

The Journey from Brno to the Edge of the World in 64 Hours

Motto:

"...This is a big hustle, sirs. We will see who sustains longer..."
(the Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo)

The transport of fifteen animals intended for the Baku Zoo in Azerbaijan carried out from 5 to 10 December 2007 is the second biggest in the history of the Brno Zoo. The first one, which was the record, was carried out in 2003, when seventeen animals travelled to three thousand kilometres distant Russian Kazan from Brno. The last year's transport was accompanied by Alexandra Burešová and Jiří Vítek. The place of re-loading was the Ukrainian Nikolayev. Both the workers of the Brno Zoo took care of animals to the Nikolayev Zoo Park, where they handed over them to the Ukrainian colleagues in good condition. The animals were transported to the target zoo under the supervision of a zoologist from the Baku Zoo by an Azerbaijan freighter.



Emu catching

Photo by Jiří Vítek



Slept Arctic wolf is carrying

Photo by Lucie Černá

It should have originally implemented the whole transport, but its truck had not obtained permission to transport animals throughout the territory of the European Union. Therefore, the Brno Zoo addressed an alternative freighter, which transferred animals to Nikolayev, where the local breeders promised to help us with re-loading. The Azerbaijan driver had to do with the fact that he would go with an empty truck to the Nikolayev Zoo Park. The journey on the route Brno–Drietoma–Banská Bystrica–Košice–Sobrance–Užhorod–Svaljava–Stryj–Ternopil–Černivci–Chmelnic'kyj–Vinnycja–Uman'–Pervomaj's'k–Mykolajiv, which is nearly two thousand kilometres long, brought many unexpected situations. The diary on the transport kept by the zoologist Vítek starts...

(red)

Saturday, December 1, 23:30, 88 and half hours to departure. The long-expected truck which shall transport more than a dozen of animals to the Zoo Park in Baku arrives at the zoo. I am still sleeping calmly.

Sunday, December 2, 8.00. I meet the driver Fajas for the first time. The Azerbaijan freighter in the service of the Baku Zoo seems to be a man, who knows what to do. As the time will show, our estimate was not accurate. In the morning Fajas is doing something in the cabin of his truck. He claims he is inspecting the truck before the journey. He bought the truck here in the Czech Republic two days ago and isn't familiar with it yet.

Monday, December 3, 56 hours to departure. The situation starts changing. Fajas comes with a wish to go shopping, he needs some small items. Tools, windshield washer fluid, a triangle – as he says – some parts for the journey. When



The Blue wildebeest marking with chip before transport

Photo by Jiří Vítek



The tractor carried boxes with animals to the camion waiting in Zoo Brno

Photo by Jiří Vitek



Box with animals is loading into the camion in Zoo Brno

Photo by Jiří Vitek

we find him at the truck with our driver, we stare in surprise at the disassembled turbo-blower and air bellows under the semi-trailer. Fajas and the driver from our zoo go shopping. After they returned, they continue the work on the truck. In the meantime, the veterinary authority complicates our lives when they do not approve Fajas's truck for transport. A rush for another freighter starts.

Tuesday, December 4, 32 hours to departure. All freighters, when hearing the place of destination is Nikolayev in the Ukraine, refuse. Late in the afternoon, after a day of frantic telephone calls and chaos, we find our "victim". An alternative truck will be in the zoo tomorrow morning.

Wednesday, December 5. I plan to leave with animals and my colleague Alexandra at about 2 p.m. The loading starts at 8 a.m.: two gnus, two Chapman zebras, three Barbary sheep, a couple of Canadian wolves, three Brown emus. Three muntjacs come

from the Chleby Zoo. The crates for muntjacs are absolutely perfect. Like a bank safe. They are handled similarly easily. You cannot properly check what is happening inside and the hole for feeding and water is technically thought-out to "perfection". But the feed is hard to get inside as will be proved by further development. At about half past one everything is on the truck, the customs officer is doing his best, and upon agreement, the truck with animals, water and a bag of feed sets out on the journey. Its driver calls round for a colleague, but otherwise they drive alone, without Saša, Fajas and me. All of us should meet in the Slovakian Sebrance near the border with the Ukraine.

We put our things to the Vito van, Fajas, who has earned a "small bear" nickname, leaves with the empty truck to the Customs Office in Brno-Slatina, where we will call for him later. At 15:45 Saša and me have our last coffee at home, take over a pile of

documents concerning the animals and depart. I call the drivers of the truck with animals – everything is all right, they are in Slovakia. The "small bear" goes behind us. He keeps the speed of about 60 km/h. At first we think, he is getting familiarized with the truck, with the running kilometres we begin to understand that we will not get a higher pace from him so easily. When passing Uherské Hradiště, Fajas's truck suddenly goes to the opposite side. We turn at the first exit and start looking for Fajas. In less than fifteen minutes we see him staying right in the centre of Hradiště. I grant myself an exception and drive in front of his truck at a crossroad fully "according to the regulations". Why he turned, he does not know.

Hours roll on. At three in the morning the crew of the truck with animals is calling. They have been waiting for us since midnight and ask where we are. There are another 40 km in front of us to the place of our meeting.

We meet at the exit from Sebrance, eight kilometres in front of the border. Fajas raises an objection why "our" drivers can sleep and he drives alone without any sleep. Upon agreement with Saša, I announce a pause until 6 a.m. We go and check animals and close ventilation windows. Saša lies down on the rear seat, I wrap up to my sleeping bag at the driver's seat.

Thursday, December 6. Freezing morning, 6 a.m. 550.4 kilometres are behind us. We do not know, what will come in a moment. Everywhere around us there are tens of trucks, which stopped over the night and life in them starts awaking. After checking the animals and a quick coffee from a thermos bottle, we head for the Customs Office. After several hundred metres we encounter a convoy of trucks staying in the direction of the Ukraine. We go along it several kilometres up to the Slovak customs area. Until now everything has been going smoothly. The Slovaks negotiate a fast passage to the Ukraine for us. I go to a Slovak vet. She takes all documents, goes through them for a while and takes out an absolute trump saying: "*I start the second year here, but I have not treated animals yet*", and calls inland. To all appearances, her superior is not pleased with the question. The vet gloomily returns the documents to me, takes one copy of each and puts exit stamps on them. At 6:35 we drive in the Ukrainian customs area.

I was here six years ago for the last time. The system seems to be new. There are more people in uniforms. A round of "hearings" starts in the cabins of the customs zone – the Border Police, customs officers, Traffic Police (GAI) and SMERP – a new and for us a mysterious authority supervising the operation of the Customs Office. Everything has been going smoothly. I should have five stamps on the form, at half past eight I have four. But Murphy's laws act unmistakably. I walk to exchange Euros to Hryvnias, the form and documents for customs officers in hands. Smiles at the window unexpectedly disappeared. The Sergeant Major uncompromisingly sends me to a waiting room as a "Chief" wants to speak to me. An hour of waiting has passed off. The Chief runs around and orders his people: our Vito must leave the customs area,

it has been customs cleared. But he orders to park both the trucks to the area for the retained vehicles. Customs officers take my passport. I try to negotiate, and after years, I slowly get the gist of the situation. Nothing has changed here. Time does not apply; the rules and regulations are set by the Chief.

You must pay for everything. I walk to the car, which in the meantime was driven out behind the line. I find it hidden at the back of stalls with anything, mainly vodka. My colleague is sitting on the seat pretending she is there only by coincidence. We discuss further procedure and I return to the Customs Office. A problem incurs. My passport is at the Chief and I am inland.

I proceed the same way as everybody here. I fill my pockets by "original" Marlboros from Lidl, take several pens, cards and go back. A soldier receives a packet of cigarettes, a pen and I can go. The situation repeats all the morning - discussions with the Chief, telephone calls, some advice from Fajas, the „small bear“, and our drivers. It seems vets do not want to let us go. In the meantime, I come to the car to see how Saša is doing. I do not envy her. With the increasing number of hours, more and more local people urinate near our car. The situation when I go back to the customs zone reminds me of the scene from the Three Veterans, the Czech movie. There a customs officer looked for a packet of cigarettes under a hat and seized it. When I go for the fourth time, I start counting. I am still winning, the amount of stock is good, I insert five Hryvnias between the packets.

The end of a shift is coming and customs officers become stricter. They will let our truck go through, but not Fajas and his truck. We go to check animals, everything is all right. A small problem has arisen with wolves. I was not consistent at the production of crates and I have not checked how individual parts are connected. The female wolf has torn off a rim of a bowl and nails are sticking out from the floor approximately 30 cm from the closure. A half an hour of adrenalin follows, when I attempt to remove nails with pliers. I was lucky. After some time the female wolf is bored with my effort and stops trying to bite me to my hand.



Animals transloading in Mykolayiv

Photo by Jiří Vítěk



View on the camion inside routing to Baku

Photo by Jiří Vítěk



Obstruction on the road to Mykolayiv – livestock drove

Photo by Jiří Vítěk

I have been here for 12 hours and an unambiguous decision is made. Our truck, my colleague and me can go, I have my passport back. Fajas must stay. I try to bargain, I try to bribe. It is clear the journey has no sense without a car to which we will reload animals in Nikolayev. No further truck will come from Baku there. We cannot return to our country. We have all Ukrainian documents settled and the way back is closed.

The new shift quickly explains me what is the matter. Fajas's truck has a carnet for the Czech motor vehicle licence plate and Fajas must pay caution money at the rate of USD 10,000. I try to intervene for his interest at the other Chief. Our truck with animals and Saša with Vito have been already waiting in Uzhorod.

Animals feel well, they are watered and fed. Fajas claims he has no money, and then he starts saying that the money is in the bank in the town. In the meantime, an SMERP office takes my passport. I do not know why. I hitchhike with Fajas to the bank in Uzhorod without my documents. There is no money.

Friday, December 7. Hour after midnight. Fajas miraculously finds the money. There is the only problem – he has not stated it in the customs clearance form. I try one of the customs officers: *"Your colleague has no time and my passport is here on the table."* It works. We go to pay the caution money at the cash desk.

I walk to the car and curl up to my sleeping bag at half past one in the morning. We do not switch the engine off. An independent heating does not communicate with us. We have no strength to go through the manual (it has more than 200 pages). Fajas arrives at three in the morning. After 20 hours everything is settled. Our stock of cigarettes and beer weakened, a telephone bill increased to a dizzy height (I do not want to hear what the auditor will say to it). We stay in Uzhorod until 6 a.m.

Shortly after 6 a.m. we set out as a convoy inland in the direction of Ternopol where we plan a pause for animals. The pause comes after 67 kilometres. A new GAI-point is situated at Svaljava,

a nicely hidden one. And I thought they do not exist any more. I go through the control at the speed of approximately 70 km/h. I only catch a glimpse of the stop and the speed limit.

Our drivers in the truck and Fajas are not as lucky as me. They have to stop and pay 50 Euros. I stop after approximately two kilometres. Saša makes coffee and we are waiting. The first who comes is the Militia. After the training at the Customs Office I am already a hundred per cent native. With the expression of the wolf from "Wait, the rabbit!" on my face, I put a can of beer and cigarettes to the window and say that we are bringing some culture, animals to the zoo. I succeeded.

We slowly approximate to the destination. Our small bear Fajas is in no hurry, we take him between our Vito and the truck. Despite this fact, we lost him on a straight section in front of Chmelnycky. We are looking for him nearly for two hours. His mobile phone is switched off. He comes from the opposite side with the expression which "raises" the driver of our truck from his seat. There is a sharp discussion among the three drivers for several minutes.

During the day we stop every four hours for twenty minutes and in the evening we are at Vinnycja. The dark is falling and the good road changes into a muddy regional path. The luck in navigation has left at these places with a colourful history from the era of the WWII (there were the German field headquarters near here, where Hitler survived assassination in 1944). Saša often consults a huge map (I do not know who produces these maps, but they cannot be used in a car due to their dimensions of 120 x 90). We are driving along the way which does not remind us even of any forest mining path in our country. We got a great idea to ask the way. When the first car appears, I get off and try to stop it. It almost swept me off the road. Well, they might not like tourists – hitchhikers here at night.

Saturday, December 8. At about midnight we come to our destination, Uman'. We have a short sleep at the petrol station, after checking animals

and three hours of sleep we set out. Well, only our part of the convoy. We did not succeed in waking up the small bear Fajas. I give him an instruction behind the windscreen wiper. We will meet in Nikolayev.

At 6:30 another problem at a GAI point, this time we are stopped. The truck with animals has gone through without a loss. The problem is solved by obligatory beer and cigarettes and the situation changes to a friendly discussion. It is 183 km to Nikolayev. After an absolutely daring passage through the town, we are arriving at the Zoo Park at half past nine. From the time when we left Brno, we have gone 1,840.1 km and 64 hours and 30 minutes passed.

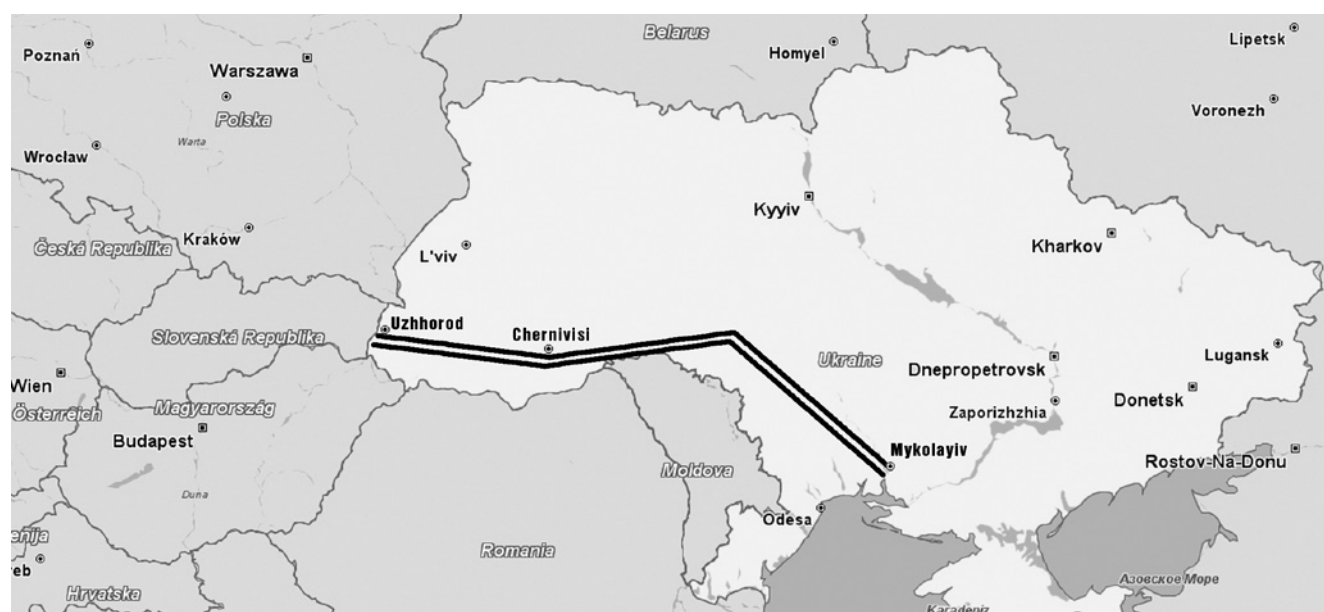
Fajas arrives at noon, the re-loading starts at two in the afternoon. With the exception of one muntjac, all animals are handed over in good condition. In the evening I go to the Customs Office in the port, in the meantime, Saša is settling in our company apartment. We both have a shower. We drink a hundred grams of vodka for the transport with the colleague from Baku, who came to accept animals.

Sunday, December 9. The festive morning welcomes us a tour of the zoo, our truck has set out on the journey back to the Czech Republic at night. Fajas with the zoologist from Baku leave before ten. We set out home through Odessa.

The journey back was without problems. The Slovaks are on strike at the border in Uzhorod, a part of distant marking is missing behind Košice. We come to the right direction, but along a regional road across the mountains. They are connecting a highway near Žilina and we do not have a map of Slovakia – our transport officer said we would not need it. We cannot get lost in Slovakia...

Monday, December 10. The transport officer was right. We find ourselves near Bojnice in the afternoon. We arrive in Brno little bit after half past five in the evening.

Jiří Vitek
Operating zoologist



Transport map of the Ukraine region