We were walking in Prague on our first morning in the Czech Republic. The streets were bustling with locals and tourists. The sky was achingly blue, and the air had a cold September snap to it.

We turned a corner and I gasped as if someone had jumped out of a dark alley. I was experiencing sensory overload from the beauty and immensity of the Old Town Square — a complex of connected medieval buildings that elicit awe and delight from over eight million visitors each year.

My partner Kat had a huge smile on her face. She knew this reaction was coming. She had lived in Prague for four months back in the ’90s.

We spent the next four days sans bikes because my bike had not arrived with us (see “Beginning Trip Blues,” February 2020). We visited a couple of the 80 museums in the city and at least 20 of the bazillion cafés, bars, and bakeries (you have to have priorities). We rode the efficient and affordable streetcars and walked until our feet were sore.

We pedaled out of Prague early on a Sunday morning. The traffic was light as we climbed up and out of the city. Within 10 miles we were in full-on lush, rolling farm country.

We pedaled north to Kokořínsko, a landscape protected region north of Prague in Central Bohemia. We overnighted at a local campground. There were a few Czech families there for a day trip, but come sunset we were the only ones there. The route was winding and hilly with massive sandstone formations jutting up through the forest. We couldn’t believe we had the roads to ourselves. It was such a contrast to Prague. But we weren’t complaining.

We wound up northeast to Žďárský Ráj (Bohemian Paradise), which was the first nature reserve in the country. We got a tiny cabin at a massive campground complex. It has to be crazy in peak season, but it was just Kat and me … and 200 Danish students, who all congregated just outside our cabin at night.

We stayed for a couple of days to hike the trails among sandstone towers and a castle or two, taking in the breathtaking vistas and dining on sausages and pilsner.

Riding along the narrow backroads of the Czech Republic, I should have been smiling ear-to-ear, but I wasn’t. What was wrong? The sky was blue, there was little to no traffic, and there were small, quaint villages everywhere.

But my mind was focused on what it wasn’t — it wasn’t epic. There were no enormous passes to cross. No vast plains to conquer. It wasn’t extremely hot or cold. Even the wind was dressed up as a gentle breeze. It was simply beautiful.

I was trapped by my own expectations of what every bike trip should be: an “adventure” (a loaded word I attempted to define in long-ago columns).

So if this wasn’t an adventure, what was it? I’d soon get my answer.
In the city of Žďár, we met Jean and Pam, a couple of New Zealanders who were also cycle touring. Jean was a longtime cyclist who traveled extensively with her husband before he passed away. Pam was a “farmer’s wife” who discovered cycle touring later in life. The two had done several bike trips together. This was their second in the Czech Republic.

The two of them were “a hoot,” as my mother would say.

As we carried our panniers up to our room adjacent to theirs, Jean asked, “You don’t make much noise, do you? The Asian girls last night talked until 2:00 am. I had to bang on the wall.”

We invited them to join us for dinner at a local restaurant. Kat and I feasted on a meat platter, washed down with large mugs of beer. Jean and Pam had soup and bottled water. When we offered to pay the tab, Pam leaned over and quietly said, “We’re loaded, honey. We just travel frugal.”

The next morning, we cycled out of town, headed toward Třebíř. Pam and Jean stuck to the paved roads, while Kat and I chose a combination of roads and dirt tracks.

We met up with Pam and Jean that evening. As we walked the cobbled streets of the Jewish Quarter, we chatted about our rides.

Pam exclaimed, “Well, that was a lovely coddiewomple.”

“What is coddiewomple?” I asked.

“To travel in a purposeful manner towards a vague destination,” she answered with a tone that suggested I should know better.

I loved it. It described our day in one word. It defined our newfound friends perfectly. Which made them … coddiewomers.

It was a lightbulb moment.

Travel is a mindset, and your mind can turn what should be an incredible experience into a disastrous, or frustrating, or (even worse) a boring one.

By focusing on what the trip “should be” (an adventure), I was missing what it could be: a coddiewomple.

That’s what we’d do — that’s what we were already doing — coddiewompling our way through the Czech Republic.

And by manipulating the definition by just two letters, it suited our bike trip perfectly: “To travel in a purposeful manner towards a Prague destination.” If you will pardon my pun, it was a brilliant PR move.
Český Krumlov, population 14,000 receives over 800,000 tourists annually.
So what was our purpose on this coddiwomple? It didn’t matter, as long as we reveled in it. Once you adjust your attitude and downplay your expectations, it’s all good.

So rather than having a plan, a mileage goal, or even a particular destination, we just coddiwompled. We’d wake up in the morning, check the weather and the wind direction, and adjust accordingly.

On one stretch of road, on an exceptionally beautiful day, we laid down our bikes and climbed up into a hunter’s blind, and just gazed out at the rolling farmland.

If a particular town square struck our fancy, we’d order lunch and a beer and linger as long as we liked. Beer was born in this country. Beer isn’t just a beverage, it’s an experience. There are 40 breweries in the Czech Republic. Each beer has its own glassware — from thick, heavy glass mugs with wide handles to tall, curved glasses. The beer was fresh. I never saw a can of beer in a month of travel. Maybe that was one of the reasons that the Czech roads were litter-free. This was not a takeout culture, and we were completely charmed by it.

We made a point to pedal to two specific towns south of Prague. Český Krumlov and Tábor. One is a guidebook favorite, and the other was recommended by the owner of a little breakfast restaurant in Prague.

Český Krumlov’s town center is a UNESCO World Heritage site. If you get anywhere near it, you should go. The settlement beneath a castle, built beginning in 1240, might be the most picturesque town square on earth. The cobblestone streets, the bridges, the churches, and the river that winds through it are right out of a fairy tale. But a fairy tale packed with tourists. So much so that you should leave your bike at whatever accommodation you’ve booked. That’s how crowded the streets are.

It’s like the Grand Canyon: it doesn’t matter how many people you see it with, it’s still worth a look.

We stayed in a funky farmhouse five kilometers outside the city and walked or took the bus in. I don’t need to return. But, wow, I’m glad we went.

Tábor is a town of 35,000. Guidebooks will tell you it is worth, maybe, a lunch stop. We spent three days there. If you want to experience a delightful Czech town, this is it. It has local shops and galleries and restaurants and pubs and a quaint town square with a clock tower you can climb the 200 steps to the top of for a small fee. And, most importantly, it has an award-winning gelato shop. This town won our coddiwomple destination award.

Unlike many of our other trips, we had fewer personal exchanges overall with locals. The frequent use of informants during Communist rule from 1948 to 1989 could explain some of the hesitation to embrace strangers.

Also, it was a colder September than most. Not as many people out in their gardens. And much of the work is in the cities so many of the streets of smaller towns and villages were empty. Locals rarely approached us.

The Czechs might be standoffish, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t helpful and kind.

At the end of one day, we pulled into this tiny town that had a campground listed. Although it was only September 20, the campground was already closed for the season.

We decided to pedal on to a larger town in hopes of finding a small hotel.
After a short but hilly ride, made “hillier” by headwinds, we arrived and discovered there were no hotels, inns, or campgrounds.

Kat approached a portly man in the town square. When she began talking in English, he put up his hands and shook his head. Kat whipped out her phone and brought up Google Translate and spoke, “This will translate for us.” His eyes widened and he smiled. Kat explained our predicament and the app translated it into Czech.

His smile grew wider and he gave us directions on how to get to the campground … that we’d just come from. Kat thanked him. We decided to head back and take our chances in the smaller town.

We pedaled back to the locked-up campground and spied two men out working in a garden. We approached them and asked if we could camp.

“No,” came the reply. There was a campground that might or might not be open about 20 kilometers away.

There was enough room in the garden to pitch a tent so, via some sign...
language. I got my point across. The man paused awhile and then turned and headed toward his house.

My guess was he wanted to ask his wife first before offering. He emerged with a set of keys and motioned for us to follow.

It turned out he was the caretaker of the closed campground.

Without speaking a word, he unlocked the gate. He motioned to a grassy area near some of the camp huts for pitching our tent. He then proceeded to unlock the kitchen facilities and showed us where we could cook and make tea. Then he unlocked the women's restroom and turned on the gas to the water heater. He reached in his pocket and handed us four metal tokens for the showers.

We were delighted and thanked him profusely.

He simply put up his hands in a gesture that communicated, “No thanks were necessary.” Then he walked away.

Aside from the touristy locations (Prague, Říšský Krumlov), we had the backroads to ourselves. In addition to our favorite New Zealanders, we met two other cycling tourists, a German couple from Berlin (except for the one time we intersected the popular bike route that runs from Vienna to Prague, where we encountered over 25 cycle tourists at a lunch stop).

After three weeks on the road, we made our way back to Prague. The bike trail system provided a wondrously stress-free experience as we wound through greenways and parks, and then along the Danube back to the city center.

We spent some more days exploring the city — visiting galleries, wandering the nooks and crannies of neighborhoods, and meeting up with Pam and Jean, who just happened to be flying out of Prague the same day as us.

We had dinner together and then took the tram up to the Prague Castle complex that dates back to the ninth century and soaked in the view of the city one last time ... and had one last beer.

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