

# Ahoj from Slovakia

*Photographer Dana Wilson left Calgary in late 2002 to live and work in Prague. The following is a group e-mail she sent to her friends and family.*

Greetings from Slovakia. I know it's been quite some time since I've corresponded with some of you, and I must apologize. But relish the fact that this letter is a form of catharsis. Finally, after four months abroad, I have started down the road that I set out on. I just spent the day with the "poorest of the poor," as my contact calls them, and it felt as though I was in another country. Remote areas of Thailand I've visited do not compare to what I saw and photographed today.

The village I was in today is completely segregated from the neighbouring Slovak village. The people here live in huts made out of sticks and mud. The children are filthy and squat in the streets to use the washroom. As my translator and I arrived, we were swarmed by kids and women with babies wanting their picture taken. I spent three hours in the village, and felt as though I took 50 steps. Four rolls of film, which is nothing considering the environment. But I feel utterly exhausted. Between communicating with the translator, trying to get clear frames (free of children waving frantically in front of my lens), and coordinating my movement with children who had found solace either on my leg or with my spare camera, by the time I got to the other side of the village, I couldn't face performing an interview as I'd planned. Brain dead.

We are now two hours past the experience, and, as I said, you are my emotional release. Later, I will recline in my hostel and fall asleep to my Czech tapes, with BBC television in the background, while the villagers cuddle up with four or five other family members in a one-room hut. I could fill the next 20 minutes with stories from this afternoon, but I will try to brief you on the last three months, because there is much to tell.

I think last time I wrote I had just arrived in Prague and was adjusting. I lived in an area near the city centre for the first month, and spent it mainly socializing with my two flatmates: a Czech art student and an off-the-wall Scotsman. Since then, I've moved in with the head of Greenpeace, who has his daughter on rotating weeks, and I'm living a more conservative, frugal and environmentally friendly lifestyle, with the occasional weekend outing.

In February, on assignment, I was in a major car accident where our Skoda (Czech for "indestructible people's car")

flipped end-over-end, side-over-side and somehow all three of us walked away mildly bruised. Then were the presidential elections, in which former dissident playwright Vaclav Havel, president since the cessation of communism, stepped down. A few weeks later, I photographed Roman Polanski and got to hang on the set of a Hollywood film, watching Hugh Jackman running around with a crossbow shooting vampires. Two weeks ago, we went out for drinks with Irvine Welsh. Last week I spent with Monique, a photographer from Calgary, photographing all the glorious avenues of Prague. And there are many. I still have blisters.

While I've been living in Prague, *The Post* has been great with providing a couple of assignments a week, which have varied in scope from the U.S. ambassador and the presidential elections to restaurants and local beekeeping activities. Recently, I got what looks like a long-term gig at a high-end social magazine, shooting social events—my fave... The latter, however, is what has afforded me the luxury of spending the past four days in remote Eastern Slovakia, and hopefully ten more starting next week. I suppose, in essence, I'm prostituting my craft to save my soul. (My boss met me on the street the day I left, passed me an envelope with cash, and I walked straight to the camera store to buy film.)

Anyway, these are some of the highlights; the lowlights I'll save for home. Either way...I like it over here and am a trifle nervous as to what the future holds. I do, however, expect the next month to carry on along the tangent I've started today. I feel finally as though I'm starting to head down the path I envision for myself, the blurred path between humanitarianism and journalism. I must now find the balance—and a sponsor would be nice also...

I have an interview with the mayor of the small town I am in next Friday, and I must find a neutral translator before I return. Someday I hope to have a writer to take care of this aspect. It's a lot of work doing both properly, not saying that I am. OK, I must go to hotel now. Tired. I hope you all are well. I still think of you all often. And though I may not write as much as I should, I do miss you.

*All my love,  
Dana*



A village in Slovakia. Photos by Dana Wilson.