

Do You Like Your Government? Ukraine 2013

This story was written in 2014, after Russia first invaded Ukraine and took over Crimea. We sat in amazement of the events that were taking place, live on our TV screen as nearly a hundred Ukrainians were gunned down in the Maidan plaza - only feet from the hotel that we had stayed in a few months earlier. It is unnerving to sit back in our comfortable American home and remember these events from our trip, now that we have a better understanding of what was happening.

We stand with Ukraine and hope everyday that things will get better for them and the rest of the world.

Do You Like Your Government? Ukraine 2013

We arrived in Kyiv, Ukraine the day before the 22nd anniversary of the country's independence from Russia. We were staying in a small hotel two blocks from the Maidan, the central square of the city, and had no idea what we had stumbled into — the lead up to revolution and war.



Planning for this trip started when Sue found a new website that was providing cheap airfare—but you had to choose

between two possible destinations. The program, in essence, chose where we would go. We decided that either Peru or Ukraine would be interesting that summer and clicked the button. We were on our way to Kyiv.



That first evening we walked through the square where preparations were taking place for the independence day celebrations. On one side was a stage where they were doing sound checks and where performers were rehearsing Russian pop music. Food vendors were setting up for blocks. It looked like it was going to be a big party covered with yellow and blue flags and bunting. Down by the Dnieper River they were setting up for a triathlon, and all over the city workers were preparing for the celebration.

The next morning we walked back to Maidan where the

musicians were in full swing. The food vendors were doing a brisk business, and as the day went on large numbers of people were celebrating. It was a big party and there was even a parade, a parade of chicken floats. Yes, chicken floats. Big, folk art, painted chickens and roasters in traditional Ukrainian colors and themes.



Two things struck us as odd.

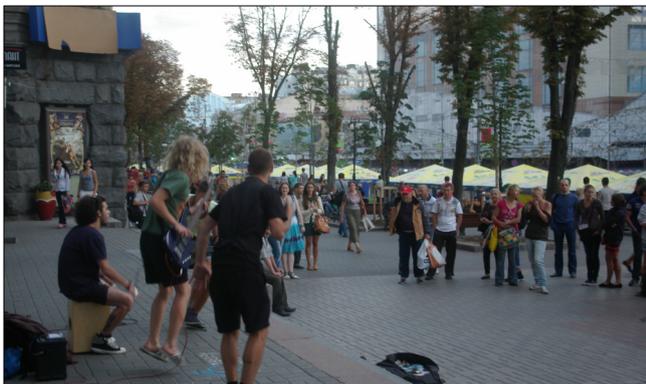
First, there were no marching bands as there would be on the Fourth of July in the U.S., and no political speeches. Maybe it was just their tradition. The other odd thing was that riot police were staged at all the entrances to the square. I remember wondering what they were afraid of.

We would not find out until a couple of months later when we were back home.

We walked and took public transportation all over Kyiv—through the park where people were ziplining across the river, to the Ukrainian State Museum of the Great Patriotic War (the Russian name for WWII), up to St. Andrew's Cathedral and through the Andriivskiy street fair flea market.

Above: Maidan, the central square, was filling with people the night before, and the press was covering the event (below).





On Independence Day there were street musicians everywhere, a parade of chicken floats, fireworks, and plenty of food.



From the Museum of the Great Patriotic War we walked through the park near the river and came across the Holodomor Genocide Museum. It could be easily missed, only marked by a small bronze statue of a famished little girl where people had been laying flowers and packages of crackers or other food stuffs. The small underground gallery features videos of survivors, all of whom said much the same thing. “First the Germans invaded and shot my father. Then the Russians invaded and killed my brother and sister. Finally, Stalin stole all of the grain in 1946 and 47, and everyone in my village starved to death. I was the only one left.” It was a stark, moving and educational experience. We hadn’t known about the famine that devastated Ukraine following WWII. Stalin was intentionally starving Ukrainians.

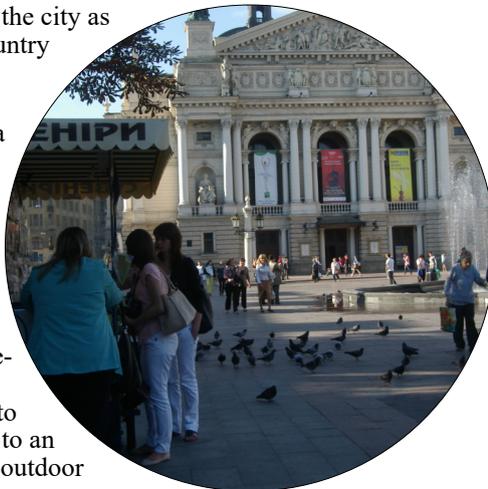


Above: The starving girl in front of the Holodomor Genocide Museum.
Below: Lviv's central square.

Ukraine is the largest country in Europe. Our transportation options included flying, trains, buses, and cars. We really didn't want to rent a car and were not fans of buses. The trains are mostly night trains between the major cities. We decided to fly to Lviv on the western side of Ukraine and spent three days in that beautiful

historic city. The city center is a beautifully restored Medieval square with many sidewalk cafes. An art glass museum just off the square was one of the highlights for us. We stayed in a hotel called On the Square run by a Canadian of Ukrainian descent and his Ukrainian wife. They were buying more rooms and investing their lives in the city as it seemed the country was rebounding.

The square was a lively place and the first time we were to see a "Play Me" piano. The old upright was moved into a space next to the main cathedral and just left there for people to play. It was next to an Italian café with outdoor



Above: The Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Kyiv.
Below: Lviv's Play Me piano.

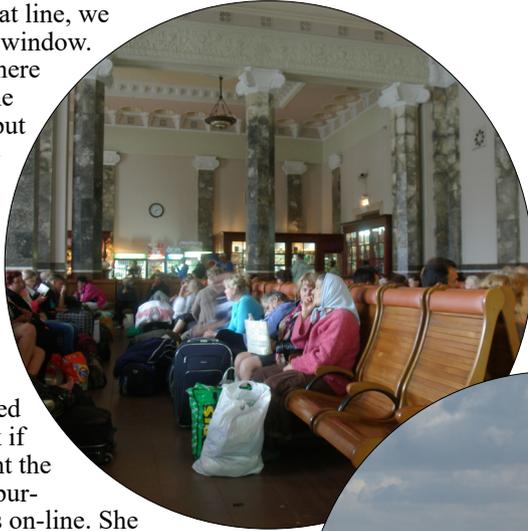
seating and we sat and watched as many people would stop by to play. All were very good. One guy would hog the piano for as long as he could to try and get some tips in his upturned hat.



Then it was time to learn how to navigate the Ukrainian rail system as we decided to travel by train to in the south on the Black Sea. Our first attempt to buy rail tickets ended in complete failure. We walked about an hour to the train station on the west side of Lviv. The place was bustling with many windows and agents selling tickets. Fortunately, there was a tourism counter with helpful people who spoke English. They directed us to window 18 where, they said, we could

buy tickets to Odesa. After a half hour, we got to the head of the line where the woman said no, we needed to go to window 16. After a half hour standing in that line, we arrived at the window.

The woman there then closed the window and put up a sign saying “closed for lunch” or something similar. We gave up and walked back to the hotel.



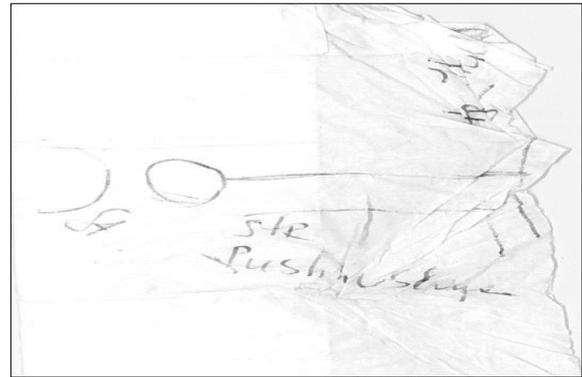
There we asked the desk clerk if she could print the receipt if we purchased tickets on-line. She

Above: Waiting for the train at Lviv station.
Right: The Black Sea at .

was very helpful and that’s how the next day we ended up on the platform waiting for the night train to .

The pursers for each car stepped on to the platform in unison and we began to board. We entered our second class compartment where we found a young mother with her six or seven year old daughter already settled in on one of the four beds. Sue and I tried to lodge our suitcases in the corner by the door, and our traveling companion began instructing us in rapid fire Ukrainian. No, the luggage goes inside the lower beds. They open up to reveal storage underneath. Our linens and blankets were overhead, and we had to make our own beds. The table under the window was also a stepping stool to get to our second level beds.

We started making our beds and then our second traveling companion entered. She greeted us in Russian, and we apologized saying we only spoke English. “That’s OK,” she said. “I know English as well as Russian, Ukrainian, French, and German.”



Above: Nina’s map showing us the way to our hotel.



Nina was very interested in us and wanted to talk. She was 62 and a physician who was returning from a visit with her daughter who lives in Poland. Nina had hoped to move in with her daughter, but couldn’t get a visa. She had been a doctor on a ship on the Black Sea for many years, but got tired of life at sea. So now she lives in .

At first the conversation was what you would expect from any new acquaintance, but then Nina asked some unusual questions. “Do Americans like Russians?” I had to think about that.

“Mostly Americans don’t think about Russians at all.” “Do you like your government?” she asked. No one had ever asked me that before, and I tried to explain how it works in a democracy. She listened politely.

“Where are you staying in ? What is the name and phone number of the hotel, and how long will you be there?” She said that she would like to show us around the town, and she had a Russian friend who also spoke excellent English. She and Nina could spend Saturday with us. She would give us a call to arrange a meeting place.

When the train pulled into the station, we walked down the platform, through the station, and on to the street on the other side. She drew a map on a napkin showing our hotel,

pointed us in the direction of our hotel, and turned to the right and disappeared into the crowd. We never heard from her again.

was resplendent in decorations for the 22nd Independence Anniversary, but also, it was the city's 200th anniversary. In the city park was a big bandshell—reminiscent of a nineteenth century gathering spot and a magnet for locals to congregate. A live band played dance tunes and many people and families with children would dance. The days we were there, there was a big celebration with a street fair and all types of performances from the park, down the Potemkin steps to the port. It was late August and the weather was beautiful.

Three days later we checked out of our hotel on our way to the train station and a night train to the Crimea. We were sitting on the steps of the hotel waiting for a taxi when we were approached by two women. The well dressed thirty

some things greeted us in English. Odd because very few people in spoke any English. "Where are you going," they asked. "Which train are you on?"



Where are you staying in Simferopol? How

Right: The Potemkin Steps made famous by the movie Potemkin about the Russian battleship during the 1905 revolution.

long will you be there?" We answered their questions.

The taxi pulled up and we moved to load our luggage. They handed us some literature



Dancing in the park (below) is common next to the band shell (above).



The women who greeted us in front of our hotel in gave us this English language brochure about the Mormon Church.

for the Mormon Church printed in English and said goodbye. We had a first class compartment that night, meaning we were alone in the room with an attendant who would help when needed or bring us some tea.

We slept well through the 12 hour journey. As our train

was entering the suburbs of Simferopol, the capital of Crimea, Sue and I finished packing our debris from the night and opened the compartment's door. A short time later a woman presented herself to us in the doorway of the cabin and tried to talk to us, but she only knew a few words in English. But she was persistent and invited herself into the cabin and sat down with us. She quizzed us as to our plans for vis-

iting the area. She drew mountains and trees to show us what the Crimean peninsula looked like and sternly encouraged us to take the day trip to Yalta, not Sevastapol, the



home of the Russian Black Sea fleet. By that point, I was

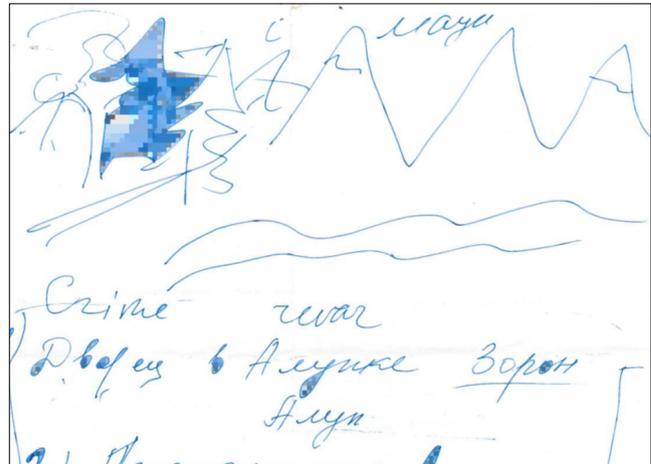
The Simferopol train station where we changed transport for a ride to Yalta on an aging street car (below) It was raining inside.

pretty sure we were being followed.

Simferopol is a scruffy regional capital with very little for a tourist to do. However, it is a jumping off point for the cities of Yalta and Sevastapol on the Black Sea. Billed as the longest street car line in the world, we



caught one of the cars from in front of the train station for a twenty three mile ride in the rain to Yalta. The car was 1950's vintage with windows that leaked almost every other drop of the



Above: Our new friend drew a map of the Crimean Peninsula showing the central mountains. She was adamant that we not go to Sevastopol.

Below: The Yalta waterfront.

pouring rain. The longest streetcar ride in the world is just a very dirty, electrified bus that runs high over the sea and through the mountains of a Crimea which is dotted with farms and vineyards.

Yalta is a resort town for Russian tourists. You may recall the name from the Yalta Conference where FDR, Churchill and Stalin met to divide up the world after WWII. It has a beautiful waterfront and many good restaurants. A statue of Lenin presides over the central square where you can also buy a hamburger at McDonalds and souvenirs from the





many street vendors.

It turned warm and sunny on the shore of the Black Sea. A restaurant owner was hawking his establishment, and showed us his menu written in Russian. When we said English, he said, in halting English, that his daughter

spoke it and lead us uphill to lunch. There we met his daughter who spoke perfect English as she had studied in the States.

The food was great and we had a delightful conversation. We found in our guidebook that there was a winery in Yalta, so we hailed a taxi in the square to take us there. A couple of miles out of town and up a hill, he dropped us off in front of an establishment with many tourists waiting outside. All we really wanted to do was get a tasting, but when we walked into the winery there was a woman seated behind a cashier cage much like what you'd see in a bank. She did not speak much English, but we figured out from a sign in English that we needed to by a ticket for the tour. We tried to communicate that all we wanted was a tasting not a tour — but she was gruff and insistent that we had to go on the tour. The next tour was 2 hours away. Not getting anywhere with this woman, we stepped outside and walked down the hill where there was a small wine shop. We stopped in there and bought a couple of bottles to take back



We sat at a table in the foreground at this restaurant in Kyiv. I don't have a photo of the man in black— it didn't seem like a wise thing to do. He sat in the far corner for an hour. We were on a flight out of Ukraine the next day.

to Simferopol.

The overnight train trip back to Kyiv from Simferopol for our flight home was uneventful and without any further visitors on the train. The first class compartment was not as



nice as the one we were in from . Everything on the Crimea peninsula was just so much more Russian than the more European flavor of Lviv, and Kyiv.

We found our hotel near the train station on the other side of Kyiv from where we had stayed before and went out for a walk to explore this part of the city. We walked through the Botanical Gardens and stopped at a restaurant near the university. It was a beautiful afternoon so we asked for a table outside. As soon as we sat down, a large man dressed entirely in black — black turtleneck and black leather jacket — sat

down in the corner opposite us. He dismissed the waiter and did not eat or drink anything for the hour we were there. He just sat there and watched us.

Sue could not see him since he was behind her, but he was plainly visible to me over her left shoulder. She had picked

up an English tourist magazine on a rack at the entrance and was reading through it. At one point she read a short piece on negotiations that the President of Ukraine (at that time Viktor Yanukovich) was having with Vladimir Putin. Yanukovich was trying to decide whether to join the European Union as a trading partner or join the group of former Soviet states that was forming a new economic union. She remarked that, “that is a no brainer. Obviously aligning with the west would be more fruitful.” Little did she understand at the time the importance of what those negotiations meant.

When I asked for the check, the man in black got up and left. It was a very unsubtle message to get on the flight the next day. Obviously we had been followed from the train station.

I found this all to be rather amusing, but had no idea why they were interested in us. Then I read a press report three days after returning home. The Russian weaponry flowing into Syria was traveling by train through Ukraine to the ports on the Black Sea. We were traveling by rail to ports on the Black Sea too.

Later I talked to a colleague who had been a weapons inspector for the UN in Ukraine, and he said that what we experienced was normal. If we had been with a tour group, the guide would have been secret police. We, however, were two Americans traveling alone, something virtually unheard of and suspect. That apparently got their attention. Another friend said that the question, “Do you like your government?” was a “standard recruitment question.”

Two and a half months later in December, the barricades went up in Independence Square and the protesters began occupying government buildings. The protests spread to cities across the country, and there were police riots with several fatalities. In late January 2014, we were watching Russian Television’s (RT) live feed from Kyiv, the bonfires illuminating the streets with Molotov cocktails arcing through the darkness over them. Every 20-30 seconds another would hit the pavement in front of the rows of riot police.

In February, Interior Ministry snipers shot and killed about 70 of the protesters live on television and wounded many more. Despite coming under deadly fire, the protesters

didn’t panic and held their ground. On February 21, forty uniformed police officers from Lviv Oblast arrived at the protester side of the barricade announcing that they had sworn an oath to protect and defend the people of Ukraine. The masses of riot police lined up on the other side would have to go through them. Saturday the cocktails flew every 5-6 seconds over the fires. By February 23 the president had fled the capital, and the police had disappeared from the streets. NBC’s live feed showed tens of thousands of protesters singing the national anthem and religious hymns in the square from a vantage point very near our hotel.

The borders of Ukraine were sealed and travel to Crimea is now difficult. We had no idea what we were witnessing when we were there, but our thoughts were and continue to be with the people of Ukraine as now Russia has taken over Crimea and 6 years later fighting continues in the east of the country.



The cafes of Lviv.