived by people from outside, aims to enable new arrivals and old-established residents alike to look at ordinary situations from different perspectives and to taste, with a pinch of spice and salt, what we're cooking together.

The ingredients for the project were provided by the members of the team, who have completed a variety of cookery courses (an ethnologist, a producer, a social psychologist, sociologists) and accordingly the individual chapters have distinctive flavours. Our title (rendered in English as *Slovakia: In_different*) has its various shades of meaning. But the key is *difference*. What is *different* means something other than what we perceive as normal and matter-of-course. At a time when people are talking about how foreigners threaten Slovakia with erasure of its identity, we pose the question of what this identity consists of. What is it that we consider as ours, as Slovak; what do we miss when we're abroad; or what do we grouse about when we're at home? We are grateful to the more than fifty foreign men and women whom we

asked for their perception of life in Slovakia, for holding up a mirror to us. Hence we are writing about ourselves through the eyes of others. Taking this perspective, through the seemingly banal events that they experienced we have let ourselves be led to an understanding of our characteristics or othernesses. This comes with an overview, and in the best of cases with humour. What we ourselves contributed was an attempt to clarify the foreigners' experiences, so that the shadow would not fall all on one side.

The division of chapters was originally meant to copy the scenario by which we conducted the interviews. We asked about the perception of Slovakia through all the senses, about the people, their communication, how they understand space and time, movement and displacements, opportunities for education, the process of visiting, and expectations in food, gender roles, emotions, as well as faux pas and jokes. Our partners in conversation described what surprised them and what they rate highly, and they offered recommendations.

The eleven chapters thus represent areas in which there is evidence in Slovakia of prevailing tendencies for certain situations to be dealt with in certain ways. We are conscious that our text is anchored above all in the given material and that there are many differences in how various phenomena are perceived, according to the character and background of the individual persons who told us their stories. There are differences between the situation in towns and in the countryside, between the views of men and women, between members of different generations, including their views on the various generations, and so on. At the same time we are aware that the rules of functioning and the culture in particular institutions and organisations play an important role in talking about life in Slovakia. Furthermore, foreigners find themselves in a specific situation of remaining and living in a different country, which influences their perception of their surroundings.

The project has taught us much about ourselves and about the fact that foreigners may have different perceptions and explanations, and sometimes indeed more understanding, of those stereotypes which Slovaks have of themselves.

The supporting motif accompanying the entire book is a wandering egg. This symbol refers to the multi-facetedness of the context we have chosen – it may be hard or soft (in connection with perceiving and respecting rules) and one has to tap hard harder on its shell to get at the yolk (and thus become friends or family). The egg hides great potential within it, and we speak of this in every chapter. Even what seems an everyday matter of course to Slovak people may have importance. As the Slovak proverb says, "The cart can be overloaded even with a single egg."

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Introduction

Apparently what most often comes out of the mouths of Slovaks is *Hej, hej*...(Yes, yes) as affirmative, *dobre, dobre*...(OK, OK) as embarrassed agreement and *neviem*... (I don't know) as an expression of uncertainty. *Aj to, aj to* (both one and the other) can at the same time mean *ani to, ani to* (neither one nor the other). Foreigners perceive these words as an expression of attitude, that it'll always work out somehow. As they see it, we nod in affirmation because we don't have to deal with things immediately and we try to suit everyone and to keep harmony in our surroundings.

An explanation might have to do with the position of Slovakia and its historical experience, which has produced a mixture of various cultural traditions and population on its territory. Hence everyone who identifies as Slovak will probably find that his or her family tree includes some foreigner who lived on this territory or traversed it from north to south, from south to north, from east to west or from west to east.

In ordinary life people use the words east and west without reflecting on the fact that these words are not just geographical concepts. Their meaning is connected with the country from which someone comes. For inhabitants of the European part of Russia Slovakia lies on the west, while to them east means the Asian countries. Inhabitants of Austria have a different perspective on Slovakia, and in their case the Czech Republic also lies to the east. Spaniards, on the other hand, look on France as a western country. Although in the text we use the terms east and west, we are aware that people give them a variety of meanings. The manner in which we use them in our text may be con-

nected with a long-term historical experience of being somewhere in between, amidst, on the margin of something.

In this context there are fundamental orientational boundaries which originated and became functional in the past. With permissible over-simplification one could say that they influence many of the tendencies in the character of society and culture in this country, and in the wider Central European space, to this day. In antiquity one of them was the northern border of the Roman Empire, Limes Romanus, and although the territory of present-day Slovakia was not a part of the Roman Empire, it lay on its northern frontier and benefited from the opportunities offered, for example, by the communication routes, and indeed from the cultivation of the vine, which is characteristic of this region.

The frontiers of the Carolingian Empire, which was the centre of education and culture in Europe in early medieval times, were also in the immediate vicinity of the territory of present-day Slovakia. Furthermore, the boundary line for the propagation of eastern and western Christianity runs through eastern Slovakia; this influences the course of the year and the annual customs, as well as the ceremonies accompanying the human person's life from birth to death. A further frontier, which is linked with experience of the arrival of foreigners/guests from the territory of present-day Germany, is the frontier of expansion of so-called German colonisation. Guests on the territory of present-day Slovakia brought new knowledge and skills connected with agriculture, extraction of ores and the working of precious metals. They were self-governing, with their own legal system, and the administration of their towns contributed to awareness of responsibility for one's own activity.

The settlement of the mountain areas of Slovakia was connected with a further wave of migration, which on this occasion started in south-eastern Europe. Thorough settlement of this territory, ruled on the basis of Moravian law, brought an expansion of the pastoral mode of life, associated with symbols of freedom and with the renowned sheep's cheese called bryndza, which has become a supporting theme in creating an image of Slovakia. Linked with the early modern period

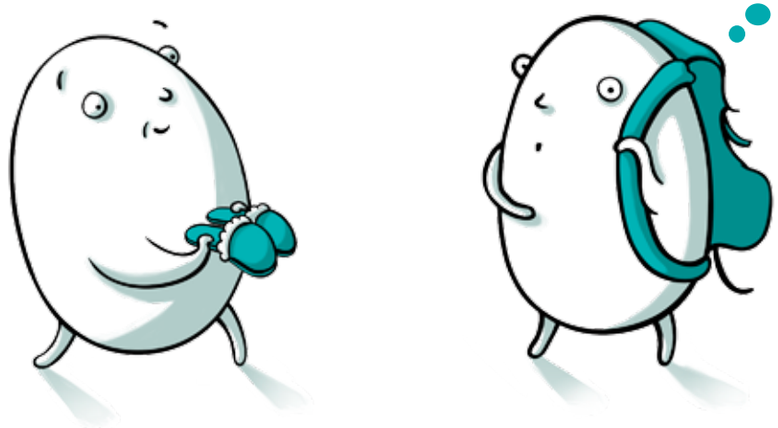
is the so-called Hajnal line, of which part runs between the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This line divides the territory of all Europe into two great regions with different structures of family and kinship. Nor may we forget the penetration of various ideas and elements underlying cultural transfer, which have influence on the functioning of contemporary society, such as, for example, the ideas of the Enlightenment and nationalism. Also formative of our identity and everyday life are the fundamental events of the 20th century, commencing with experience with democracy, extermination, normalisation, and the practices connected with communist-socialist ideology and the idea of a united Europe.

Since the territory of Slovakia is on the frontier of East and West, in the past key thoughts arrived here belatedly and deformed, at a time of decadence – thus they were accepted with a certain embarrasment. The inhibition of Slovaks vis-à-vis innovations was a theme often mentioned in the foreigners' accounts.

The well-known historian Ľubomír Lipták has said the following in connection with the economic situation, in the European context: "...Slovakia formed a kind of transitional territory: it was notably retarded compared to the developed countries of Western and Central Europe, but it was not by any means one of the most retarded European areas. While the Czech lands were something like an eastern foreground of capitalist industrial civilisation, though a grade below its elite level, Slovakia was like a scout, despatched westwards, of that poorer half of Europe, although on the scale of industrial competition it was a little bit higher."
If we take other indicators also into consideration, in association with the above-mentioned structural limits we see ourselves rather as lying to the east of the West and not to the west of the East. According to Ľubomír Lipták, we are a "typically Olympic people: we take part. A pity that we don't win, except in rare cases, but even participation must meet some sort of limits. We can manage that, thank God, so we've also got chances of medals. It's a challenge."
The challenge, which resembles a self-discovery, extends also to the text which you hold in your hands. The above-mentioned frontiers of

the various cultures which have formed us, and still do, are a heritage. Presence and everydayness, which we co-create with foreigners, may also be seen through the Slovak proverb "You won't shake a rock with an egg", meaning that some things simply are as they are. However, if our aim is to develop our potential, then probably the solution won't be to shake the egg, but to hatch it.

On Trusting and Checking



"Trust, but check out." That well-known Slovak proverb contains a certain element of guardedness, which is noticed by foreigners living in Slovakia. Too much trustfulness is regarded as a kind of naiveté, as Jules from Canada says: *People warn me that there are liars all round us, that you can't always believe what the ordinary person tells you, his/her stories... They warn me not to believe everything... I think people in Slovakia want to show that they're wise by being cynics... It also depends whether you're with an acquaintance or a friend, or with somebody else who's unknown to you, but here the degree of mistrust is much higher.* Slovaks are cautious in choosing who to believe and who not to.

Foreigners explain this mistrustfulness by a certain closed character of the country, stemming from its socialist past. People were trained in guardedness, because someone might pass on information about what they said or did. Many recall how during socialism their parents told them emphatically not to talk in school about what they heard at home.

At the same time one may encounter a certain conservatism and **unwillingness to open up to new things.** For example in food: Lien from

Vietnam says that many people here eat only chicken. With many different recipes, admittedly, but still chicken only. One day they have wings, another day breasts or thigh, and yet there are so many new tastes that could be tried. Melanie from Germany feels that despite the great quantity we have here of various vegetables, it's as if we find vegetables unpleasant and we don't want to try out the different ways of preparing them. Often they're prepared in the same way.

Distrust of foreigners may also stem from the fact that Slovaks do not have enough experience of them. During the past 70 years not many foreigners came here, because the borders were closed under socialism. That began to change only recently. In neighbouring Vienna you see people of diverse races, who come from all possible countries and speak dozens of languages. **In Slovakia it still isn't common to meet people who are visibly different,** speak various languages or dress differently from the norm. Time, however, favours diversity. In the larger towns the situation is beginning to change notably, but in villages or smaller towns there is still very little experience of foreigners.

The rejection of refugees may also be connected with this. A number of foreigners were astonished at the response of stringent rejection which the refugee situation evoked in Slovakia. Gabriela from Mexico describes it very precisely: *Slovaks have a feeling that they've got their way of life and they don't want to change. It's obvious that they don't have experience with foreigners.*

And since people in Slovakia are still only getting used to foreigners, often it can seem that they stare and glare at you, especially the older people, who have probably never met a foreigner in their lives. Some foreigners may find it unpleasant to be gazed at: *One of the things you notice is that people look at you. People were looking a lot at me. I was like a celebrity almost. I feel like a celebrity sometimes* (Adewale, Nigeria). In towns where different nationalities are living, for example Hungarians or Roma apart from Slovaks, foreigners sometimes feel more at ease. A further "other" more easily gets lost there and does not draw so much attention.

Gazing does not necessarily imply bad intentions. People are curious. Mostly, however, they just look from a distance, as if from behind a glass barrier, keeping what they consider a safe distance from someone they don't know. Others pretend they're not there. For example, at bus stops people have earphones on, and if they're not looking at you, then they're looking at their mobiles. We can judge that as a modern phenomenon, but foreigners often have the feeling that they have no one to talk to, if, for example, they need to ask for directions. Only rarely do they meet with a smile, because that only rarely appears spontaneously on the faces of people in the street, and the foreigners miss that.

Mistrust, however, is very often only masked embarrassment. People in Slovakia come across to foreigners as quieter, more withdrawn, less willing to enter into small talk. This surprises the more communicative foreigners, but there are also those who are glad to relax in an environment of unconcern, not having to watch what they say.

When foreigners, however, speak to someone, they may meet with an unwelcoming response, and simply because people in Slovakia are not used to speaking other languages. In contact with a foreigner they may be in stress, and when they do not know what to say they prefer not even to try. If you speak to someone in a foreign language, often they are unnerved and say: *What? What language am I hearing? What am I to do? My colleague who speaks English isn't here today, damn it* (Brian, Ireland). It may seem to you that they've literally frozen. Or they prefer to overlook you. For example, when the police stop you and none of them is sufficiently sure of his English, they'll let you go rather than have the bother of communication. *And then they come up to some Englishman and they think: "Oh God, not today", you know. Any number of times I've been waved on by police, whereas Slovaks have been stopped and persecuted* (Brian, Ireland).

Mistrust can also be expressed by a dogged adherence to the rules. The quantity of bureaucracy and papers that have to be filled in is an ordinary part of life in Slovakia. This need not necessarily mean that you are distrusted personally. The stipulated rules perhaps only give people an illusory feeling of assurance and control over the situation. In

HOW TO OVERCOME THE INITIAL MISTRUST?

Slovaks give the impression of being very reserved, but in reality this is true only in the beginning. Sometimes it suffices for the foreigner to take the first step, since the Slovaks, because of caution or low self-esteem, will not take it themselves. They appreciate it if the foreigner uses a few words, for example a greeting, in Slovak. At that moment the ice begins to melt.

Slovakia, for example, you do your shopping in the stores with baskets. Hence Gabriela from Mexico got into an embarrassing situation when the store security pointed out to her that it was totally unacceptable to put the things in one's own bag. It can happen that the store security demands that you take a basket even if you only want to buy bread and milk and carry them in your hands.

And yet the case is not hopeless. To gain the trust of people in Slovakia takes a certain length of time and requires patience, but it's worth it. **After you overcome the first mistrustfulness or guardedness the Slovaks may turn into people who will gladly help you if you need it.** Tenuk from Malaysia says that Slovaks very seldom ask for help, but are glad to give it if the second party makes the request. When the ice breaks, Slovaks will frequently go to all lengths simply to help you, Ada from Ireland said. The sense of closedness very quickly changes when you get to know each other better.

It is not easy and it takes time and effort, but once you succeed you will get a friend for your life. In Mexican culture you meet someone easily and you may think you have many friends, but once something happens you may find out that they are not such good friends. So here in Slovakia, rather than making acquaintances you make real friends (Gabriela, Mexico).

To overcome the initial mistrust it generally helps if you find a "door opener": someone who'll help you get into the community. Trust is gained by mutuality.

When you get into the circle of "pals" they want to know everything about you. If you don't get that far, they won't bother too much to learn if you have children or what country you come from. And it's quite possible that during such interrogation the Slovaks will look you straight in the eye. Eye contact during conversation is entirely common in Slovakia. It need not mean anything except that the other party is listening to you. Brian, for example, at first had the feeling that all women were flirting with him, because they looked him in the eye during the entire conversation and constantly nodded as a sign of agreement. In Ireland he hadn't encountered this. Eye contact is maintained even while drinking toasts. If you clink glasses with someone, they expect you to look them straight in the eye.

On the Perception of Space

How do foreigners perceive space in terms of movement, travelling, residing, and distance between people in various kinds of communication? To these questions we received varied and often even contradictory answers: space, according to foreigners in Slovakia, is well structured and planned, sometimes too uniform, as if not for people... everything is relatively close, within reach... graffiti on buildings... prevalence of dark colours... lots of green in the city districts.

Foreigners in Slovakia often appreciate the fresh air, the mountains and the beautiful landscape. *Slovakia is a varied and very diverse country, if you go by train from Bratislava through Žilina to the Tatras; it's a surprise, how the country looks visually* (Ivan, Russia). On the other hand, however, the public space is also associated with greyness, rigidity, lack of maintenance, and the obscurity of certain buildings and spatial non-resolutions. This disharmony results from the disjointed development of Slovak towns, public unconcern, and rapid changes.

In Slovak towns and villages public space (streets, houses and square) was to a greater or lesser extent affected by socialist realism, typified

by concrete as a building material, grey colour, and economical geometric shapes. This picture is added to by historical and also modern buildings, and they thus create a specifically compounded mix. Furthermore, public space has also been penetrated by large shopping centres, noisy traffic and advertising, which often disturb the space originally designed for people. *But every time I come back to Petržalka, I am still, like, almost shocked by how different it is from the cities that I know in France or Germany, where you have like little tiny streets around the medieval center, then a church, and then it grows, grows, grows. And here is very different...* (Marine, France).

It is typical of Slovak towns to have residential districts where the residents are very diverse in regard to income and also age and number of household members. Uniformity is often associated with the settlements and they are called "the concrete jungle". ***Even though the residential districts may seem cold and reminiscent of a ghetto, they are mostly quite pleasant places for living with relatively good social facilities.*** *Here you have a kindergarten, there you have a playground for kids. Everything is close* (Boran, Turkey).

In reality, the number of people in Slovakia living in apartment houses and in family houses (especially in the countryside) is roughly equal. The mode of life in the village is a surprise especially for people from Western Europe, who have the feeling that in their countries the countryside is more similar to the suburbs of the bigger towns: *A lot of people move to the village here..., because they want to be in quiet. Ok, so the village is quiet, but also they want to have, like, fruit trees, grow vegetables in their gardens and have chickens in their gardens..., they want have the rural way of life* (Tyrell, Ireland).

Especially in the winter months, many foreigners feel that the public spaces are empty, without people, and they miss a deeper relationship of the inhabitants to the city and the shared spaces and care for them. Despite the visual heterogeneity of the urban environment one can find certain similarities between towns in Slovakia. **Many foreigners appreciate that most of the towns have the centre closed to cars as a pedestrian zone: mostly this consists of a central square and some adjacent streets.**

People feel space to a great extent through movement and travelling. Foreigners have a relatively positive view of public transport in Slovakia and the possibility of getting to various towns by bus or train. However, there are areas where a car is indispensable because of poor transport connections. Even so, however, it may happen that your bus or train will be delayed by more than 30 minutes. Currently there are various systems for the purchase of travel tickets functioning in Slovakia, so it is better to verify the purchase of a ticket at a newspaper kiosk, a station, or from people at a bus-stop.

If you prefer to travel by car, driving is on the right in Slovakia and lights are used during the day. The driving style of motorists is variegated – from considerate driving to the arrogant style of those drivers who pressurise you and want to overtake you at all costs. Hence one must arm oneself with patience. Especially in towns, the roads are in a bad state and one must watch out for subsidence and potholes on the journey. Tyrell from Ireland discovered that an application which warns you of potholes originated in Slovakia, which he says perfectly captures this perennial problem. The same goes for the footpaths: they are often neglected and in large part unsuited to the unobstructed movement of people. Cycle routes also are only just in the process of developing, so that there are rather few of them and especially in the larger towns cyclists may have problems with the closeness of the passing cars.

HOW TO TRAVEL ON URBAN TRANSPORT?
If you want to take local buses, it's good always to have small coins handy, so as to avoid holding up the other passengers. You can confidently trust the timetable, even though sometimes you may expect delay.

Also important for the perception of space is an overall feeling of safety and the possibility of free movement. Foreigners generally feel safe in Slovakia, though their degree of contentment will depend on the experiences they have had in their country of origin. It evidently surprises people from other countries who are accustomed to houses without fences and gates that in Slovakia there are houses with fenced gardens. *In Germany the normal thing is that the gates are open. You have a big house, but you don't have fences and walls*

with bars. Here everything is behind bars. Iron fences. I think it's an affirmation of wealth and status; it's more clarification, not fear (Melanie, Germany).

A number of foreigners, however, admit that they avoid movement in the town in the evening hours and without a guide. There are many bad experiences after dusk, especially for people who are visibly different (for example, based on skin colour or religious identity). Hence when moving at night their preference is to go in a group of friends.

TO KISS, EMBRACE, OR OFFER THE HAND?

In Slovakia you will meet with various forms of greeting. Some people prefer a kiss on each cheek, others only use this greeting among closest friends and family. The safest is to offer one's hand or wait for the person you're meeting to initiate the greeting.

And how is it with one's own bubbles – the invisible borders of personal space? Those may vary. The distance to which you may approach a person without disturbing his comfort zone and giving him an unpleasant feeling, is great or small depending on what he has been accustomed to. Melanie from Germany thinks that Slovaks keep an appropriate distance. In contrast, Hector from South America misses closeness and feels that people keep too great space between one another. One of the ways of remaining in one's own bubble is to read a book or enclose oneself in communication with a mobile phone, for example in public transport: *No one is talking aloud, you mostly see introverted people with their earphones, telephones* (Gabriela, Mexiko). For foreigners, Slovaks generally appear quieter than average in their behaviour in public and in wider spaces.

A good way to check respect for personal space is to stand in a queue. Brian from Ireland was one who appreciated the maintenance of appropriate distance between people: *In a queue there is a nice space between you and you, like this. Slovaks are great queuers. If there are two desks, Slovaks will form one queue and when one becomes available one person will walk that way, when the next desk becomes available they walk there. You are very disciplined people when queueing.* Other rules besides, say, those at the Post Office apply when waiting for public transport. Especially in the large towns, queues are not maintained for boarding buses, rather people press in all together. Especially in packed buses the rule applies: whoever gets in first will be taken.

The various boundaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable in contact between people are reflected also in forms of greeting. On the question of when a kiss on the cheek, an embrace or a handshake is appropriate, we received a variety of answers. According to Tyrell the "smacker" is European-continental. At home in Ireland *they'd just give a greeting, they probably wouldn't even shake hands, and if it were friends they'd probably embrace – men and women. In a way, embracing seems much more intimate to me than when you kiss someone.* Jonas from Germany cheerfully calls it the Bussi-Bussi *Gesellschaft* (kissy-kissy society), *so kiss-kiss all the time when people know one another well; it's not like that in Germany. For us, we'd need to be very close. Clemens adds: and definitely not in a work setting, that when somebody has a birthday 30 fellows come up to him and kisses left, kisses right; inconceivable! What we do is offer a hand, or when you're close to someone you'll embrace, but here I've never seen that* (Clemens, Germany). In contrast, Davorin from Bosnia thinks that kisses as a greeting are somewhat rare here: *In Bosnia everyone kisses. Here it's completely taboo. And for us it's normal that men kiss men, and here (in Slovakia) that's regarded as gay.* Kisses on cheeks needn't always be kisses – sometimes just a fleeting mutual touch. **Offering a handshake may be regarded as a typical greeting with which you won't do any harm.** Among good friends you may also encounter embraces.

The view of mutual touching and behaviour in public between men and women differs according to what people are accustomed to. Communication between men and women seems relaxed to many foreigners. *Well, it's interesting that in Slovakia men touch women more and women men, as such... Not among partners, it's so general they can simply be friends* (Davorin, Bosnia). Labeeba from Egypt is disquieted by this open expression of liking between men and women. By contrast, Lien from Vietnam sees emotions expressed in public as a sign of sincerity: So here people show their emotion directly, they show it openly cause it's pure, it's normal emotion, right. They kiss, they hold hands and so on, everything is totally normal, is, like, honest. Melanie from Germany feels that men in Slovakia are more gallant: *There are also very polite men here who hold doors open for me. It's something you feel more here.*

In the space of town or village you will meet with various expectations of how you should behave. "As someone does, so he will fare," says one of the oldest Slovak proverbs. For that reason too, it is better at the start to be observant and check out certain moves.

On the Perception of Time

In my country time means nothing. OK, by now I've sort of got used to the fact that time means something, but that's nowhere near as much as it means for the average Slovak (Davorin, Bosnia). People measure time through a personal perspective, which can change, however, according to their own experience. How does time flow in Slovakia? Are Slovaks fast or slow? Do you have to learn to wait? And how is it with relaxation and the organisation of the day?

Lots of work and little free time, or the contrary? In Slovakia the working week is from Monday to Friday, with Saturday and Sunday as free days. However, that does not necessarily affect many services and continuous operations. Even though there are two free days a week in Slovakia, Gabriela from Mexico has the feeling that people relax little and work too much. *It's still quite a common habit, sometimes even here in Slovakia, that a person who's working has two diaries, one personal and one professional... It's happened to me fairly often that I arranged with someone, at such and such a time we would meet. Then I got a phone call or an email: I hadn't noticed that then I've got a family occasion, or whatever. And were you not aware of it then?*

No, because I had written it in my personal diary, but not my work diary (Jules, Canada).

HOW TO COPE WITH WAITING?
Various institutions (government offices, Post Office, mobile operators' sales outlets, etc.) give a definite order to those waiting: you print your queue number from an automatic dispenser. If there isn't a dispenser in the waiting room, ask those waiting who is last in line. In any event, do not be surprised if you spend more time waiting than you had originally planned. Waiting can be made more pleasant by reading, knitting, breathing exercises...

To the Bosnian Davorin, however, it seems that people in Slovakia use their free time actively: *People go on breaks... and for wellness stays, to the Tatras... I'll go on Friday, come back on Sunday*. The model of an active weekend is fairly common in the larger towns, depending on financial possibilities. Relatively **frequent are weekend visits to the closest family and mass movements from western Slovakia to the east, especially during long weekends and holidays.** *They really love to plan their weekends well in advance... Every weekend they are doing something, if they have kids; every weekend we go hiking, we do this and that, go skiing... if I ask my students "are you going to do something?" they give you a list* (Tenuk, Malaysia).

A characteristic feature of spending free time in Slovakia is the Sunday family walks, also at weekends or during holidays spent in cottages in the mountains or nearby villages. *Lots of people here have cottages in the Záhorie region, or up there in Orava, people go there* (Tyrell, Ireland). And have you already heard of "the Slovak sea"? It's in Croatia, where many people spend their summer holidays. As Tyrell sums up: *Cottage in winter, Croatia in summer.*

School summer holidays in Slovakia are in July and August and to a great extent this also influences the working of various institutions, while offices often are empty and you won't get much done in the public administration. Slovaks often take their holidays "at the mortar", that is to say, doing some repairs around the house or apartment. They also spend free time in cultural or sporting activity. Favourite free time activities are visiting bars, pubs and coffee shops, also working in the garden, watching television, and increasingly doing voluntary activities.

Birthdays and name-days (celebrating one's name on a fixed calendar day) are occasions for meetings of the family and friends with gift-giving and congratulation. For Tyrell the congratulations are too long and intimate. *But in Slovakia people come to you, they look you straight in the eyes and they tell you, Happy Birthday and I wish you lots of love and lots of happiness and luck for the year to come. They do this at the New Year and it makes me really uncomfortable – so much sincerity. it's too much... We are not so open to each other where I come from* (Tyrell, Ireland).

And what about the organisation of the day? *So there's the feeling that everybody has to go in early or has to be at home early. Everybody has to be, the kids have to be in bed early. You know, things like that* (Adewale, Nigeria). It's connected with the fact that people are used to getting up early in the morning and having lunch roughly at midday and supper after arriving from work. Hence the streets are fairly busy by 7 a.m., when everyone's hurrying to work or to school. Marine from France confirms that people normally begin working early in the morning and stop working early. So it can happen, for example, that after 3 p.m. you won't find anyone in government offices.

What does it mean when you agree to meet someone, and should you come on time? Should you come precisely at the agreed time, or is it expected that you'll come a bit earlier, or is it permissible to be late? There is no universally valid rule, but **in Slovakia people generally expect that you will appear at the precise time agreed, or with 5–10 minutes delay.** Also in use is the so-called academic quarter hour, meaning a 15-minute delay with apologies. Some people feel that having to meet at the exact time is a nuisance, others are glad. *Here people are 5 minutes late, I was pleasantly surprised* (Magda, Britain). Melanie, who comes from Germany, is accustomed to greater punctuality: *How are kids supposed to come on time, when their parents never keep to exact times? And we have to keep to that.*

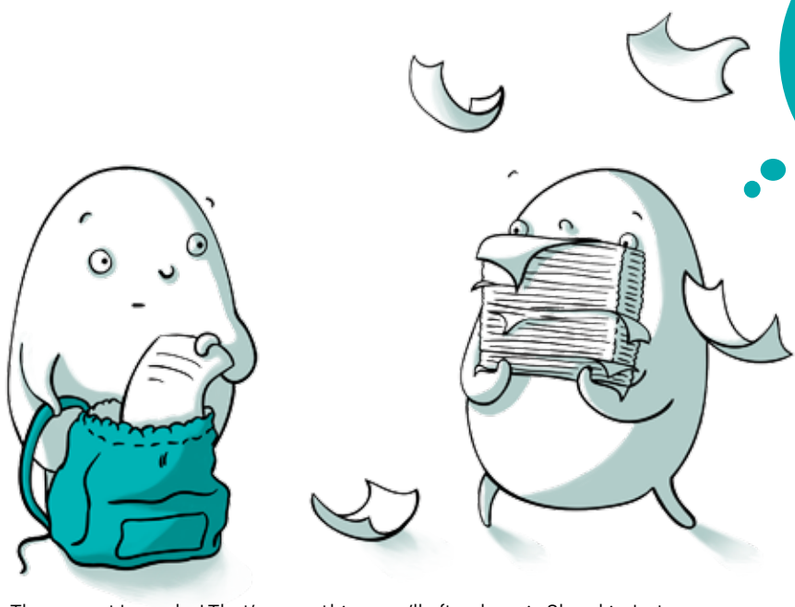
Where working time is concerned and keeping work-related appointments, one can expect deviations rather than strict precision. Slovaks often do things at the last moment, so you may learn that a work meeting has been cancelled five minutes before it was due to start. If you've agreed a meeting a long time ahead (1–2 weeks or a month), Jules from Canada recommends that each of you confirms it to the other, that you

HOW TO AGREE ON A MEETING AND HOW LATE MAY ONE BE WITHOUT OFFENCE?

If you agree to meet someone at a certain time, it is expected that you will come punctually, or with a small delay of 5–15 minutes. As the saying goes in Slovakia, "patience brings roses". Accordingly, find the patience to wait for meetings and fulfilment of work duties, and it is best to confirm other agreed meetings one more time by telephone or email.

remind your partner, so that you don't end up alone at the meeting-place. *An hour before the meeting a question will come, whether the meeting we have agreed is still on. The Slovaks must confirm it one more time, even if there's been no disrupting factor* (Jules, Canada). Where spontaneity is concerned, it's best to agree on a meeting 2–3 days beforehand, so that you don't surprise someone with your unexpected visit or invitation. *If I called someone to ask whether he'd like to go for coffee in an hour's time, first of all he'll think I'm mad, and secondly he'll think that was quite impolite of me, to make the invitation so sudden* (Davorin, Bosnia).

In Slovakia it's also customary to go with colleagues for a hot lunch during the lunch break, which lasts 30 to 60 minutes on average. For many foreigners it may be surprising that people in Slovakia take the time for a lunch consisting of soup and hot food. Slovakia is not a country where people would find a sandwich or other such dry lunch sufficient. People usually pay for their lunch with a "gastro ticket", which the employer contributes for the employee's food in the form of a cheque that may be spent in restaurants or in stores (on foodstuffs only). In larger enterprises the employer provides a canteen with the firm's own tickets.



There must be order! That's something you'll often hear in Slovakia, but for all such declarations we have our BUT! But goes with every rule, but is our friend in all weathers, but is our constant guide, who finds shortcuts for us and sometime roundabout ways. Through but we find our way out of the maze of the various commandments and prohibitions. Sometimes we freeze in but. That's when but serves us to avoid an immediate resolution, and we prefer to reply: but that way isn't possible, because the rule is written sequentially, a, b, c, d!

The Slovaks are traditionalists, which is good; they hold on to their ways and their customs, but on the other hand they sometimes artificially hang on to certain rules. For example, the principle "take it in the order a, b, c, d" gives the rule's universal validity, but not necessarily its purpose. I have experienced officials applying rules in black and white, to the letter, verbatim, and I don't know if they do this only to foreigners, or to everyone. That's no way to make progress in solving problems (Vita, Lithuania). Foreigners relatively often attribute this attitude to Slovaks, even those not in administration: they seem insecure, as if they had not yet acquired enough flexibility so as to bend the rules. When they get

to intimate circles, however, they discover that where it's a matter of family or friends, flexibility too can be had. So we make a distinction between two types of excuses: the first type stiffens the rules and the second type adapts those same rules. As the Slovak proverb says, "laws and rules can be stretched like leather", or in the words of Dejan from Bulgaria: *Rules are there to make us live life better, but some of them always must be scrapped so that we can live better still.*

HOW TO SURVIVE THE BUREAUCRACY?
There is lot of bureaucracy still, unfortunately, so that's why I said, be patient. You need to understand. Please read about the history, because then it explains why people are like this. It's a very young country in terms of democracy (Durga, India).

The guardians of order are legendary in the administration, the police, the schools, the hospitals and wherever we are dependent on the favour or disfavour of the system. *But besides the attitude of rejection, in those same places I constantly meet fine people whom I hadn't known before, in situations where I wouldn't have expected that* (Franz, Austria). **On the one hand people who wield the official stamp seem obdurate; on the other hand someone can always be found who can be won over, because he or she gives priority to humanity, sometimes unpaid, sometimes with an extra payment.** Extra payment functions on various levels and in various forms in the country; it functions also on the small scale where everyone in a system with which he is familiar himself pays or takes and knows that problems can be resolved with a not too large sum of money.

Rules are black on white, but man brings colour to them. When foreigners speak of rules, they do not forget to mention the key people in many places, those inscrutable janitors of both sexes: ***Rules are in black and white, but the janitor writes in blue!*** (Giada, Italy). At first sight they can seem severe, but one must not take this personally. They like to hear how we've been referred to them, and depending on their humour they make an exception or they open the locked doors. Slovaks indeed may come across as morose on a first glance, but they do not hold out for very long and afterwards the rule applies: **when you get in among us, you're ours forever**. *It is curious that afterwards no one knows what rules apply* (Giada, Italy). As if the rules were especially for those who are "on the outside". An exception may occur, it is true, if the guardian of the rules is your second cousin. Since Slovakia is a small country and the probability that people will know each other is relatively high, it is

a fact that *in comparison with Germany everything is taken more casually* (Melanie, Germany). Thus rules are broken and people hope that no one will catch them. It is enough, however, to come from a country where the rules are ignored somewhat more, to be impressed, even allowing for this measure of casualness: *It is impressive how people follow the rules. In particular, their honesty and integrity* (Gabriela, Mexico).

Granted, there cannot be rules for everything and in many areas people are left to themselves. Slovaks are aware that they sometimes lack spontaneity – as in public, so also in private. Foreigners who come from the Middle East, Asia and Africa are aware that everything must be agreed beforehand, written in diaries; *you can't even accept a visit at unusual times and definitely not of a sudden* (Adewale, Nigeria). Only the close family is an exception.

People in Slovakia have clear ideas: they want to see ahead, and that goes for the designation of things by "a, b, c, d". *Here the grey zone isn't allowed for. Someone is either a good person or a bad person. There's no taking into account how in certain circumstances a good person may totally fail, and vice versa. Like in the village – if he fails, he carries that with him all his life* (Franz, Austria). Thanks to others, Slovaks are learning how one can live differently, how to give space to unexpected change.

Checking out which box someone fits into, whether he is sufficiently traditional, and commenting on the person who sticks out, is one of those activities which could not be called rare in Slovakia. *In terms of the culture I think it's more culturally acceptable as a country… Slovakia. I think people would be less nervous about living here… in traditional communities anyway. As long as the locals accept them* (Brian, Ireland).

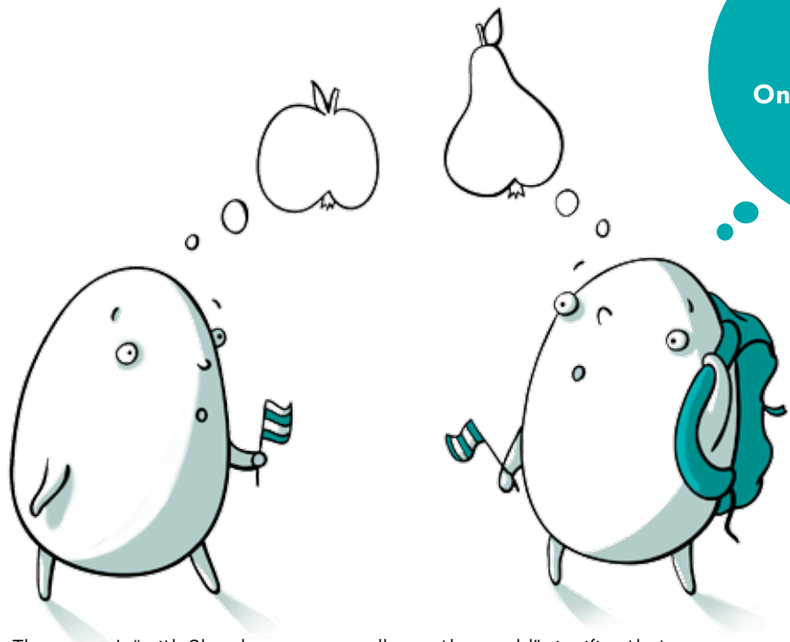
A frequent nuisance to foreigners is the already-mentioned excess of bureaucracy. Compared to other countries, we are somewhere in the middle between the necessity for triple checking of a stamp in Bengal or Cameroon and the ready acceptance of documents in the countries

of Western Europe. *Here the papers are not accepted, because they must first be translated. That position of the notary, which is so dominant in East European countries, is something which we don't have in Germany in this form* (Melanie, Germany). Foreigners feel there is a serious obstacle to the naturalisation of qualifications, especially in disciplines that have their own professional chambers. The non-recognition of professional qualifications acquired abroad affects not just foreigners but also Slovaks who wish to return to Slovakia after studies and years of practice abroad.

The fact that people in Slovakia take the stamps and seals seriously, and apart from that also crave mutual respect, is expressed in the widespread use of titles. *When greeting people take pains to say "doctor", "master" or "bachelor" – I've had this experience. Though it doesn't seem normal to me that people have Mgr. written on their apartment doors* (Davorin, Bosnia). There are countries where we learn the title only after a longer time, if at all. The fact that we in Slovakia are title-orientated surprises foreigners, especially if identical abbreviations are used to designate a variety of professions. The title Ing. (Engineer) is acquired not only by graduates in technical fields but in economics also. *It's not normal to have such a large number of engineers; that was one of the first things that struck the eye: every email I received was signed by an enginner! Do they give that title to everyone? What does it mean? Titles are important. It seems to me that there are too many engineers. You talk to a salesman and he says he's an engineer. What difference does that make? Seems we've got a different meaning for the word engineer* (Vita, Lithuania).

WHAT TO DO WITH TITLES?

If you don't understand the usage or abbreviations of titles, talk a bit about them. You will thus get information not only about professional standing, but also of the relationship between education, title and current work position. You will learn more about your partner's life in a social game with titles, and perhaps you will also get advice on how properly to convert (naturalise) your own title.



The proverb "with Slovak you can go all over the world" signifies that Slovakia is a land of emigration and also that in various corners of the world people can communicate in Slovak. Despite the advantage that Slovak confers, thanks to its central position among the other Slavic languages, foreigners who decide to learn Slovak meet with misunderstanding. *People imply that it is that it is not worth it to learn such a difficult and unimportant language. Even at school the young students say so. They plan to leave the country* (Gabriela, Mexico).

Marine from France was similarly surprised: *They seem to think they are not worthy that people would learn their language, or that it brings no immediate benefit or added value for your career prospects or whatever. So therefore they think that there is no point doing it. It's a very limited point of view. Foreigners are also surprised and mystified by the reaction of some Slovaks, when they tell them how much they like their country and its language. They have a feeling of littleness that they don't matter* (Giada, Italy).

The feeling of littleness, identified by others also as humility, is in sharp contrast with the importance of the language, which willy-nilly

WHICH LANGUAGES ARE TO BE ENCOUNTERED IN SLOVAKIA?

Outside the administration, in the service sector and particularly in towns, there's no problem about speaking English. With people of the middle and older generations you can probably also converse in Russian and German. Currently students study German, Spanish or French, as well as compulsory English. Since there is a numerous Hungarian and Roma minority, you will encounter their languages also and to a restricted degree, other Slavic languages.

is brought home to foreigners who must fill official forms. **To have instructions for completion available in any other language but Slovak is relatively a rarity.** *I also had registered with the health insurance and social insurance and there again I found the people don't speak either English or German or French, which is the triple combination which I was always offering. It made it difficult, because if you are on your own, you really struggle to make yourself understood* (Marine, France). Hence in contacts with the administration there are two great problems: bureaucratisation and the language exclusivity of Slovak. As Brian from Ireland pointed out, it's *OK if you're on your own. But for instance if you just had a child, then you going into the social security office in Britain and there* ***is a leaflet about newborn children*** *and what you can claim...* ***In Slovakia you had to ask for everything and that is a problem because you have five or six different insurance companies to deal with and all of them have papers only in Slovak.***

Language, processing of documents and dependence on those who issue them, are closely connected: *When there are police, doctors, officials, then it's clear who's boss and who does not have any power* (Jules, Canada). *There are situations in which a person must be lucky to find someone who doesn't switch off humane reason in the office* (Franz, Austria).

To explain the behaviour of officials we can try to put ourselves in their shoes: whether the situation corresponds to a lack of finance for pre-training in communication with clients, lack of tuition in other languages, or a systematic removal of problems which have come about "for technical reasons". At the tax office you can understand the frustrated official who finds that her computer system regularly crashes. There are situations where the official and the client feel together and sigh together, how impossible all this is. Equally, however, it happens that the official will defend the system, and especially in front of foreigners, with the words: "It's like that in Slovakia; adapt to it, including the language". Davorin from Bosnia is one of those who experienced a turn-about thanks to the language: *At the Foreign Police they don't know English and their behaviour is hostile. But when I learned a bit of Slovak and when they saw me making the effort, the very woman that I absolutely hated processed everything for me perfectly... And many people have this experience, that when they learn the language or at least they're able to speak sufficiently, then they don't have any problem.*

The Foreign Police is the branch of administration that foreigners probably come in contact with most often. Despite the fact that this office has importance for foreigners' lives, they do not meet with much goodwill there. Knowledge of Slovak is the key to survival, because otherwise a problem arises from not comprehending instructions in the Slovak language: *For example, there are rules at the Office, but no one knows them... we always used to go there with some documents and this and this were missing, but they never said anything beforehand* (Susanne, Germany).The foreigners feel abandoned at the police also because they wait a very long time for the officials to call them: *No one at the window and the queue growing, people waiting, and they aren't doing anything* (Anna, Pol'sko). For clients it's frustrating, listening to what is going to follow: *I can't inform you about it, we have three months to reply to you, maybe "it's pending", and so on* (Adewale, Nigeria). Gabriele from Mexico and Lien from Vietnam were agreed on the communication problems they faced: *The process of arranging a residence permit was difficult, hard to understand and humiliating...* ***they were not speaking English, very rude and then not very professional,*** *you know, treating us like some kind of criminal.* Vita from Lithuania, who was used to standing a long time in queues from the time of the former Soviet Republics and had a Slovak guide with her, found this experience easier to manage. Furthermore, the firm that employed her processed most of the documents.

It seems that the relationship to the Slovak language and appreciation of its sound qualities changes as the foreigners' relation to Slovakia deepens. (Slovak) *sounds hard, in fact harder than German. At the beginning I thought, it's got loads of consonants. But now I find it very harmonious and not so harsh at all. It's not as nice as Spanish, but one can listen to it all the same* (Jonas, Germany).

Many countries have humorous stories about people who have accents which betray their different cultural or social origins. Brian, however, was surprised that the unconcealed linguistic elitism and snobbery also affects Slovak minorities: *Every time you turn on the TV there's some terrible program where they ask people on the street. And they always seem to target people in Levice for some reason. Yes, because it's mixed, there are Hungarians, there are Roma people and their knowledge of Slovak is not that good, so they're sure that the answer they give will sound funny. This is the Slovak mentality, you just have to accept it.* There are foreigners who have had appreciative comments on their efforts to speak Slovak but have nevertheless noticed that Slovaks can be openly and tactlessly amused at the foreigner's expense. **If the foreigner accepts this broad-mindedly and is also able to joke at his/her own expense, that is the best ticket of admission to the closer circle of friends.**

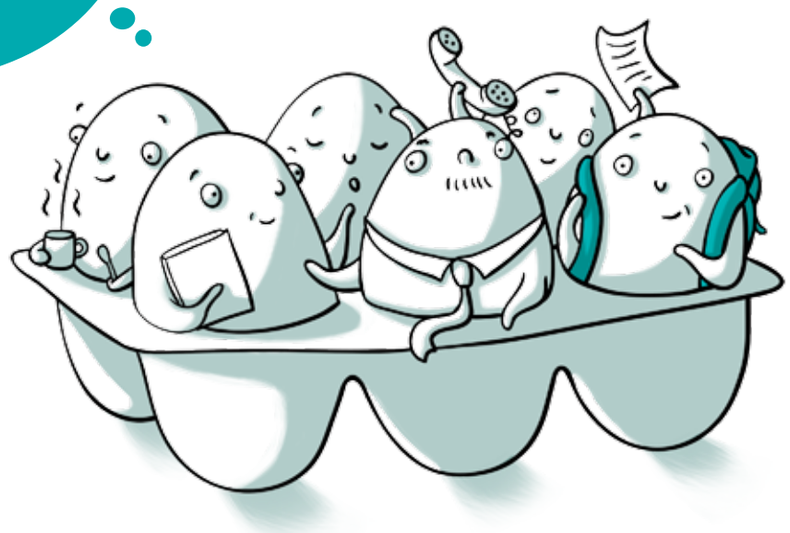
HOW TO SURVIVE WITHOUT SLOVAK?
If someone does not talk to you or greet you, do not take it personally, because Slovaks who are not fluent in foreign languages are ashamed of that. But ask for and find intermediaries who will help you. It helps to speak Slovak even a little.

The rule of acceptance through joking need not apply in the case of persons in a position of power. Those may take offence, as service providers explained: when the client *wanted to go out for a smoke and said, I'd like to smoke, he* (the member of the police) *began roaring, what's this "I'd like to"? Maybe: could I, please!?* Communication, where people are dependent on each other, speaks in other languages, in other communication styles; it can have forms which unpleasantly shock both sides.

So then, let us look together with Clemens from Germany at situations where it is not so much about applying power but about mutual exchange. *I have a feeling that you laugh louder. And I think, much more heartily than us. When two colleagues laugh, then almost the entire office laughs with them, even though none of us have the slightest idea what the joke is. I think that in this country you're noisier and more emotional, in a positive sense. When they get going and it's suddenly noisier, I would say unusually noisy for me, then they change to Slovak. They switch over very quickly and also speak very fast. Here I often have the feeling that they're butting in upon one another. We wouldn't talk so loudly in Germany.* Apart from the non-verbal differences, foreigners are in difficulties when the Slovaks, whether during work or after, speak Slovak in their presence, although all of them had one common language at their command. They prefer to summarise for the foreigners what has been spoken about, as if all of the time they were uncomfortable with their own pronunciation.

Foreigners are still more painfully aware that it often never occurs to people in Slovakia to discover the perspective of the other, *which might be interesting for the foreign person... they aren't able to communicate broad-mindedly... people perhaps are a little ahamed, but so many times I've encountered this: they don't know what to communicate, which is something essential. Some sort of small talk, but which brings some benefit, some added value* (Franz, Austria).

On Working and Saving



Do you come too from a country where it is said: "He who gets up early will have coffers full" (i.e. The early bird catches the worm); "He who isn't lazy, his grass will grow"? Or are you more likely to meet the version: "What you can do today, put off till tomorrow"; "Slowly you'll get there"...? We will find plenty of Slovak proverbs about industry and laziness, extravagance or thriftiness and good husbandry.

As regards working morality, Clemens from Germany says that *one cannot say unambiguously that the Slovaks are one thing or the other; there is no simple answer. Some of them come (to work) before me and go after me, but there are others who take quite a relaxed attitude to it.* Overall, one may say that foreign investors in Slovakia are content with the measure of industriousness.

The question remains how content the Slovaks are. Does their real life begin after work, or is it also in progress during working time? People who come from countries where the workload is higher have the feeling that time in Slovakia has slowed down and that the Slovaks work only from the necessity of having an income, while waiting for the end of the working time so that they may finally live. Conversely, **people from countries where the work tempo is slower have the feeling that Slovaks take even their breaks very quickly.** *There's no point drinking coffee in Slovakia!* (Jasna, Croatia).

What do foreigners observe in the organisation of work in Slovakia? Amateurism, casualness, or alternatively a professional approach and briskness? One must point out that many things which function in the working environment cannot be said to be specific to Slovakia but are derived rather from the culture of the firm and its customary rules, the type of work and the size and type of the working collective.

Nevertheless Vita from Lithuania, who works in a multinational company, had this to say of her Slovak colleagues and their work communication: *Many people think of work as something from nine to five, full stop. If I send an email at five, I get an email that "I'll be away all week", without being told of this beforehand. You expect something from that person, he's involved in something. It's a defect of responsibility in the work position. I don't expect someone to be accessible outside working hours, but he should let me know beforehand that he won't be available, or that he'll reply at a certain time, or that he'll nominate someone who'll fill in for him. I would recommend more transparent, more sincere communication, not to reply just because I must reply, but to reply meaningfully and with care.*

In employment where the collaboration of the collective members often directly conditions the quality of the results of work, foreigners are quick to perceive a mechanical maintenance of rules or alternatively, the initiative and resourceful improvising of colleagues who work as independent units. Most of them are inclined to regard the behaviour of their colleagues as reactive. People wait for instructions and simply fulfil them: *I have the feeling that all of them do a lot of asking, so if a problem arises they want advice on how to solve it. And the advice is*

not taken just as advice: it's something gravely consequential that one has to go, not like in our country where you ask someone's opinion – here it's taken more like a command. When someone says, I know how to solve it, then it will simply be done that way (Clemens, Germany). Active colleagues are rather the exceptions: *With us it's like that also: a lot of weight is given to experience, and there are old authority figures who won't let themselves be rushed into anything. We have one expert who does everything his way. Even if it's totally different to what was agreed at some work meeting, he nonetheless does the thing his way and it works! Just that he knows what he's doing* (Jonas, Germany).

According to foreigners, Slovaks at work are not too willing to accept any change or themselves to initiate one. Often they do things as they've been accustomed, in their own way: "more casually", perhaps they are deficient in goal-orientedness, striving for constant improvement and doing things professionally. Insufficient initiative in work is connected also with the pre-1989 systemic measures, when employment was obligatory. Some work positions were unnecessarily maintained, while the work content need not have anything to do with effectiveness, meaningfulness or self-realisation. Currently there are regions in Slovakia with high unemployment and people often put a great deal of effort into finding interesting and reasonably valued work.

Relationships between superiors and subordinates are relatively open in Slovakia. Strictly hierarchical relationships are not usual. According to Lien from Vietnam, in Slovakia it's possible to have a friendly relationship with one's boss, to discuss one's differing opinions and not to be afraid to show one's view of the matter. However, there are countries where relationships between colleagues, superiors and subordinates are even less formal and more relaxed. For example, it is quite common in Slovakia that people on various levels of the work hierarchy use the formal pronoun and address one another using surnames.

How do foreigners view thriftiness? There are those who come from countries where it is normal to pay higher tips and to buy rounds for friends, even if one doesn't necessarily have a higher income. They

believe that the "investment" comes back again in another form, and they don't try to square things. They found it very unpleasant if a Slovak partner accused them of squandering money and forced them to count every cent. **In Slovakia people watch to see that everyone pays for himself.** In the event that they pay for someone else, they expect he will soon give them back the money. Boran from Turkey had a similar experience when he was astonished that people in a restaurant were putting in two or three euros to pay the bill. If he proposed to pay for all, people refused, saying that this was not normal in Slovakia.

Though an ordinary tourist may think Slovakia is a cheap country (Wow, beer for a euro, that's fantastic!), it's by no means always so. Brian from Ireland says that after the honeymoon period when someone is still living in Slovakia as a tourist, he or she becomes sensitised, realising that if you take account of low earnings, here everything is dear. *You are a bit stingy but you've got a right to be. Because you're not a wealthy country, I mean the average salary in your country is 800 euros a month... It's like Jesus handing out five loaves of bread and three fish, you know. it's quite amazing. I think the Slovaks call this a Slovak miracle... being able to survive on the type of income they get.*

The ability to survive even with a relatively low income is closely linked with help from one's near relatives. Financial, but especially non-monetary forms of help are indispensable, whether it's home repairs or the care of children, grandparents or other relatives. *You have to rely on donations from your family. I often think if parents, aunties and uncles didn't help you with your monetary needs, the economy in this country would collapse* (Brian, Ireland).

Low income in relation to price of goods and services is counterbalanced by reciprocity and circulation of mutual aid. The emphasis on saving and economy in Slovakia is partly connected with the fact that many people are trying to buy their accommodation as personal owners. Rented accommodation is relatively rare, with renters being mainly students or people who have come here to work. The usual method of buying one's home or apartment is to borrow money from a bank in

the form of a mortgage, which the person guarantees with the fixed property which he is buying, or some other form of fixed property. Subsequently for a number of years, often for 20–30 years, he pays some hundreds of Euros monthly, which represents a significant burden for his personal budget.

HOW CAN YOU HAVE LITTLE MONEY AND LOTS OF MUSIC?

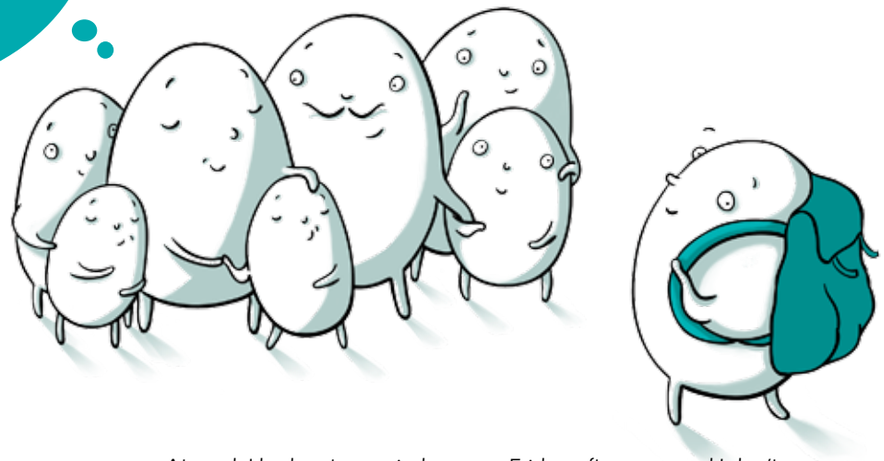
Take note that prices in Slovakia are similar to those in other European countries, but average pay is considerably lower. If you want to survive on your income in Slovakia, work out a detailed budget, keep track of your outgoings and above all connect up with a network of people who unselfishly help each other out. **"He's a rogue who does more than he can."**

For a foreigner it may be unusual that many people in Slovakia try to cultivate their own vegetables and fruit and keep domestic animals, for example hens and hares. Having one's own domestic products ties in with economy, thrift and the habit of "filling the larder". It is relatively common in Slovakia to spend time growing things in the garden and then afterwards cooking the products.
The relationship of consumption and saving is expressed more in the colder regions of Slovakia. For people who come from warmer areas it is a shock when, visiting a house, they experience the feeling of *fourteen degrees, and to them that was perfectly normal, to have a temperature of fourteen or fifteen degrees,... so OK, I'll put on a pullover and thick socks* (Davorin, Bosnia).

Many foreigners mentioned conspicuous consumption. Franz from Austria thinks that the emphatic orientation towards material things also influences the choice of education and profession for children. Parents are orientated towards schools and professions which they think will guarantee their children a sufficiently comfortable life (economics, management, law). As he sees it, people in Slovakia are not as exhausted by immoderate and senseless consumption as people in neighbouring Austria, because they have not yet experienced it to such an extent: *People don't actually know what young people would need. The quest for certainties, that is certainly manifested here much more than in Austria. Since young people are actually better off now, (parents in Austria) don't force their children to study economics, because they know they don't get anything from that. For life, I mean.*

On the other hand, however, foreigners have also observed people who are not interested in conspicuous consumption: *Something else that I like has to do with extravagant spending: people here don't need to show themselves off, while we Bosnians do. These people don't bother much about that. I know people who earn three thousand euros monthly and yet they've just got a Skoda Fabia, or they don't have any car. So I think Slovaks save money more while we spend much more extravagantly, and we also spend more than we earn* (Davorin, Bosnia).

On Families and Private Life



At work I look out my window on a Friday afternoon and I don't see a single car in the carpark.. And I can park comfortably in front of the house, at long last. Everyone has gone home (Clemens, Germany). Clemens is describing the situation referred to in the joking answer to the question, Where are all the Bratislava people on Friday afternoon? On the Košice train... The inhabitants of Bratislava currently are mainly people who migrated to the capital for work or study in the second half of the 20th century, and their descendants. Despite that, the "old inhabitants" call the present-day travellers CPčkári – on the one hand they're *cezpoľní* (come in through the fields) and on the other hand they need Cestovné Poriadky (timetables). They often travel at weekends to relatives in the country. The jocose name describes the affectionate/unaffectionate, teasing relationship of the capital city to the other parts of Slovak. At the same time it indicates that **despite the constantly perceptible difference in the lives of city and country families they retain a kinship connection.**

Ada from Ireland thinks that *there's* ***a strong sense of family*** *and there's, like,* ***a loyalty within the family*** *and children are happy to invest the time, spending it with their parents...* ***The home stays a home for a lot longer*** *and people don't seem to try and escape as much as people from the country in Ireland and England.* It seems that though the children fly from the nest to Bratislava they still return to their parents, because they've left their hearts in the nest still. Between generations it functions in the opposite way also: Brian says that Slovak parents help children even when they've grown up, in the following spirit: *I've earned my money but I'm also willing to help you to manage. Or brigáda (relief work)... everybody goes to help out. In Orava they build each other's houses. I mean, for me it's like Utopia.* That also functions on the level of minor everyday assistance. At home in Ireland Brian and his wife could not depend on relatives to mind the children if they want to go out for an evening; in Slovakia his wife's aunt minds them regularly.

Although parents may support their children by a variety of means, Labeebe from Egypt feels that on the other hand they are rather glad when their adult children leave home. In the future he plans for himself and his adolescent daughter a more intensive relationship than the relationship between parents and adult children that he sees round him. For Boran from Turkey also, the intensity of contacts between family members is weak: *The Slovak people don't have this kind of ...family relationships with others... we are so close with all siblings, or uncles I would say and cousins, and so on. In Slovakia you have only babka, dedko (granddad, grandma). One neighbor maximum.* Lien from Vietnam likes the fact that in Slovakia the nuclear family – **father, mother and daughter– is responsible for itself**, that other relatives do not interfere in their life decisions, as they do in his homeland. He likes this freedom and opportunity to decide whether to take advice to heart, and which advice.

Boran from Turkey appreciates the *fact that Slovaks are prepared to do 200%, not just 100%, for the family. Although they are not together every day, they have a perspective on what is happening in the life of that second person; they check whether everything is in order and whether anyone needs help.* He remembers a similar system functioning at home, and as a child he found it a great nuisance. According to Adewale of Nigeria it is good that the family stands at the forefront in

HOW TO REGARD THE FAMILY IN SLOVAKIA?
Boran from Turkey thinks that Slovaks are substantially less responsible outside the family than within the family (which is something he does not like) – many of our modes of behaviour within the family are used also in our behaviour in society. Society is a product of families, but at the same time the families are a product of society.
If with the passage of time you become a member of an imaginary family for some one of your colleagues, neighbours or acquaintances, they are prepared to do a great deal for you. The feeling of responsibility depends on the feeling of closeness towards the other person.

Slovakia. Only occasionally is ***the family embrace too tight:*** the parents, for example, influence the choice of a future husband or wife and *sometimes the young pair doesn't stand up to this pressure and they each go their own way* (Magda, Great Britain). According to Franz from Austria, the powerful bonds of parental training are to be seen even in the case of young children. In comparison to his native country, the upbringing seems to be relatively authoritarian: *Sometimes, when I hear someone... shouting, come here...I think he's calling a dog, but actually he's calling a child.*

In Slovakia family members visit each other. Melanie from Germany, who works with children, hears the same stories always after the weekend, how the children were visiting the grandparents and playing with their male and female cousins. Celebrations of children's birthdays also mainly take place in the family circle, which was not customary in her homeland. Generally those who come to Slovakia regard the celebration of holiday periods as mainly family affairs, relatively closed. Melanie's experience in Germany was that during the holidays people went with the family to a restaurant or for a walk. In Slovakia she was astonished to find the restaurants in the countryside, where she'd gone for the Easter holidays, closed for the festival period.

A few months previously Melanie had been delighted and rather surprised that the people in her house had made a package for her at Christmas, when she'd been living there just a few months. Since she'd had experience of life in another country in Eastern Europe she assumed that those in the house would like to get some little thing, but they did not actually expect that from her. Hence the surprise and delight was on both sides. Her colleagues, who knew that she was from Germany, did not expect presents or acknowledgements from her on birthdays. Nonetheless **by presents she found a means of breaking the ice in her new job** and thus became a secure and important part of her working "family".

Davorin from Bosnia thinks that in Slovakia family bonds are strong, that the family matters to people, and particularly people in the country or in smaller towns: *The further east, the more family*. Ada from Ireland has a feeling that people are much more interested in the lives of others and are part of the lives of members of their family. This mode of functioning is transferred more into the working environment, where colleagues can be exceptionally understanding and helpful especially in crisis situations. Melanie thinks that in Germany too it would be no harm to adopt something of this approach. Davorin from Bosnia, on the other hand, was surprised that in his colleagues' opinion private affairs had nothing to do with work, so that when he openly explained to his boss in the office why he would have to remain at home next day: *I've stomach problems, I've a cold, and I think I've a temperature, I think... and they all began laughing at me, why are you saying all that? For what? And the boss said, OK, OK, fine, so you'll be at home tomorrow, you needn't say exactly what's wrong, those are private matters. And in Bosnia, for example, it's altogether common, that the employer must know what the problem is precisely.*

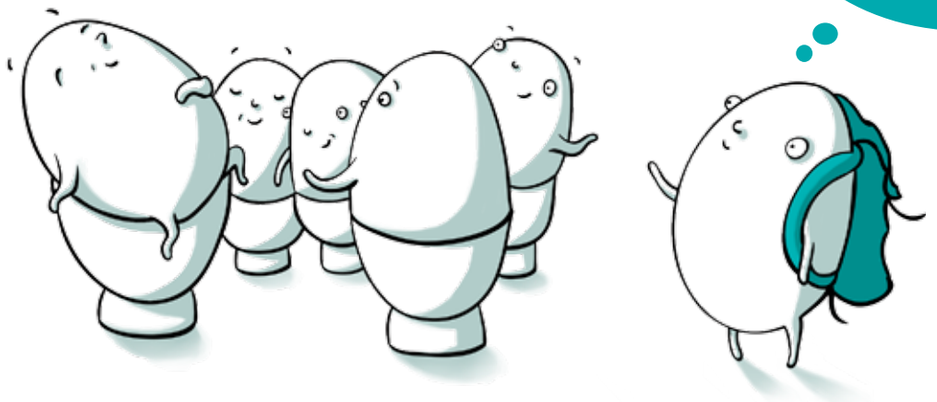
The intersection of private and working life may also take the form of talking about one's family with colleagues in the work setting, and this may be strange particularly to people coming from western countries. Vita from Lithiuania and Franz from Austria dislike the fact that the linkage of family, private life and work matters holds back teamwork, because they do not want to discuss such themes at work. According to them, **Slovak colleagues are not always sufficiently able to switch over between private life and work.**

Asking about children also falls into this category and some may take it as an invasion of privacy. Right at the first meeting you may be asked questions such as: *Where are you from? Why did you come to Slovakia? Are you married? Do you have children?* Colleagues and friends asked Adewale from Nigeria when they were going to have another child: *My wife feel the pressure I think, because she is always getting those questions from her mom and so on. They ask me about my second one, and I ask my colleague, when are you going to have your first?*

Family life genuinely is orientated above all towards children. *The country is green and friendly towards children. People like to spend time*

Slovakia too has a version of the proverb, "What goes around, comes around". You will need a great deal of patience, of course, but after a certain time Slovaks will begin to see you as friends and maybe even part of their family – and afterwards you will be included in all the good things, and the not so pleasant things, which go together with that.

out of doors, and for us that was like heaven (Vita, Lithuania). In society the orientation towards children is expressed only partially: public spaces, restaurants etc. are not always sufficiently child-friendly, nor are workplaces friendly towards working mothers and families. Some foreigners may be surprised by the lengthy family leave, which is generally availed of only by women. *In Slovakia a woman from the middle class expects to be at home with the children for three years. That is a generally recognised value. They feel they've let themselves down if that's not possible. In England, to be three years with children is Utopia* (Magda, Great Britain). Discussion of this theme, of course, might be much longer and more complex. For example, Marine compares the situation in her native France (with built-in opportunities for employment of various kinds of short-hours contracts for parents and especially mothers caring for children) and reflects on the difficulties that a long-term departure from the workforce may involve for women in Slovakia.



People are reserved: that's the first impression, but not the second (Vita, Lithuania)

Tap, tap, one must tap the egg. Foreigners who come to Slovakia regard Slovaks as unapproachable. Like an egg with a very firm and hard shell, which we must spend a long, long time tapping if we are to get at its precious content.

Interestingly, both people from the West and from the East think this. Boran from Turkey thinks that *as soon as possible you must prove that you are theirs, so that they will trust you, because otherwise they are cold. Slovaks are cold.* Jonas from Germany has similar experience: *When I see someone on the street and I smile or incline my head, there is little reply. At home in Bavaria we greet one another like that, even if we have no common involvement. When someone inclines the head to you or when you have eye contact with someone, then some response will come, but not here.* According to Clemens (Germany), it is as if two kinds of Slovaks existed: *the people whom you don't know at all are withdrawn and distanced and tend to be cold.*

HOW TO MAKE FRIENDS?
As a Slovak proverb puts it, "seize the time like a goose grabs grain". **However, building and maintaining friendly relationships requires investing not only a lot of time but also strong will, so as to be able to create a home whose foundation is friends.**

That is my feeling. But afterwards they are more friendly and helpful, and even very cordial.

Magda (Great Britain) has the following explanation of this seeming "two-facedness": ***If you just happen to arrive and don't come by invitation, no one feels any responsibility for your inclusion.*** According to her, ***foreigners have no way of getting to certain places if the locals do not invite them.***

HOW TO MAKE FRIENDS?
Kamran (Afganistan) advises: *Prepare a meal together... and invite neighbours or acquaintances. In time they will invite you. Mutuality is important.*

If, however, it is necessary to collaborate with someone or function in a collective, afterwards for the most part there is an attempt to make those who are coming, those others, our own if possible – our pals. According to Clemens, this befriending actually happens more quickly than in his native Germany: *First of all they told me that all of us in the department used the familiar address – managers as well; the top boss, maybe you'd speak formally to him. But he also is a German, maybe he puts more emphasis on it – I address him formally and he reciprocates. But I have the feeling that we will quite quickly get from formal "Vy" to informal "Ty". Thus in my opinion, you will be notably quicker to use first names and to use the informal address than you would be in Germany.*

Lien from Vietnam also praises the fact that in Slovakia the boss can be friends with an employee: they can talk, oppose each other and discuss their differing opinions on a particular thing. She likes the possibility of expressing one's own opinion and then going together for a beer. In some cases, however, the Slovaks try to maintain the friendly atmosphere at the expense of solving problems, as Melanie (Germany) found. The situation could climax, when the cup finally spilled over, in a quite sharp exchange of opinions, in which emotion was primary. Jonas (Germany) noticed at work that *when two people quarrel, or perhaps they have some quite sharp exchange of opinions, it cannot be taken as entirely serious, because five minutes later they've forgotten it all. I think all of them know that just now it's going to be pretty noisy, but afterwards it'll be fine again.*

He noticed that the Slovak like to make friends at the workplace also: *In the office we're sharing a space: there are three of us, but we're actually never all together at the table. You see, we're always rushing somewhere, but in the afternoon we meet and that office isn't very big, so we're squeezing. When there's eight of us there. But it's always very cheerful, we eat chocolate, somebody just brings something. I noticed too that it's different from what we do in Germany. That someone's always bringing something and offering it to the others; they're always offering me some trifles. That they're always sharing when they bring in something. In Germany each one would eat his own things on his own, that's usual, but here they always put it on a table and everyone can take.*

According to Davorin from Bosnia, the stage where people are building mutual trust is longer than the Serbian equivalent: *In Bosnia it's completely normal that I'll go, I don't know, three times drinking beer with someone and the fourth time I'll tell him the biggest problem that's plaguing me in life... but here it's more like, let's take the plunge after half a year when I've been friends with someone, after that he'll start talking of some real problems that bother him or her.*

If you become part of a circle of friends, then according to Tyrell from Ireland, especially in the country and in small towns *it's like a real family, and then they share the things that grow in the garden, you know; they take care of their house when somebody goes away for a while.*

Sometimes being with friends takes on the dimensions of inevitability for surviving or at least dealing with important things. According to Melanie (Germany), everything is done just through friends, through other people, it can't be done at all otherwise. The way it is, sometimes I go to Google Translate, I translate a few words and I look to see if I can find something on the Slovak internet. But it's not at all simple, since I haven't mastered the language. Afterwards my experience is that people who've been here for longer and give me tips – it doesn't always work out, but people who've been here longer still or have Slovak partners are more easily able to carry things through to satisfactory results. Because they know someone who takes care of them. Things that happen to me, like when I was several hours at the hospital at emergency and I thought I was going to die – such things don't hap-

pen to them. They don't have to wait in a queue, someone comes for them and takes them to a room at the side and sorts them out. That means that you have to know someone.

ADVICE FROM MARINE

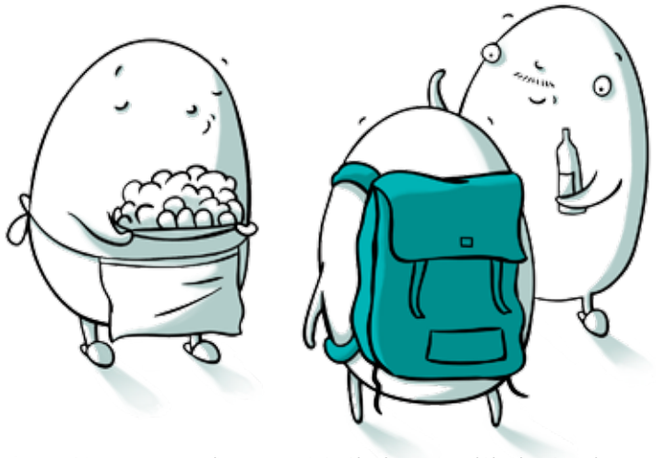
(France): You need to find what you interested in and use it to make friends. It's like, if you have a hobby or something, whether it's a sport or music, or some kind of activity, which you could do regularly – through that you can build relationships. I think it's the best way to go, because you need to have some Slovak friends, basically.Meet other foreigners (and not only of your own community) so that you know that you're on the same boat with others, not isolated, and so that you can exchange experience about life in Slovakia, pick up some interesting tips and tell jokes about Slovaks.

To find Slovak friends, especially male friends, isn't easy. Foreigners think that it's simpler to make friends with women. **It's important though to have friends, so as to make life easy in Slovakia.** Male and female friends will go to the Foreign Police with you, they'll accompany you to other offices and to the doctor, and they'll explain everything that you don't understand. Melanie too has been helped by Slovak acquaintances in communication with the administration. However, when it was a mediated contact, an acquaintance of an acquaintance, she worried a little whether things would turn out well: *So openly and directly I told that woman too my worries, how I felt afraid in that situation. But she answered me very, very, very nicely, that she'd been collaborating with that man for a long time, for some years, and no one had ever complained of him. And that reassured me and confirmed my attitude towards your country, that you try to find a common language in the emotional field also with someone who needs it..*

Jonas from Germany tells the story of how he made friends with Slovaks while doing sport: *In the fitness centre they greet me more heartily all the time, that's really nice. At the beginning it was just a wave of the head or something such, and now they even smile at me. I know the staff and also people I train with, I know their names by now. I suppose it just takes time and I have the feeling it takes more time than in Germany, not an awful lot, but still. But something that wouldn't have happened me in Germany was that one fellow actually brought me beer from the Czech Republic, because he works in a brewery... after such a short time, five or six weeks, that someone would bring me a present of beer, that made an impression on me.*

Antje from Holland appreciates help very much, but she feels the lack of independence and of the ability to keep her affairs private: *because you always need some assistance and translation, and then you can't keep your secrets and everyone knows everything.* ***Here I cannot live my life really properly, because I'm always dependent on someone.*** Slovak friends are (at least at the beginning) an important bridge towards normal functioning in the country. If you do not know the Slovak language, Slovak-speaking friends are an indispensable bridge.

On Visiting



A guest is someone who comes into the house and the host welcomes him according to the reason and circumstances of his visit, his social status, and the relationship that he has to him.

People in Slovakia take a very responsible approach to the reception of visits and they need to make thorough preparations for each. Keeping contact with traditions of the past, hosts have a feeling that they should have the rooms tidied up and refreshment prepared for the guests. Therefore they require time so as to get ready for the visit. Even in the context of the family visits are sometimes planned for entire weeks – what to cook, what to bring, when to come, what to help with. Despite that, a planned visit for foreigners may be a stressful experience. **If you want to visit Slovaks at home, it is better to arrange it beforehand.** Slovaks normally prefer expected visits and they do not much like visits late in the evening or at night. If you come unannounced, it may happen that they politely refuse to see you, as they have another programme planned.

Sometimes it happens that neighbours who have lived side by side in one apartment block for 20 years do not visit each other. This is an expression of a certain reserve, which is not that difficult to dissolve. It happens that foreigners who move into the apartment block behave as they are accustomed to do their own countries and start talking to other foreign people. Kamran from Afghanistan was one who in this way "broke the ice": *In Afghanistan we invite people home when we're cooking something. A person wants to give his neighbour something good. That way we got to know our neighbours and they invite us too when they're cooking something.*

A good rule is not to come on a visit "empty-handed". For foreigners this custom is a novelty, because in the countries they come from one brings nothing at all to a visit. Alternatively, the foreigners from countries to the east of Slovakia may feel that the gifts which the Slovaks bring are rather modest, because they are accustomed to bring many more presents when visiting. In Slovakia it is thought proper to bring some small consideration, normally a bottle of wine, biscuits, chocolate or flowers (an uneven number).

A custom which surprises foreigners is taking off one's shoes. In Slovak households people normally take their shoes off in the hall and afterwards go about in socks or put on slippers. When you arrive on a visit people will offer you slippers, but you can refuse them. Even if your Slovak hosts tell you that when entering their home you need not take your shoes off, they just want to be polite. You won't do any harm if you take your shoes off nonetheless.

For Slovak people it matters that good care should be taken of guests. It is not expected that guests will help the householders in any way whatever, for example washing dishes and the like. Relax and enjoy the hospitality and show appreciation of the effort they make. Despite the fact that Slovak people often devote a great deal of energy to preparations for a visit, sometimes they apologise to their guests for not having tidied up properly or not managing to cook more. This despite the fact that they've been tidying or cooking for a whole day. They do not necessarily mean that seriously, but foreigners in Slovakia say that this often makes an impression of low self-regard or humility.

Slovaks like very much to press food on their guests till they're bursting and often serve food without asking. Many foreigners then have the feeling that they should not refuse. It really does make Slovaks happy when you eat well in their homes.

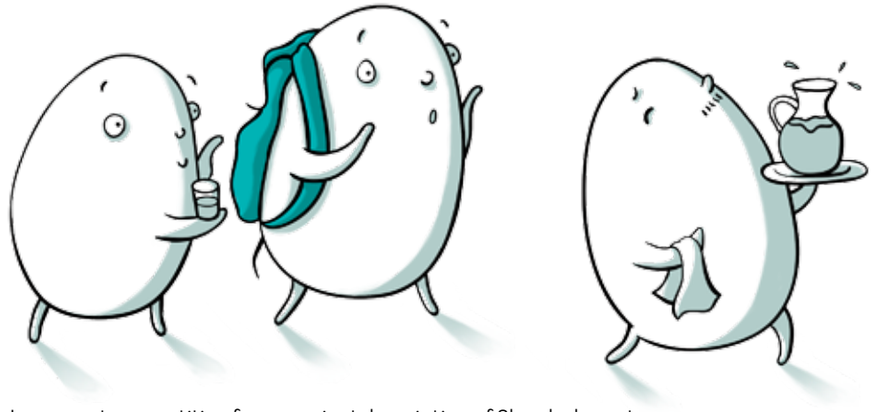
We stayed with one of the reception ladies and she was so nice, but we had this problem... well, not problem, but in the morning she served us coffee and I really don't like coffee. So then you have it and you really feel bad not to drink it, but if you say no you feel rude (Dirk, Holland).

To Garai from Egypt the foods prepared seemed bland, without the diversity of flavour he was accustomed to at home, with many spices and greens. Carlos from Columbia replied that what mattered was not so much how the food was devised or its quality, but how great an effort the householders made to attend to the guest. Some foreigners found such generous hospitality embarrassing, while others praised it and said it was a fine thing to be a guest in Slovakia. Even here, however, foreigners from different countries perceive things differently. To some of them Slovak hospitality seems exceptionally generous. Others have been used to still more generous spreads, for example Davorin from Bosnia, who felt when visiting Slovak households that no great care was taken of him: And sometimes else that seemed really strange to me *was that when I went somewhere* ***they didn't start serving me immediately, and ... they sat down also.*** *And just, I don't know, something like: would you like a glass of water? Or at most, whatever, coffee. While in Bosnia, if someone comes on a visit who doesn't come often, then we make preparations.* Maybe he simply hadn't given notice beforehand and his hosts were taken by surprise.

On visits you may also encounter an interesting ritual of offering and refusing. The saying goes that in Slovakia it's polite to refuse three times and only then to tuck into the food and drink. Foreigners too noticed this, when they found that on visits the Slovaks "a million times" offered them, let's say, cake, and "a million times" they had to refuse. They ended up actually taking a piece of cake, because they sensed that their hosts would not give up so easily.

HOW TO MANAGE SUCCESSFULLY IN VISITS TO SLOVAK HOUSEHOLDS

People in Slovakia appreciate it if you give prior notice of your visit and take your shoes off when entering the apartment. They value expressions of self-restraint, humility and respectfulness in all their forms. After a polite refusal of the offered food do not hesitate, however, to start savouring what your hosts have prepared for you – no need to remain hungry and thirsty.
For guests who have received an invitation to someone's household, the Slovak proverb applies: "Guest in the home, God in the home..."



In a recent competition for a succinct description of Slovak characteristics, the winner came up with these four: "we don't know, we haven't got, it can't be done, we're not interested". Garai from Egypt described how he experienced this approach when he and his friends, in a restaurant on a poultry farm, wanted to order boiled eggs. The waiter told them that he didn't have boiled eggs, only fresh. Though they pleaded with him that surely this could be done, the waiter replied: *We don't have a setting for boiled eggs in the cash register.* Even though it is evident that the Slovaks know how to boil, they've got the saucepan, the fire, the eggs, and perhaps even the problem with the cash register could be solved, what is frequently lacking is interest. **As if in some places they took more account of rules than people.** Sometimes, however, lack of interest has a much simpler reason: people in services do *crazy shifts* for little money, and so they lack both the energy and the motivation.

Not only foreigners but natives also in Slovakia may have the feeling that staff simply take no notice of them. Even in comparison with neighbouring countries it seems that in services there is a lack of considera-

tion and attentiveness. What can one do if the employees do not notice the guests looking at them? *If you need help you must ask for it. No one will offer you any. In a shop that's OK, but in a restaurant it's strange not to devote attention to a guest for a long time, for example if I myself have to ask for a menu* (Vita, Lithuania).

HOW TO SURVIVE INATTENTIVENESS

Don't always be so critical of your surroundings. After all, there are many reasons to be glad (Adewale, Nigeria). *Don't be angry when at first things don't go as you imagined, that you feel pushed out on a limb; that's going to coninue for a little bit longer, so have patience, brother...* (Clemens, Germany). But do be careful on the roads, even as pedestrians, because the Slovaks whizz by.

Even after you have ordered there is no certainty that the waiter will come. In some places it has happened that guests have received something altogether different from what they ordered. Equally there are places where the very opposite is true. If a waiter's behaviour showed that he felt himself responsible for Melanie's table that evening, she found that astonishing and, given her previous experiences, refreshing. Unconcealed willingness in services is a nice surprise: *I asked for more boiling water. In Germany I would have had to pay for more tea, and here they gave me an enormous pot. I had the feeling that I knew in Germany thirty years ago, of something personal, family-style, nice* (Melanie, Germany).

Slovaks are both polite and impolite. As Ada from Ireland says, most people in Slovakia are incredibly unassuming, but apart from those there are others who say *I'm taking this, it'll be mine, and keep your mouth shut.* Vita from Lithuania too had an expectation that people would be coarser: *But they aren't, they're nice.* ***If you ask for help I'm sure you'll get it.*** *Even though the media say that you're not receptive to foreigners, in reality that's not true. Slovakia is a pleasant and forthcoming country.* To keep up morale people tell each other that the help which we're paid for isn't always so gracious, but it comes all of a sudden where no one expects it: on the street, from unknown people and at the last moment.

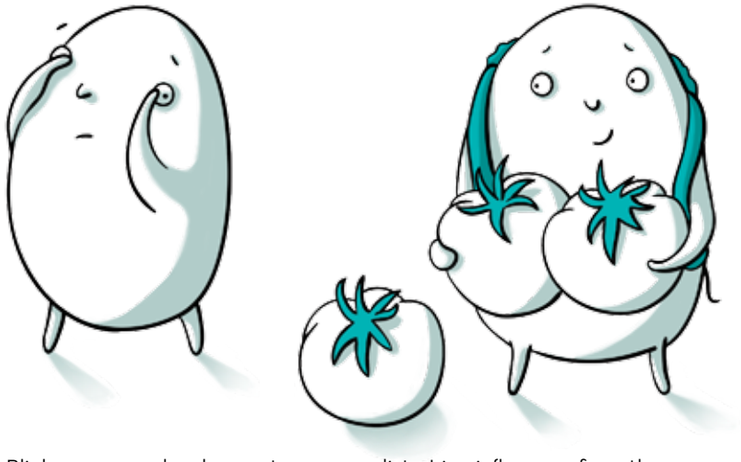
A similar diversity of experience exists in the matter of driving. People who come from countries to the east of Slovakia are pleasantly surprised by how we respect the rules while driving. When a fifty kilometre limit is prescribed in a village, in most cases it is obeyed. Those foreigners who do not come from Western Europe regarded Slovaks as responsible, even though perhaps not entirely patient. Foreigners who are accustomed to more considerateness were more inclined, however, to see them as self-centred: *... he'll press on you from behind, hooting and flashing lights, all excited: this fellow's going to drive the way he wants, and he won't have regard to others* (Magda, Great Britain). Certainly, in Slovakia cars drive significantly nearer one another than in Western Europe, Australia or America, which makes it riskier. But pressing in behind is probably a signal, without hooting, that the front car should make way.

Many foreigners are taken aback by how fast Slovak drivers go (though it is worth obeying the prescribed speed limit in Slovakia, if only because of police penalties). In ordinary dealings they find people quite pleasant, but behaviour behind the wheel shocks them. Especially in those situations where a car does not stop at a pedestrian crossing, or stops only with inches to spare. As for getting into line in connecting traffic, no one checks it, and so the stringing of cars alternating one after the other is a rare phenomenon. Giving precedence is not one of the Slovak virtues.

Brian from Ireland was shocked at the lack of courtesy: *You'll be waiting for 20 people. So you really have to be assertive over here. You know, show a little courtesy but not too much. As my wife often says to me, you let everyone else on the bus before you get on yourself. No one will say: "no, after you!", they're just walking past you. So I am always last on the bus.* Eventually Brian said to himself, I have to adopt these rude ways so as not to be left standing like a fence-post. Are Slovaks in such a rush and so time-pressed that they forget other people might be in the same position?

Foreigners may also experience insufficient thoughtfulness when they come newly into a group and no one introduces them to the others, or just to one person, as if out of the blue. Because usually everyone knows one another in those *groups and people are used to that. And what then, well... All of a sudden here's some foreign fellow, what's he doing here? It's sort of irritating. Well, I've got used to that* (Franz, Austria). To foreigners in whose cultural environments there is less touching, it may be startling that some Slovaks kiss when greeting, usually once on either cheek. It appears that sometimes Slovaks prefer a simple hearty squeeze to the pitfalls of conversation.

On Blinkers



Blinkers are used on horses to remove disturbing influences from the surroundings. The symbolic blinkers which people wear have precisely the same purpose, from the point of view of their users. Suppression of the surroundings is an advantage and at the same time an obstacle to taking in the wider picture. To look beyond the horizon, to grasp the other person's perspective, to open out the blinkers: sometimes that takes time.

For example, if you live in a rented apartment in Slovakia, it is not uncommon that *as a tenant you must be very nagging and even unpleasant if you are to get things moving. And by unpleasant and nagging I mean so unpleasant and nagging that as a straightforward German I almost feel guilty. In my apartment, for example, I don't have hot water, never. About 10 litres comes out, that does for two minutes and after that it's cold or lukewarm* (Melanie, Germany).

Repairs in Slovakia take somewhat longer than in western European countries, but they go a lot more briskly than in countries to the East. People are inclined to deal with things first of all by DIY. If that doesn't work, the second time round they'll call a repairman, and even then they may not be lucky straightaway. The "masters" after consultation promise that they will come. Maybe only one or two days later, maybe in a month. Sometimes they do the repairs well, sometimes not, and then the search for a master continues, because those who truly are good repairers are exceptionally busy and not particularly cheap.

On the other side of the balance, stories circulate among Slovaks about all-destroying tenants. As if even the idea of profit from tourism has not made a sufficiently strong impact in Slovakia. We gladly shared our humility with foreigners and so it doesn't bother us, no more than it bothered our grandparents, that Melanie, when she wants a bath, boils water a few times in a pressure cooker. *That's how I've managed things for myself, because I thought if I go somewhere else it won't be any different – I've heard the same from my colleagues. With the rest of what's in my apartment I'm content, so I told myself, that's simply how it is. When I was in Lucknow we did not have hot water at all. Actually we didn't even have a washing machine, because there wasn't sufficient water pressure. And so I have the feeling that everything is easy, nothing is frightful, but it is frightful for some of my colleagues, the ones who haven't lived anywhere else and who lived in the lap of luxury in Germany.*

Even though luxury may have a variety of forms, foreigners in Slovakia are shocked by the tendency not to change the state of things, not to raise quality, to let be what exists, as if it were enough that it functions so-so: Playing tricks or trying to bend the rules, yeah, and like, the motto is "I don't care"... *it's like you're saying I don't care, if you don't take the challenge or do some additional things that you need to, so as to improve yourself ... Like, you want to learn, you want to develop yourself; it's not only – you didn't come to the world only to do this job, yeah. You act, like: yes, sorry, we are coming to that point, but, like, – I don't care* (Adewale, Nigeria).

Hand in hand with persistence in the unchanging state go excuses: *sometimes they're so bad that those people don't actually know how*

HOW TO GET RID OF THE BLINKERS?

Live in some other country beforehand, then you won't find everything so different. Pick a country where everything's much more extreme, then Slovakia won't seem as different as to someone who so far has only lived in the West. And you won't get excited over things which in any case you can't change (Melanie, Germany).

to lie, it's completely threadbare. For example, "closed for technical reasons". Even in completely absurd situations, when there are manifestly other reasons. Actually, it's connected with that lack of responsibility. It's the kind of style, that each of us repairs things with his own hands. So to go right down to the depths and really take something to excellence, that's the problem. To be orderly, exact, to take responsibility for some decision (Franz, Austria). The Canadian Jules too summarises the responses to his own proactive approach: *Everyone round me is saying that it won't work. It surprises me that no one comes up with anything that could work!*

Change occurs *when people realise that the responsibility is solely theirs, that you're contributing to your country, not just to yourself. Slovaks have their inhibitions – to come forward in a spirit of curiosity, to approach something with the right dose of naiveté –that's how I see it anyhow, so then we can talk about that, how to do things differently, to innovate. If they complain a lot and have little comprehension of the other side, then there's scarcely any possibility of compromise, of being able to overcome their own ego and do something for the happiness of society* (Melanie, Germany).

World-wide it is notorious that the farther east you go, the more problems are wrapped up when they're talked of. Slovakia, like lots of other places, is somewhere in the middle in terms of describing things by hints, attempting to avoid conflict, wanting to offend no one and not lose face. One person sees this as wearing blinkers, another as laziness, but it may also be a strategy for not creating public scandal and solving a problem quietly. Striking out blind may *expose you to the risk that the opposite party will concentrate on what you've said and not on solving the actual problem. So the debate and the solution of the problem will not move forward, rather everything will be turned round the opposite way* (Melanie, Germany).

Camouflage is well-known: as in families ("Mama's skirt hides everything", just let there be no "fire on the roof"), so also in workplaces (better if we communicate "in velvet gloves", "keep away from the hot potatoes" and "don't put out fires that aren't burning us"). Avoiding the hot potatoes can be observed in workplace meetings: *I have the feeling that when it's about solving some problem they expect that someone will tell them what they have to do, and they don't do much or they do nothing of their own volition, even though they themselves are quite familiar with the problem and know what it's about. But again, there are all sorts. Sometimes it happens that before I even have time to read a report of the problem, already it's fixed. And others don't fix it for three weeks and afterwards one has to insist and ask and then ask again and again, if that problem has been fixed yet* (Clemens, Germany).

Foreigners have the feeling that despite an evident fault they are more likely to meet with enumeration and description of abstract problems than a succinct identification of the problem. *The feeling of inconvenience must really be very, very great before a beginning is made on actually fixing something* (Melanie, Germany).

When Slovaks are not able to change something, they do at least point that out. On the one hand we have on record an endless problem with road-mending; on the other hand Slovak start-up firms have developed a mobile application which aims to give early warning of subsidence on the road. And so it's no wonder that in the branding campaign **"Slovakia – A Good Idea", the people's innovative quality is the strong side of a relatively unknown country.** There are also inventors, artists or people otherwise gifted with creativity and independence, who come from Slovakia. Foreigners, however, have noticed more of those who prefer to follow a strict procedure – similar to a recipe in a cookery book: if they don't have the recipe, they ask for advice and are glad to follow it to the letter, to be tutored. *I have the feeling that all of them ask a lot, so if some problem arises, they all want advice on how to solve it* (Clemens, Germany). Nonetheless foreigners feel that sometimes people put on blinkers and won't abandon familiar certainties, as in the proverb: "The worm thinks there's no sweeter root than radish".

HOW TO GET RID OF THE BLINKERS?

Forget all the prejudices and the things that you've heard about Slovakia, because they're not true (**Jonas, Germany**).

The only rule is the exceptions and those create new rules.
Richard Rohr

SLOVAKIA: IN_DIFFERENT.
AS TOLD BY FOREIGNERS

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This publication comes across as witty and informal, but definitely it is no dumbed-down "light fiction". The acute writing gradually discloses layers of Slovak behaviour and motivations, uncovering even the darker side of the Slovak nature and forcing our fellow-nationals to take thought. Fortunately the authors, generously assisted by the foreigners, propose methods of tapping the symbolic shell so that we may get to the best that is hidden in every egg.
Mirka Molnár Ľachká

This publication may be taken on two levels. The sensitively conducted observations of foreign women and men living in Slovakia may be extremely helpful to those who have arrived only recently or are still on the way... A second moment is self-identification. The cultural attribute of "Slovakness" is a hot topic in politics and marketing. On what should the country base its identity, its branding; what are the Slovaks like, what would "Slovak-style" be? In this case there is no choice but to step out from one's own shadow. Enormous thanks to all who are making this effort.
Júlia Vrábľová

Regarding the Slovaks, what is usually identified as negative is perceived by some foreigners as positive...
Michaela Mošaťová

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