

*Neil MacFarquhar*

LONDON — When President Toomas H. Ilves of Estonia arrived in Turkey last week, he had prepared for a state visit — one state visit. What he got, courtesy of an erupting volcano in Iceland, was more like a presidential road trip — nine countries in four days — evoking the sedate diplomacy of a bygone era.

Mr. Ilves left Istanbul on Sunday. On Monday he ate an impromptu dinner with President Boris Tadic of Serbia. In Poland, he stopped to lay a wreath on the fresh tomb of President Lech Kaczynski. In between, he and the Estonian first lady got their coffee and gas at convenience stores.

"I am not Odysseus returning to Penelope after 20 years; it has only been four days, so it is O.K.," said Mr. Ilves, speaking by cellphone as he approached Estonia just in time to host a dinner for visiting dignitaries.

Airports rumbled back to life across Europe on Wednesday. But after volcanic ash shut down air travel across the continent for a week, passengers still faced uncertain prospects for boarding flights. Uncounted thousands of others, having opted for land or sea journeys, were telling of epic adventures that involved, among many weary details, big out-of-pocket expenditures and a shortage of clean socks.

Prof. Eric Sandweiss of Indiana University, who is spending the year in London to research urban history, took his wife and twin 14-year-old sons on an Easter trip to northern Italy. After Ryanair canceled their flight home from Pisa on Saturday, the earliest train reservations they could get were on Tuesday.

The cost of meals, an apartment rental and scarce tickets on a series of trains reached \$1,600,

far more than the expected refund from the airline.

"I did not know I was going to plunk down the family inheritance on travel," Professor Sandweiss said Wednesday on arriving at St. Pancras station in London. Ms. Sandweiss was more philosophical, especially about a world where nature can still prove paramount. "We are its passengers rather than its masters," she said.

Nobody seemed to be the master of much in Europe. Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, embarked on an odyssey that took almost as long as her Estonian counterpart's, only it started in San Francisco. After airplane stops in North Dakota, Portugal and Rome, Mrs. Merkel rode in a bulletproof limousine from Italy to Germany.

Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the commander of United States and NATO forces in Afghanistan, took a 17-hour bus trip from Paris to Berlin so he could brief German officials on Wednesday.

In Moscow, huge lines at Belorussky station brought back memories of the former Soviet Union. Shortages empowered bureaucrats and created a vibrant black market in transportation tickets, some of dubious authenticity, travelers there said.

But a young woman appeared with an offer too good to refuse, recalled Sergei Dreznin, a composer trying to make his way to Germany. The woman had a bus at her disposal and could take 50 people with her to Copenhagen via Berlin at a steep discount to the black market price. She needed the passengers to offset the cost of taking the bus to her wedding, Mr. Dreznin said.

It seemed like a minor miracle, not least because the woman also found two drivers with the visas needed to cross much of Eastern Europe. But after the bus began crossing Russia's vast expanse, the woman realized she had left the papers she needed for her marriage certificate behind at the train station. She and her fellow passengers had to turn back. When they finally got under way again, it took 30 hours to reach Berlin, their first stop.

"I think Europe weirdly needs this kind of occasion to be reminded that life is tougher," Mr.

Dreznin said.

That lesson appeared to have been widely absorbed, and not just by Europeans.

A manufacturing and sales team from 3M in Minneapolis split on how to get home from central England. "We are on Plan E right now," said Frank Klink, a laboratory manager for the company. "We were thinking Plan F or G might actually involve a ship."

Brent West, the American general manager of a company that makes parts for the gas industry, had packed only a shirt, underwear and a pair of socks for what he thought would be a lightning-quick one-day trip from his headquarters in England to Finland.

After eight trains, three ferries and a car ride over three days, he has a new appreciation for the interlocked pieces of his world. "It makes you wonder whether you need to look more closely at things like your food sources," he said.

The first couple of Estonia had a smoother ride, albeit not a short one. Mr. Ilves and his 14-member delegation rented a bus to take them home from Turkey. But the security protocols in some countries meant he and his wife had to ride in a separate car much of the time. In each country he passed through he assessed the condition of the roads and of Internet access, and noted that some were markedly better than others. Mr. Ilves was too diplomatic to name names.

To pass the time, he read a book about Estonian literary history, or a collection of essays he also carried written by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin. His wife, Evelin, read, too. At times when he had Internet access, he downloaded newspaper articles to read. He called his office a lot.

"It was all very civilized," Mr. Ilves noted. He was keenly aware of the change of seasons, moving from the blooming spring of southern Europe to Estonia, where it got colder and less lush.

A friend who called to commiserate reminded him that his fate was rather better than that of King Charles XII of Sweden, who, after years of imprisonment after a battle against the Russians in the early 1700s, needed six and a half days to ride the 870 miles back home. They cut his boots off when he finally reached Sweden.

"Presumably they won't have to do that for me," Mr. Ilves said.

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