PentaHelix Partner's Slow Travel saves 600 kg Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Last month in Riga, Latvia, the PentaHelix consortium had its 4th project partner meeting with all 11 partner organisations from 5 participating countries in attendance. Bert Serneels, Project Manager at IGEMO who is responsible for 6 Belgian PentaHelix municipalities, attended the meeting, held on 11th and 12th December, having travelled for 5 days from Belgium.

Bert, a supporter of 'slow travel' and reducing your carbon footprint wherever possible, crossed the 2000km distance from Brussels to Riga using only public transport. Planning his journey via Google Maps with additional guidance from extensive rail travel blog 'The Man in Seat 61', Bert began his journey to Latvia four days earlier than many of the other PentaHelix partners.

Setting off with a 6.5hr ICE from Brussels to Berlin (via Cologne) on Friday 6th December, Bert spent a night in Berlin before continuing to Warsaw on another train – taking his travel time to a total of 12.5 hours. After spending Sunday sightseeing around the Polish capital, his journey to Riga continued with an overnight Eurolines bus to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, which he visited on Monday before being followed by a final 4-hour bus on Tuesday 10th December to his destination, Riga.

After two busy days spent with the rest of the wonderful PentaHelix project team, Bert spent one additional day in Riga, before taking a more streamlined route back to Belgium on Friday night. His return journey included a 12.5-hour bus to Warsaw with only a brief stopover before hopping on a train to Berlin where he spent Saturday evening, before taking another train back to Brussels on Sunday afternoon, arriving home only 30 minutes later than anticipated.

In his 'slow' travels, between 5 capital cities and across a total of 4000km, Bert spent over 60 hours on public transport and saved an estimated 600kg of CO_2 compared to if he had taken a 2.5hr direct flight to and from his final destination. This amounts to almost ¼ of the estimated annual CO_2 budget per person to limit global warming to 2°c[1].

Explaining his motivation for travelling 'slowly' to Latvia, Bert described how it has become normalised to rely upon heavily polluting planes for international travel:

"We cannot afford to jump on planes for every short meeting around the world and we should be much more conscious of when and how we travel. I'm certainly not against flying as such, only against burning fossil fuel to do so. For the moment, there is no technological alternative, so our only option is flying less and compensating through tools https://www.treecological.be/ in Belgium or https://www.greentripper.org/en."

However slow travel isn't only about the environment; one personal benefit of travelling by land instead of air is the opportunity to experience new places that otherwise would only have been seen from a window at 30,000 feet. All of the cities along Bert's journey are host to UNESCO World Heritage

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[1] "2300 kg CO_2 ANNUAL BUDGET TO LIMIT GLOBAL WARMING TO 2°C" - https://www.greentripper.org/en/

Sites, however had he not taken stopovers in Warsaw and Vilnius, he admitted he would "probably never" have visited otherwise.

On the expense of his trip, Bert recognised that it is not an accessible choice to everyone, but that there are still ways to manage your carbon footprint when it comes to travel: "[…] not everyone has the time and money to make this choice, so carefully choosing which meetings are important enough to make the journey and whether there are no other alternatives is also an important aspect of the consideration. For example, if a European or worldwide carbon tax would make your flight 4 times as expensive, would you still go? If so, it is probably important enough."

And for anyone inspired by Bert's travels, he has some advice: "If you're travelling on public transport, certainly if you're alone, try to speak to local people. They've given me the best tips of places to visit in their cities, such as the Lazienki Park in Warsaw or Three Crosses Hill in Vilnius. If you're a vegan for the climate as I am, use the Happy Cow app and you'll find great vegan food in any major city."