
“ESC WHAT! IN SLOVAKIA” BY “ANOOSHA QAISAR”

The European Solidarity Corps is a European Union volunteering programme which creates opportunities for young people to contribute to projects (such as environment, health, inclusion, digital technologies, culture, sports and human rights etc.) that benefit communities and people around Europe. For young people ESC volunteering also promotes Non formal education and Builds interpersonal skills which help them for the betterment of the society.

Life together in a group of 10 volunteers from Portugal, Slovakia and Italy was challenging. I remember how afraid I was at first about living with strangers in a new country. This project pushed me outside my comfort zone at times, which I felt was very good for me. Such experiences as cultural shocks as well as new environments and adapting to them are very much part of international exchanges. I also believe it was living together that helped me get to know the others very well and make lifelong friendships.

The aims of this volunteering project “**ESC WHAT! Waterways Heritage Action Together**”, that was supported by different European Volunteering Capital Candidate¹ and winning cities, is the need for a greater understanding of the importance of water and waterways (canals, rivers, harbors, aqueducts) for European Cultural Heritage. The activities foreseen are those necessary to clean and restore waterways and their surroundings. This can include: clearing unwanted plants and weeds; collecting rubbish; painting and restoration of stone, brick and or wooden structures, preparation of information actions with the local community using non-formal techniques. By restoring the waterways in this way the cultural heritage of Europe is protected and greater awareness raised amongst the volunteers and residents about their importance for our future.

As a part of our regular activities, we visited "Pusty hrad Castle" is an old castle in the city of Zvolen Slovakia which is above the confluence of the Hron and Slatina rivers. We came to know the history of these rivers by our organizer Martina. After that we visited an Archaeological site "Borova Hora" is administered as the scientific department of the Technical University of Zvolen which is situated in the middle part of the basin of the Hron river. At the top of the hill there is a mineral, thermal and mildly radioactive lake that does not freeze in winter. It was a very beautiful day because we met some friendly locals there and we also found a lot of foreign rose flowers, trees and also built greenhouses with succulents and cactuses.

¹ The #EVCapital is an Europe-wide open competition that **aims to promote volunteering at the local level by giving recognition to municipalities** that support and strengthen partnerships with volunteer centres and volunteer-involving organisations, celebrate and promote volunteering and the impact made by volunteers.

<https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/evcapital2024>

Apart from that, we were also trained by the different workshops and presentations on the topic of Land art installation , Water Heritage and Life of refugees in Slovakia. It was a very emotional experience for all of us when we came to know the history of refugees and asylum seekers of Ukraine. We went to the camp to understand their daily lifestyle and interview some local people. It gave us the opportunity to open our minds from different perspectives.

At the end of the project, we visited the municipality of Kosice, which was the European Volunteering Capital in 2019 and we met Adriana Ćurajová (City coordinator of volunteers) to know the importance of Environment and Cultural Heritage in their daily life and we discussed good practices comparing our countries and ideas to improve better actions, we have signed the big diary of the mayor as a remembrance for this international youth cooperation. We had a walking tour of the city with a professional guide. It was a memorable last day of this project with mixed feelings of sadness and happiness.

I chose this project because my goal is to be informed and to inform others in order to solve a lot of social problems, and build a stronger society. I'm down for everything that can make our world a better place and I'm not planning to stop developing myself as a conscious citizen. I believe that by participating in volunteering projects everyone can become a gamechanger for their community because social involvement of young people makes a difference. I believe that my experiences abroad have been useful to me in terms of my studies, future career and personal development.

These two weeks were full of challenges, deep conversations, long evenings, communication problems, self-analyzing and growing as a person. I am grateful to Martina from the Slovakia Organization and Joseph from CEV who helped us in getting this amazing ESC Volunteering experience in Zvolen, Slovakia. Overall, I can highly recommend this volunteering initiative because it is the perfect way to explore another Slovakian culture, challenge yourself and to live and celebrate European diversity.