

Patience and Research

I was proud of myself. I had done my research. I searched the Ukrainian train system at www.poezda.net, found the train I wanted, switched the website to Russian so I could get the information in Cyrillic and had written down the train I needed. I had waited in the line to buy a train ticket for about 20 minutes. I was now ready to hand the piece of paper that had my train itinerary in Cyrillic to a stone-faced woman who was going to issue a train ticket from Odessa to Kiev, Ukraine. She took the paper, clearly annoyed I had forced her to put on her reading glasses, and then drearily said “Nyet.”

“What?!”

A louder and more agitated “Nyet” followed accompanied with a hand motion for the next person in line to proceed. A sharp elbow by the woman standing next to me and I was out of the line. It seemed as my research and patience was all for naught. Maybe I was in the international queue and needed to be in the line for the domestic lines. However, neither of the other two ticketing offices was of any help.

I sat in the open area of the large ticketing office, contemplating my next move. Maybe a bus, but fourteen hours on a bus? I’d rather take a train, an overnight train, so I could stretch out and sleep if possible. Then, I heard a young woman speaking German to an older woman and I knew my German was better than my Russian. I asked the younger woman for help and she told me her mother was East German and knew Russian. Even with the help of mother and daughter it was a struggle to get a train ticket. It was not an overnight train, only day trains were available, but at least some of my research and patience had paid off. In order to enjoy Ukraine, one must be patient and do some research. In the still prevalent old communist way of thinking, you’ve decided to come to the Ukraine and if you don’t like how we do it here, leave.

I had researched Odessa and from all accounts it was a dodgy and decadent port city. Unfortunately, the Odessa port is a central area of the female sex slave trade. Most of the sleazy, big clubs are located in an area a few miles from the city center called Arkadia. The two most popular are Ibiza, a nod to the Spanish party island that shares its name and Itaka, based on ancient Greece. The clubs charge ten to fifteen dollars for a cover charge, which is cheap for Western Europeans, but expensive for locals. Attractive, young girls wear short skirts and high heels and smoke cigarettes from extended holders, much like high society 1920’s America. They eat fruit and drink champagne at special VIP areas reserved by mostly middle aged Western men. The clubs stay open up all night. Indeed, the receptionist at my hostel looked surprised when I returned at four in the morning and asked why I came back so early.





The clubs are a place to be seen but so is the city center. Many locals were taking pictures of themselves next to nearly every statue along Prymorsky Bulvar, to prove they were in the big city of Odessa. The city center was surprisingly pleasant and contains a Town Hall, Vorontsov Palace and Potemkin Steps, which are the 192 steps that lead to the port. Other attractions include the Opera and Ballet Theater and

the Pushkin Museum. There are beaches in the sleazy area of Arkadia and also at Lanzheron Beach, near the center, which is more family oriented but most beachgoers still were scantily clad swimming wear.

Taking the train I entered Kiev, a city beloved by many of its residents and with good reason. The Caves Monastery contains several places to visit in its nicely kept complex, but most important are two sets of underground caves. Most women cover their head when entering and many people buy thin yellow candles that are dedicated to the monks that are buried in the caves and they also double as illumination.

The Museum of the Great Patriotic War and accompanying Defense of the Motherland Monument are near the caves. The museum is extensive and deals with the Soviet Era especially World War II. Although the captions are in Cyrillic, one can get a sense of the museum through the letters and pictures that are displayed. The museum has abundant classical Soviet statues and music.

Another attraction is the Independence Square where the 2004 Orange Revolution occurred. This removed the Russian supported candidate Viktor Yanukovich, with Viktor Yushchenko who may have been poisoned by the Russians. There are several places to visit around the square one being Blindazh, a military themed bar. There are old Communist posters, mesh, gasmasks and the menus are located within the old style Soviet style briefcases. The owner, wearing a t-shirt, boxers and slippers, sat at the table next to us. He looked and acted like a mob boss.



The Chernobyl Museum illustrates the tragic events of the 1986 nuclear disaster. The reactor was a high speed, high power, low safety reactor meant to supply energy not only to Eastern Europe but also Western Europe. After the accident, many soldiers had the option of spending two minutes at Chernobyl to help construct a hastily built concrete sarcophagus or two years fighting in the Soviet-Afghan War. Many thought Chernobyl was a better deal, many of them developed cancer. The meltdown in Chernobyl released 500 times more radiation than the bomb dropped in Hiroshima, and there will be no building in the area for 500 years. The last reactor at Chernobyl was not shut down until 2000 and was controversial because Ukraine needed the energy the reactor supplied. Many of the cows and thus their meat in the area are contaminated due to radiation but because of the need for food it is not destroyed. Instead the meat is dispersed throughout the country so that one area doesn't get too much of the contaminated meat. Ukraine and France are working on a new sarcophagus as the old one may collapse.

One can see the aftereffects of the disaster while visiting the museum. One room



has an apple tree budding which has become the symbol of the continuing recovery process. There is an exhibit that illustrates the financial and moral support other countries gave, especially their Cold War enemy, America. Included is a letter from a nine year old American girl in which she writes, "I want to give blood to help Chernobyl victims". The last room contained powerful artwork that incorporated death with the yellow and black triangular radiation symbol. One poster has the radiation sign stuck to a white dove and pulling the bird down. Another is of an animal's skull with yellow and black streaming out of every orifice, and labeled, "Radiation- world's most dangerous animal". Another is a picture of a baby, whose nook has the radiation symbol, indicating that the radiation will be passed on through the next generation.

Nearby, there is a synagogue that housed Hasidic scholars. The Bulgakov House-Museum gives a good look at life in Kiev during the late 1800s and early 1900s. There are three churches of note in the area as well, St. Andrew's, St. Michael's and St. Sophia's. All are worth a visit due to attractive interiors and the soft colors of their exterior.

I traveled in Kiev with a Jewish man, Antonine, who had lived in Ukraine until age six. His mother had a brain tumor due to Chernobyl, but a wealthy American Jewish family sponsored Antonine and his mother. He remembers his mother telling him to pack one bag of his most important belongings because they would not be coming back. He

packed ten small model racing cars, but the Czech border guard took eight for his child. Antonine still has the blue and red models and displays them in his apartment in New York. He talked about his memories. School teachers were strict and he was learning algebra early in grade school. He talked about his home and growing up. We visited a statue of a Viking ship (Scandinavians were the early leaders in Kiev) where Antonine and his family took one last picture before leaving Ukraine.

In the western part of Ukraine is the pleasant city of Lviv, which is a nice place to stroll along numerous historical buildings. There are several old churches from a variety of denominations, including Roman Catholic, Armenian, Dominican and Benedictine. There are some of the normal museums related to the nation's history, military and ethnography.

Traveling in Ukraine can be a struggle. There is a language barrier for those who don't know Russian and customer service can be atrocious. However, Odessa, Kiev and Lviv all have their charm. Odessa is dodgy in places but has a fine city center. Kiev is one of the most attractive European cities. Recently, tourists have discovered the relaxing city of Lviv. With patience and research, one can enjoy Ukraine.