Journeying back and forward

Dearest Alex

Great to hear that you're going interrailing! And you're right: I did it myself back in the day, 1990 to be precise, when I was a student.

Prague was a highlight. I had to send off my passport in advance to get a special visa. At the time it was all very exciting. These days, I'm so grateful to be able to flutter my EU passport and waltz through border control. Of course, if you're in Schengen, you wouldn't even know you've crossed a border except for your phone company pinging you.

No need to tell you that students didn't have mobile phones in 1990. If you wanted to book a bed in a youth hostel, you had to find a payphone, in a street or bar, and pump in coins, different ones for every country, of course.

For my accommodation in Prague, I had the name and address of a lady who took in visitors but no phone number. So I wrote a letter: yes, a physical letter and before you snigger, no I didn't use a swan's feather and my own blood. I know you think I'm quaintly old-fashioned for still using email, but even that was unheard of back then.

Prague, at that time, was in a country called Czechoslovakia. Another ex-country that I visited on my interrail trip was West Germany, just a few weeks before German Reunification. I remember there was a certain apprehension. Some people thought it was happening too quickly, but others felt it was too important to wait.

There were other names now no longer on the map. When I was growing up, a whole swathe of Europe was marked 'USSR'. It was after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, that everything changed. We had to get to grips with the names of countries which, from our vantage point on the western edges of Europe, had been 'hidden' behind the Iron Curtain.

Then there was Yugoslavia, once a considerably sized state in south-east Europe. In the 90s, that momentous decade, it ceased to exist and, in its place, countries emerged with names that our great-grandparents would have known.

Honestly Ally, I'm not even that old, whatever you might think, but the changes in my lifetime have been extraordinary, and largely for the better. It's important we don't lose sight of that. The EU isn't perfect but, given our tumultuous history, we've done pretty well.

Anyway, enough propaganda, as your dad would say.

Have a wonderful trip with many adventures and Ally, my darling, while we can't know exactly what the future has in store for us, let's always remember how far we've come.

All my love,

Auntie M