

Coming In Loud and Queer: Fooling a Polish Pharmacist



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I lived in southern Germany in the year 2000 and traveled around Europe a lot. I benefited from travel ease because I lived in Regensburg, conveniently located pretty close to the center of the continent. On the first weekend we got there, some of the kids on my study abroad group and I went to Prague in the Czech Republic.

Only four hours away by train, we spent a frozen weekend nervously practicing our German skills and getting our first taste of European travel. I ended up back-packing through many countries, making it as far west as Morocco and as far east as Turkey, visiting most of Southern Europe in the meantime.

Lots happened and I have fun stories about trying to camp in a downpour with only a mummy sleeping bag to share between two people, or about language confusion in Italy while I tried to ask an elderly woman in Spanish with Italian inflections where I could find an ATM. It is

who said "Dietrich" like "Deatrix," but, maybe because it didn't come up much, it wasn't ever a cause of major action.

Sex, though, is the basis for one of my most embarrassing moments outside of the country. Now, I have to fess up: it was straight sex. After getting my heart ripped out by that very same travel companion, I dated an American woman I met in Greece who came and stayed with me in Germany for a while. Now, she was a feminist and had short hair, but she wasn't a boy or a dyke.

She and I went to Poland, where I got a crash course in pharmacy etiquette and Polish when we got there and wanted lubricant. This is where the story might as well be gay, and to be honest, I have sometimes recounted it and left out the fact that I was with a woman at the time. Here, though, in the pages of *Out in the Mountains*, I will be truthful about the episode.

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impossible to log that many miles with only one or two people as companions and not have experienced too much to even remember.

My best story probably involved losing all of my belongings on a beach in Italy, but I realized, when Euan told me this issue would be travel-centered, that only very few of my stories from my time abroad are gay. My friend and I went to gay clubs and bars, and even thought we were qualified to author a guidebook for gay vegetarians in Europe, but nothing extraordinarily funny, scary, exciting, or weird happened because we were queers.

Sure, I remember certain gayness from the trip fondly, especially a cute bartender in Barcelona

We arrived early in the morning and went out lube shopping before we could check into the hotel. Pharmacies in Europe present the horrible challenge of being more like the prescription drug counter at an American drug store – everything is behind glass or in a back room and needs to be retrieved by the person working behind the counter.

I went into the first one and knew right away I was in for trouble. I didn't see one thing displayed behind the counter I could point to. I was even too nervous to ask in English at the counter. I had to go back outside and work myself up to move on to the next one.

There the setup was slightly less intimidating and I was the

only customer. I went up and asked, in English, if they had any lube. The woman gave a blank stare. I asked in German, which she understood better than in English, but still didn't know what lubricant was. Before I could think of anything else, she called one of her colleagues out, a man in his twenties who understood English better. I asked him again, but he had no idea what I wanted. He asked me to explain it to him, and although his age and beauty were encouraging, I just couldn't describe the function of lubricant as the middle-aged woman looked at me.

I left the second pharmacy empty-handed again and went back to my lady friend, hoping she didn't see my failure as a reflection on my attractiveness. We walked to a third pharmacy and I, embittered by both the fact that she waited outside in the embarrassment-free Polish air and that I had already tried twice, decided I would not leave without lubricant.

I pulled my old ask-in-English-then-German trick and got the same response. I looked around the store and saw a box with a picture of a woman in a gauzy nightgown sitting on the beach. It was labeled "Intima" and I knew it was my only choice. I said "Intima," hoping that although I had probably just asked for the name of a douche, she would put two and two together and get me the goods.

She smiled and said, yes, then the German word for condoms. No, I said, and gave an exasperated look that evidently translated into: "kind of like condoms – damn it, I was so close, come on, it's what you use with condoms, please!" She brought out a little box of good ol' American KY. Classic straight-people lube.

Elated, I felt as if I'd won the battle, conquered a new country and language on the basis of locating lube. She was about to hand it to me when she paused, cocked one eyebrow, leaned over the counter and said, questioning me: "For a woman?" Her creepy intonation frightened me, and I suddenly realized she knew I was gay. I smiled a little, not understanding how to feel about it. It was for a woman, but assenting to her seemed too much like self-denial. I mumbled thank you and took the lube, pleased that she might think it was for another man. ▼

Joel Nichols is temporarily gracing Brandon with his presence prior to more European travel.

trip I decide I'm feeling survivor's guilt. I read about Lepa [a woman at the peace conference from Belgrade] in *Off Our Backs* [Washington, DC-based monthly feminist news journal] and think what am I doing, really, to alleviate the suffering of women in warring countries? How do I help out my Israeli friend who remains stuck in her tiny, noise-polluted apartment once more caught in an emotionally unsatisfying if not abusive relationship? How do I find Dorit the help

she needs to climb out of her deep depression?

"What do I do in Burlington to raise the consciousness of the Lefties around Middle-East peace without feeding into anti-Semitism? I'm thinking too hard. I just need to take time to cry about all the pain in the world." ▼

Crow Cohen is a lesbian feminist who lives in Burlington.

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many friends and am quite happy. She says she understands. When she separated from her husband she had many more friends. Now that she's back with him, she spends most of her time with just him. She finds that isolating. I eventually end up accepting her offer to sit three in a seat.

"Towards the end of the