

Travels across the Ukraine and Moldova

Entering the Borderlands

June 21st, 2008

Our first taste of the Ukraine was in the airport bar chatting for a couple of hours over vodka and beer. It has that decidedly eastern European feel, the buildings are dingy and long past their prime, the women are very carefully dressed in almost comical glam (very short satin dresses with matching high heels or tight jeans with embroidered sequins and a mid-riff top complete with glitter), while the men were dressed with complete disregard in old mismatched clothes. John was on a different flight to us, but managed to find us while we were having lunch with an polyglot American who was working in the Ukraine training NGOs. It was really good to see John again.

We had quite a few hours between landing in Kiev and flying out to Lviv, so we walked into the outdoor area of the airport bar and found space at a table where an old guy was eating cheese and bread and drinking vodka. We were able to have a fairly complete (if repetitive) conversation with him, although it did require John translating from French a few times. He was a 51 year old Armenian living in the Ukraine since '88 (he said the Ukraine was a good country, not like Armenia, which was "lost") and who did six month stints working in Algiers as a French-Russian translator (making him fluent in five languages). He son was 32 and a private contractor for the construction business, and had a long-term girlfriend but wasn't married. He hastened to add, though, that his son's girlfriend was a good woman worth marrying, and started to bemoan the "liberty" and "openness" that made it easy to find women for a good time in the Ukraine but hard to find a "good woman for a wife, who will stay at home". He insisted we all drink vodka with him (we protested that it was too early, but he said in the Ukraine vodka was for breakfast, lunch and dinner, unlike terrible Algiers where there was no vodka at all, and the women were pretty but dressed head to toe so you couldn't see their faces) and we finally all had a couple of drinks, except Lydia. He was very enamored with Lydia, and kept on telling her that she was a good woman and a beautiful woman, and tried really hard to buy her something. It was an interesting introduction to the Ukraine, but I think Lydia felt a bit of relief when we finally had to leave to enter the secure area.

Our flight to Lviv is now just about to leave. We waited long enough at the bar that a storm has had time to roll in. The wind outside has picked up and lightning is coming down. Our tiny plane almost looks like a converted military aircraft, and has the feel of an old piece of machinery faithfully serving long past its due-date thanks to the aid of gaffa tape. We are left with the comforting words of the Director general of AeroSvit ("The Ukrainian Airline") - "If you have a printed AeroSvit ticket, save it. Soon you might be the owner of a rare item."

The most European city in the Ukraine

June 22nd, 2008

We got into Lviv last night and rewarded ourselves with a shower and a short nap. We then walked across town to John's hotel to meet him for dinner. The city has a very European feel to it (except for the large soviet-style residential blocks on the outskirts of the city, that we saw as we flew in). It actually looks like an older and shabbier version of the Warsaw town centre, but that was recreated after being destroyed in WWII, while this is the real deal. The streets and cobblestone, the buildings in the town centre are all 3-4 stories high, creating a wall along the sides of the wide boulevards. There are many pedestrian streets and squares, with sculptures and small parks, and the town was full of people eating and drinking at the many cafes and beer gardens. We had pizza

at one cafe (where you picked your toppings on a touch screen) and then wandered around some more before finding a beer garden to have a drink at. Some guy from Chicago came up to us and started chatting, he had just got married and was at his wedding reception and really wanted to have a native English speaker to talk to (he spoke Ukrainian, so he could talk to all his wife's family, but it was a struggle). Lydia and I spoke briefly to the bridesmaid, but then we went back to our hotel for a good rest while John went in to watch Ukrainian wedding drinking games.

We spent today walking around Lviv, which is really a beautiful city with a vibrant outdoors cafe culture. Lviv is the cultural capital of western Ukraine. It was founded in 1256 by the Tuthenian King Danylo in honour of his son (Lev, which also means "lion", and there are 3000 statues of lions in the city to celebrate it). In 1349 it was invaded by Poland and became Lwów (and a series of forts was built to protect against the Turks). It flourished until a series of sieges in the late 1600s, finally being pillaged in 1704 by Charles XII of Sweden. In 1772 Poland was partitioned, and the city became Lemberg, the capital of the Austrian Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria (when all the Polish forts were destroyed). It remained part of the Austrian empire (with increasing Germanic cultural influence) until the demise of the Austro-Hungarian government after the first world war, in 1918. While Ukrainians were the majority in the surrounding country-side, the long cultural domination of Poles and Austrians made them the minority in the city, with the Polish population largest, creating resistance against the newly proclaimed Western Ukrainian People's Republic, which succeeded in bringing the region back under Polish control. It was only after conquest of Poland by Nazi Germany in 1939 and the subsequent handover to the USSR under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that Lviv (renamed Lvov by the Russians) and western Ukraine were united with eastern Ukraine for the first time. The wars and purges eliminated much of the Jewish and Polish populations of Lviv and the western Ukraine, and the shorter time of Russian occupation gave fewer Russian immigrants, making Lviv the cultural centre of a rising sense of Ukrainian identity, with an ethnically homogenous people living in an architecturally and historically diverse city. The city was renamed Lviv in 1991 with Ukrainian independence, but we heard Lviv and Lvov (pronounced luh-viv and luh-vov) interchangeably.

We met John after breakfast on Prospekt Svobody, the main road running on the outskirts of the old town (much of which is pedestrian only, even though the streets are much broader than typical medieval towns), with a nice long park running down the middle of the road, full of statues (such as the Shevshenko Monument). Lydia played with a pig called Mulja, that some lady was taking for a walk, and called the pigeons frumpy. We started our Lviv walk in ploshcha Rynok, the large market square dating back to the 14th century old town design (the town hall, built at the same time, was rebuilt in 1851). The square looks very European, with beautiful buildings, a tramline running through it and throngs of people sitting in cafes and standing around talking to each other. We then walked to the Roman Catholic Cathedral, which was built between 1370 and 1480 in a combination of Renaissance, Gothic and Baroque style (but was underwhelming, having more recently got a fresh layer of plaster over the whole building, thereby looking rather modern). More interesting was the Boyim chapel just behind it, which was built in 1671 as the burial chapel of Yuir Boyim, a wealthy Hungarian merchant and three generations of his family. It is meant to be "the best example of mannerism style in central east Europe". From the outside the building looks rather short and shabby, but from the inside it is designed to look deceptively soaring, with a high dome roof above the small and cramped roof. There is a fresco of the last supper painted which has Judas portrayed as the devil, resulting in the archbishop Soikosvsky refusing to consecrate the building. There is also a disguised door hiding a secret passage from the chapel to their house.

We then visited the pharmacy museum, which was out the back of a working pharmacy called "Under the Black Eagle" which had been open since 1735. John was very interested in their condom selection, which included typical names such as "Romantic Love", "Lust" and so forth, along with the more disturbing "Forced". The building itself was built in 1613. The museum was surprisingly large, with a pill room with various old "medicines" (opium, arsenic, etc) and pill making machines, a herb room (including mandrake root), an odd set of stairs that wound around an inner courtyard (shared with a couple of families that lived in the same building) and up to the alchemy laboratory, complete with stuffed crocodiles, owls, blowfish, a human skull, and various glass equipment. Then down into the dungeons for the medieval laboratory and wine storage.

We then visited a number of different churches, the Armenian Cathedral, founded in 1363, the late 17th century Transfiguration Church, the impressive Dominican Church and Monastery with a small square out the back which had a second hand book fair (we bought a Ukrainian phrase book and a Soviet "learn to speak English" book with amusing chapters on American history) and a statue for the first man to bring the printing press to the Ukraine (after he was driven out of Russia by the Church). We saw the Royal Arsenal, built in 1639 to hold weaponry for war against the Turks (it now has city archives) along with remnants of the city walls and the Gunpowder Tower. We saw the Assumption Church and the Three Saints chapel (built between 1591 and 1629) with the 65m tall Kornyskt Bell Tower (built 1578 to 1591). We walked past the Bernadine Church and Monastery (built in the 17th century) and then had Japanese for lunch in a very trendy cafe on Prospekt Svobody.

After lunch we walked to Lychakiv Cemetery, an interesting walk past the main university. The cemetery is beautiful and overgrown, full of elaborate crypts, tombs and statues. We see the grave of Ivan Franko (1857-1916), who is considered a Ukrainian nationalist and freedom fighter for his subversive writings, which was topped by a large statue of a stone mason in action. We also found a graveyard for the veterans of a war fought in the 1860s (it took us a long time to work that out, as the graves were all in unison, but the dates of death varied greatly), but we couldn't think of what war Lviv would have been involved in at that time (added note - we were told later it was a Polish uprising against the Russians). The cemetery is not the original Lviv cemetery, that used to be in the centre of town, right next to the main drinking water wells, until the Austrians took over and moved it out of town for purposes of hygiene.

In the evening, Lydia had a nap while John and I drank a few beers in the beautiful weather outside. I read a few interesting chapters from the history book while John wrote in his diary. I'm not sure if it was written as a joke or by someone who knew a few names and phrases but had no comprehension of American history. The first three quarters of the book is normal, with background on Russian and eastern European history, but the last section was comical, talking about Coulombs finding America as he fled from religious persecution. The section on the Ku Klux Klan was a good example "a group of Southerners who had nothing to wear but sheets with holes in them and always looked as if they had just come from a Halloween party. It was these Klux who introduced phonetic spelling and gave us such words as Kleenex, Krispies and Krazy Kat".

In the evening we met our group and then went out for dinner at a Medieval theme restaurant. Theme restaurants are the main stay in the Ukraine (I guess people stay at home if they just want Ukrainian food in a normal place). I ordered a potato and mushroom dish which ended up just being fries and lots of beer. John and I then talked into the early hours of the morning while Lydia went to sleep, only to be woken up at 2am by a tipsy Adrian.

Struck by lightning in Lviv

June 23rd, 2008

We are currently stuck inside a cafe, dripping wet, near Castle Point lookout, after we were caught in a sudden and fierce lightning storm.

This morning we had our official tour of the city. We pretty much went to the same places we explored by ourselves yesterday, but (according to John and Lydia) more charming and thoughtful commentary :(One of the interesting things our guide told us about were some of the differences between Ukrainian orthodox and Ukrainian Catholic churches. At the altar the catholic churches have statues, but the orthodox churches have icons, because they don't believe it is possible to represent god in three dimensions. They also portray Jesus differently on the cross, Catholics having a single nail going through both feet and orthodox having one nail per foot.

We went back to ploshcha Rynok, the central town square, and were told that it was called Rynok ("ring") because of the ring of merchant houses that surrounded the square - 44 buildings in all, each with the same height and most with three windows on the ground floor (the lord wanted each merchant to have equal opportunity to display wares, and so heavily taxed houses with more than three ground floor windows - large houses have multiple windows, but only three on the ground floor). At each corner of the square is a statue of a Greek God - Adonis, Neptune, Diana and Amphitrite. The trident of Neptune is a symbol of Ukrainian nationalism, so when the Soviets were trying to suppress nationalism they removed Neptune's trident, the original stone trident is now gone, but has been replaced by a new cast iron one.

We revisited the Pharmacy museum, where we got to hear the very opinionated medical views of our guide ("doctors are going back to herbs because chemicals are bad for the body" and "the only way to give medicine to children is through a suppository, my daughter always complains 'but I don't want to have a rocket up the arse!'" and "doctors must have the eye of a falcon, the hands of a virgin, the heart of a lion and the mind of a serpent"). Following the Pharmacy museum we went to the Armenian street where we had very good drinking chocolate, which each came with a fortune. Lydia's fortune was "you are the moonlight glinting off the dew on a chrysanthemum" while mine was "you are borrowing the memories of old people because your mind will not hold your own memories".

We then walked to the old Jewish quarter (30% of the city was Jewish before the holocaust, with over 30 synagogues, now there are very few Jews and only two synagogues left) and to the remains of the old fortifications. Our guide told us the story that when the Tatars were invading the guardsman wanted to get everyone back into the city walls without causing a stampede and a panic, so instead of calling the alarm he moved the hands on the clock tower to 5:55 (the city gates closed at 6) so everyone rushed back to the city and they closed the gates.

After our tour we visited the spectacular Opera House at the end of Prospekt Svobody, and attempted to have lunch (a successful attempt for John and Lydia, but a dismal failure for me as all the "vegetarian" dishes I got ended up having pork in them). We then walked up here to Castle Hill, the site of some ruins of the old Polish fortresses on the ring of hills after Lviv. Not long ago it started to rain, just a light patter after a morning of nice blue skies, with lightning far off in the distance, but once we hit the top it started to pour down and the lightning and storm was just above us. We made it to the cafe at the base, dripping wet, which is better than the man and boy who just straggled in after being forced to weather out the brunt of the storm on the top after paths were blocked by fallen trees.

After note: the storm was actually pretty extreme. It passed within the hour giving beautiful blue skies again, but walking back along Prosekt Svobody there were broken branches and powerlines everywhere, with entire large trees uprooted and thrown around. John and I went out in search of dinner while Lydia napped, and the entire city was shut down by the damage and blackouts. After an hour we found a fresh produce market where we were able to get a loaf of bread, some cheese and a couple of bananas, which ended up being the nicest meal I've had here so far.

Additional after note: the storm was actually a hurricane, and killed five and injured twenty that day in Lviv.

Ukraine is not dead yet **June 24th, 2008**

Today we left Lviv for Ternopol. Jason, our tour leader (who looks like a beach surfer, really at odds with his strong English accent, and seems oddly nervous about the tour), gave us a bit of a run-down on the history of the Ukraine, so it seems a reasonable time for me to do the same. The Ukraine does not really have a history as a single entity. The eastern part of the country has been historically settled and influenced by Russians, while the western part of the country has been aligned with Poland. Stalin, himself Ukrainian, systematically tried to destroy the Ukraine as a nation, enforcing the Great Famine and deporting millions to Siberia for collaborating with the Germans during Nazi occupation. The gain of independence on the 24th of August 1991 was the first time that the country had existed unified and independent. After a long struggle for a sense of Ukrainian history and culture (with a struggle to identify a history independent of Russia, making the Nordic medieval Rus and the cossacks the closest they have to an embryonic Ukrainian state. Even the language was long condemned as a Polish corrupted dialect of Russian), even the ardent nationalists were surprised by the advent of independence. The struggle for a unifying identity is probably best reflected in the national anthem, where the first line is literally translated "Ukraine is not dead yet".

Ukraine's glory has not perished, nor her freedom
Upon us, fellow compatriots, fate shall smile once more.
Our enemies will vanish, like dew in the morning sun,
And we too shall rule, brothers, in a free land of our own.

We'll lay down our souls and bodies to attain our freedom,
And we'll show that we, brothers, are of the Cossack nation.

Our drive to Ternopol gave us a chance to see the country-side of this very rural nation. It is fertile and green, the black soil being the richest of the world, justifying the status of the Ukraine as the breadbasket of eastern Europe. It was interesting at our petrol station stop on the way, Wriggly's chewing gum seems to be used as an unofficial currency of small change, with a packet being kept in the cash register.

Ternopol was founded in 1540 by Jan Amor Tarnowski as a Polish stronghold. There are two theories on the naming of the city, one is that it is named after the founder, the other is that it is a variation of "field of thorns". To aid in the growth of the city Jan Tarnowski was given a grant by the king to make the city tax free and duty free for fifteen years, and allowed them to hold three fairs every year. Its early history involved being destroyed over and over - in 1575 by the Tatars, between 1648-1654 during the Chmielnicki Rebellion, in 1675 by the Turks and Tatars, in 1694 by

the Tatars, twice in 1710 by the Russians, in 1733 by the Russians, three times between 1768 and 1772 by the Russians and Poles. The city became largely safe under the Austrians until it was burnt down during World War I. On the Eve of WWII it was a city that was 50% Polish, 40% Jewish and 10% Ukrainian, but the Jewish population was devastated by the Nazis and the Polish were expelled by the Russians.

Like Lviv, Ternopol has a vibrant outdoors and cafe culture. We walked around the city centre and had lunch at Europe, then got taken on a tour by a soft-spoken girl wearing stilettos. We walked through the main Freedom Square, connecting the city centre with the artificial lake (which is nice, with people boating on it and lots of kids play equipment), with a large statue of a Galacian King of Rus. We saw the Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Last Virgin Mary, which was built by Dominican monks between 1749 and 1779 in late Baroque style, and is painted with soft pastel styles. It is very popular for couples getting married (until recently couples legally had to wear Ukrainian dress during their weddings, but they ignored the verdict and the law was eventually changed). We then visited the older Church of the Nativity (Ukrainian orthodox), built 1602-1608. The church has thick walls, 2-3m, so it wasn't destroyed in WWII, except for the dome which was rebuilt in the 1950s. The decoration was heavy in the dark somber gold variety. We saw Theatre Square, with the magnificent Taras Schevencko theatre, and another park built in 1937 with a statue of Pushkin. We crossed the train tracks to walk to the soviet veterans park, the Park of Glory, built in 1980, complete with a statue to the Motherland and an extinct eternal flame. Either the girls in Ternopol have a more stylish style of dressing (still very sexy, but less eye clashing), or after a few days in the Ukraine my eye is starting to adapt to the silk, satin, velvet and spandex.

In the evening we walked along the shores of the lake and then up to Starimiln for dinner, which was magnificent.

Studying in Chernivsti June 25th, 2008

We spent today exploring Chernivsti. The province of Chernivsti was settled by the Grand Prince Yaroslav Osmomysl in the twelfth century. It was populated by an influx of inhabitants from the fortress of Chern "Black Walls", which was destroyed in 1259 by the Mongol invasion. For the city of Chernivsti itself, it is at least 600 years old, it is celebrating its 600th birthday on the 5th of October this year, based on the first documented mention of Chernivsti in a letter written by the Moldovan Prince Alexander the Good in 1408.

Chernivsti province is the smallest of the Ukraine's 24 provinces and has a unique history and geography. It is heavily covered by beech forest, with 30% of all the beech forest in Europe. It is 8000km² with a population of one million (of which a quarter live in Chernivsti). For 250 years it existed under Moldovan or Turkish control, until it was ceded to the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1774 under a negotiated peace treaty. The 150 years under Austrian rule are considered to be the "Golden Age" of Chernivsti, for culture, industry and the economy, and these years heavily shaped the future of the city. Then in 1918 when the Empire collapsed, Chernivsti became part of Romania, until 1940 when the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact allowed the USSR to take it over. It only became part of an independent Ukraine in 1991 (our guide for the day said the Ukraine was still in its "transition period").

In its long time in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Chernivsti was a major city, being third in size to only Vienna and Prague. The city had a huge population of German-speaking Jews, in fact they

constituted 60,000 of the total population of 132,000 prior to WWII (only 20% of the population was Ukrainian). There were 65 synagogues and the city was known as “the Jerusalem of the Prut” (the Prut is the major river running through the city). Almost the entire Jewish population were killed after the Nazis occupied the city in 1941, only two synagogues now exist (and one, built in 1877, is used as a theatre) and 5000 Jews (and most of those are leaving to Germany under a new immigration program for victims of the holocaust). The Jewish owned buildings were almost the only buildings destroyed in the war, as the city welcomed the Nazis as liberators from the USSR when they came and it wasn’t bombed by the allies.

Chernivsti’s position in the Austro-Hungarian Empire allowed it to flourish as a cultural centre. It was granted a major university, founded in 1875 with three departments - law, philosophy and theology. Now there are 19,000 students in 16 departments. The university is a sister university to Saskatchewan University (100,000 Ukrainians immigrated to the agrarian provinces of Canada). The architect, Joseph Hlavka, a famous Czech architect and head of the Czech Academy of Science but building his first building outside of his home country, put a great deal of effort into building the complex. He started up his own special brick factory to make bricks of the highest quality, and suspended construction during bad weather, making the construction drag out to 18 years (but resulting in such a solid building that it hasn’t needed any restoration for the last 133 years).

University tuition was open and free under the Soviet era, but is now quite expensive (US\$1500/year, which is a substantial proportion of the average annual salary). The most expensive of all the departments to study in is the English department, due to the greatest demand (99% of the students are women, likewise in Medicine 80% of the students are women). The only exceptions to the expensive tuition are the 40% of students that get an Honours grade at high school (and can study for free) and those students studying in the department of mathematics (they were concerned that enrollment in mathematics would drop, with low demand and poor paying jobs). Our guide tells us that the Ukraine produces 6% of the world’s mathematicians, physicists and biologists, and most come from the university here (which I can believe of maths and physics, which are strong in ex-Soviet countries, but not biology, which was destroyed by Lysenko).

Our guide for the day meet a quiet lady in charge of a very impressive set of keys, and started taking us around the university, into all the lecture halls and so forth, until an angry guy started to shout at us in Ukrainian. She just shouted back in Ukrainian (including the words “promoting tourism” a couple of times in English) and kept on going. She showed us the main lecture hall, which once had magnificent marble floors, an elaborate carved roof and a huge chandelier. The room to the right, the Blue Room, was the archbishop’s library, and when the Nazis retreated in 1944 they set fire to the library, destroying it. The carved room caught fire causing the chandelier to fall down and crash through the marble floor. The library was turned into a gym for years, but has now been restored as a meeting room (the Blue Room), while the central hall is now a lecture hall and is simply beautiful (everything except the marble floors was restored in Soviet times - the floors were considered too expensive). On the left was the Red Room, which escaped the main blaze and has the original carved wooden roof. Both the Red Room and the Blue Room were dedicated to Joseph Hlavka.

We then visited the university’s church, with a 38m high dome, designed for its acoustics. Our guide (who is very religious, like most Ukrainians, proclaiming “there are no atheists in the Ukraine”) said that under the Soviets it was turned into a lecture hall for teaching mathematics (which she said with a horrified look). She said the fact that the church wasn’t damaged in this process means that “even the atheist mathematics students had God in their heart” (I guess she

didn't really contemplate that the Nazis who burnt the main library had "God is with us" on their belt buckles, while the atheist students could have respect for human achievement and history without having "God in their heart"). The university also has a beautiful botanical garden, which we could overlook but only students and professors could enter.

Our guide (who was excellent) then took us to Theatre Square. The theatre overlooking the square had the names and busts of Shakespeare, Wagner, Puskin and Olga Kobylanska (a Ukrainian writer) decorating it. The theatre was restored in 1980, after the Soviets paid 3½kg gold and 11kg silver, as Chernivsti was the first Soviet city on the Olympic torch route. The Square also includes the Medical University building, the beautiful 1908 Jewish community centre building, and the horrifically ugly 1938 Romanian community centre building, which was designed and built by the American car company Ford, and would look ugly as a car park in an industrial wasteland (it does have a skating rink on the roof though, only the fifth in Europe when it was built).

The central square had the City Hall, built in 1847. The Austrians encouraged the building of stone buildings in the city by removing their tax for 30 years if they built in stone (they should do the same in Australia, so we don't have such an embarrassing dearth of nice stone buildings), so most of the architecture is a relic from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They also banned the building of identical houses, so that the villa area didn't look homogenous (another good urban beautification tip we could learn from). One of the nice buildings around the central square was built when Chernivsti province was added to the existing 10 provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with each of the 11 provinces being represented by a girl and the Chernivsti girl being dressed in a wedding dress as she joined the union. This building served as the Communist Party Central Committee headquarters, and is now an art museum. Also on the main square is a building which once housed a very famous restaurant, famous for supplying fresh newspapers from around the world back when that was very rare indeed (during Austrian times). The restaurant also included a bell tower which could be booked for tea for two, and had a very long waiting list (the hotel next door was called the "Bell View" as it looked out onto the bell tower). The main shopping street from the square was ripped up as they were making it pedestrian.

Our guide told us a few interesting things about the current economy. The people of the Ukraine have little confidence in their young currency, the hryvnia, and so generally put their savings in US dollars. The recent downturn in the US dollar (from 5.5 to 4.7 hryvnia per dollar) has thus single-handedly wiped out 15% of their life savings. Real estate is also extremely expensive, as the Ukrainian ex-pats use their overseas earnings to buy local real estate. It now costs US\$70 000 for a one bedroom house, extremely expensive for local earners.

Finally on our tour we saw a few churches, the 1844 Holy Spirit Cathedral (an Orthodox church used as an industrial display during Soviet times), the 1875 St Peter and St Paul Cathedral (also built by Joseph Hlavka, an Armenian church common in the Ukraine was only Poland and the Ukraine took in Armenian when they were forced to flee their homeland), the 1938 St Nicholas' Church (built in Romanian style with twisted towers, thus being called the drunken church) and an old wooden church built in 1607 and looking like a house (during the Turkish period Churches were converted to mosques, so new less imposing churches were built). After our tour we had coffee in the extremely modern and stylish Blaser Cafe, just off the Theatre Square, and then had a Ukrainian dinner just off the central square. I had vegetable soup while Lydia and John ordered vegetable canapés and were served fruit salad pancakes with chocolate (Lydia was not unhappy with the mix up).

Into Moldova

June 26th, 2008

This morning we drove to Moldova. The border crossing was quicker than we expected, only 1 ½ hours, which we spent having a trivia quiz (while the border guards exclaimed at seeing an Australian passport from Lydia). Then a long drive across Moldova, allowing Lydia to practice her growing number of Ukrainian phrases, which (considering they are from a 1980 phrase book) are useful for asking about the labour productivity of collective farms, but less useful about asking directions to an internet cafe.

Once we got to Moldova our guide was Natalia. She was very charming “I think you will be very happy to be here, people compare it to a piece of paradise, a country of fairy tails and romance”, yet also modest “they say there are seven wonders of the world, and there are also some nice things in Moldova”. She started by introducing us to Moldova:

Moldova was once a major empire, but was consistently cut down by the Rus, Huns, Mongols and Turks. We were warned by Jason not to ditch the EuroVision Song contest in Moldova, as their 5th place in 2004 was one of their proudest moments. How the mighty have fallen. In 2001 they elected the Communist Party back in, and the President (who was reelected in 2005) wants to get Moldova into the EU. The President is reasonably popular, but is no Stefan cel Mare.

There are 4.4 million Moldovans, but 1.5 million are youths working overseas (mostly Spain, Portugal and Italy, the country has massive unemployment after all the heavy industry closed down with independence in 1991). The people are 65% Moldovan, 14% Ukrainian, 13% Russian, 4% Gagauz, 2% Bulgarian, 2% Jewish and 2% others (mostly Belorussians, Poles and Roma) and are often called the “friendliest people in Europe”. It is the poorest country in Europe, earning on average \$150/month. 40% of the population is below absolute poverty (\$4/day). The country is 33 800 km² and landlocked. It is very flat, with the highest point being 430m and the lowest point being -10m. 80% of the country is covered by the fertile black soil, which is seven times more productive than Russian soils, and twice as productive as the highly fertile Ukrainian soils. The climate is also perfect for growing, with nearly 300 sunny days a year. This allows Moldova to mostly export agricultural goods, tobacco, wine, fruit, nuts and vegetables. Moldova is famous for its wine, and has 170 000 hectares planted with vineyards. The wine is stored in long caverns below the ground, where the climate is a steady 12-14 degrees with 85-90% humidity. Yuri Gagarin visited Moldova and spent two days in the wine cellars, after which he said “I’m more sorry to be leaving the wine cellars of Moldova than I was to leave space”. Natalia said “as for how Moldova looks in the different seasons... if I compare nature to a woman, whether she is dressed or naked she is marvelous”.

In the evening we drove out into the country and visited the 13th century cave monasteries at Oreiul Vechi, carved into the cliffs. We then had dinner at a farmhouse in the village (which was great) and watched the daughters sing and dance.

Expulsion or jail: our Moldovan Exodus

June 27th, 2008

We were expecting to wander around Chisinau today, the capital of Moldova. While an old city, founded in 1436, it is very modern, having been completely flattened in 1940-1941 with the invasion of the Red Army (28th June 1940), who were then defeated after a long siege by the Nazis (17th July 1941), with a major earthquake hitting in-between (10th November 1940). Khrushchev, after the war, used Chisinau as a trial run for large Soviet-style residential sky scrappers to quickly

built a large number of houses for all the displaced people, so it has a very dense (5000/km²) and large (600 000) population considered the country. The city is also very wealthy and expensive, with corruption concentrating the little wealth of the country into the city.

Unfortunately we didn't get to see much of the city, except the main street in passing as we hurtled from embassy to foreign affairs consulate and back, after the local guide decided that Lydia's 48 hour transit visa was a two day visa and was therefore due to expire at midnight. The people at the embassy agreed, and said she would become an illegal immigrant at midnight and would not be allowed to leave the country after that (this possibly has something to do with the tension between Moldova and Australia, about 10 years ago the Moldovans sent an underwater hockey team to play in Australia. The team didn't even know how to swim and lost 30-0 to Columbia. Then they hopped out of the pool and filed as refugees, Moldova doesn't seem to have forgiven Australia for accepting them). It shouldn't have been a problem as there are hourly buses from Chisinau to Odesa, our next stop in the Ukraine. Unfortunately, almost all the buses pass through Transnistria, a break-away republic of Moldova which declared independence in 1990 and achieved functional independence after a war with Russia's backing in 1992. No countries, however, recognise Transnistria as a sovereign state, especially not Moldova which claims the territory as its own (even though it can't enter it). They therefore let anyone into Transnistria, but don't give an exit stamp at the disputed border. Transnistria, which believes it is still in the USSR, happily lets anyone into its territory, unfortunately they can't give a Moldovan exit stamp at the border, which means non-Moldovans and non-Ukrainians can't go from Moldova to Transnistria to Ukraine, as the Ukraine will only accept in people with a Moldovan exit stamp in their passport (unless they have a Moldovan or Ukrainian passport, which don't need to be stamped). The only bus leaving to Odesa that didn't pass through Transnistria was leaving in 30 minutes, so we had to rush to the hotel, through our clothes in a bag and get a taxi to rush us to the bus depot as we fled the country. We arrived two minutes before the bus was due to leave, and then spent the next six hours sweating in the sauna of the bus as we crossed the Moldovan countryside and legally left the country with a few hours to spare.

The Potemkin Steps

June 28th, 2008

With our unexpected extra morning in Odesa, we had a glorious sleep in and enough time to wander into town, meander around the Opera House (built in the 1880s in Viennese baroque style) and the Potemkin Steps and have lunch at the Love Cafe, and still get back to our hotel before the rest of our group arrived, all hot and bothered from the long drive from Moldova.

Once they were ready, we went on a city tour of Odesa. Odesa was part of the largely unoccupied nomadic steppe until Russia won the second Turkish-Russian war over access to the Black Sea. Catherine the Great gave the job of settling the region as "New Russia" to her one-eyed lover Grigory Potemkin. He attracted new settlers and founded cities. Odesa was founded on 2nd September 1794 around the small Turkish fortress of Khadzhibey, which guarded a good natural harbour. The name derives from an ancient Greek settlement on the site, Odessos, which was feminised in Russian to become Odessa (Odesa in Ukrainian). Odesa was largely built by de Richelieu (governor from 1803 to 1814, and the great-great-nephew of the Duke de Richelieu from "The Three Musketeers"), who relied on recruiting foreigners with cheap land (and an interest-free loan on the condition that they built a house) and religious toleration, filling up the region with Bulgars, Serbs, Moldovans, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Swiss, Germans and minorities from within Russia. Until the 1905 pogroms started it was the third largest Jewish city in the world, after New

York and Warsaw. It was made a Free Port in 1819 (duty free for fifty years), and quickly grew into the fourth imperial city of Russia (after St Petersburg, Moscow and Warsaw) and the second port of the empire (after St Petersburg, with three million tonnes of cargo per year, but it never became a naval base).

As the city was a planned city (by a Dutch Colonel engineer), it has a grid-like structure, many parks and a good public transport system. The most sought after apartments are the ones built in the Stalin period, as he stipulated that they should be built to last, with solid construction and full services. The other style of houses common are Khrushchev period, far less attractive as they were designed to be built rapidly to solve the housing crises. Sycamore trees have been planted throughout the city, and there are lots of parks, giving it an attractive feel. The oldest streets are paved with Italian granite, as there was no local source for hard rock. The city now has one million people, and due to its unique settlement it became much more European and cosmopolitan, and culturally aligned much closer to Russia than to the Ukraine (with more Russian speakers than Ukrainian speakers). Our guide tells us that if there was a referendum tomorrow asking “do you want Odesa to succeed from the Ukraine and become part of Russia?” more than 50% would say yes, but while there is some grumbling about the Ukrainisation of the education system, Odesians are generally not the type to get worked up about these issues.

Our first visit was to the war memorial (to Odesians, “the war” always refers to World War II). Russia entered WWII on the 22nd of June, 1941, and by the 5th of August most of European Russia was occupied by the Germans, with Odesa being one of the few cities to resist occupation. Odesa held out for 73 days, from the 22nd of June to the 16th of October, against such odds (18 divisions of Germans and Romanians against five divisions of the Red Army) that it gained the status of “Hero City”. During the resistance, civilians and sailors from the merchant and naval fleet in port joined the resistance, and the pinnacle of the war memorial, overlooking the Black Sea, is the “Obelisk to the Unknown Sailor”.

Our next stop was down French Boulevard (framed by the “Obelisk to Victory” called “The Thermometer” by locals). The street was once famous as the street of villas of the aristocracy and the richest of the merchants, with summer houses on the beach. After the revolution the villas were taken over by the trades union as sanatorium for the workers. Now all have been bought back by the new aristocracy, and the street is almost exclusive for the mega-rich holiday homes. We went to Arcadia beach, one of those currently still public. It had long side-strip full of tacky shows (a western theme, “sex mission”, Egyptian theme, etc), the beach was crowded with the full gamut of bathing suits on display (sailor hats were also popular), and everyone looked like they were having terrific fun. Every spring palm trees are brought to the beach and moved back to the botanic gardens in the autumn, to add to the tropical theme.

We then walked down the most famous street in Odesa, the Prymorsky bulvar. This street has some of the most famous buildings on or near it. There is the first stock exchange built at one end, now the City Hall, with Ceres (the God of Fertility, to help the grain) and Mercury (the God of Trade) carved on the building (the second stock exchange, built in 1894 is now the Philharmonic Hall). A statue of Puskin is in front of the building, and it was while in exile in Odesa that he started some of his most important works.

In the middle of the Prymorsky bulbar is the Potemkin Steps, 192 steps (once 200) joining the city to the port. Before 1903, working conditions for factory workers was horrendous, with eleven hour days, harsh conditions, no worker safety and the banning of unions (WorkChoices v2.0). In 1903, across Russia there were huge assemblies and riots of workers protesting their rights, including a

9000 strong workers assembly in St Petersburg. In 1904, wages were cut a further 20% in real terms, sparking a strike of 110 000 workers in St Petersburg, in a petition to decrease hours, increase wages and increase working conditions. The retaliation to the strike, “Bloody Sunday” sparked the 1905 revolution. In June 1905 the Potemkin Battleship had a strike over rations, the workers being given rotten food to eat. The firing squad refused to execute the strikers, and instead joined the rebels to overthrow the officers in a mutiny. The mutineers then sailed the Battleship Potemkin to Odesa, where there were huge gatherings of support at the base of the steps now known as the Potemkin Steps (which lead from the city to the port, built in 1837-1841). The Russian authorities refused to negotiate, however, so the mutineers sailed to Romania and surrendered to the Romanian authorities. These events lead to the October Manifesto by Tsar Nicolas II, but he ended up revoking all the progressive reforms, sparking the more severe 1917 revolution. In the 1925 film “Battleship Potemkin” a massacre occurred on these steps, which, despite being fictional, became ingrained in the cultural memory enough that the steps were renamed “The Potemkin Steps”. The steps were surprisingly nothing special, although they had an interesting optical illusion of being parallel from the top, as the stairs are 13m wide at the top and 21m wide at the base. At the top of the stairs is the Monument to Odesa Foundation, which was built on the 100th anniversary of the founding (1894), and demolished on May 1st 1920 (to be reconstructed from fragments in 2007). We finished the evening by wandering around the city and having dinner in a 1920s theme restaurant at the top of the stairs.

The catacombs of Odesa **June 29th, 2008**

This morning we visited the Museum of Partisan Glory, the entrance of 1000km of catacombs below Odesa. After the city was taken by the Germans and Romanians on the 16th of October, 1941, the city was occupied for two and a half years. The whole time, however, partisans fought a guerilla war against the occupiers. Knowing during the siege of 73 days that the city would fall, they prepared the catacombs under the city for war. There are over 1000km of catacombs in the limestone strata under Odesa, made by carving out building blocks for the foundation of the city. The limestone strata is 14 metres thick, and three distinct layers of catacombs were carved out, linked to each other and to the city via wells and basements. Within these catacombs the resistance held out the entire duration of occupation, until liberation on the 10th April 1944, 1500 people in twelve different detachments (each with almost no contact with each other), most of which died. We saw the main base of one of the detachments, of 105 people. It included a kitchen and bakery, telephone, beds (just grass upon a stone platform), kerosine lamps, a meeting room (including a library and photos of Stalin and Lenin), a room to publish resistance newspapers for those above, a hospital (with actual real beds, but little else), even family rooms and classrooms for the children. There was a munitions dump, with rifle racks, home-made mines, caltraps and Molotov cocktails, and the main entrance was protected by a machine gun.

At first the partisans relied on secrecy, only coming out at night to attack (having to change clothes so the smell of mold wouldn't give them away), but once the Nazis found their base the machine gun hallway was their chief defence. The Germans tried to retaliate by flooding the catacombs with salt water or poison gas. Even then they still had contact via other passages, including a well that went up into a partisan member's basement, through which food, fuel and information could pass undetected. Painted on the walls was “Blood for Blood, Death for Death”. We saw the paintings they made on the walls for their own amusement, a comic of Hitler and his generals, and a lighter scene of the charming old Slavic tradition of courtship, whereby a guy who liked a girl

would pour a bucket of water on her head, and if she liked him in return she would give him an easter egg.

We spent the afternoon back at the beach, and then took an overnight train for Simferopol, the capital of the Autonomous Republic of the Crimea.

Swallow's Nest June 30th, 2008

This morning we spent on the train to Simferopol, the capital of the Crimea. The Crimea was the homeland of the Crimean Tatars, a Turkic people who formed the Crimean Khanate within the Ottoman Empire between 1441 to 1783. The Khanate was once one of the most powerful forces in Eastern Europe, and a centre of Islamic civilization. In 1783 they were annexed by the Russians, who proceeded to destroy every sign of Tatar culture and architecture in order to portray the region as unsettled except by nomads and to replace Islam with Christianity. The Tatars were especially devastated by the Crimean War (1853-1856) when France, the UK, Sardinia and the Ottoman Empire joined forces to invade the Russian Crimea. This caused a continued exodus of the Tatars to the Ottoman Empire, with those left behind becoming a minority in the Crimea (25%). During the Russian Civil War, the Crimea was a strong hold of the White Russians, and during the Nazi occupation a minority of Tatars collaborated with the Germans. This may be part of the reason why Stalin persecuted the Tatars, deporting the entire population to central Asia on May 18th, 1944. The region was never considered part of the Ukraine until February 19th, 1954, when it was transferred from Russian SFSR to the Ukrainian SSR to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Treaty of Pereyaslav that unified eastern Ukraine with Russia. The Tatars were only permitted to return home in 1989, in time to vote for independence for Ukraine in 1991, then independence for the Crimea in 1992 (14 days later, on the 19th of May, they agreed to stay within the Ukraine as The Autonomous Republic of the Crimea). With the ongoing return of the Tatars they now constitute 12% of the Crimea, another 60% is Russian, with ethnic Ukrainians 24%. Ukrainian, Russian and Tatar are all official languages of the Crimea. Despite the freedom to return, most of the land of the Tatars is now private farmland, so there is a big problem with ownership issues and Tatars squatting on their former land.

We didn't stop to see Simferopol at all, driving straight to Yalta, the main resort in the Crimea (between Simferopol and Yalta is the longest trolley line in the world). We caught a boat out to see the Swallow's Nest, a famous castle perching on the edge of the Black Sea, originally called the "Castle of Love" and now a restaurant. It was a truly picturesque castle, built in 1912 as a mock medieval castle for Baron von Steinheil, a German noble.

We then walked along the promenade of Yalta, naberezhnaya imeni Lenina, and had dinner in a jungle theme restaurant, watching all the little kids in the square drive small electric cars and rollerblade around.

An unfortunate extended acquaintance with the inside of the Yalta Hotel July 1st, 2008

This morning I woke up violently ill, so I stayed behind in the hotel while Lydia explored the palaces of the Yalta conference. I guess at least I have everything I could possibly need in this concrete monstrosity of a hotel (a former Intourist Hotel), it has 2000 rooms, nine bars, a private beach, nightclubs, a pharmacy (probably most useful to me today), beauty salon, hairdresser, massage therapist, post office, shopping arcade and a dolphin show.

As an aside, at the pharmacy it costs 1.80 Hryvnia for a packet of 12 panadol (and this was the price in a rip-off hotel, not a local pharmacy). That translates to about 3 US cents per tablet, which shows just how much profit pharmaceutical companies make in developed countries.

The Crimean Tatars

July 2nd, 2008

Today we headed out to see the Crimea of the Tatars. The Tatars originate from seven clans of the Golden Horde, who left after Ghengis Khan died and set up summer pastures in the Crimea. Eventually they came to settle permanently in the Crimea. The northern tribes are of Mongol origin, while the southern tribes included components of northern Iranian, Greek, Goth and Germanic peoples. The Tatars are Sunni Muslim peoples, with a very distinct culture from the Russian and Ukrainian majority of the Crimea. There is lots of tension between the Tatars, with resentment from being a minority in their own land, cut out from most of the territory by privatisation. Some Tatars maintain that the Crimea should be ceded back to Turkey, as the original treaty between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in 1783 (when Russia forced the Ottoman Empire to cede the Crimea) included a proviso that if the Crimea was ever given to a third party ownership would default back to the Ottomans. The Tatars maintain that by Khrushchev gifting the Crimea to the Ukraine, this provision was invoked and they should be allowed to join Turkey. They hold demonstrations on this issue, and land rights, every May 19th (the anniversary of their deportation).

We started by visiting the cave town of Chufut-Kale. This was a well protected town on a stone plateau in the Crimean mountains which had never been taken until the Tatars came along. Legend has it that when the Tatars reached the town they banged kitchenware together for three days straight until the town surrendered from lack of sleep. The town then became a Tatar stronghold, although they later moved the centre from Chufut-Kale to Bakhchysarai. Chufut-Kale means “Jewish Fortress” as the predominant population came to be Karaites (a Jewish sect that only believes in the writings of the Torah and not the subsequent interpretations). The Karaites are only 500 in number in the Crimea, and 2500 in the world. In Israel they consider themselves to be the true Jews, however in the Crimea they were culturally and linguistically Tatar, and successfully petitioned not to be called Jews under the Khanate (for taxation purposes, although it later helped them greatly during the Nazi occupation). They have two synagogues in Chufut-Kale, one built in the 14th century and one in the 18th century. The city is now empty (since the last well failed), but the Karaites from Crimea, Lithuania and Israel still return for special services several times a year. The town also has an old gaol, built into the edges of the plateau, which was built in 1299 by the Tatars as a prison (but when the Tatars moved to Bakhchysarai in 1475 it was converted to a storage room).

Hiking back from Chufut-Kale we saw the Dormition Monastery, founded in the 8th century by Christian icon worshippers fleeing persecution from other Christians who had banned icon worship in 754. We then visited the Khan’s Palace in Bakhchysarai, one of the few pre-Russian buildings surviving in the Crimea. The palace was built in 1531 as the capital of the Crimean Tatars under the Ottoman Empire (using Jewish and Armenian builders), however most of the current form was developed in 1787 for the stay of Catherine the Great, and was built to mimic to Topkai Palace in Istanbul (of which it is an inferior and shabby mirror). The Khan was said to be a direct descendent of Ghengis Khan, but actually had relatively little power, with four powerful lords below him and the Ottoman Empire above him. His meeting room, the “Divan Chamber” (Persian for “Council”) included a closed in balcony with wooden grating, so that he could listen in to meetings he wasn’t at (or could get unknown advisors to listen in). We also visited the Summer House, the small

palace mosque (16th century) with the Golden Fountain built for ablutions (built in 1733) and the Fountain of Tears. The Fountain of Tears was built in 1764 for the Khan Giray, for a mausoleum for his favourite concubine Diliara Bikech (stabbed by his wife), and later moved in 1784 to the Palace. The fountain drips his tears of sorrow, and was written about by Puskin in his poem “The Bakhchisaray Fountain”. The harem was built with walls 10m high and 3m thick. Originally the rooms only had windows high above eye level (“so only Allah could see their faces”) but extra windows were put in below at eye level for Catherine the Great.

On the way back from Bakhchisaray to Yalta we stopped in at Fors Church, which looks spectacular from a distance, jutting out on a stone ledge from the forest, overlooking the Black Sea coast. The Church was built in 1892 to commemorate the survival of the family of Emperor Alexander III from a train crash in 1888. They were saved by Alexander’s amazing strength (he straightened horse shoes for fun) in keeping the carriage from collapsing while they escaped.

On our last evening in Yalta we had a group dinner on the beach.

Through the Valley of Death with the Light Brigade July 3rd, 2008

Our main focus today was on Sevastopol. Sevastopol is considered the third best natural harbour in the world (with 39 harbours), after Hong Kong and Sydney. The city was built as a naval city, with Odessa being the merchant port. When Catherine the Great visited it on her first tour of the Crimea, Potemkin (who wanted to impress her) gave her an escort of 10 000 carriages. He also brought with him many Russian serfs and dressed them in satins and gave them bread and salt, setting up props of a village. Then each night he moved the fake village forward so Catherine the Great could see how prosperous he had made her new region (leading to sayings about “Potemkin villages”)

Sevastopol has been the main naval base for the Russian Black Sea Fleet since its development. As an aside, there are three theories for why the Black Sea is called the 'Black' Sea. The first is due to the ancient Greek name, the 'Inhospitable Sea', *Pontos Axeinos*, which may have later been converted to the Iranian *axšaina* or Dark Sea. The second is due to the ancient Greek habit of labelling compass directions by colour (and north was black). The third is because of the darker colour of the sea, due to increased algae levels in the top brackish 200m (below that the sea is dead and heavily saline due to low input of freshwater and slow mixture through the Bosphorus to dilute out the evaporated salts, with a layer of hydrogen sulfide separating the two). Anyway, now that Sevastopol is part of the Ukraine, Russia leases the port for \$97million/year. The lease is through to 2017, and there is tension as the President of the Ukraine does not want to release it, while Russia of course does (Sevastopol itself is the most pro-Russian of all the Ukrainian cities, due to the large investments from Russia in the city).

Sevastopol was also central stage for the Crimean War. The origin of the Crimean war was an argument over who had the duty to protect the “Holy Land”, with both Russia and England/France claiming the duty to protect it from Islam. After Russia asserted its right by invading Romania (under Ottoman control), England and France (worried about the growing power of Russia) joined forces with the Ottoman Empire (and Sardinia) to push back Russia. They invaded Romania in 1853 and pushed Russia out quite quickly, then moved into the Russian Crimea in September of 1854 in a war which lasted until 1856 and became known for poor generalship, incompetence and stupidity.

The main push was to stop the Black Sea Fleet, which meant taking Sevastopol. The Admiral of the Black Sea Fleet (Admiral P. Nakhimov) scuttled his fleet at the entrance to the Sevastopol harbour, to prevent the British from conquering it by sea. Instead, the British landed at Balaclava (which rapidly became known as “Little Liverpool”, just outside Sevastopol, and pushed towards the city. The first battle on the 20th of September was a British slaughter due to poor coordination with the French (although they eventually won), setting the scene for Lord Raglan’s disregard for human life. The British expected it to be a very short war, and so their troops were not prepared for winter (the French, on the other hand, remembering Napoleon’s route from Moscow, were prepared well). After the first terrible winter, with more troops dying from malnutrition, cold and disease than from military action, better equipment was sent over. It was due to the English families knitting woolen cover-all hats for their Crimean troops and sending them to Balaclava that the name acquired its current English meaning.

The most famous battle was on the 25th of October, 1854, the Charge of the Light Brigade. On this day 18 000 Russians marched from Sevastopol to take Balaclava, a movement which could have pushed the British out of Crimea. They rapidly crushed four of the six Turkish redoubts, and were only stopped from reaching Balaclava by the 550 men of the 93rd Highlander division. These men, lead by Sir Colin Campbell, formed “a thin red line, tipped with steel” two men deep across the valley, withstood the fire and waited until the last minute to retort, causing horrible damage to the Russians. They managed to hold the line until Raglan got the Heavy Brigade to charge in and break the Russians. Lord Raglan then sent the Light Brigade to stop the remaining Russians from carting off the Turkish guns from the redoubts as trophies (a standard policy after Waterloo). He was very vague (negligently incompetent) as to his directions, however, so the glory-hungry Lord Cardigan, leader of the Light Brigade, lead his men to capture the Russian guns still in Russian hands. He charged his men into the “valley of death” with “canons to the left of them and canons to the right of them”, rushing light horse straight into volleys of canon shot. In a twenty minute span, of the 663 who charged 118 were killed, 127 were badly wounded and 500 horses were killed. The French general watching said “this is magnificent, but it is not war”. Despite the odds, the Light Cavalry succeeded in its mission and so it was technically a victory, but at horrific cost. Despite this loss, Sevastopol eventually fell, after 149 days resistance. There were 500 000 casualties during the war, with 180 000 Russians, 60 000 British, 35 000 Turks, 35 000 French and 200 Sardinians killed. At the Peace of Paris, the borders remained unchanged, with the only outcome a binding of the Russians to lose their right to a Black Sea fleet for 17 years.

There were a few bright spots of the Crimean War too. One was the heroic doctors and nurses. The best known is Florence Nightingale, the head of the unit of 34 nurses at the British hospital in Balaclava. Perhaps even more deserving of recognition is Mary Seacole. She tried to enlist with Florence Nightingale, but was refused as she was from Jamaica and was black. She made her own way to the Crimea anyway, and served on the battlefield itself, helping all soldiers of either side, becoming known as the “Crimean angle”. On the Russian side, Danya Mihailova (known as “Dasha Sevastopolskaya”) also served on the battlefield as a nurse, while the doctor Nikoli Pirogov became known as the “father of the field hospital” as he utilized a systemic approach to battlefield anaesthesia, plaster casts and a five level triage system. The Crimean War was also the birthplace of military journalism, with a correspondent publishing his letters in the London Times. They directly lead to the 1864 Geneva Convention of the protection of the sick and wounded on the front line and the founding of the Red Cross (which, despite popular misconception, is not a religious institution but was founded as a secular one - the Red Cross was selected as the inverse of the flag of neutral Switzerland).

On our visit to Sevastopol we saw the Valley of Death, Lord Raglan's look-out, the Monument to the Scuttled Ships and the Defence of Sevastopol Panorama (a beautiful building displaying the magnificent panoramic painting of the Crimean War). We also walked along Grafskaya Pier, full of Russian military hardware. There are few old buildings in Sevastopol, as the city was heavily damaged by WWII (only 8 houses were left intact, but the city was rebuilt within seven years by Stalin's order), but lots of monuments to war.

Following Sevastopol we visited Chersonesus. Chersonesus is an ancient Black Sea Greek city, founded in the 5th century BCE. You can see the old walls (10m high, 3m thick with two layers and a "corridor of death" in between, built as protection from the Scythians), the mint (casts for coin making were found inside), the agora and what little remains of the theatre (built to house 1500, it doubled in size during Roman times but was destroyed under Christian rule as theatre was considered promoting sin). The city survived for nearly 2000 years, but gradually died due to the decline in trade and was abandoned in the 12th century CE. On the same site is St Vladimir's Cathedral, built 1861-1891.

We have now left Sevastopol and are on an overnight train to Kiev. Lydia, John, Martin, Julia and myself played geography quiz games until it became too hard.

The Churches of Kiev **July 4th, 2008**

We spent this morning on the train from the Crimea to Kiev. Kiev is the capital of the Ukraine, and is a surprisingly vibrant and wealthy. 5 million people live in Kiev (although only 2.6 million are registered), giving it 10% of the Ukrainian population. The city is ancient, once the capital of Kievan Rus 1000 years ago, ruling over a swathe of Eastern Europe from the Baltics to the Black Sea, but it was built of wood and burnt down frequently, so almost nothing is left of the original city. The city was also quite small until recently (with 70 000 people in 1834), and only grew large as a sugar refining city in the 1840s. Due to its 778 day occupation by the Nazis in WWII it was designated a Soviet Hero City.

In the afternoon, after arriving, we were taken on a city tour. We started with Kiev National University, founded in 1834. The main building is painted dark red, the legend is that it is painted red with shame for the cruelty of the Tsars after Alexander III exiled 183 students from Kiev to Siberia for protesting.

From the national university we went to St Sophia, built from 1017 to 1031 CE. It is no longer a functional church, being turned into a national museum in 1934, although they have a service in it once a year on August 24th for independence day. The church is a world heritage site due to the 11th century paintings they recovered inside, under layers of newer paintings, with 3000m², more than any other church. The complex also includes the bell tower, built in the 18th century during the major renovation of St Sophia, and "Little Sophia" a small church that was the one most commonly used, as St Sophia itself was too cold. The outside of St Sophia was extensively modified in the 1630s, from the original Byzantine style (it was once built as a copy of Istanbul's Ay Sophia, but three times smaller) to the current baroque style. Inside, along with the 11th century paintings, we can see scratches on the walls, done by bored parishioners listening to a long service in a language they didn't understand (Old Slavic) while standing up - this graffiti has actually been of great value in historic cultural and linguistic studies. Saint Sophia includes the sarcophagus of Prince Yaroslav the Wise (978 to 1056). The bones have been confirmed as his by scratch marks on his ribs and a broken hand (gained during battle) and the characteristic bone formations

showing that he was lame. His skull, however, is missing, as it was lent to a sculptor (Gerasimov) to recreate his facial image, who was deported to Siberia.

From St Sophia we walked down to St Michael's, the church facing St Sophia down a long boulevard. St Michael's was built in 1108, but later completely destroyed. It was rebuilt from 1996 to 2000. The best thing about St Michael's is the colour, a perfect sky blue. The builders wanted it painted in traditional Ukrainian blue, a washed out periwinkle blue, for which they usually paint on sky blue and let it fade for one year. However for St Michael's they bought high quality sky blue paint from Germany, which has not faded at all.

After St Michael's we walked down to St Andrei's and Andriyivsky Uzviv, and then caught a bus to a look out over Kiev. The look out is a monument to the unification of Russia and Ukraine, with a steel arch and a statue commemorating *Homo soveticus*, now complete with a Matrix amusement ride. From the lookout we could see many of the 86 parks of Kiev, including the large park on an island of the Dnipro River, running through the city, founded in the 16th century and so having Chestnut trees nearly 500 years old and being more forest than park.

Finally we had our last group dinner, and Lydia, John and myself went out for beers afterwards with Jason and Julia.

Bustling Kiev, full of life July 5th, 2008

This morning we walked around the Lavra Monastery complex in Kiev. The complex is huge, encompassing many Churches, squares, museums and two catacombs. It once housed over a thousand monks, now there are 120 monks (but with an average age of 35, it is not the remnants of a dying community, unlike western European religious centres). The complex was started in 1051 by Saints Antony and Feodosiy during the reign of the Kievan Rus. The catacombs are the oldest part of the complex, with housing and Churches only being developed on the surface after the catacombs were filled in the 11th and 12th centuries.

The complex was quite beautiful, and world heritage listed, but I just wasn't really feeling it. It was raining and there was lots of standing around listening to tour guides, killing my feet. I think that at this point I was just churched out for the trip. There was one church I found rather amusing though, above the entrance it had a painting of Jesus throwing the merchants out of the church for using it to sell goods, and just past the entrance, like almost every other Ukrainian church we visited, was a small booth selling post-cards, icons and prayer books, without even a hint of irony.

Another interesting part was the museum of micro-miniatures, filled with the art of Nicolai Syadristry under microscopes. At first we couldn't get in because just as we got there it started raining and the sign on the door clearly said "at the time of atmospheric precipitation exhibition is not function", but our guide banged on the door until they let us in. There were such pieces as the portrait of V. V. Andreev engraved on a poppy seed, the world's smallest book (with twelve pages at 0.6mm²), a 3mm hair with "long live peace" engraved on it in five languages, a tiny chessboard on the head of a pin, the world's smallest watch, a lock only 27 microns across, a flea with tiny horseshoes on its feet, and a portrait of Lenin made by writing his complete works in miniature (a feat which took 12 hours a day for six months).

We also went through the national treasury, which contained gold ornaments from the Scythians, Sarmatians and Cimmerians, dating back to the 4th century when they lived as agricultural

communities trading via the Black Sea Greeks. The treasury also had artifacts from the Kievan Rus and old Ukrainian churches.

Finally in Lavra we went to the catacombs. Most of it is used by the monks, but they put aside one corridor for tourists to visit. Lydia couldn't go in, unfortunately, because the monks are quite aggressive in their policies, and insist that women had to have covered heads and couldn't be wearing makeup or trousers (they also banned opening your mouth in the catacombs). The atmosphere inside seemed quite unhealthy for human life anyway, with the slowly decaying remains of saints on display in the humid and stifling air.

After Lavra everyone felt relief when we could get off our feet and rehydrate over a slow meal at the nearby CCCP restaurant (with both cheap and good food). We then walked past the Patriotic Museum, with WWII tanks on display, and 'Rodina Mat', the defence of the motherland monument, with striking Soviet scenes display in wrought iron along the concrete pass leading to the 62m tall titanium statue of a stern woman holding a sword and shield.

We then caught a taxi to Andriyivsky Uzviz, the winding cobblestone road from the base of Saint Andrei's Church (built 1754), where Lydia did some shopping, and moved on to Independence Square. Independence Square (and the offshoot road vulitsa Khreshchatyk, which becomes a pedestrian street on weekends) was full of people shopping, talking, hanging out, and (in front of McDonald's) break-dancing. In front of the post office at the corner, graffiti from the Orange Revolution is preserved under glass as an informal monument. It was very nice to walk around slowly, people watching and having dinner on the street before catching the metro back to our hotel.

Tomorrow we are just going to laze around in Kiev before flying back to Seattle.