



# The Adventures of a Czech Exchange Student in the USA

**H**ello, my name is Pavla and I love exploring the world. When I was 17, I begged my parents to let me study in the USA. Why? I do not remember exactly, but one of my theories is that I saw too many American movies with popular teenagers riding a yellow bus to school. I wanted to be one of them. How surprised I was when I finally found out that only kids 10 years old and under use the yellow bus. There were no cool teenagers on board.

## The Exchange Program

If you want to study abroad in the US, you need to contact an agency in your home country that helps you through the process.

I needed to fill in a lot of forms, get references from my teachers and complete a health check from my doctor. I also had to write an essay about myself, my family, my hobbies, and my interests and add some pictures. American host families need enough information to choose the student that fits into their family the best.

As an exchange student you can request a certain area where you would like to stay. My mom summarized it as following: "There are hurricanes and tornadoes in the South, the big cities on the East Coast are crowded with criminals, and there are earthquakes on the West Coast. You will be safe in the Midwest!" Finally, my application traveled to host families

in the states of Ohio, Pennsylvania and Michigan.

## Training in NYC

My crazy dream to study at an American high school was about to come true. For the first time in my life, I boarded a plane and took off towards New York City, where my initial training took place.

The training took four days and it covered an introduction into American culture, dealing with the "culture shock" caused by a foreign language, different food, time changes, weather and American habits. The next part of the training was about the rules of the exchange program such as a ban on driving, drinking alcohol



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the police station. I had been at a party where I wasn't supposed to be. Oops! I was grounded\* for a month.

### Traveling

Thanks to my wonderful host parents, I was able to see lots of beautiful places in the States. I spent Christmas on the sunny beaches of Florida, visited the breathtaking Niagara Falls, snowboarded in the state of New York, shopped in Chicago, and took part in a school trip to Washington, D.C. After I returned home, Dan and Karen visited me twice in the Czech Republic, and I was so happy that they could meet my family and see where I live.

### Language Barrier

English was always my favorite subject and I started attending English classes when I was four years old. I wasn't worried about being able to communicate. Hah! I was not ready for the American accent or the most troublesome thing – slang! I was just smiling and nodding for the first couple of months because I understood every fifth word. It got better after about three months. It was easier at school because the teachers spoke proper English. My host mom, a teacher, also spoke in a way that I could understand, but my host dad didn't make it easy for me. I give him credit for teaching me a lot of useful slang expressions.

### Senior Year

Even though I was supposed to be a junior • back home, in the US I was a senior •! The reason for that is that we attend school for thirteen years in the Czech Republic, while Americans attend for twelve years. I was very lucky because I could graduate and become, as my host dad always says, “the only Czech graduate from V-town” (short for Versailles). One perk\* of being a senior was the chance to go to the prom •. My host mom, Karen, took me shopping and got me a beautiful dress, which I still have. My date\* gave me a corsage • and I felt like one of those cool teenagers in American movies.

### Sports

One very good way to meet new people is to become a member of a sports team. That's how I met my very good friend Cole who once

did my hair (but I had to promise him that I wouldn't tell anyone). Today, he is a very successful hairstylist in Cincinnati, Ohio.

I was a decent runner so I chose cross-country running\*. It was great to get some exercise after a day at school, even though sometimes I cursed myself for getting into it, especially when I had to get up early on Saturday mornings. But being a Tiger (our team mascot) was worth sacrificing my Saturdays.

### Epilogue

My year in the USA was simply unforgettable and significantly influenced my entire future. I would like to thank to my amazing host parents who welcomed me into their home with an open heart and were my guides when I needed it, even after my high school year was finished. I am very grateful that we still keep in touch. The small American town in the middle of nowhere will always have a special place in my heart. Every time I go back to V-town, it feels like going back home.

**Pavla Smotlachová** (CR)

### CULTURE POINTS

**junior** – a student in their second-to-last year of high school

**senior** – a student in their final year of high school

**prom** – a formal dance for older students at the end of the school year

**corsage** – a small group of flowers that a woman wears on her wrist or dress, often worn at a prom



### GLOSSARY\*

**skipping classes** – not going to school or a lesson

**to be grounded** – not allowed to go out, as a punishment

**perk** – advantage

**date** – a person you go out with for a night or to an event

**cross-country running** – running long distances

and skipping classes\*. The best part of the training, at last, was a trip around New York City! Our Czech group looked down on the entire city from the Empire State Building, admired the Statue of Liberty, took pictures at Time Square, and walked through Central Park.

### My Host Family

Next we were ready to meet our host families around the US. My destination was, in my opinion, in the middle of nowhere – a town called Versailles in the state of Ohio, with about 3,000 inhabitants. I was more than concerned when one of the first Google search results for Versailles was about the chickens!

My host parents, Dan and Karen, were waiting for me at the airport. They treated me like their own daughter. My host mom introduced me to her extended family so I got many amazing cousins, aunts and uncles. I enjoyed a Thanksgiving celebration with the entire host family and I felt part of it because everyone was always so openhearted towards me.

Of course, not everything was perfect all the time, but I could rely on them even when I was in trouble. For example, there was the night (or more like early morning) when Karen's phone rang with a request of a police officer to pick up her exchange student at